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Slowing down, caring deeply, trusting children: An ethnographic study of Forest School practice

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ABSTRACT

Forest School is an experiential, nature-based educational approach that often evolves as it takes root in new cultural and ecological settings. This ethnographic study explores how one Forest School in the Southeast United States interprets and enacts the Forest School model within its local context. Drawing on participant observations, interviews, field notes, and photography, we examine the lived experiences of the Forest School community to understand how cultural practices shape daily life at the school. Three central themes emerged: (1) slowing down to deepen learning and connections, (2) supporting the whole child through individualized care, and (3) trusting students with independence and responsibility. These findings reflect a nuanced and place-responsive interpretation of Forest School, foregrounding practices such as slow learning and authentic care that are often implicit but underexplored in the literature. This study contributes to the global conversation on Forest School by highlighting the importance of contextually grounded adaptations and offering insights for educators and policymakers seeking to preserve its transformative potential.

***Keywords*:** Forest School, ethnography, early childhood education, slow learning, holistic development, place-based education

Forest School, a nature-based early childhood educational approach rooted in experiential learning in outdoor settings, has witnessed a surge in global popularity in recent years (Harris, 2022). As it expands into diverse cultural and ecological contexts, however, Forest School faces critical tensions that challenge its core values (Knight et al., 2023). Among these is the risk of its transformation into a standardized, commercialized product, which could compromise its integrity as a context-responsive pedagogy (England et al., 2024; Christiansen et al., 2018). These concerns are particularly pertinent as government agencies and formal education systems increasingly seek to regulate or formalize Forest School programming.

To preserve Forest School's transformative potential, it is essential to recognize that its philosophy cannot remain static as it takes root in new settings. Instead, localized adaptations shaped by cultural values, ecological features, and community needs are not only inevitable but necessary for its meaningful implementation (Leather, 2018; O'Brien, 2022). This ethnographic study specifically examined a Forest School in the Southeast United States that served children aged 3 to 12, providing repeated opportunities for child-led, nature-based learning experiences.

Ethnography was an appropriate approach because it allows for in-depth exploration of how participants experience, interpret, and enact Forest School within their local cultural and ecological context, providing a nuanced understanding of its place-based implementation.

Literature Review

Our study is framed by the literature related to the contextual nature of Forest School, its historical and theoretical foundations, and why it is seen as a beneficial schooling model. This literature is explored below.

Forest School in Context

There is not one clear definition of Forest School as it has shifted and developed within different geographical and cultural contexts, underscoring its responsiveness to *place* (Dabaja, 2022b; Elliot & Krusekopf, 2017). In essence, Forest School is an outdoor educational experience for children conducted in woodlands or other natural environments with trees, emphasizing exploration, play, and learning in a forested setting (Tiplady & Menter, 2020). The literature further indicates that Forest School involves regular visits to a natural space, child-led explorations, and opportunities for emerging inquiry (Dabaja, 2022b; Mackinder, 2024; O'Brien, 2022). Morgan (2018) suggests that "forest" is one of the key defining features of Forest School, meaning it should be in a woodland or wild setting rather than a contrived location.

The term *Forest School* varies geographically, commonly referred to as "Bush Kinder" in Australia and "Forest Kindergarten" in certain European countries (England et al., 2024). In the United States, the location of this ethnographic study, there are a variety of terms and definitions related to early years outdoor programs, including "Nature Preschool," "Nature Kindergarten," and "Nature-Based Kindergarten" (Dean, 2019; Larimore, 2016). And while there are similarities between these programs, Forest School remains distinct due to both the underlying philosophy and the lack of an indoor facility or established curricula (Sobel, 2014). In the U.S., individual state requirements regarding health and safety for preschool programs also delineate a nature preschool from a "grittier, wilder" Forest School (Sobel, 2014, p. 232). Yet some scholars have argued that Forest School within the United States has taken on distinct components of the culture, including hyper-individualism and overt litigation concerns (O'Brien, 2022). Compared to its U.K. and Canadian counterparts, there is limited research within the United States on Forest Schools (Dean, 2019). This is likely due, in part, to Forest Schools not yet being widespread in the United States, although their numbers have steadily increased in recent years (NAAEE, 2023).

In some comparative studies, scholars have found that the underlying cultural context can influence the implementation of a Forest School program (e.g., Mackinder, 2024). This highlights the importance of understanding Forest Schools as a phenomenon that is shaped by country-specific cultural and educational contexts. Because Forest School practices must be contextually adapted to local cultures and environments (Lloyd et al., 2018; Wahab et al., 2020), exploring the nuances of a Forest School situated in the southeast region of the United States can contribute to the literature. Even Forest Schools within the same country but different regions can have a variety of approaches, highlighting how programs can fluctuate given the unique context (Speldewinde et al., 2021). Thus, this ethnographic study is timely and important given that Forest School is not simply a "drag-and-drop" approach that can be directly translated into a new country or region while negating the unique cultural context (Lloyd et al., 2018).

Historical and Theoretical Foundations

Examining the theoretical underpinnings that guide Forest School's ethos can shed light on understanding its historical foundations. Forest School's detailed history is complex, and entire scholarly works have been dedicated to exploring its development in different parts of the world (e.g. Cree & McCree, 2012; Dean et al., 2019). For this ethnographic study, we offer a brief overview of Forest School's history, highlighting its development as a pedagogical practice *and* an ethos towards learning (Power et al., 2015).

Forest School has its roots in Scandinavia, emerging during the middle part of the 20th century as firmly rooted within the culture of the region (Dean, 2019; Williams-Siegfredsen, 2012). The Scandinavian term *friluftsliv* literally

translates to “free air life,” and describes a lifestyle characterized by the freedom *of* nature as well as the freedom *in* nature (Gurholt, 2014; Knight, 2023). *Friluftsliv* as a cultural construct is at the heart of Forest School, including ideas about recurring time outside, connection to place, and a respect towards nature (Knight, 2023). Thus, in Scandinavia, there is a sense of cultural continuity between Forest School as a practice and *friluftsliv*, the underlying philosophy. Some scholars also posit that the ethos of Forest School has its roots in Froebel’s Kindergarten and Soerensen’s play-based preparatory schools, both which emphasize holistic, child-led learning (Dabaja, 2022b; Knight et al., 2023). After being established in Scandinavia, Forest School spread to other parts of the world and has recently grown exponentially in popularity (Cudworth & Lumber, 2021; North American Association for Environmental Education, 2023).

