

# Compound Flexibility

*A Critical Review of Fraser Brown's Theory of Compound Flexibility when applied to practice*



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Brown's concept of Compound Flexibility suggests a link between a child's environment's flexibility and the child's gradual development of flexibility. The level of flexibility a child experiences impacts their ability to explore, experiment, and have control. Fraser Brown explains that when children engage in exploration, experimentation, and control, their brains release opioids, leading to a positive self-perception. This process aids in the development of self-confidence, self-awareness, and self-acceptance, enabling children to better handle daily challenges.

Transitioning from a classroom teacher, I occasionally struggle to break away from the structured teaching approach ingrained in me, where lessons are meticulously planned down to the minute. In many UK classrooms, lessons are teacher-driven, with students assigned fixed seating arrangements, learning predominantly indoors throughout the day. Fun elements are primarily reserved for playtime during breaks, a learning style that I found challenging as a seasoned educator.

Throughout my school years, I successfully adapted to the academic environment and met expectations set by both the education system and my parents, who emphasised academic achievement over overall well-being. However, I had creative talents that were suppressed until long after completing my education, as I had prioritised formal education and learning as the primary focus. Several key factors have shifted my perspective:

- I appreciate the value of continuous learning and recognise that learning is embedded far better when I am able to research and develop my own interests. Additionally, I know that I learn best when exploring and cultivating my own interests.
- I find traditional classroom instruction, which involves extended periods of passive listening to one person's theories and experiences, uninspiring. This teaching style makes it challenging for me to stay engaged and focused.



3) As a mother, my goal was to provide my children with numerous outdoor adventures, reminiscent of my own cherished childhood memories when my siblings and I spent long days exploring the neighbourhood with its network of alleyways and derelict houses. We played football and cricket on the streets and we created the rules of the game or we would all explore the local park. My approach with my children was informal and spontaneous - they needed no encouragement to explore and play independently - and I would sometimes wonder if I should do more and lead more. I felt it was lacking. I now realise that these experiences played a vital role in shaping my children into resilient, confident, independent, and creative individuals. The freedom and flexibility they had during these outings influenced their current personalities and inspired their life journeys. They learned to make decisions, take risks, care for others, understand sharing and generosity, and prioritise their own happiness. When preparing to conduct six sessions at Amaryllis Day Nursery, my primary focus was on replicating the training

had received from Lily. The initial five days of training stood out for their lack of restrictions, opportunities for additional learning and practice, and the empowerment felt through the ability to make choices, leading to a sense of fulfilment and happiness.

Amaryllis Day Nursery is situated in an urban area of Manchester, approximately three miles away from the city centre. When I approached the nursery manager with a view to delivering forest school sessions there, it hadn't occurred to me that there would be such a lack of outdoor space at the establishment. In the front of the building is a fenced area that sits on the pavement but there is no garden space at all the back. Directly at the rear of the building, across a minor road, is a huge field. However, there are no trees planted there it is just an expanse of grassland, most often used by local football teams. Furthermore, organising a trip to the field or further still, to Hullard Park is, I was informed, a logistical nightmare in terms of staffing and, as such, such outings rarely take place.



We whittled using potato peelers and we created characters that we told a story about. In small groups, I was able to instruct the children to use the hammers for leaf hammering on fabric. We made story boxes so that they could continue the learning journey at home and become masters of their craft when they explained the processes to their family members. A play sink with taps enabled us to create a mud kitchen in the park and the children had fun creating exactly what they liked using clay. It was then that I felt the children finally had the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities, be independent and exercise their right to choose. It was wonderful to see the transformation in the children. They were eager to take control and after watching me demonstrate how to use the tools I would hear a chorus of 'I can do it' 'Let me do it now' and I knew that I was embarking on the right path. I witnessed children who had been happy to follow, become leaders and begin the final sessions by telling me what they wanted to do and/or explaining the rules of the game they wanted to play. I also recognised that these experiences increased their resilience and when it rained during one particular session

And we moved to a spot under the trees to provide shelter it was the nursery staff who found it difficult to adapt. The children were nonplussed by the rain and continued enjoying the activity. They were protected by tree branches whilst a burst of heavy rain circled the perimeter. In weeks one and two the children and staff were on high alert for any sign of a raindrop, which may lead to an activity being curtailed. Our sessions were full and engaging and the children embraced every activity with eagerness. They were confident in their ability to try and do new things and I saw how relaxed and at ease they were. They would physically pull me along the path to the park and tell me what it was they wanted to do and what they knew.

Forest School encourages long-term engagement with the woodland environment and if we had a longer term of sessions, I am confident that significant progress would be evident. It was a privilege to lead the sessions. The benefits the children experienced were also felt by me and I emerged a far more confident, capable and happier Forest School Leader.





I had succeeded in creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for the children. I utilised the space that I had and brought in various props to create the opportunities that they needed to have and I gradually learnt to enable the children to reach their full potential rather than controlling every aspect of their experience. I have assisted them in their journey to become happier, confident and inquisitive children who wish to be independent and know how to manage risks.

Brown's theory on teaching children in environments with flexibility is one that I agree with. It enables leaders to adapt learning to suit the children and adapt to any changes in that environment- such as the appearance of an animal or the sight of an unusual tree. However, as a seasoned teacher I know that there are other factors to take into account. In order for progress to happen, children need to feel secure and safe in their environment and amongst their peers. They also need to feel that others are invested in their progress and want to see them do well. A teacher who allows a great deal of flexibility in the learning environment but has not developed a good rapport with the children and shows little interest in their

achievements will not foster the same well-rounded, capable children as one who does. As leaders, we need to take into account the holistic wellbeing of children. So, whilst I consider compound flexibility to be of major importance there are other additional strategies that must be employed in order to nurture positive, resilient, confident and empathetic children.