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Exploring how Forest Schools principles can improve students learning in Australia

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What are forest schools and what is their relevance for Australian Schools?

The importance of nature and engaging children with the outdoors is not a new concept. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries educators such as Rousseau, Froebel, Isaacs and the McMillan sisters pioneered the role of nature as an important part of a child’s education. Although differing in perspectives, all saw children’s lives as being enriched by spending time outdoors.

In the twentieth century these ideals have started to reappear through the advent of forest schools. Tracing back to Scandinavia in the 1950s this model is now being adopted in countries across the world in rural and urban contexts. In Australia there is current interest building in how the principles and practices of forest schooling can be applied to prior to school and school settings. My study tour allowed me to collect information and visit exemplar models to ascertain the applicability of forest schools to Australia as an innovative approach to enhance the learning of all children.

Themes that emerged during the study tour

*1. The importance of nature or untamed wild spaces*

From observations made during the study tour it is evident that children gain much from playing in natural settings. Part of the allure of ‘wild spaces’ for children is that they can claim them as their own. Observations of children delighting in finding their secret hiding spots and revisiting a treasured special place were evident in every site I visited and across all age groups. As De Coninck-Smith and Gutman found (2004), it is believed that this delight is connected with construction of the children’s identities. Furthermore wild spaces were places where the meaning of the space was constructed by the children, so they became pure children’s places (Rasmussen, 2004). It appears that children not only embrace these opportunities but thrive in them.

On a more practical level being in wild spaces provides opportunities for children to explore a variety of surfaces. Many lengthy discussions were had about how most surfaces children experience today are flat – tiles, carpet, concrete, bitumen and the like. In contrast the floor of a forest is uneven and unpredictable. This makes the children think about where they are putting their feet and challenges their core muscles.

*2. Common philosophy but flexible implementation*

All forest school programs I visited included extended and regular periods of unstructured play in the forest. A recurring theme shared by educators was that this regular implementation afforded children the chance to see the forest in various weather conditions and across the seasons taking the play to more sophisticated levels and higher heights of ‘noticing’.

When the day-to–day operations were unpacked internal flexibility was observed within some forest schools. In both urban and rural forest schools in London the children can attend either one session a week (with each session typically being three hours long) or full-time five days a week. Educators reported that this flexible attendance pattern was introduced in response to parents who were trying to balance the benefits of a nature-based program with more traditional nursery education, reflecting parental desires to have an insurance policy just in case the forest school experience didn’t result in their child being ‘school ready’. This issue warrants further research as it conflicts with findings presented later in this report in relation to children being ready for school after attending a forest school. This finding was only observed in England, and not in Scotland, Germany and Sweden.

*3. Image of the child*

Drawing on the concept of the image of the child articulated so well by Reggio Emilia pedagogues, I observed strong commonalities in how children who attended forest schools are viewed. The list below is by no means exhaustive.

**Children as decision makers**

In all sites visited adults respected children’s decision making. This ranged from activities undertaken to their movement from one place to another. Children led the pace and educators followed their lead in stopping and engaging with the experiences they delighted in.

**Children as experts**

Adults acknowledged children as experts. Their knowledge of the procedures and special characteristic of the spaces visited was highly respected. I was constantly supported by the children in what needed to be done, from where to put my backpack to knowing how to protect myself from the more prickly holly species.

**Children as trustworthy**

Children were observed enjoying a sense of unscripted and unsupervised play where they could be out of the sight of adults. This belies a belief in children as capable and competent and that children can be relied upon to play safely and cooperatively without the need for constant adult support and direction; how wonderfully liberating this must be for children and staff.

**Children as responsible risk takers**

On the whole in the sites I visited, children were not limited in what they could do but rather needed to justify the decisions behind their choices and actions. This was not without adult support. Centre-based risk assessments were completed but educators also saw their role as helping children make fully informed risk assessments on their own. This resulted in an improvement in each child’s confidence, independence, resilience and ability to manage risk.

**Children as capable and independent**

A contrast to Australian settings that struck me was the staff commitment to building independence and autonomy in the children. In all sites I visited children dressed/undressed themselves in appropriate clothing for their visit to/from the forest. This involved donning waterproof dungarees to putting on wellingtons. Children younger than two were observed doing this.

**Children as capable of self-reflection**

The children attending forest schools were observed to have high levels of self-awareness. They appeared to be comfortable in their own company and able to entertain themselves. Furthermore, they were very aware of their strengths and weaknesses, often embracing experiences that challenged their fears or areas requiring development. It was reported that this quality is often commented upon by teachers when the children start school and a contrast to children who attended traditional models of early childcare and education.