Benefits of Forest School

Forest School has a wide range of benefits that are holistic in nature, contributing towards the *whole* child’s development as they play and learn outdoors (Sella et al., 2023). Many of these benefits align with similar research related to time spent outdoors or nature-based learning in more formal settings (e. g. Kuo et al., 2019; Mann et al., 2022; Marchant et al., 2019). Forest School supports the social and emotional development of children, having a positive effect on their mood, self-esteem, and even behavior (Dabaja, 2022a; Hepworth et al., 2024). There are also positive cognitive outcomes such as improved concentration and an increase in creativity (Boileau & Dabaja, 2020; Sella et al., 2023). Another important benefit of Forest School is the impact on a child’s connection to nature and, subsequently, pro-environmental attitudes and behavior (Harris, 2021; Smith et al., 2018). A great deal of the literature reflects the significance of sense of place and belonging as it relates to a child’s connection to the natural world (Cumming & Nash, 2015; Dabaja, 2022a). It is important to note that the holistic nature of Forest School’s benefits apply to diverse settings and to diverse groups of students. For example, some studies have examined the Forest School experiences of students with autism, highlighting the importance of outdoor play in contributing towards social and practical skills (Bradley & Male, 2017; Friedman et al., 2024). Another study looked more broadly at students with special education needs and determined that Forest School had a positive effect on their self-regulation and social development (McCree et al., 2018).

Another clear benefit of Forest School is the way in which it supports a child’s physical development, such as physical endurance, gross and fine motor skills, (Dabaja, 2022b), and immunity (Michek et al., 2015). Coinciding with the physical benefits of Forest School is the construct of risky play. Some scholars argue that risky play is integral to Forest School as it is a critical component of play pedagogy (Knight et al., 2023). Others suggest that Forest School can be an effective place to explore concepts of risk (Harper, 2017) since it can support the development of a child’s risk management skills (Dabaja, 2022a). There are tensions, however, between healthy risk taking in Forest School and cultural risk aversion that is common with educational settings (Connolly & Haughton, 2017).

Despite the extensive literature on Forest School’s history, philosophy, and benefits, less is known about how these principles are enacted and experienced within specific, localized communities. Exploring these lived experiences can provide insight into the cultural practices that shape teaching and learning in a Forest School context. The research question that guided our inquiry was: *What are the lived experiences of the Ridgeline Forest School community and how are these reflective of their cultural practices?*

Methodology

Acting as the foundation to our ethnographic study, an interpretivist theoretical framework emphasizes human experience occurs through a socially constructed nature of reality that research can seek to understand (Willis, 2007). As interpretivists, we recognize the subjective nature of the social world and seek to contextualize knowledge by understanding human actions (Johnson & Parry, 2022). Forest School is inherently a social world of people with shared meanings (see Goldkuhl, 2012), so our goal was to understand *one* Forest School as cultural phenomena, exploring the processes and patterned realities of the community (Rose, 2022). There has been a call to develop theoretical frameworks for Forest School (Leather, 2018), and some scholars have developed context-specific ones for distinct geographical and cultural settings (e.g. Barrable & Arvantis, 2018; Knight et al., 2023; Sharma-Brymer et al., 2018). We recognize that an interpretivist theoretical framework is very general in nature, but Forest Schools

within the United States are underexplored, and thus, require a broad paradigm through which to engage in inquiry. We turn now to the specifics of our research design, outlining our ethnographic approach, the participants and site, data sources, analysis steps, and then the ways in which we attended to ethics throughout the work.

Ethnographic Approach

"If education is always risky, always unsettling, then ethnography is the perfect method to capture its dynamism and power." (Mills & Morton, 2013, p. 1).

Many definitions and conceptualization of ethnography have emerged in recent years that overlap with other qualitative inquiry approaches, resulting in ambiguity and controversy surrounding the term (Gobo, 2011; Pole & Morrison, 2003). Some scholars argue that the multiple conceptualizations of *ethnography* are problematic given the discrepancies between underlying philosophical ideas, such as the desire for generalizable findings which is rampant in education settings (Hammersley, 2018). For the purpose of this inquiry, we adopt Brewer's (2003) definition, each feature of which is described in more detail below when we elaborate on our method specifics:

> Ethnography can be defined as the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting (if not always the activities) in order to collect data in a systematic manner, but without meaning being imposed on them externally. (p. 312)

In early childhood education, ethnographic research offers a unique lens through which to understand the mechanisms of sociocultural events, enabling the collection of detailed, in-depth descriptions of everyday interactions since the research is *in context* (Flewitt & Ang, 2020). Within nature-based learning settings, such as Forest School, ethnography can create opportunities for the researcher to situate themselves within the inquiry and deeply explore phenomena as an individual and community process (Speldewinde et al., 2021). Furthermore, for the majority of the public, particularly in the United States, Forest School remains an unknown and "hidden" construct; ethnographic inquiry can generate meaningful and rich insights so as to inform the broader educational community (see Reeves et al., 2008). Because ethnography is focused on learning *about* people by describing and explaining a culture through holistic insights (Hammersley, 2018; Jones & Smith, 2018), it aligns well with our interpretivist framework which acknowledges and celebrates the complexity of social realities of a community.

As researchers, we bring our own experiences, values, and familiarity with outdoor learning and early childhood education to this ethnographic study, which informs our observations, interpretations, and interactions with participants. Authors 1 and 3 are university professors who partnered with a local Forest School to explore its cultural practices. Author 2, a PhD student and full-time public-school teacher, joined the study to investigate this phenomenon from a practitioner's perspective. We recognize that our positionality shapes the questions we ask, the aspects of the setting we attend to, and the interpretations we draw from the data.

Participants and Site

Due to the contextual nature of Forest School (Lloyd et al., 2018; Wahab et al., 2020), it is important that the setting and background be described in detail so as to shed light on the geographic and cultural nuances. Furthermore "place and space matter" within educational ethnography reflects the cultural and social components of learning, including processes and community perspectives (Hopson, 2017).

