
A Hybrid Without Batteries

The Evolution of a Hybrid Outdoor Kindergarten

— Baruch J. Simon

Growing up, I went to a school that calls itself a wild school. This concept, somewhat radical, rests on the premise that mother nature is and always has been a primary teacher. Access to nature and the exploration therein is of primary importance, and “sky time” is valued as much as any academic learning. Upland Hills School, in the forests of southeast Michigan, sits surrounded by hundreds of acres of national forest, swamps and hills. The school is located inland of the sweet seas, between the suburbs and farmland of Michigan. Growing up as a student at this wild school showed me aspects of myself that were previously dormant and taught me firsthand the fragile, yet resilient relationship we foster with the earth and sky, and the interconnectedness of all beings. It shaped me in ways that are still revealing themselves as gifts throughout my life. At the school, classes are offered such as theatre play shop, maple syrup collecting, all-school capture the flag, and animal tracking. Our wintry mornings included daily sledding on a nearby toboggan hill and skating on a forest pond down a trail. From these roots, and from these teachers, I knew that I wanted to become a teacher myself, in order to align my life’s purpose fully with the mission of Upland Hills school: to preserve, protect and nurture the innocence of children.

I became a Waldorf early childhood educator to uphold the mission of Upland Hills school. I knew that I wished somehow to honor and carry forth the gifts that were given to me from my childhood. Being



a student at the school had instilled in me a passion for learning, a love for the arts, and deep reverence for the natural world. Eventually, our family moved to the mountains of western Colorado, and I joined the faculty of the Waldorf School on the Roaring Fork as a Kindergarten teacher. The evolution of a



forest hybrid Kindergarten at the Waldorf School on the Roaring Fork emerged over the course of several years. We saw the need to evolve the curriculum to meet the changing developmental needs of young children in our time.

From the time I came to the Waldorf School on the Roaring Fork, we hiked to the wetlands each Friday morning. The children bundle up in all of their layers, and, no matter the season, venture outdoors through a system of trails to the wetlands for the morning. The pathway crosses through the back of the school's campus, down a hill, and along a series of platforms, before crossing a short suspension bridge over a creek to the wetlands. We trek out into the woods over the wet marshy willows and water reservoirs, often seeing ducks, geese and occasionally hawks or eagles along the way. The teachers take time to observe with the children the nature that surrounds the landscape. We hike with snacks of bread and butter, cheese, and carrots in our backpack, along with emergency first aid and supplies. The children take water bottles for themselves in their own backpacks. Upon arriving

in the wetlands, the children do circle together, rest their backpacks on the earth, and then set to playing. The play takes on a life of its own, and time stands still while immersed in the willow woods upbank from the Roaring Fork river. The children then settle in: digging with sticks, climbing trees, grinding fairy dust, or being content in observation of the wildness of the landscape.

This experience cultivates inner and outer resilience through tangible interactions with the natural world. It also opens up the imagination to use "found objects" for creating worlds of play. Sticks, stones, bark, and sand provide a canvas for the imaginative world of young children to unfold. In that unfolding the children find themselves as part of something much greater, yet connected to a developing inner confidence within themselves. This is truly a gift to the innocence and imagination of young children. New ideas are wrought; collaborations and opportunities for greater exploration occur. Most children are content to just "be," held by the teachers in the natural forest environment.

There are many reasons to bring children out into nature beyond having the opportunity to play in and with the natural playscape. Outdoor time provides children an opportunity to breathe fresh air, to witness the wonders of the natural world, to increase powers of observation, and to calm and work out extra energy. Thus, the overall experience fosters the forces of creativity, will, and imagination.