*4. Valuing childhood and the importance of unscheduled time*

Many children in Australia today experience timetabled lives, moving from one experience to another or engaging in prescribed activities after the preschool/school day has ended. Discussions with the educators I met on the study tour focussed on this and the impact it is having on children. Often these discussions were link with a lament for the more unstructured, child-directed, less regulated and less adult supervised play of children of past generations.

Forest schools provide an opportunity for children to engage in stillness, a slower pace and unscheduled time due to the relaxed pace of the program. In the sites I visited children could be children and childhood was celebrated as a special time to be treasured. There was no rushing from one activity to another and time seemed unpressured. This resulted in three main outcomes.

Firstly, there was strong evidence of uninterrupted play and creativity in everything observed. Children could engage in an activity for as long or as little as they liked. I observed that the children were highly engaged and focussed for extended periods of time. Connections could be made to Csikszentmihályi’s (2008) notion of flow. Many of the children were observed to be in a heightened state of focus as a result of total immersion in the task at hand. This created a sense of timelessness and being fully present in that exact moment.

Secondly, there were warm, calm and timeless interactions between staff and children. The children must have felt valued and actively listened to. The conversations taking place were thoughtful and plentiful.

Finally, even the educators felt relaxed and able to engage in the present. No thoughts about past or future, just existing in the here and now. Forest experiences not only give this gift to children but the adults benefit too.

*5. Core learning outcomes*

A key question I asked at each site visit was how do children who attend forest schools compare with those who do not when they enter their first year of school. The educators shared that school teachers had reported that those children coming from forest schools were found to:

* + have better concentration skills
  + be better at taking well thought-out decisions
  + be better at planning and completing assignments
  + show less aggravation
  + be more helpful to their classmates
  + have fewer sick days
  + have greater self confidence
  + be calmer
  + have better mobility and sense of their body
  + be happier
  + resolve conflicts more easily.

*6. Positive effect of nature kindergartens on children with additional needs*

At a couple of the sites I visited there were children with additional needs in attendance. They engaged in the program exceptionally well. One educator reported that the forest is where one young child was at his best and it was surprising to hear the reports of how hard he is to manage at school. The educator followed this up by saying there were so many improvements and benefits seen in special needs children attending forest school.

Personally, I believe that forest schools and natural experiences have an important role to play in supporting children with additional needs. It is not surprising that many of the places I visited also had programs for adults with learning difficulties or disabilities. From all reports these programs have had a positive impact on the lives of these people.

*7. The importance of teacher training*

In conversations with directors, CEOs of forest training organisations and coordinators of outdoor education programs the role of the teacher as crucial to the success of the program was a recurring theme. As one director shared, ‘You just can’t simply take the children into the forest and think that is all you need to do. The role of the teacher is crucial. It is their expertise, training and ability to make detailed observations that make forest schools successful.’ In the majority of forest schools I visited the staff had undertaken specialist training to be part of the program. Key aspects of training that were highlighted as important included:

* + mentoring
  + seasonal experience (i.e. experience of all the seasons) and long term training
  + it being rigorous enough to ensure the right people lead forest school experiences for children.

An educator elaborated on the last point by sharing that just because you love either nature or children does not mean you will be a good educator in a forest school. Consequently, she had modified her recruitment process to ensure both areas are addressed and successful meeting of criteria in each is achieved before employment.

*8. Loose Parts play*

A question I explored during the study tour was, ‘But what if your centre is not near a forest or woodland and cost prevents you transporting the children to a forest?’ An answer to this was seen in Scotland where educators are pushing the boundaries of positive outdoor school environments to improve the physical health, mental health and wellbeing of children. This is done through playground design and Loose Parts play,[[1]](#footnote-1) an open-ended type of play that promotes inventiveness, complexity, imagination, decision-making, problem solving, collaboration and reflection. It also enables children to play at their own level so it provides a ‘just right’ challenge.