Ridgeline Forest School (pseudonym) is an independent program situated in the Southeast United States. It is located a little over ten miles from a small suburban community outside of a mid-sized city. Ridgeline leases the land from a private owner to use for Forest School, and the teachers and students have access to a diverse selection of areas on the campus. These outdoor spaces include: an open grassy area, meadow, ravines, lakes, creeks, and several acres of woodland with trails. The forested regions are home to a variety of mature trees and species of flora and fauna endemic to the region. Ridgeline's program takes place entirely outdoors, with one composting toilet and a simple open-sided structure to use only in case of severe weather.

The program itself runs Monday through Friday, with some weekend options for older students throughout the year. Ridgeline is open to children ages three to 12, with intermittent programming offered to adolescents. There are three different "classes," each with two teachers and grouped within age bands: ages 3–4 (10–12 students per group), ages 5–7 (12–20 students per group), and ages 8–12 (12 students per group). Most children attend twice a week, but families can choose the schedule and frequency that works best for them. In total, 182 individual students participate in the program across the year. School-aged children are typically homeschooled, as Ridgeline is not part of the local formal school system. All instructors have a background in education or outdoor education, and nine instructors currently make up the staff at this location. Like many independent programs in the United States, Ridgeline is not publicly funded, so families pay a fee for attendance, with subsidized options available to those in need.

The students and teachers who attend Ridgeline Forest School are referred to by their *forest name,* a self-chosen title that relates to something nature-based or whimsical. Thus, the pseudonyms used in our study reflect this vital component of Ridgeline's culture. Students can change their forest name when they wish and new students or teachers join each year, so any overlap between the pseudonyms and real-world forest names is coincidental. Table 1 illustrates Ridgeline Forest School's staff who were a key part of this ethnography.

Table 1
Ridgeline Forest School's Staff

Name (Pseudonym)	Role
Ms. Sage	Founder and leader
Mr. Coppice	On-site leader and head teacher
Ms. Stratus	Teacher and parent
Ms. Gneiss	Teacher and parent
Ms. Mushroom	Teacher and parent

We also observed and talked to many students and families during this study, so these voices will be included as part of the greater narrative in the findings.

Data Sources

Since ethnography is a holistic approach to studying holistic cultural systems (Whitehead, 2005), it was important for us to dive deeply into truly knowing Ridgeline and its community by becoming intimate with its people, its practices, and its culture. For this reason, we collected a variety of data in hopes of painting a rich picture of Ridgeline and what it is like for parents, teachers, and students to be part of this Forest School.

Participant Observation

Because a key component of ethnographic inquiry is the researcher's direct involvement in the people and place which they are studying (Reeves et al., 2008), our Ridgeline observations were a foundational data source. These observations included using multiple senses to observe both the physical environment itself, the outdoor space, as well as the interactions of the people within that space (Whitehead, 2005). To be clear, we did not look for any pedagogical strategies or particular actions; rather, we sought to better understand the daily cultural practices of Ridgeline. We took on the role as participant-as-observer, meaning that we intentionally integrated into the setting, but our presence and role were openly recognized (Jones & Smith, 2018). For example, we sought to not interrupt the regular rhythms of Ridgeline, but the teachers would frequently interact with us during transitions *or* the

students would invite us to participate in their play or learning. Author 1 was even invited to choose a forest name, an honor that highlighted the positive relationship she had developed with the community.

There were six visits total, with each visit lasting between two and four hours. The first site visit to Ridgeline took place in October of 2023, and the final visit for this formal inquiry was in May 2025. This adheres to suggestions that ethnography emerges from spending a significant amount of time with people to gain an insider – *emic* – perspective (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Semi-structured Interviews

In ethnographic research, semi-structured interviews are open-ended and seek to elicit descriptive responses from an *emic* perspective (Whitehead, 2005). We interviewed a total of 14 participants, including nine parents and five Ridgeline teachers or leaders (some of whom were also parents of children at Ridgeline). Two parent participants chose to be interviewed together.

Semi-structured interviews are guides for interviewers in terms of focusing on a set of common topics for multiple participants while allowing for the interviewer to follow up or asking probing questions (Roulston, 2010). While interviewing teachers, the questions focused on the day-to-day activities of Ridgeline, their personal experiences and feelings as a teacher at Ridgeline, and the work of teaching at Ridgeline. Parents' interview questions were focused on their child's/children's experiences at Ridgeline and their thoughts and feelings about their family being a part of the Ridgeline community. Interviews lasted from 23-61 minutes each, with the majority lasting 30-40 minutes. All interviews were conducted online via Zoom and after allowing Zoom to take a first pass to transcribe the interview, the third author then reviewed the interview and transcript to make any corrections.

Photography

There is a long history – over 200 years – of photography supporting ethnographic studies in anthropology and sociology (Ball & Smith, 2012). As Liebenberg (2009) noted, "...images can serve as signifiers of culture, highlighting values and expectations of individuals as well as groups. Research incorporating images can therefore provide important information regarding the cultural reality of the community studied" (p. 444). Taking this to heart, each time we visited Ridgeline, we took pictures of students, surroundings, and artifacts in an attempt to better understand the culture of the school. In total, we took 316 pictures while at Ridgeline.

Field Notes

In ethnographic research, field notes go beyond the observations recorded as a key data source and include the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the researcher (Rose, 2022). They serve as both a data source as well as a component of the data analysis since they highlight the iterative nature of the inquiry and our own interpretations that shifted and evolved (see Whitehead, 2005). During our long-term engagement with Ridgeline's community and the aforementioned data sources, it was important for us to engage in reflexivity by recording our reactions as scholars in a way that was both descriptive and systematic (see Reeves et al., 2008). After each visit to Ridgeline or interview with a community member, the research team would record field notes, using rich descriptions to accompany the other types of data. These field notes were an invaluable component, contributing to "the depth and insight of [our] ethnographic research project" (Rose, 2022, p. 132).

Analysis Steps

Pole and Morrison's (2003) text entitled *Ethnography for Education* acted as the foundation for the various components of our analysis, yet each step was also informed by other ethnographers and qualitative scholars. The data analysis process was iterative, as is common in ethnographic inquiry; data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously, with each informing the other (Rose, 2022).

