Forest Kindergarten

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The forest kindergarten movement has existed in Europe for decades but has only recently gained popularity in the U.S. It is spreading in the private sector of early education and influencing the educational methods of more traditional North American preschools. As a contrast to the push for early academics, these programs emphasize experiential and student-directed learning, play, and movement. In this sense, they fit into the traditional model of progressive education in the U.S.

Non-Waldorf forest kindergartens emphasize free play heavily, but are also likely to introduce topics related to science and nature study or ecology as part of their daily explorations.

When compared to state and other private schools, Waldorf schools in the U.S. have always devoted generous periods of time to outdoor play as part of their early childhood programs. In addition to the regularly scheduled time outdoors, many U.S. Waldorf preschool and kindergarten programs have additional days spent in the forest or on a farm. However, programs that take place entirely out of doors are new to the Waldorf school movement. This article will explore what this form of education has to offer our modern students and teachers, while also examining some of the challenges that these programs face.

In researching this topic, I interviewed several professionals who work in various outdoor Waldorf and LifeWays programs. Central to all of the conversations I have had about this topic is the effect of such a program on a child's process of incarnation. Teachers spoke specifically about the differences in the morning "breathing rhythm" of an outdoor program.

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The healthy alternation between in- and out-breath—between relative stillness and activity—is one of the essential elements of Waldorf early childhood classrooms. However, there are varying ideas about what makes for a healthy rhythm. There is no doubt that outdoor programs have significantly more "out breath" than traditional Waldorf early childhood programs. Some teachers I spoke with felt that this was a necessary antidote to our modern culture or was simply the natural state of childhood. Others felt there was need for greater subtlety in assessing this question.

Another important theme that arose during my conversations was how an outdoor program changes the teacher's experience of her work with parents and children. This is an issue of great import, considering the strong connection that exists between young children and their teachers. The mental and emotional state of teachers has a profound, albeit subtle, effect on the children in their care. Lastly, this article considers other topics central to Waldorf early childhood education, such as the festival life of the school, artistic work, and the nature of free play.

Variations in experiences of free play

The teachers I spoke with agreed that modern children, particularly urban children, do not receive sufficient time to explore freely in nature. Forest kindergartens offer this kind of experience in abundance. In an outdoor program, free playtime takes on a different tone. There are no toys or playthings; children must find these for themselves among the debris and plant life that nature makes available. In this way, the

forest experience offers excellent opportunities for children to develop individual initiative and strong imaginative capacities. Several of the teachers I spoke with observed that children's play changes when they are deep in nature. The relative openness of the outdoors affects the types of games that children play and how they play them. While children must make playthings out of the most basic resources, their play also tends to be more movement-based, or larger in gesture, than their indoor play. One teacher described this difference by saying that in the outdoors children's "out-breath" is bigger than is possible indoors. During such outdoor play, teachers noticed fewer conflicts than they observed indoors and play took on more variety and creativity. They also noticed children breaking from play habits and friend circles that existed in the classroom. Teachers noted fewer disciplinary issues, too, particularly with the older six-year- olds.

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It was noted that, with fewer transitions in the morning from one activity to the next, children's play was deeper, which I interpret to mean games lasted longer and took place with greater concentration. Some teachers also noted more rough-housing. With the additional space outside, teachers felt comfortable allowing such play, to varying degrees. While playing in the forest, children experience a higher degree of being trusted. They are not always as closely watched as they would be indoors. Children are allowed to play more wildly, but without disrupting others (for example, gun play). It was often mentioned that boys are able to engage in these types of activities, to which they are naturally drawn, but which have to be censored in other settings. Risk-taking is also a natural part of the outdoor play experience, and children in such programs are encouraged to find their way into the play atmosphere, developing individual risk-management skills. There is plenty of climbing, running, balancing, building, and other large motor and strength-building activities. [See Joan Almon's article, "The Value of Risk in Children's Play" in the Spring/Summer 2014 issue of the *Research Bulletin*, Vol. XIX Number 2 – ed.]

