Autism, Art and Nature as Relational Aspects of Forest School

Kevin Burrows

Chapter Objectives

In this chapter, I aim to:

- consider how people who are within the autistic spectrum (AS) and people whose neural functions are the norm (whom I shall call neural-typical) perceive Forest School
- look at what educational models which are inclusive for autistic spectrum and neural-typical perceptions need
- suggest how Forest Schools can facilitate inclusive learning.

In this chapter, I will look at art making and creativity in Forest Schools as experiences that sustain inclusive learning for people within the autistic spectrum (AS) and neural-typical people who are outside of the AS. There are fundamental differences in how AS and neural-typical people process information and I seek through Forest Schools to clarify holistic and experiential learning processes common and accessible to both. Educational models that encourage separation of experience into concepts, abstracts, metaphors and archetypes are accessible to the neural-typical mind but can exclude
autistic perception and there is a need to develop inclusive models that support both neural-typical and autistic learning. I suggest that creativity in Forest School woodland can reconnect the symbiosis between human and natural worlds and influence experiential learning models that are intrinsic and accessible to both AS and neural-typical perception.

**Case Study 1: Ivan**

In a Forest School woodland in the south-east of England, 17-year-old Ivan has autism and finds verbal communication difficult. His speech is often abrupt and guarded and it is unusual for him to initiate dialogue, and when Ivan communicates it is usually connected to his physiological needs. Ivan has taken himself off to a secluded part of the woods and is working alone. Modelling with clay, he is making a clay face on a tree. Ivan has been working undisturbed for some minutes and has become engaged in creative dialogue with the clay and tree. After about half an hour, Ivan begins to sing, and his singing grows in strength and in confidence. I check that he is

(Continued)
OK; he indicates that he is and continues singing. His singing does not have words but his sounds appear to be a source of comfort to him. Ivan is relaxed, calm and outside of the guarded and agitated self that he can present in the classroom. It is difficult to know what is going on for Ivan, but here working creatively in woodland he is calm and relaxed and I sense a contentedness about his demeanour.

Forest Schools and Working in Cooperative Creative Groups

My work with people who have autism in Forest School environments seeks to address the anxiety and confusion already present in the autistic mind, which can be aggravated when set against an anthropocentric world view of deconstructed and mechanistic learning models. For the person who has autism, there are experiences and environments with which their perception cannot cope, and such environments can cause them anxiety.

Professor Rita Jordan (2007) points out that it is not the autism that we see but a reaction as secondary behavioural manifestation of the condition. People who have autism are under severe stress, severe anxiety, because of their fractured perception of the world. In other words, the person with autism can demonstrate extreme anxiety in environments that are outside their autistic perception of the world.

My own observations that Forest School environments seem to calm AS students may be explained as reduced hypersensitivity which in turn reduces anxiety.

Carl Delacato (1974) in his ‘Delacato Method’, advocates that for those in the AS, these are times of polarised perception and anxiety-laden behaviour. In ‘hypersensitivity’, the senses become hypersensitive, where lights flicker and sound is amplified, and in ‘hyposensitivity’, there is sensate shutdown or withdrawal from overloaded sensation, where senses become dull.

My work takes place in woodland which I believe can evoke a communicative and beneficial human reaction, promoting a sense of
the Forest School as a holding container. This nurturing Forest School container foregoes concepts of abstract and metaphor and forms pedagogies that hold and reciprocate experiences of wild and sensed perception in both neural-typical and autistic mindsets.

Olga Bogdashina (2003: 46–52) cites autistic perception and world view as ‘Gestalt perception’ where the unprocessed and the experiential is simultaneously perceived as ‘fragmented’ or ‘distorted’ perceptions of self and world. That is, a world where experiences of self and environment are unprocessed and unfiltered, with sensations that in busy, discordant environments can become overwhelming.