"Bringing Order"

The first analysis step involved "bringing order" to the data, meaning we organized it into broad categories, finding general patterns after a few interviews and participant observations had been conducted (Pole & Morrison, 2003, p. 78). Because ethnography is an emergent form of inquiry, there are often newly discovered phenomena that appear during the initial analysis process (Whitehead, 2005). We found it helpful to use Spradley's (1980) descriptive framework to organize our participant observations and field notes. Spradley's framework suggests that ethnographers consider nine categories when examining phenomena in the field: actors, acts, activities, events, space, objects, time, goals, and emotions. These nine categories provided a way to bring order to our raw data, serving as a framework for organizing field notes and observations after each on-site visit was complete. For example, we recorded activities such as stick collecting or rolling down a hill and later entered these notes into the table, categorizing them within Spradley's framework.

"Moving Backwards and Forwards"

After bringing order to the data, we began to categorize the data in a more nuanced way by further sorting the entire dataset systematically. This required "moving backwards and forwards through the data" as we grouped broad ideas into more nuanced categories that would later be interpreted (Pole & Morrison, 2003, p. 82). We looked at all that we had learned about the Ridgeline community and culture as sorted into Spradley's categories and then established subcategories through which to sort our observations, transcriptions, and photos (Whitehead, 2005). For instance, within Spradley's category of "time," we recorded the observation: *teacher gives students an extra five minutes for snack since they were distracted by bug watching*. This observation was later grouped under the subcategory of "slow learning," an early pattern that emerged as we worked with the dataset and refined our categories.

"Establish Connections"

This analysis step was conducted near the end of our data collection at Ridgeline and involved "establish[ing] connections" between and across the categories we developed in the previous step (Pole & Morrison, 2003, p. 93). Maxwell & Chmiel (2014) detail the ways that qualitative researchers can look at relationships between categories, noting their similarities-differences, cause-and-effect, or sequential nature. Our approach, however, was not guided by existing literature but was instead emergent, grounded in the data itself. The research team considered various ways to connect ideas, using a simple paper-pencil approach to visually document these connections. Specifically, we looked for overlap among subcategories across all data sources collected throughout the year. We met together to discuss these overlapping ideas, and revisited the data multiple times as we developed the themes. The end result was a typology unique to Ridgeline yet most likely transferable to other Forest School contexts within the United States and beyond.

"Describe and Explain"

Part of our final step involved including vignettes as a literary genre within ethnography, bringing to life our own interpretation of the Ridgeline community through descriptive retellings of what we observed (see Mills & Morton, 2013). We "describe[d] and explain[ed]" our observations using a narrative style while also highlighting key connections established as we developed connections in the previous analysis step (Pole & Morrison, 2003, p. 89). Writing up ethnographic findings involves both a description and interpretation, and the overall configuration of the writing contributes to effectively communicating to the reader (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Attending to Ethics

Ethnographers must continually ask themselves "Is this ethical" as they engage relationally with participants and repeatedly manage ethics while in the field (Russell et al., 2022, p. 1). The unpredictability of working with and within a community led us towards regular reflexivity regarding our roles as researchers as well as the ways in which we could accurately and honorably represent Ridgeline. Our field notes were an opportunity to bring our own emotions,

interpretations, and thoughts to the data collection and analysis process as an act of reflexivity. For example, Author 1 wrote:

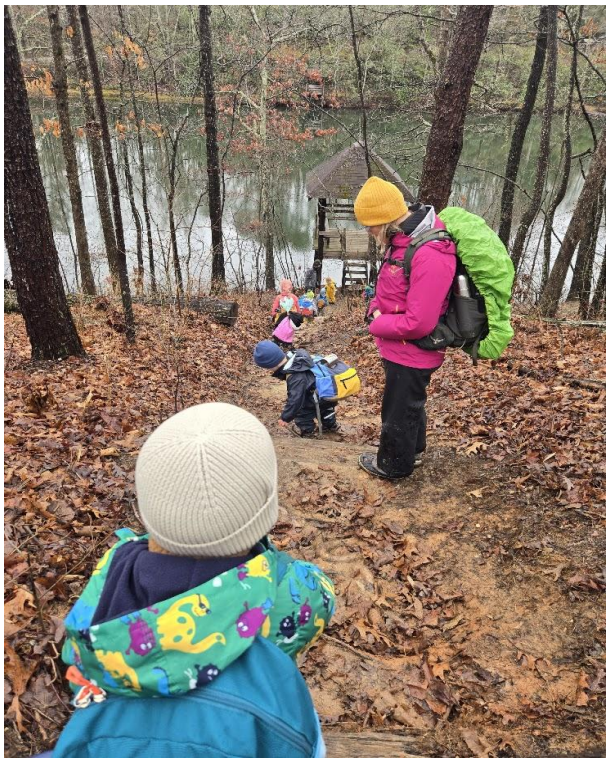
> I can't remember the last time I actually saw students competing in these kinds of games wherein there are clear winners and losers. The kids seem ok with losing! I am remembering my own experiences from childhood during which it was perfectly acceptable to lose at a track and field event or at a school-sanctioned game.

In writing this manuscript, we wrestled with the challenge of meaningfully representing our participants' narratives in a way that honored them and their community (see Rose, 2022). It is our hope that we were (and still are) relational and respectful in past, present, and future acts by attending to ethics throughout the entire ethnographic process.

Findings

Throughout the data analysis process, there were many patterns that emerged, yet three themes were salient throughout, effectively responding to our ethnographic research question: *What are the lived experiences of the Ridgeline Forest School community and how are these reflective of their cultural practices?* We introduce each theme with a descriptive vignette based on our observations at Ridgeline and then expand on each theme by offering sample quotes from participants as well as a general synthesis across all the data.

Theme 1: Slowing Down to Deepen Learning and Connections



A group of students approaches a steep hill that slopes down towards the small shelter overlooking the lake. The hill is riddled with tree roots, slick mud, and a myriad of other obstacles that could prove daunting for 3- to 5-year-olds. Slowly, the students begin to descend, with the teachers dispersing along the hill to observe. There is no handholding or carrying, however, as the students are expected to figure out on their own how to safely navigate down this obstacle. Some students let muscle memory take over, and steadily shimmy down, moving feet-first. Others are more

> *cautious, grabbing onto knobby roots as they let their body slide one hurdle over the other. A three-year-old boy is last to go, and Ms. Gneiss gently encourages him, "Do you see what your friends are doing? Look at how they are getting down." Slowly and carefully, the boy turns around, copying his slightly older peers. Minutes pass, and, although he is making headway, it is at a very leisurely pace. Ms. Gneiss watches, and makes her way down beside the boy, gifting him with the time to figure out this challenge on his own, only interfering with encouraging words rather than physical support. At last, the whole group reaches the bottom of the steep hill which intersects with a gently sloping paved trail. There was an easier way to the bottom that would have been quicker for the group of young students, but time was afforded for this more complex journey and the self-confidence it instilled.*

Taking the more difficult, challenging route with a group of children may seem like a lesson in patience for teachers, but this is a common occurrence at Ridgeline. Time is valued by the community as a tool for deeper, more meaningful engagement with nature rather than something to race against. At Ridgeline, there is an intentional slower pace that creates opportunities for students to be present in their learning and their relationships.

