Module 1

Gender in the forest: expanding possibilities without turning differences into destinies

WP4 REgen II Training REthinking Gender roles in Education in Nature 2: Gender dynamics among children aged 6–12 in nature-based education

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Abstract

Forest pedagogy projects offer distinctive opportunities for play, supported risk-taking, cooperation, mental health, emotional maturation, and theoretical and practical learning. However, contact with the forest does not in itself eliminate social stereotypes. This module examines how gender dynamics can emerge in the distribution of tools, leadership, care, space, emotions, appearance and play between the ages of 6 and 12. It proposes an approach that distinguishes individual preferences from social barriers. The aim is neither to reverse stereotypes nor to impose counter-stereotypical choices, but to ensure that every child can explore activities, relationships and forms of participation without their gender predetermining their opportunities. It emphasises observation, caution in interpretation, listening to children and reviewing adult decisions.

Keywords: gender; Forest School; nature-based education; stereotypes; children aged 6–12; inclusion

Introduction:

Advance preparation, on-site field observation and shared enquiry have been central to the Erasmus+ projects REGEN: REthinking Gender Roles in Education in Nature 1, focusing on children aged 2–6, and REGEN 2, aimed at the 6–12 age group.

From 2024 to 2027, educational teams from Belgium, Italy, Morocco and Spain have been travelling between participating countries to experience other educational settings first-hand, observe practice, compare cultural realities and analyse how gender dynamics emerge in diverse nature-based education contexts.

More than twenty practitioners from Europe and Africa are participating in this collaborative research process, building knowledge through their own experience, exchanges between teams and reflection on everyday practice.

Beyond the findings and materials produced, this experience represents an exceptional opportunity for professional and personal learning: investigating together, questioning assumptions, sharing perspectives and understanding how cultural context, place and pedagogical decisions influence the opportunities we offer children, while also being pleasantly surprised by the convergences and similarities across our educational realities.

The forest is not outside culture

Entering a forest does not automatically erase the social messages children have learned about what supposedly belongs to girls or boys.

The setting changes, bringing different materials and ways of relating, but the group arrives with a history: families, school, advertising, media, video games, children's literature, friendships, and experiences of success or shame.

Nature offers extraordinary possibilities for broadening children's experiences, but it does not act as a vaccine against stereotypes. This is precisely why nature-based pedagogy needs a professional perspective that can recognise when a preference is genuine and when a social rule is closing a door.

In this respect, nature-based pedagogy begins with a simple yet demanding idea: expanding opportunities without reducing children to categories. The aim is not to make everyone choose the same things, correct conventional preferences, or demonstrate that a girl must enjoy tools or a boy must play with dolls.

The aim is to ensure that no choice is imposed by fear of ridicule, exclusion, lack of access or adult expectations.

This distinction between preference and restriction positions educators as reflective researchers of their own contexts.

Nature-based pedagogy is defined as a sustained, regular, learning-centred process, based on relationships, play, choice, observation, reflection and repeated contact with a natural environment, supported by a qualified professional team.

These same principles can provide fertile ground for examining gender dynamics, provided freedom is not confused with an absence of adult responsibility.

The literature has identified potential benefits of nature-based education and Forest School, while also warning that the approach must be examined critically and in context, without idealisation (Maynard, 2007; O'Brien & Murray, 2007; Leather, 2018).

Gender expectations, development and individual variability

Between the ages of six and twelve, affiliations, peer comparisons, and ideas about competence, reputation and social acceptance become more established.

Developmental research describes significant changes in children's understanding of gender categories and stereotypes, alongside considerable individual variability (Martin & Ruble, 2010). This means that trends observed in groups do not justify predictions about an individual child.

Statements such as “boys are more adventurous” or “girls are better at caring” turn a presumed difference into an expectation that may alter access to real experiences.

Bigler and Liben (2007) showed how the visibility and importance of particular social categories within a context, together with the organisation of the environment, can foster stereotype formation.

Bian, Leslie and Cimpian (2017), meanwhile, found in a specific sample that stereotypes about intellectual brilliance could emerge at around six years of age and influence expressed interests.

These studies do not describe inevitable destinies: they show precisely that social expectations have effects and that educational contexts matter.

In professional practice, it is useful to distinguish sex, gender, gender identity and gender expression, without turning an educational session into an interrogation about identity.

Clothing, hair or a choice of play does not allow anyone's personal identity to be inferred.

The educator's task is to protect dignity, broaden opportunities and respond to what the child communicates, rather than fill gaps in their knowledge with assumptions.

Where gender dynamics can emerge in a Forest School session

Gender dynamics rarely appear as an explicit lesson.

They usually emerge in small decisions: who receives the pocketknife first, who is invited to light the fire, who holds the map, who cares for a peer, who tidies up, who leads a construction, who is comforted, who hears “be careful” and who hears “give it a go”.

They also appear in the use of space, the characters in imaginative play, jokes, clothing and the interpretation of emotions.

Studies specifically situated in nature-based education are particularly valuable.

Hine (2024) found that Forest School could reveal restrictions associated with gender norms while also creating opportunities for greater freedom from them.

Decker and Morrison (2023) observed how gender is communicated, experienced and constructed in nature-based education settings.

Trapasso et al. (2018) analysed gender differences within Forest School sessions from a physical activity perspective.

The REGEN 1 report, developed with the participation of nature-based education projects in Spain, Belgium and Italy, combined observations, interviews, a literature review and surveys to explore how these dynamics emerge in forest pedagogies.

The pedagogical conclusion should not be “the forest eliminates stereotypes”, but something more interesting: the forest changes what becomes possible.

Real tools, uncertainty, mud, fire, storytelling, care for the place, construction, exploration and cooperation enter the picture.