When children are left free to create from their own imaginations, it is remarkable to witness the structures they build, such as shelters, teepees, or forts using fallen tree branches and tree limbs found in the woods. These creations are often large enough for several children to climb inside and explore. Sometimes burrows of tunnels are built within the willow bushes. When they build with fallen trees or limbs, the children are using gross-motor movements and muscles. Their hard work is often done in collaboration with classmates, which fosters communication, flexibility in thinking, teamwork and problem solving. One of the benefits of this type of hard work is that it builds willpower, tenacity, and resilience when faced with challenges, all skills that serve students and prepare them for life. Many students turn to a smaller tiny world and build fairy houses at the base of trees. Building small structures utilizes fine motor skills and provides opportunities for children to imagine more intently by pretending that they are entering a fairy world or a magical realm.

Some children initially do not know what to do or what to play, and ask frequently when we will return to the classroom. We sometimes have to encourage a friend to help bring the child into play and bridge social interactions in nature. Sometimes we whittle wood together with the older children in the classes. Over time, in spending this hike day each Friday outdoors in the wetlands, we discovered more and more benefits to the children's development.

Recognizing that the developmental needs of young children are continuously shifting, we also noted that there is something inherently consistent in terms of their overall needs for sensory, motor, and physical development. Integration through natural materials has a wisdom that streams forth from the children's own will forces. A child with vestibular needs might repeatedly walk on a log evenly placed upon two stumps. They might then progress to balance from one rock to the next along a rocky trail.

Children with eye tracking or vision needs might gravitate towards this activity for their integration. Climbing trees builds upper body and core strength, and creating monkey calls and language while in the trees builds communication and social interaction. With the influence of more and more children exposed to screens, we saw this healing balm of nature to be multifold in its benefits. In response to these growing needs for integration and nature explorations, we created a rhythmic, weekly outdoor program that allows children to be outside for over half of the day; hence, the forest hybrid was born.

Our weekly rhythm shifted from a single hiking day to spending additional time outdoors each day as part of our daily and weekly program. This allows experiencing and learning from the elements of nature and embracing the wisdom of "sky time."

Rather than becoming strictly a forest program, we wished to retain aspects of the indoor curriculum that we felt could best be accomplished indoors. Activities such as painting, drawing, and certain crafts were held beautifully in the indoor space of the Kinderhaus. The forest hybrid evolved as a means to meet the children in a way that nourished their natural development and connection with nature, yet also retain aspects of the indoor curriculum we felt were essential.

The hybrid rhythm is as follows:

- Drop off
- Outdoor Play
- Transition inside
- Circle Inside
- Artistic Activity Inside
- Outdoor Play at Willow Camp
- Snack Outside
- Outdoor Play/Craft at Willow Camp
- Clean up Willow Camp
- Head indoors for Story/Puppet Show/People Play
- Lunch Indoors
- Rest Indoors
- Outdoor Play in the Kinderhaus Play Yard
- Pick up on the Play Yard

We begin our day outdoors on the Kinderhaus play yard with free play and jumping rope. We then call the children to line up and head inside for circle, followed by our rhythmic artistic activity of the day. Next we set our chairs for story time on the red rug;

place our lunches, placemats and napkins at the table; and then get dressed in all of our layers to head outside for the rest of the morning. Starting inside with some formed activities sets the tone for the day and warms the children during the coldest time of the morning. It also encourages the parents to drop off children at school in a timely manner.

Once outside, we hike down to our Willow Camp. This is an outdoor play space that includes a tipi, a warming tent, a ring of wood rounds, and an outdoor mud kitchen that was built by a third grade class at our school. Willow Camp also includes an outhouse to take care of bathroom needs. The camp is in a ring of trees and hills, thus creating a natural boundary on two sides of the space. The fences on two other sides surround and enclose the space. The children learn the boundaries by walking them in the first week of school. They adhere to these boundaries with reverence while playing, exploring, and caring for the space. We have tools such as shovels to dig, brooms to sweep, and sifters to make fine sand. Some children build fairy houses or create playscapes with the found objects of sticks, rocks, sand, mud, snow, and even ice. What continually fascinates me is the ability of children to incorporate found objects into their worlds of play. Having taught for several years in the kindergarten, I expected the children to be bored with the limited resources with which to play. However, I observed that an even richer, more imaginative playscape was created with less formed objects.