> *Ridgeline gives Acorn the amount of freedom that he needs and space he needs to just adjust himself internally.* (Liora, parent)

Many parents commented on how Ridgeline teachers give students the freedom to develop at a pace that is just-right for them, recognizing that all children are different and don't typically benefit from a fast-paced learning environment. At Ridgeline, the value and practice of slowing down is woven into daily activities across all age levels - whether it's allowing students the time to struggle and succeed in building a fire, pausing a hike to explore a spontaneous natural phenomenon, or creating ample opportunities for unstructured play in the woods. There is also time for meaningful rituals; meditation and reflection can happen when time isn't crammed or overly structured. Mr. Coppice, Ridgeline's lead teacher, describes how he intentionally seeks to create opportunities for students to slow down and learn about nature in a meaningful way.

> *Okay, let's sit down first, and let's all be silent for like a minute. Let's be silent for a few moments and listen to the water. And everybody's completely silent, completely focused, 12 kids, you know, completely silent, completely focused, completely concentrated listening to it.* (Mr. Coppice, teacher)

Mr. Coppice's narrative highlights that, while there are weekly themes and goals for learning at Ridgeline, there is not a frenetic pace towards that objective but a meandering approach that fosters a love of nature through slow learning. This might be the daily ritual of starting together in a circle to consider the day ahead or it may be more significant, such as when students do their "solo time" in the woods at the end of the year. Oftentimes, meaningful thought occurs when there is simply a slower pace to activities that fosters students' ability to connect with nature and reflect on that process.

> *I think [Ridgeline] has impacted them to be more self aware in nature. It's opened their eyes to what nature has to offer on a different level. It impacts them, just in terms of overall confidence in nature, but also joy in nature. And I think it has increased their excitement of learning.* (Connor, parent)

The lived experiences of students at Ridgeline is one of deep, meaningful learning that is slower paced and deliberate. As a cultural practice, slow learning is intentional and often manifested through reflective routines or joyful leisurely explorations of the natural world. Lexi, a parent, describes what it's like at the end of the day when she sometimes has to wait for her child to return from the woods to the meet-up area.

> *And then they'll come up the hill, and we're like, "Oh, there they are." Man, I just love that. Like focus on enjoying and like observing nature and being in nature, where they kind of lose track of time sometimes. I think that that's just unique in our society to allow kids to do that.* (Elle, parent)

Theme 2: Supporting the Whole Child Through Individualized Care

> *Without thinking, the young boy hurled the rock at his best friend, flinging it through the air in an impulsive act. He is the only one who sees the rock hit Orion in the side of the head. It looks like it actually hurt a lot, but Orion keeps on playing in the rain, most likely irked that the rock had interrupted his play. Moments later, the young boy sees blood flowing down Orion's temple, and the teacher also notices, taking action to inspect the wound. The injury isn't severe and will heal quickly, but it is clear that someone acted unsafely by throwing a rock in the first place. Safety at Ridgeline is important, and the boy is uncertain how he will be punished. Will they allow this transgression to slide? Will he be kicked out of Forest School forever?*

The above vignette summarizes a story from Shay's interview, the parent of the boy who was hit in the head with a rock. She used the phrase "a beautiful experience" to describe the incident, particularly in how it was handled by Ridgeline teachers in a way that honored both students' emotions and provided individualized attention to remedy the situation. Shay outlines how the teachers handled the student who threw the rock in a way that was kind, just, and restorative.

> *Mr. Coppice was like, "You know what, I think you need to take a break from Forest School. You can't come back for two weeks. And I'd really like you to either make him some art or write him a letter and tell him that you're sorry, or express your feelings." He didn't say that he had to say he was sorry. And this little boy genuinely experienced remorse. He ended up painting, like two pictures for Orion, one of them was them playing together. And he articulated, he wrote a letter, - his mom wrote it for him - saying that he was sorry, and that he couldn't wait to come back and play with him. And to this day, they're still like best friends.* (Shay, parent)

A core value of Ridgeline Forest School is supporting students holistically, and this is seen in the cultural practice of teaching children by attending to who they are emotionally, socially, and developmentally. As in Shay's story with her son Orion, the community of teachers recognizes that emotions are complex and that creating space for emotional expression is a valuable part of the Forest school experience. Other parents within the community acknowledge how Ridgeline teachers support the whole child, particularly when it comes to relationships and social-emotional growth.

> *I think that the way the teachers facilitate that and lead the group and manage those group dynamics is really important. Like, it's really formative for [Name] and how he's learning how to be social, both with his peers and with the younger kids and with his teachers. So it's really important to me that he has healthy relationships going on there because it is, like, one of the only consistent social things that he does.* (Luma, parent)

Each Forest School student is different, and educating the whole child involves responding to each individual in a way that fosters mutual respect. Holistic education is a cultural practice at Ridgeline and one that is manifest through the lived experiences of students as they receive personalized care.