Is it then that ‘Gestalt perception’ offers a view of self that is entwined and interconnected with the environment and, if so, can the environment evoke either hyper or hypo sensate AS experiences? Observing AS students’ behaviour in both Forest School and within more rigid mechanistic classroom situations, I hypothesise that Forest Schools can nurture a relational experience of ‘self’ with ‘other-than-self’. Forest Schools can become environments that are inclusive of Gestalt perception which can regulate and contain ‘hypersensitivity’ and reduce anxiety for those in the AS. Other ‘unnatural’ environments that promote deconstructed, distorted and fragmented notions of ‘self’ as separate from ‘other-than-self’ can be confusing for the AS learner and can increase their ‘hypersensitivity’ and anxiety.

In my own Forest School practice, relational learning is achieved by working within the group structure of the ‘story-telling circle’ (see Figure 12.2 below), a circle of logs in a wooded glade where students initiate and share story telling, their own stories inspired by objects found in the woodland.

This is rather like an acted-out social story where power dynamics can be worked through, experientially and creatively. Multimodal expressive arts, concepts of mask making and the dancing of masks, and ‘acting out’ (as in Figures 12.1 and 12.3) increase the potential for phenomenological and experiential interaction and inclusion, empowering social relationality, communication and feelings of self-worth.

Experiential learning from acting out takes place in a larger wooded glade or other part of the woodland and the acting-out activity is then reflected upon in the story-telling circle. Here students have a chance to reflect, empathise and develop understanding of their own
and each others’ feelings or, better put, ‘behaviours’, promoting a better understanding of themselves and their relationship to the group. The experience and reflection help form a consolidation of emotional awareness, social skills, sense of self-image and self-worth, meeting inclusion and belonging needs. These newly discovered feelings and patterns can then be developed further in the wider outside world.
Creative Arts therapist Ilka List (2008: 80) speaks of a ‘secret garden, healing through nature’ where she expands the expressive arts therapy, sand tray ‘worlds’ of psychotherapist Margaret Lowenfeld (2007: 4–6) as ‘simultaneous perception’ in natural environments.

Forest Schools have these very same qualities as places that can facilitate expressive arts and play therapy, ‘worlds’ as places of ‘simultaneous perception’ between self and the natural environment. I argue that the dialogue of expressive arts and play in Forest School environments is a way forward for education and therapy models that are accessible to both AS and neural-typical perception and processing.

**Case Study 2: Matt – Research project to assess what is experienced during non-verbal dialogue using clay, tree and self**

Neural-typical Matt, who is a member of Counsellors and Psychotherapists Outdoors (CAPO), agrees to take part in a group exercise in woodland on the shores of Lake Coniston in the Lake District. The exercise concerns the potential dialogue through creative process in woodland. Matt has recently received news of the violent death of a close neighbour, and the news is still raw. The image Matt creates is of a screaming face over the wound where a tree has had a branch torn from its trunk (Figure 12.4). Matt works quietly alone with the tree and clay for over half an hour, followed by a reflective semi-structured interview. During the interview, Matt explains that:

‘Where pain is formed over the loss and wound, it is a healing process.’

He also said that the creative process in woodland was very deep for him and that the reciprocal process between self, clay and tree alone, without the need to externalise through language, was enough, that there was a healing through the senses.

**Why Outside? Why Forest Schools?**

I have noticed considerable growth in my (16–19 years) AS students’ value of self, self-esteem and communication skills. Students appear to respond positively to being in the Forest School creative group-work container of natural woodland. I call this Forest School because the woodland environment experience has further enhanced learning for the special needs of this learning group. My thought is that
woodland intrinsically nurtures whereas mountain and wilderness challenge. What is it exactly that happens in a woodland or forest environment that is different from other natural environments? To distinguish a Forest School’s function from other natural environments, let us look at some aspects of ecotherapy practice. Wilderness and adventure therapy sometimes seek to take people, for example dysfunctional adolescents, out of their ‘comfort zone’ through relational experience in nature as a kind of ‘hero’s quest’. The aim is to face and conquer fears and challenge behaviours, encouraging profound experiences in nature at transitional moments in their lives. But then they must return to urban environments, not being able to make sense of, accommodate or sustain what has been experienced, what psychotherapist and ecotherapist Martin Jordan (2009) calls a ‘psychological one night stand with nature’.