Links to Early Years Learning Framework and Australian Curriculum

It could be argued that every outcome of the Early Years Framework could be seen in action in the forest schools I visited. However, maximum gains were observed in the following outcomes:

*Outcome One – Children have a strong sense of identity*

* + Children feel safe, secure and supported. More than in traditional models of early childhood centres, attachments between educators and children are extremely strong based on establishing respectful and trusting relationships as well as extensive and reciprocal conversations. The time spent in conversation was impressive.
  + Children develop their emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and sense of agency. By its nature forest schooling promotes the development of these skills. Cooperation and willingness to embrace challenge was in operation in every site I visited. Furthermore children saw mistakes as opportunities for learning, promoting high levels of resilience.
  + Children develop knowledgeable and confident self-identities. In all sites I visited children had a strong sense of self and appeared respected on all levels, by both their peers and educators.
  + Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect. At all times children had a sense that they were part of group. Not only did they listen carefully to each other and look out for each other’s safety, but they were able to understand each other’s point of view. Even disputes were resolved with a sense of empathy.

*Outcome Two – Children are connected with and contribute to their world*

* + Children become socially responsible and show respect for the environment. This evolves organically as a result of being in nature and is obviously fostered through a forest school program. Increased ability to observe subtle changes or nuances was also noticed.

*Outcome Three – Children are connected with and contribute to their world*

* + Children become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing. Of note in this area was increased trust and confidence, a willingness to embrace challenges and take responsible risks as well as an increased ability to cope with the unexpected and frustration. A comfort in solitude and children being comfortable in spending time alone was also seen.
  + Children taking increasing responsibility for their own health and physical wellbeing. Children attending forest schools were observed to be independent in organising food, clothing and safety to meet their needs. They had a greater competence in fine and gross motor activities including whittling and navigating uneven surfaces. This was extended into competence in independently using a variety of tools, including saws and hammers, and demonstrated excellent balance and spatial awareness when climbing trees or rocks. They were also observed to use their senses more extensively.

*Outcome Four – Children are confident and involved learners*

* + Children develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity.
  + Children develop a range of skills and processes such as problem solving, inquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating.
  + Children learn and adapt what they have learned from one context to another. Conversations with educators and receiving kindergarten teachers highlighted the fact that children attending forest schools were able to make connections between their experiences in nature and more formal learning environments. Furthermore, the strategies developed while in nature were transferrable and enriched classroom learning experiences. This was particularly the case in relation to such dispositions towards learning as persistence and responsible risk taking.
  + Children resource their own learning through connecting with people, places, technologies and natural and processed materials. Learning through the senses was a key strength observed in this area, as was exploring ‘ideas and theories using imagination, creativity and play’ (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace, 2009, p. 37). Children in forest schools and during Loose Parts play were constantly seen revisiting and extending their ideas as well as building on the ideas of their peers to extend their play or construction.

*Outcome Five – Children are effective communicators*

* + Children interact verbally and non-verbally with others for a range of purposes. Communicating with a purpose and confidence and to share meaning was evident in every site I visited. The study tour highlighted the fact that children talk much more while walking from one place to another than when stationary.

These results are similar to the findings of Elliott and Chancellor (Elliott & Chancellor, 2014).

Recommendations

The key recommendations as a result of my study tour are:

* 1. There are significant benefits to be gained from children being in the outdoors and engaging in nature. Knowledge of nature begins in nature as a result of engaging with nature using all the senses. Not only does this lead to better learning but also to better health. There is a strong case to implement a forest school methodology more widely in Australia within prior to school and school settings to enhance an appreciation of nature and increased health in our children. ‘People born in the forties are the last people who, through their grandparents, have a natural link to the countryside. It’s sad that nature schools are needed, but good that they exist. There will be an even greater need in the future.’ (Ingvar Bingman, chairman of the foundation Keep Sweden Clean.)
  2. Undertake an exploratory study, in conjunction with Aboriginal Elders, to ascertain whether forest schools could be an avenue to teach an understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal cultural with integrity and a way to address the problem of Indigenous culture being a tokenistic add-on. As stated by Tyson Kaawoppa Yunkaporta (2009), we need to ‘learn *through* culture, not just *about* culture…using cultural knowledge not just in *what* we teach, but *how* we teach’ (p. 8). Forest schools have the potential to provide a unique opportunity to introduce and implement the Aboriginal Eight Ways of Learning for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.
  3. Use forest schools as a model to explore the potential of intergenerational play in challenging the concept of age-based classrooms.
  4. Undertake an exploratory study of how participating in a nature-based program could benefit children with additional needs, specifically children with Asperger’s Syndrome and Attention Deficit Disorder, as from my observations benefits to these children were seen.
  5. Develop a range of forest school models appropriate for urban and rural Australian contexts.
  6. Undertake an exploratory study into the potential links between the Forest School and Positive Psychology movements, specifically the notions of mindfulness and flow.

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1. Loose Parts play involves children using recycled or loose parts as a springboard for quality play opportunities. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)