> …*Self-exploration, learning things about themselves, learning things about their community, about others around them, it is such a holistic experience of just goodness and joy. Yeah, it's just so positive.* (Nenna, parent)

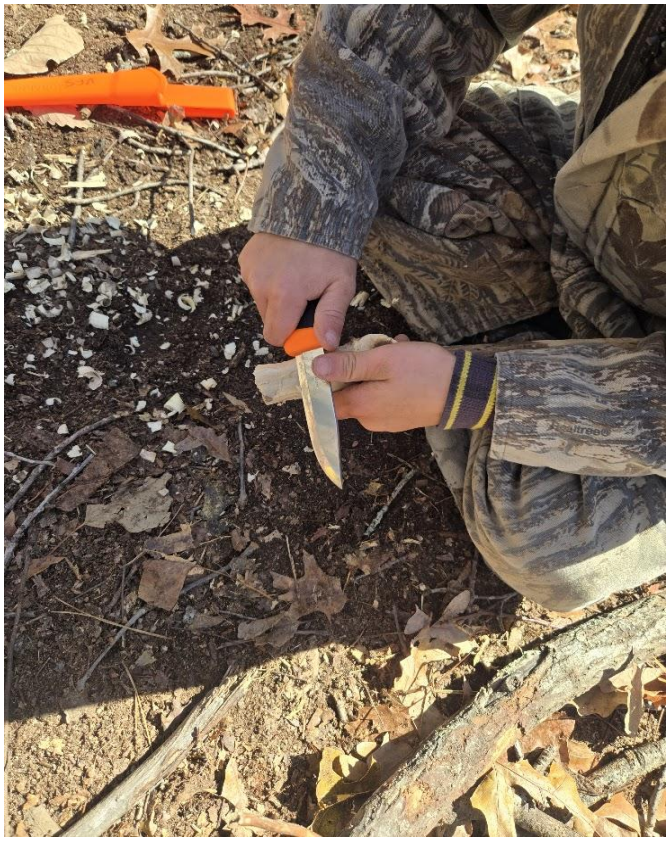
Parents, like Nenna, recognize this cultural practice of the Ridgeline community and the ways in which teachers attend to a child's wellbeing in many ways. Students are simply *happy* at Forest School, and this is largely due to the ways in which Ridgeline teachers support the whole child by curating opportunities for social-emotional health and celebrating student interests.

One of the ways in which students receive individualized care and support at Forest School is through recognizing their achievements and growth in a holistic way. The community uses journey sticks to mark growth in twelve different areas. Ms. Sage, the founder of Ridgeline, explains the system:

> *The children get bands of different colors based on their growth. And everybody's growing at different rates, and so the growth is not like linear where everybody gets the same checks to get a band. No, each child individually is showing where they're growing in a specific area, and it can be something really simple, or it can be something really big. It's shown like, "Oh, that was an aha moment today. Here's a green band, because you identified plantain for the first time on our nature walk, and you were really excited about that so you're going to get a band today for that."* (Ms. Sage, founder)

Whether it's facilitating restoration when a child makes a poor decision or giving students the option of walking barefoot in the forest, Ridgeline values the individual child and his/her experiences. Teachers articulate and exemplify the importance of individualized care, and parents report improved moods and well-being in their children. At Ridgeline, students aren't just "managed", they are respected, taught, and celebrated as unique individuals.

Theme 3: Trusting Students with Independence and Responsibility



Goldenwing, a six-year-old, sits crisscross a few feet away from the smoldering fire, elbows on his knees. In his left hand, he holds a stick that's about 10 inches long and relatively "green". In Goldenwing's right hand, he holds a very *sharp whittling knife. Slowly but confidently, the young child begins creating small strips or curls from the stick, holding the knife at a precise angle and firmly pushing away from his body. He is focused and intent on practicing his whittling skills, an optional activity during this chilly winter day. A Forest School friend approaches to ask a question, and Goldenwing immediately (but conscientiously) puts his sharp knife back in its sheath. An*

> *important whittling rule for these children is to always put the knife away when shifting attention so that distractions don't lead to fatalities. There is also a safety zone that children honor when someone has the whittling knife out, known as the "Blood Circle." The teacher, Ms. Stratus, is nearby, helping a handful of interested students find appropriate wood to whittle and hone their skills. Once everyone is settled, Ms. Stratus sits crisscross herself and gets out her whittling knife, ready for the rhythmic task of creating strips of wood from her chosen stick.*

Ridgeline Forest School seeks to build confident children by letting young people do hard, real, meaningful things. A key part of the culture is the idea that children are capable of many things which oftentimes manifests when teachers curate opportunities for student-led activities and step back to let young learners run the show. In the case of whittling, an adult is always nearby, but young children are trusted with very sharp knives because they are capable of being responsible with such instruments.

Ridgeline teachers explained the importance of supporting student autonomy by encouraging children to consistently be self-starters and to work towards completing tasks independently. This could be as simple as putting on their own socks, asking a peer for help in moving a log, or by remembering to collect their own tinder. Parents contribute to the cultural practice of empowering students as competent individuals, as described by Ms. Mushroom, a Ridgeline teacher.

> *That's kind of how the parents participate, by helping toward independence. Like the more you can support your kid to be independent and okay with stuff, the better.* (Ms. Mushroom, teacher/parent)

A key part of this push for independence involves trusting that students can adapt to changing environments. Ridgeline is geographically located in a place that has a wide range of temperature, rainfall, and, during the years of field site visits, high winds. As researchers, we watched students have a solo meditation moment in pouring rain sitting completely still without complaining. We also observed very young children spend all morning outside in 28 degrees Fahrenheit, using a myriad of strategies to keep their hands and bodies warm. Simply being outside all day at Ridgeline Forest School exposes children to challenging conditions as they adapt to the ever-changing outdoors, giving them practice in successfully adjusting to other variable environments.

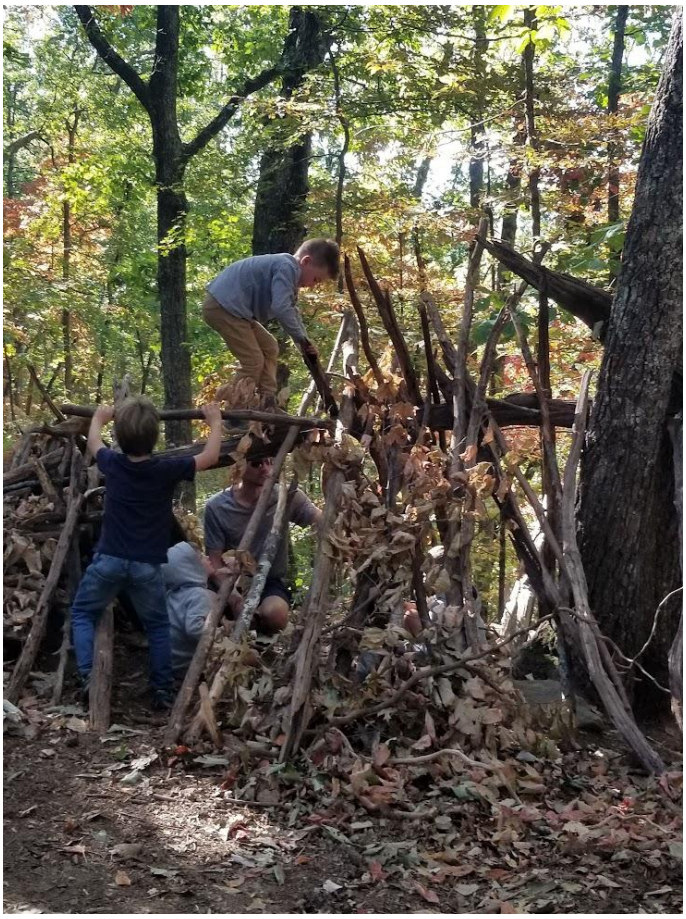
> *Kids are being out there and getting to know their bodies and their limits. I just think it's invaluable.* (Elowen, parent)