The wilderness and the mountain are places of pilgrimage which traditionally seek inner strength, knowledge and understanding of ‘self’ – they are places to disassemble the self, to face demons, to conquer fears, to accommodate life change. At the ‘Wilderness and Inner Space’ conference hosted by the University of Kent, psychotherapist Martin Stanton (2009) spoke of wilderness and wildness as ‘primal resonance between the raw and wild in nature’, whilst at the same conference artist and psychotherapist Tessa Adams (2009) spoke about
mountains as ‘environments of wonder and fear’, suggesting that the raw experience in natural spaces resonates with the internal raw and sometimes fearful landscape of the self. I agree that nature offers wild and often dark places of transference, soul searching, awe and wonder and that it is through this inner–outer perception of self and other that transitional spaces in nature can heal. But how can this be for the person who has autism, whose Gestalt perception has no capacity for affective resonance or empathy for ‘place’ or ‘other-than-self’ formed through abstracts or metaphors? It is relationality and belongingness in nature that my work seeks. Ecologist David Abram (1996: 116–17), in regard to natural places as places of learning and relationality between the ‘human’ and ‘other than human self’, speaks about North American ‘Vision Quest’ and the Aboriginal ‘Walk About’. This echoes the ways in which indigenous oral cultures turn towards their relationship with the Earth for teachings that must vitalise and sustain the human community. In my own European culture, woodland was once the predominant feature of the English landscape, pockets of which are still in existence today as are the myth and legend of my own indigenous woodland culture and eco-schema. Forest School practitioner Sara Knight (2009: 94) reflects that there is something magical and enchanting about woodland: ‘trees have an additional magic of their own’. The ‘Green man’ and ‘Jack in the green’ are thought to date back to wild or feral men of the woodland (see www.icons.org.uk, 2009). Woodland may be seen as one of our indigenous eco-schemas and the ‘feral-woodland-mind’, one of experiential and relational perception. Although today these mythical beings or ‘selves’ may be viewed as metaphors, there is always a subjective, experiential and sensate origin to all metaphor. Can we rediscover our former state of wildness in a woodland environment through sensate phenomenological experience? Our woodland eco-schema is the experiential place of the feral self (Green man, Jack in the green) given what presents itself through a phenomenological experience. It is where nature is viewed as experiential and relational, rather than as pre-determined cognitive thought abstracted from metaphor and archetype. Educationalists Colin Beard and John P. Wilson (2009: 162–5) discuss the outdoors as places that awaken the senses and increase experiential learning, and in part suggest that it is the sensate natural rhythmic qualities in nature that meet our experiential learning needs. They describe outdoor spaces of mangrove and forest as places where the senses are more in tune with the natural rhythms of the outdoor environment and a vital part of our ability to create a good experiential learning climate. Clinical psychologist George W. Burns, (1998), comments on our psychological and biological ‘hard wiring’ being triggered
by natural stimuli and that the environment is much more than allocation for experiential learning and an integral part of experience. In her writings on ‘creating restorative eco-therapeutic practices’, psychologist Mary Watkins, (2009) refers to her therapeutic space in the woodland ‘environment as a holding and sustaining force’. Child psychologist Anita Barrows (cited in Roszak et al., 1995: 104) notes that ‘nature has always been a holding environment for me’.

Ideas about phenomenological experience through the aesthetic of the expressive arts are also present in psychologists’ Kaplan and Kaplan’s (1989: 10–11, 195–7) work on restorative environments. Kaplan and Kaplan conceptualise and research restorative environments and comment that perceptual aesthetic reactions that support effective human functioning indicate the existence of an ancient and far-reaching human behavioural function of unconscious assessment of environments. That is, human reaction to natural environments can be beneficial through what environmental psychologist Terry Hartig, (2004: 273–9) calls ‘Restorative Environment as a Health Resource’.

**Case Study 3: Steve**

Steve is 18 years old and was diagnosed in his early years as being within the autistic spectrum (AS). Steve has attended mainstream schools with a Special Education Needs (SEN) support worker, and he came to my work setting from a mainstream secondary school a year ago. Initially, he was withdrawn and cautious. Steve initially found it difficult to form relationships outside of the adults who work in our unit. In unstructured times, he can move into what seems to be ‘standby’ mode where he focuses on a fixed space as if blotting out all around him.