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Controversy can arise surrounding rough-housing and its role in child development. This topic requires a great deal of attentive observation on the part of the teachers. The case is often made that boys, in particular, require such play to properly release energy and find their way in the social world. However, children interpret this kind of play in a wide variety of ways, so it cannot be said that rough-housing is always healthy or always disruptive and unhealthy. Teachers must work to read the mood of the play to know when, whether, and how to intervene. They must know their students well enough to determine quite firmly where the boundaries are to be drawn. A particular question for teachers to ponder in relation to this issue is: *How do I support the moral development of the children and their developing sense of the other, and at the same time give them space to find their own way with their peer group?* It is the teacher's job to create a safe, supportive classroom community. Since these types of situations can create conflicts among the parent group, regular and clear communication with them about the school's values is also essential.

Expansion and contraction

As mentioned earlier, outdoor programs offer abundant expansive, or out-breathing, activities. However, in the programs I observed, times of

free play are interrupted by mealtimes and, in some cases at least, by circle time and movement rituals that lead the children from one play area to another. These transitions create opportunities for moments of in-breathing, albeit on a smaller scale than would be the case indoors. Such transitions are also moments that allow the teacher to connect individually with students during care activities. For example, hand-washing before snack can still be done with the kind of quiet, loving attention that is typically practiced indoors. Such a moment allows teacher and student to slow down and connect. Especially in winter, this moment of soul warmth, experienced together with warm water when possible, adds a balance to the ruggedness that comes with a morning spent outdoors.

Like indoor programs, forest kindergartens often include a work component. In the outdoors, work is physically more laborious—stacking wood, lifting, shoveling, and raking. Work of this nature requires the children's will forces to be more focused and concentrated. These activities require a great deal of strength, which helps to bring children more fully into their bodies. In this respect, real work and sustained walking can help to balance the excarnating effect of free play in the wilderness.

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In outdoor programs, small motor activities are generally de-emphasized. Crafting, painting, sewing, and working with beeswax are rarely—if at all—part of the daily schedule. Programs that include circle time may offer some small motor activities, but this activity tends to be relatively brief and is mostly a group activity, which is a quite different experience from quietly painting or sewing. There are varying opinions on the necessity of such work in the kindergarten.

The question was raised by more than one teacher whether some indoor kindergarten classrooms offer too many small motor activities. Teachers ask themselves whether the Waldorf movement in general has become too focused on creating objects that can be sent home as proof of a child's engagement in the classroom. Some teachers who work in more traditional Waldorf settings report feeling pressure to have their children create products for their parents. Many individual schools and teachers have been working to bring into focus what really serves the needs of young children.

As forest kindergarten students leave their programs and enter the elementary schools in growing numbers, it may become clearer whether something is missing as a result of the relative expansiveness of the forest curriculum. In my view it is unlikely to be a particular skill, since young children easily find their way into handwork, painting, and drawing in the elementary school. It is rather a question of whether this kind of indoor activity develops something in the children that days spent in a forest setting does not. It is a question that each school has to answer individually.

It is very possible, of course, to find work for the children in the outdoors, as already mentioned, and artistic work certainly does not have to disappear when the program is held outside. If the school cultivates a strong relationship to the seasonal festivals, for instance, there will always be things to create and rituals to prepare in anticipation of these special moments. The integration of these seasonal crafts and arts into an outdoor curriculum seems to me an essential component, offering children the opportunity to process artistically their many experiences of nature's seasonal changes.

Practical considerations

Spending an entire day outside with children presents the teacher with many challenges. These range from carrying all supplies (including food, dishes, camp stove, a toddler potty, etc.) in backpacks to the play destination, to supervising up to 200 acres of farm and forest. In most cases this type of program requires a great deal

of practical preparation and forethought, but ultimately the teachers I spoke with felt that it takes no more preparation time than is required of a teacher in a more traditional program. Farms and gardens require year-round care, and wilderness spaces, to a lesser degree, also need to be maintained. For programs that own such a space, this year-round commitment needs to be considered.