Last year at Willow Camp, the children spent several weeks digging out an old car tire that had been submerged under several layers of leaves, sticks and soil. Each day for two weeks, the children worked to excavate this tire. They used sticks, shovels, and their hands to uncover the buried treasure. Once the tire had been brought forth from the earth, there was much celebration and even shouts of joy. Next the children brought the tire to a small hill and took turns rolling it down the hill. Each time the tire rolled down the hill, the children roared with laughter and with joy. This became a favorite activity for the play at Willow Camp for the next several weeks, endlessly discovering ways to engage with this, “found object.”

Last fall, we decided to make all of our Michaelmas crafts outdoors at Willow Camp. We brought two tables outside from the tent and began sanding and rasping our swords and handles. We then drilled holes into the swords using a hand drill, sawed a small

section of a wooden dowel, and secured the dowel in place with wood glue. We painted the swords golden yellow and once dried, we made holsters for each sword by twisty-tying rope to make a belt. Additionally, we dyed capes using marigolds, calendula, and sunflower petals from the garden. We added turmeric to the dye pot to glean the richness of gold and after mordanting the silks overnight in the dye pot with vinegar, hung them up to dry. These processes were all done outdoors, culminating in our knighting ceremony inside the classroom in conjunction with the festival of Michaelmas.

In the winter months the children build snow people, snow forts, tunnels and other sculptures in the snow. Sleds and balancing snow boards are favored playthings as the hills become covered with snow. The children practice sharing the sleds and boards and giving each other a turn. They also work to integrate their sense of balance, proprioception, and gross motor skills while sledding.

Each spring, we create our crafts for the golden knights (rising first graders in the fall) outside at Willow Camp. We roll a skein of yarn into a ball and finger knit the ball to create a jump rope, with handles made using a petal lathe. We will sew pouches for our Little ones outdoors and make puppets to create a puppet show using ideas of the children’s own creation. We do woodwork outside by building sailboats to float down the creek.

The Willow Camp tipi was donated by a family at the school and provides a cozy space in which to play. Last year, we placed flagstone on the dirt floor of the tipi to ground the space, with large lambskins to create a soft, warm and inviting surface. We brought some play stands, wooden blocks, and a play kitchen into the tipi, as well as some silks with which to play. We encourage Little ones to be played with inside of the tipi. This became an outdoor/indoor nook for play to occur while we were at Willow camp.

The warming tent is roughly 24 feet long by 15 feet wide and has a cubby space to hang our backpacks while at camp. It also includes a wood stove in one corner of the tent. The wood stove warms the tent well on days where there is heavy downpour of rain or when the temperature drops below zero degrees. We can fit the kindergarten children inside of the warming tent to have our snack together on days where the weather is inclement outside. The upkeep and maintenance of the warming tent and tipi provide continual opportunities

for the children to do practical work alongside their teachers, like carrying wood, clearing the decks of snow, and sweeping the platform floor.

The forest hybrid Kindergarten strives to meet the developmental needs of young children by balancing our rhythmic time outdoors with time indoors. In doing so, we wish to imbue in children the reverence, resilience, and overall foundation of sensory and physical integration that will prepare them for a lifetime of learning. The living nature of the program is unique to our environment and takes into consideration the rhythm that will best meet the children of the Roaring Fork valley for today's world. Seeing the children grow and develop in their kindergarten years through this rhythm is rewarding for families and teachers alike. If you have an opportunity, please come and visit us in Carbondale, in the Roaring Fork Valley of western Colorado. ♦

Baruch Simon *completed his M.Ed., with Waldorf Teacher training certification, from Antioch New England University in 2007. After beginning his Waldorf kindergarten teaching in California, he now is in his fifth year as lead teacher of a “hybrid” indoor/forest class at the Waldorf School on the Roaring Fork. Baruch’s passions include puppetry, music, snowboarding, biking, and exploring time in nature with children. He lives in Carbondale, Colorado with his wife and their son and daughter.*