When being asked questions in a classroom situation, he can appear not to be paying attention and he focuses his gaze on a quiet part of the room, the floor, a wall or something bland; Steve does not make eye contact. I read that in his behaviour he is trying to find somewhere visually quiet to reduce his hypersensitivity in busy or noisy surroundings. It is apparent that he has some recognition of the content of the lesson as he will repeat back what is said; his written work is good as is his reading, both at E1 (entry level 1). Steve delivers his words in a fast and abrupt stream of verbal language, which to the uninitiated can come over as being provocative. However, he is very polite and always uses ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ which softens reaction from first-time acquaintances. His words are fast, mechanical, almost
spat out and he often repeats the same phrases or passages associated with the same theme. He has a wonderful smile and often laughs.

My early assessment of Steve was made from my observations in a regular classroom with tables, chairs, posters and all the usual ‘busy’ paraphernalia that goes on in indoor classrooms. Since then, we have worked outside in the ‘Forest School’ woodland area where the tasks set were to look for found objects in the woodland and return to the story-telling circle based on a circle of logs around a ‘fire pit’. Steve’s objects, were an old saucepan, a brick and a piece of ivy. On his first few sessions in the woodland, he sat quietly with the objects, occasionally moving them around but mostly staring at the ground they occupied. Over a period of time, he was able to construct a semblance of a story to do with the found objects. The content of the story is unimportant but his ability to assess and interrelate has improved over a long period of time.

How People Within the Autistic Spectrum Perceive, and the Domestication and Loss of Wild Experience

Is it the environment that the neural-typical population have built through perceived separation from and domination of nature that people with autism find anxiety laden? Adventure therapist Nick Totton (2009) (www.bacp.co.uk/5iatc/keynotes.php) suggests that we have ‘forgone our wildness through our own domestication’. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the ‘world’ outside of autistic perception is Totton’s civilised, domesticated ‘world’. For the person who has autism, I suggest that there already exists a wildness of autistic perception, which is trapped in a ‘civilised’, neural-typical world imbued with domestic rules of separation judgement, value and isolation.

Temple Grandin has drawn parallels with her own autistic perception and animal sensory-based thinking, linking perception of environment and behaviour to her profession as ‘livestock handling system’ designer. Similarities between her autistic perception and animal sen-sate experience have enabled Grandin to create stress-free environments for cattle and other livestock. Drawing on her own autistic experience, Grandin (Grandin and Johnson, 2005: 30–50) suggests that fear is the main emotion in an animal and in autism and that
for the person with autism, thinking is based on a ‘non abstracted’ world perception of what she terms ‘seeing in details’. Seeing what is actually there, what is sensed, rather than seeing the abstract projection of inner concepts as outer worlds. That is, she perceives in sensory-based thinking, in sounds, thinking in touches and thinking in pictures. There is, I suspect, a commonality of reduced anxiety and stress between perceived relationship of sensory thinking, sensate experience and environment, in both Grandin’s cattle corral and stockyard designs and the fragmented world perception of those who have autism.

**Why Art and Creativity?**

In light of Cozolino’s assessment of Grandin’s neural functioning, one can understand that the person within the AS does not deconstruct or form abstracts through language acquisition, but interprets information through visually oriented processing as a direct experiential process.

Happ’e and Frith (2006), Howlin (1997: 39–40), Ozonoff et al. (1994) and Cozolino (2006: 280–9) state that the brain architecture and neural processing of people who have autism show deficits in ‘central coherence’, ‘the ability to form abstracts’, ‘executive functioning’ and ‘language acquisition’, i.e. the neural processes that connect cognitive flexibility, abstract thinking and the ability to initiate or inhibit appropriate actions.

Cozolino (2006: 287–9) states that Temple Grandin’s AS brain architecture shifts perception from cerebellum-dependant language areas to her visual cortex enabling her to think in images.