One teacher cited the helpfulness of the point-periphery meditation[1] in developing a healthy relationship to the wide-open space she and her students occupy. In the forest, the teacher's presence must reach farther than the walls of a classroom. She needs to have her "I" reaching out to children who might be quite a distance from her. Children also need to develop a relationship to non-physical boundaries. Teachers and students create a kind of home within the woods, erecting invisible boundaries inside their permissible play area. One teacher felt that this particular meditation helped her to develop a relationship to the boundaries she created for the children out of doors, as well as to feel her awareness stretching far enough to encompass all of the children in her care wherever they were in the play space.

Another teacher shared that the experience of warmth has to come more from the teachers rather than from the space itself. Of course, children have their warm clothing and sometimes hot water bottles, or even fire and warm food, but the sense of warmth goes well beyond its physical expression. In the outdoor classroom teachers have to work harder to create moments of soul warmth. One teacher noted that children who come to her program from an all-day outdoor program seem to have "thinner skin" and "need a sheath of warmth" wrapped around them. Teachers who work outdoors, then, must find replacements for the indoor experiences that foster this feeling more easily. One way to accomplish this is to create moments of warm connection during care-giving activities. It would be easy in an outdoor program for some of these activities to fall by the wayside or be pushed more quickly into independence. But activities such as hand-washing, hair brushing, or dressing offer important opportunities for the teacher to envelop the children in her warmth and presence. Planning such moments in the daily rhythm also allows teachers a scheduled time to observe each student.

Imitation and the outdoors

Teachers I interviewed spoke positively about the experience of working outdoors, saying it improved their teaching and their strength for the work. They did not seem to mind the extra practical requirements of their programs, perhaps because they felt their work with the children flowed more easily. Several cited how being outdoors was nourishing for them, supporting the peaceful mood they wished to cultivate. They felt that spending the day outdoors had a positive effect on their pupils because they were less stressed and more engaged than they might be in a different setting.

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From this we can also see that outdoor programs may suit certain teachers better than others. When we consider how much children absorb through their imitative capacities, we can appreciate the importance of the teacher's overall mood and attitude toward her work. Teachers who feel enlivened by further time outdoors will be able to pass that refreshment on to their students.

The practical work of the teachers in the forest kindergarten is quite different from the knitting, sewing, and cooking tasks that teachers are working on indoors. Outdoor work tends to be more physical while still requiring careful, purposeful attention. Teachers may be chopping wood, clearing brush, gardening, pruning, and

whittling. The children then have different work to imitate in their play, which will also contribute to the mood and energy of their outdoor play. Some teachers certainly appreciate this shift in their daily work, as well as the chance to move away from more traditional gender roles.

Even though the work is different, it is, of course, still important for teachers to consider the gesture with which they complete their tasks. The gesture of chopping wood is essentially different from, say, the gesture of kneading bread. Chopping wood has significantly more intensity. The teacher who is aware of these qualities will be better able to balance them with the attention and mood she brings to her work. Outdoor classrooms offer a wide range of work possibilities allowing for a balance between expansive and contractive work on the part of the teacher.

Working with parents

Additional challenges arise for forest kindergarten programs concerning communications with parents. Depending on the location, different safety needs arise. Parents must be well informed and committed when it comes to proper clothing. Teachers need to be especially well informed about first aid, the specific dangers of their region, and proper protocols in case of any emergency.

A few of the teachers I spoke with noted that American parents are often more likely to worry than their European counterparts. Parents may not be comfortable allowing their children to play in the rough-and-tumble manner allowed by some outdoor programs, or may feel concerned about the risks inherent in natural play areas. It is essential that teachers inform parents about the nature of all elements of the program and that parents are completely on board with them.

Parents also have to be willing to take on additional work such as tick checks, washing muddy clothes every day, and providing multiple sets of outdoor gear. Otherwise such a program cannot function properly. It is essential that forest kindergarten teachers are clear, careful communicators and that paperwork is properly addressed.

Some schools offer an outdoor element in their parent-child classes to begin this education early and help families develop a comfortable relationship to nature. Many parents may not have experienced such relationships in their youth, and it may take extra effort on their part to learn how to connect their own young children with the wilderness. School-sponsored family nature walks are an effective way to encourage early outdoor experiences. Families with these background experiences are more likely to structure their home lives in a way that is in harmony with the children's school experiences.