Each of these experiences can become gender-coded or be available to everyone.

The difference lies in the group's culture, the organisation of space and adult decisions.

Preference is not destiny; inclusion is not the reversal of stereotypes

Inclusive practice does not mean allocating activities according to quotas.

A girl may love dolls and a boy may choose to build a shelter for weeks.

The problem arises when a choice becomes a rule for every member of a category, or when a preference is used to close off other possibilities.

The literature on toys and play shows that children's preferences are complex, influenced by social, cognitive and biological factors, and cannot be explained in reductionist terms (Weisgram & Dinella, 2018).

The proposal, therefore, is to observe barriers before “correcting” choices.

If a girl does not approach stick carving with pocketknives and knives, we can ask whether she is uninterested, already deeply engaged in another game, has not been shown how to participate, finds the space monopolised, or anticipates ridicule.

Exactly the same may apply when a boy avoids caring play, such as playing mothers, fathers and babies.

The first task of professional intervention is to make the option genuinely available.

This perspective protects children's autonomy. Forcing a child to undertake a “counter-stereotypical” activity to demonstrate openness would replace one imposition with another.

The strongest principle is to broaden possibilities, provide competent teaching, support access and accept the right to say no.

Risk, emotion, leadership and care: four particularly sensitive areas

Supported risk-taking is central to many Forest School approaches. However, courage should neither be measured by gender nor confused with recklessness.

A very confident boy may lack technique; a hesitant girl may be making a sophisticated risk assessment. Readiness to climb, carve or work with fire is assessed through understanding, control, attention, environmental conditions and the ability to follow safety agreements, rather than being a gender-based entitlement.

The same applies to emotions. Fear, sadness, frustration, pride, tenderness and anger are human experiences.

Inclusive pedagogy avoids rewarding emotional suppression in boys or interpreting vulnerability in girls as incapacity.

It also broadens the idea of leadership: leading is not simply speaking louder. It may involve organising materials, mediating, suggesting a solution, sustaining a relationship, remembering an agreement or making room for others.

Care deserves the same recognition as technical competence. Preparing a safe area, repairing harm, supporting a peer, observing an animal or returning materials to their place are complex actions.

If pedagogy celebrates only the spectacular, gender hierarchies may be reproduced even when the stated values are egalitarian.

Intersectionality and caution in interpretation

Gender never operates in isolation. Disability, social class, language, background, ethnicity, age, access to suitable equipment and previous experiences may radically alter a situation. A child who avoids mud may not have a change of clothes.

A participant who does not speak may be concentrating, tired, learning a new language or simply prefer to observe before joining in. Intersectionality is not about accumulating labels; it means remembering that barriers combine and that experience should be explored through questions rather than assumptions.

Research on peer exclusion is relevant here. Killen and Stangor (2001) showed that children reason about inclusion and exclusion in gender and racial contexts, bringing together group norms, fairness and belonging.

For educators, this reinforces a dual responsibility: to respect children's social lives while intervening when a group rule undermines dignity, discriminates or unfairly restricts access.

From cultural understanding to educational action

REGEN 1 was created to better understand gender dynamics in nature-based education with young children and to support teachers as researchers of their own contexts.

REGEN 2 brings together organisations working with children in nature in Belgium, Italy, Morocco and Spain. It extends the analysis of gender dynamics to ages six to twelve and proposes participatory research, practical tools and resources for educators, including an application, cards, training modules, a fanzine, a conference and publications.

This continuity matters: the intention is not to import an external theory into the forest, but to observe how it is expressed in everyday practice and develop responses that can be reviewed.

The pedagogical approach can be summarised in a simple cycle: understand, observe, broaden opportunities, listen, intervene when necessary and observe again.

It does not seek to create a childhood without differences.

It seeks to prevent differences from becoming compulsory boundaries.

What can we do?

- Ask what opportunities are genuinely available, rather than only which activities appear in the plan.
- Compare how different participants are invited, supported, corrected and acknowledged in similar situations.
- Describe behaviour before interpreting identities or motivations.
- Intervene clearly when dignity is undermined or exclusion occurs, without labelling the child who reproduces a stereotype.
- Listen to children themselves about what helps them participate and what makes them withdraw.
- Review decisions as a team and look for patterns over time, rather than drawing quick conclusions from a single incident.

Greater freedom, not a new norm

A rigorous approach to gender in pedagogy does not seek to fit children into a new list of “correct” behaviours.

It seeks to protect the right to explore without gender categories deciding in advance which bodies are brave, which hands are skilful, who can lead, who should care or which emotions are permitted. This task requires knowledge, but also professional humility.

For those of us who educate in nature, the forest offers an extraordinary opportunity: to reveal abilities that remain hidden elsewhere and create communities where tools, stories, risk, care, science, beauty and leadership belong to people rather than stereotypes.

The goal is not to eliminate difference.

The forest reminds us that growing means more than conforming to a predetermined shape: it means unfolding possibilities in relationship with others, with the land and with oneself.

Our responsibility as adults is not to construct a childhood without differences or replace stereotypes with more acceptable ones, but to protect the space in which each person can discover their abilities without gender predetermining what they may attempt, feel, care for, build, lead or imagine.

Whenever an educator observes before judging, asks before assuming, supports without intruding and sets a boundary when dignity is at stake, they do something apparently small yet profoundly transformative: they broaden the horizon of what is possible.

We may never know how far the effects of these everyday decisions reach, but we can choose the kind of world we begin to build through them.

A world in which difference is neither grounds for hierarchy nor a boundary to freedom; a world in which every child can grow knowing that their story is not written in advance, that their abilities are not determined by a category, and that they have the right to explore, make mistakes, change, participate and become whoever they discover they can be, free… naturally.

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