Other parents echoed Elowen's narrative regarding the benefits of Ridgeline, stating that exposing children to the outdoors as much as possible contributes to their health and wellbeing. Yet this appears to be mediated by a child's own sense of independence and the opportunities they leverage to be responsible for themselves or others.

> *It's impacted my kids' ability to adapt to different environmental changes. And it's encouraged them, it's helped them see that they can do more maybe than they thought they could do. And I think it's also given me a lot of comfort knowing that they feel comfortable in different outdoor environments.* (Liora, parent)

This idea of independence is also woven into the cultural practice at Ridgeline of moving from novice to expert. The curriculum leans heavily on survival skills, and students are trusted to develop their skills through activities like fire building, foraging, whittling, shelter-building, water purification, and others. Ridgeline teachers are the responsible adults, yes, but they also share this responsibility with the students in a way that fosters community and independence. Ms. Sage, the founder and leader, stated that primitive skill-building is a core part of Ridgeline's culture and that she hopes it trickles over to parents as well:

> *So the kids aren't only coming to Forest School to get this information, but maybe parents can also be educated as well. Maybe these are things like a family can feel they'll have the tools that they need to be able to go on a camping trip together with one another.* (Ms. Sage, founder)



Trusting students with independence and responsibility is a cultural practice of Ridgeline and embodies the lived experiences of this Forest School. This means that teachers allow students to fail, to learn from setbacks, and then succeed on their own efforts. Student-led learning geared towards practical skill development has produced a community of competent children who can do hard things.

> *Both my children gain confidence, just with the skills they learn. You know, they come home and are so proud of themselves.* (Raye, parent)

Discussion

This study sought to learn more about a particular Forest School – Ridgeline Forest School in the Southeast United States – using the guiding question, *What are the lived experiences of the Ridgeline Forest School community and how are these reflective of their cultural practices?* Here, we discuss our findings in light of the literature on Forest Schools more broadly.

Slowing Down to Deepen Learning and Connections

Ridgeline's culture was marked by a slowing down to allow students to focus on tasks and move at their own pace. 'Slow education' is a concept "used to describe an emerging philosophical movement and approach to teaching and learning which allows students to pursue their own interests, become absorbed in their work, care about it and reflect on it—all without the pressure of exams and targets" (Smith, 2017, p. 19). This idea arose in the U.K. in the 1980s, inspired by the slow food movement, and coined by Maurice Holt (2009). Several studies have shown the benefits of slow education or slow school, such as encouraging student self-reflection (Smith, 2017), increased

physical and social wellbeing, increased confidence for learning (McCree et al., 2018), and supports young children's individual developmental trajectories (Nault & Barette, 2020).

Consequently, the idea of slow education and 'slow schools' is not new; however, it is not an idea that has been readily taken up by schools in the U.S. The freedom for students to slow down and dig into their learning is therefore something rather particular to Ridgeline. As seen in the data, teachers at Ridgeline allow students to try things and learn at their own pace and take moments to enjoy the silence or task before them. While the concept of slow education and Forest Schools seemingly go hand in hand, what is surprising is that rarely is this mentioned in studies on Forest Schools. For example, the Forest School Association (FSA) in the U.K. shares six principles that are key to Forest Schools, but none mention a deliberate slowing down for learning. Rather, the principles refer vaguely to 'learner-centred processes' and the aim of supporting 'holistic development' for all learners (FSA, n.d.). Similarly, in McCree et al.'s (2018) study of a Forest School, they note that there is ample time for 'free social play' but do not mention a purposeful slowing down to connect nature and learning. We see this disconnect as an interesting tension, as slowing down is often implicit in Forest School philosophies and activities and yet it is not explicitly discussed. Parents and teachers at Ridgeline seemed to recognize the importance of moving at one's own pace and losing track of time; we would urge more studies related to Forest School to consider pacing and time as concepts of interest.

Supporting the Whole Child Through Individualized Care

The literature on Forest Schools widely recognizes holistic development as a key goal (e.g., Dabaja, 2022b; FSA, n.d.; Knight et al., 2023). Cudworth and Lumber (2021) note that Forest Schools offers a learning environment that supports, "a holistic development of the child, one where their personal growth, cognitive, social and emotional development can be nurtured through a connection with their wider environment and other people and other animals" (p. 81). Consequently, it is not surprising that supporting the whole child was a core piece of Ridgeline's culture.

What is noteworthy, however, is that Ridgeline also emphasized individualized attention and care. And while this is part and parcel of holistic education, again, it is not something explicitly mentioned in the literature on Forest Schools. For example, McCree et al. (2018) discuss a finding they call 'nurture' in which the teachers were meeting students' basic needs (warm clothes, warm drinks during the cold) and building trust through those actions, but they do not talk about care. In Noddings' (2012) discussion of care, she notes that carers (in this case, Ridgeline's teachers) are attentive to what the cared-for (a student) is experiencing and expresses as a need – not what the carer assumes is best for the cared-for. For this relationship to work in education, the teacher must establish a safe environment in which students can express their needs, must also be an intent listener, and possess a depth of knowledge and understanding about the topics at hand. Surely to be a competent Forest School teacher, one must care. However, the field would benefit from more focused and nuanced studies of care in the Forest School context.