It is important to note that forest programs have to take care in their selection of eligible children, since they need to be mature enough to handle the additional freedoms and responsibilities these programs afford. Teachers must be careful during the initial interview process to ensure that a child is capable of participating without putting anyone in danger. Without the presence of a fenced-in play area, teachers must depend more on children to be aware of invisible boundaries and to be careful around heavy or sharp tools and fires.

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Wilderness, farm, and classroom

It is important to distinguish between the experience of a forest program and a farm or garden program. In the forest, children experience nature that has been only mildly affected by humans, if at all. In the garden or on the farm, children experience humanity's

transformation of nature. Indoors, children experience most fully the effects of human culture and influence on the natural world.

Waldorf preschools and kindergartens aspire (through their architecture, painting, and wall decorations) to create an indoor atmosphere that nurtures and supports the development of the young child. Nature is nurturing in her own way, but indoor spaces imagined, designed, and created by humans offer something different. Here arises yet another question to be considered carefully and thoughtfully by each school faculty: What does our indoor space offer our students? Is it necessary? What does the forest or farm experience offer in contrast, or in addition?

Ideally children will have the ability to experience all three of these stages of transformation: wilderness, garden or farm, and indoors. Unfortunately, many modern indoor spaces are created with a more utilitarian intention rather than a spiritual or developmental one. Generally it is less expensive to ready an outdoor space for use by the children. However, teachers who work entirely outdoors may consider the benefit of simple structures like forts, lean-tos, or houses built of branches. Such houses give children the chance to retreat a bit from the expansiveness of nature and come to a more inward mood. Most indoor classrooms have a cuddly corner for children who want to step out of the play for a quiet moment. Some children will need to retreat more than others, and having such a place available can be helpful. A structure that is built with care and attention to detail will have something uniquely human to offer the children.

Conclusions

Many people within the outdoor school movement suppose that young children will have an easier time transitioning to an indoor elementary school classroom after their forest kindergarten years because these children will have had time to move, develop their initiative, and learn self-control. It's hard to assess the truth of these suppositions because forest kindergartens have been operating in this country for only a few years and because there is such wide variation in individual children. In juxtaposition to this view lives the concern that children will not learn how to be in a classroom and will require a greater adjustment period as they enter a more traditional program. For the moment, the most pressing question remains: Does a forest or farm program help children to incarnate properly in their early childhood years? We want our children to reach age seven inwardly prepared for the tasks of the middle years of childhood.

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Forest and farm schools offer greater out-breathing and a different kind of structure. Waldorf educators know that part of their task is to teach their students to properly breathe in the broadest sense of the word. It is the teachers who bring form to the day to help children find their way to in-breath and out-breath. In a program with less structure, children may be left free to find their own rest and movement in their play. Different children have differing needs for finding balance. Some need help to overcome excessive rigidity; others need to find their way to more form. It falls to the teacher's wisdom, born of her observation and meditative practice, to create a structure that provides the proper balance for the children in her care. An outdoor program has its own challenges and gifts, but the essentials of the task of education remain unchanged. The teacher must reflect, adjust, and study to understand fully the needs of her students.

We ought not to see the forest kindergarten movement simply as a solution to the negative effects that modern society visits upon our young children. Sometimes we hear the argument that children's needs will be met only by a return to the ways people lived and interacted many years

ago. However, our students are modern children, and while we can create such atmospheres within the controlled space of our schools, we need to look also at the bigger context within which our students live. In my opinion, increasing outdoor time alone is not enough. While it may help to lessen some of the symptoms students are showing as a result of the challenges of the modern lifestyle, it isn't necessarily going to meet their deeper soul and spiritual needs. For that, we need teachers who are paying attention and asking the right questions. There is no doubt that these schools, and schools that have expanded their outdoor time, are offering something relevant and meeting a need that lives in their communities. But, in the end, it is not the details or location that count so much as what takes place each day between teacher and student. This is where education lives.

Endnote

1. Rudolf Steiner, *Education for Special Needs*, GA 317 (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1998), pp. 177–78.

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Photo courtesy of Mary O'Connell, from her LifeWays book *Home Away from Home*