Baron-Cohen (cited in Harvey et al., 2007: 351–62) suggests that people within the AS have impaired theory of mind which means an inability to understand, empathise or perceive others’ beliefs, desires and intentions as different or separate from the self.

Minshew (cited in Dunn Buron and Wolfberg, 2008: 55 and in Grandin and Johnson, 2005: 33) states that people within the AS can better process information through visual–spatial and visually oriented processing.

Cozolino, Baron-Cohen and Minshew’s findings affirm that people who have autism can process direct experience, through their visual
cortex, without the ability or need to empathise or build inner abstracts, metaphors or symbols. The person within the AS has no means to externalise experience as ‘other than self’ and cannot form notions of the separation of their Gestalt perception into ‘self’ and ‘other-than-self’ as they perceive holistically. The person with autism’s inability to empathise or build inner abstracts that connect to concepts about outer worlds separate from the self, invites interconnectedness through visual and experiential channels of brain function that are ‘relational’ rather than ‘deconstructive’.

James Hillman’s development of Jung’s concept of ‘Active imagination’ into imaginal psychology has a bearing upon image making as a phenomenon of experience.

Jung’s practice of active imagination follows the artistic tradition of encouraging characters and images to reveal themselves, to speak for themselves and to influence the person who contemplates them (McNiff, 1992: 110; Chodorow, 1997: 2–3, 8–9).

Psychotherapist James Hillman (1972: 201) argues that the imaginal forgoes the need to translate or reformulate in a bid to rationalise, interpret or analyse the dream or fantasy into abstract or archetype.

Expressive art therapists Knill, Levine and Levine (2004: 21–3, 81) and McNiff (2009: 41–7) have embedded active imagination, the phenomenological and the imaginal as key tenets of expressive arts therapy. Stating that, we are free to look at the world and our mental life as phenomena of experience as images, as particular phenomena, distinct from symbols.

The creative process offers ways to process our relational world through phenomenological and imaginal experiences of active imagination. There is arguably an accessibility of a duality between AS and neural-typical perception through therapy and education paradigms, that recognise imaginal perception within the visual and experiential language of the expressive arts. This has particular prevalence in a Forest School environment where the relational aspect of learning through the senses takes president over deconstructive methodologies. The Forest School enables relational and experiential processing through the senses by providing an environment where Gestalt perception can become the function of learning. Gestalt perception and learning processes a holistic view of self and other-than-self as one simultaneous experience.
of interrelation. Here Gestalt perception is processed through (non-interpretive) imaginal experience of the senses as the active imagina-
tion’s imagery of the creative and visual arts accessed through to the
visual cortex.

Case Study 4: Research project with people
who have neural-typical perception to assess
what is experienced during non-verbal dialogue
using clay, lake and self

A second CAPO member Rose was sceptical about the visual and
tactile process and later stated that it was not an exercise that she
particularly looked forward to. Rose had an initial aversion to clay
and to working creatively. Rose worked by the lakeside at the shore-
line and found that she soon became enmeshed within the rhythms
and patterns of the lake’s ebb and flow between water and the
land. She found that she could form a connection with the patterns
and rhythms of the lake by working through direct movement into
the clay as rhythmic sensation (see Fig 12.5) rather than external
aesthetic decision. It was as if by bypassing the metaphorical
language of aesthetic forming, she created a direct response through
sensation.

**Figure 12.5** Water rhythms in clay
Conclusion

I believe that experiential, creative and expressive arts cooperative groupwork in Forest Schools can encourage inclusive learning common to AS and neural-typical perceptions. Forest Schools are environments that can reduce hypersensitivity and enhance deeper primal experiences of self, in relation to other-than-self. Key to inclusive teaching of AS and neural-typical mindsets are paradigms and methodological pedagogies delivered through the active imagination of the creative process and accessed through the visual cortex. Notions of what is experienced rather than what is conceptualised are accessible to all living beings and it is the deconstruction and separation of human from nature that excludes us from our wildness.

Discussion Points

- What are the strengths of experiential learning?
- What are the weaknesses of mechanistic deconstructive pedagogies?
- Are you aware of any AS, neural-typical inclusive models of learning?

Further Reading


References