Trusting Students with Independence and Responsibility

A final significant theme in Ridgeline's culture was that of allowing students to be independent and responsible for themselves. This is also a common theme in Forest School literature, accompanying or subsumed within the concept of holistic development of children. In a review of Forest School practices in Canada, Boileau and Dabaja's (2020) participants noted that benefits for students include independence, persistence, self-regulation, resiliency, self-reliance, and risk taking, all due to the structures inherent in Forest School. Cerino (2023) argues that for children to learn, they need freedom and independence to forge their own path at their own pace, but in a way that is supported by adults or teachers; this is certainly seen in the culture at Ridgeline. Further, as noted earlier, the notion of risky play and the ability to explore risk management is often integral to Forest Schools (Knight et al., 2023; Harper, 2017; Taylor, 2020).

In the vignette about the young boy whittling, the teacher had set up safety parameters (others staying out of the 'blood circle,' putting away the knife when talking with others, etc.), but did not micromanage the student. Rather, the boy was trusted to explore his abilities, manage risks, and move at his own pace. In the U.S. (and Canada), the notion of allowing for this level of independence and risk during schooling is often frowned upon due to the risk-

averse and highly litigious natures of these societies (Boileau & Dabaja, 2020; Connolly & Haughton, 2017; O'Brien, 2022). Consequently, the level of autonomy and responsibility seen at Ridgeline can be considered quite novel in terms of the typical education in these countries.

Summary of Themes

It is clear that these three themes (slowing down to deepen learning and connections, supporting the whole child through individualized care, and trusting students with independence and responsibility) are tightly intertwined. These themes emerged because teachers truly know their students, understand both their capabilities and what is developmentally appropriate, and consistently provide guidance for safety. Teachers are also comfortable with allowing students to fail and/or struggle so they could work through difficult things, often only providing support or helpful information when students asked for assistance. Slowing down the pace of learning allows teachers to more holistically care for their students. By knowing their students more deeply, teachers can support students' needs for independence and risky play in safe ways. We argue that without any of these components, Ridgeline would not function as it does or have the culture that is so appreciated by its teachers, students, and parents. Just as Forest Schools focus on holistic development in students, we would urge researchers exploring Forest Schools to not only look for components vital to the culture, but also investigate how these components impact each other and work together to create the particular culture at that site.

Context and Place Matter

We would be remiss not to acknowledge the importance of place in the culture of Ridgeline. As noted earlier, a key characteristic of Forest School is a strong connection to and responsiveness with place (Dabaja, 2022b; Elliot & Krusekopf, 2017). While the teachers played a significant role in the practices reflected in the themes, the natural environment at Ridgeline served as a second teacher and the backdrop for meaningful experiences. With its varied areas – meadow, woods, streams, hills, and more – Ridgeline lent itself to a wide range of activities and learning. Teachers took advantage of this, spending extended periods in different spaces and giving students time to engage with what the place had to offer. A consistent notion woven throughout the themes was the comfort and familiarity students felt at Ridgeline. As they interacted with nature and each other, there was a sense that this was *their* space to explore, play in, and learn from. Further, there appeared to be a place for everyone; if a student preferred the woods over the stream, for example, teachers could notice this and build on that preference. In sum, the place supported students in slow learning, whole-child development, and independence nearly as much as the teachers did. And although each Forest School is unique, we would venture that place may play a similar role in many Forest Schools.

In terms of situating this study in the literature, as previously stated, Forest Schools can vary by context and location. The fact that we observed similarities to the Forest School literature (autonomy, attention to holistic development) as well as some differences (explicit attention to care, explicit attention to slow learning) exemplifies this point. Additionally, while O'Brien (2022) made the argument that Forest Schools in the U.S. may be hyper-individualistic and risk averse, we did not see evidence of this at Ridgeline, further demonstrating that differences in Forest School cultures can occur within countries. This study of Ridgeline therefore contributes to the literature in terms of providing yet another detailed description of a Forest School culture and illustrating the variety of these nature-based educational settings that exist.

Implications and Conclusions

This ethnographic inquiry contributes to the literature on Forest Schools within the United States, which is very limited compared to other English-speaking countries (Dean, 2019). The rich dataset of observations, photos, and participant interviews paints a clear picture of the lived experiences of one Forest School community in the United States–Ridgeline–and their cultural practices. Furthermore, the themes that developed shed light on the nuanced characteristics of Forest School within context. Yet this work also informs the global literature on Forest School and nature-based learning in an early childhood setting. It fills gaps concerning the explicit exploration of slow learning and individualized care while also broadening the understanding of student independence and responsibility. In the

Discussion we suggest specific directions for future scholarly work on Forest Schools and contend that more research is needed in a variety of international contexts.

For practitioners, this study provides examples of one Forest School's community and their cultural practices. We believe that the vignettes, participant quotes, and photos can serve as both an inspiration and a pathway for those seeking to develop or improve their own programs. The ethnographic approach of this inquiry provides helpful details from which other Forest School teachers and leaders can benefit. Although situated in a single context, these findings highlight how cultural practices shape teaching and learning within Forest School. Educators can draw from these examples to inform their own instructional decisions, adapt strategies to their local context, and advocate for the value of place-based, experiential learning. In this way, the study not only documents a specific program but also offers guidance for enhancing student engagement, fostering holistic development, and supporting reflective practice in diverse educational settings. It also serves as a reminder of what children are capable of when trusted with independence, and how granting them greater agency can enrich their learning in meaningful ways.

As Forest School continues to grow and thrive across the globe, it is imperative that educators, policymakers, and practitioners recognize the importance of avoiding commercialization that risks diluting its core values. At the same time, thoughtful, place-based adaptation must be embraced to ensure that Forest School remains responsive to the diverse cultural, ecological, and social contexts in which it is practiced (Wahab et al., 2020). At Ridgeline, the absence of commercial pressures allowed the program to develop organically from its local context, which in turn shaped the three themes identified in this study. These themes emerged precisely because the school was not bound by standardized models or market-driven expectations, but instead could evolve in response to the needs of its community and landscape. While the Ridgeline Forest School community is contextually specific, its distinctive culture offers valuable insights into how Forest School can be authentically implemented. By examining such localized expressions, we can deepen international conversations about what it means to preserve the integrity of Forest School while allowing it to evolve meaningfully across settings.

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