

# EXPLORING EARLY OUTDOOR EDUCATION IN DIFFERENT CULTURAL CONTEXTS

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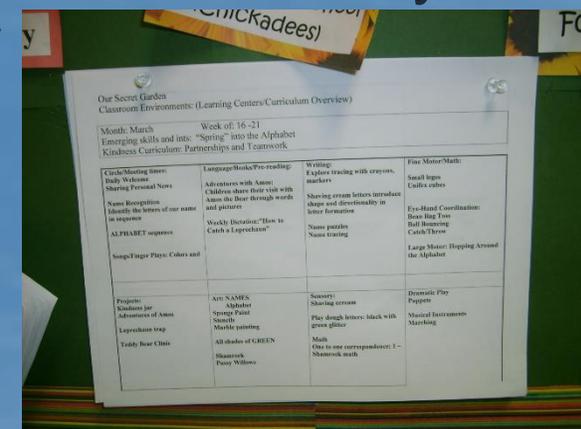
# OUR CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH PROJECT



- As a concerned\* early educator and nature lover/environmentalist, I had been thinking about ways to combine my two passions for some time...
- Then I discovered **outdoor education\*** – at the 2004 RECE conference in Oslo, Norway
- I visited my first 5 **NATURE PRESCHOOL** sites in the spring of 2015\*, then a department head from Bath Spa University (in England) visited our college ... and I learned about our shared interests, which led to my involvement in the project
- We are 3 researchers, as you know; I looked into **U.S. approaches** to outdoor experiences with special attention to Nature Preschools ... like this one 😊

# TO CLARIFY: NATURE PRESCHOOLS & FOREST SCHOOLS/KINDERGARTENS...

- **U.S.** Nature Preschools and Kindergartens at record numbers according to a 2017 study.\*
- **Nature preschools** require their teaching staff to have skills and experience in both early childhood education & environmental education. A “significant portion” of the school day in nature preschools is spent outside.
- **Forest kindergartens** are a type of nature preschool that take place **entirely outdoors**, often allowing the children’s interests and curiosity to direct the day’s activities and inform the curriculum.\*
- Note staff backgrounds & gender, also\*



# OUR PROJECT GOALS\*:

- To *gain* a deeper awareness of the different perspectives which are foregrounded in different contexts
- To *identify* the ways in which these perspectives may/do impact our understanding of forest and outdoor experiences
- To *identify* factors that might impact how we understand the benefits of 'forest' and outdoor practice & provision
- To *identify* practitioner perspectives in relation to practice and pedagogy regarding forest and outdoor experience
- And to *share* understandings and learn from each other – as we have 😊

# METHODOLOGY

- Case-study approach [hence only 2 programs]
- Purposive sampling
- Semi-structured interviews with teachers/pedagogues
- Extended observations of respective settings' outdoor play & 'forest' practices > that's me!
- Initial visits (5), **return visits to two sites**, + have visited two additional sites in NY & one in Ottawa, Canada ... (plus follow MANY other North American sites online)



# THE NATURE/FOREST SCHOOLS I VISITED BUT WILL ONLY ADDRESS BRIEFLY...

- **2015:**

- Our Secret Garden Nursery & Preschool, Newbury, MA
- Merrohawke's Forest Kindergarten program, Newburyport, MA
- Drumlin Farm Community Preschool, Lincoln, MA >>



- **2016 & 2017:**

- Forest Kindergarten of the Waldorf School of Saratoga Springs, NY
- RMSC Cumming Nature Center, Naples, NY
- Ottawa (ON, Canada) Forest and Nature School

# ARCADIA NATURE PRESCHOOL\*, EASTHAMPTON, MASS.



- Visited one day, March 2015, + two days, with lead teacher interview, March 2016
- Program **founded on the premise that** happy and rewarding early childhood experiences with nature from the foundation for the development of creative, caring, & aware adults\*\*
- **Goals:** foster children's ability to work both independently and cooperatively, and to act in a caring and responsible way towards their environment, themselves, & others
- **First, indoor time:** exploration of (fabulous) materials, group time, snack, etc.
- **Children** are encouraged to be independent, to explore, question, & choose things that interest them
- **Teachers** add materials, ask questions, record children's predictions, etc.

# MORE ON ARCADIA...

- **Then, they go outside\***: for instance, take a walk in the woods, tap maple trees, or explore the stream that runs through the (very large) property



# ARCADIA LEAD TEACHER INTERVIEW

The **benefits** of attending Arcadia/a nature preschool:

- The opportunity for children to explore with all their senses\*
- They also develop a sense of wonder ... & their day is still related to academics
- They learn a respect for & appreciation of nature; a love for being outdoors; they have opportunities to socialize and connect themselves to a place

Teacher **practices**:

- Asking lots of (open-ended questions); modeling inquiry\*\*; bringing in natural materials to explore; immersion in nature – “there are many ways to explore & learn”
- **NOTE:** They **follow** Mass-Audubon guidelines and Massachusetts early childhood program requirements, but **do not follow** a specific curricular approach – the teachers’ backgrounds are both in ECE + environmental education
- It appeared to me that teacher practices aligned w. stated goals, but some of the goals are so long-range (*the development of creative, caring, & aware adults*), that it’s hard to tell

# DENISON PEQUOTSEPOS NATURE CENTER\*

## PRESCHOOL, MYSTIC, CT.

- Also visited one day in March 2015 + two days, with a lead teacher interview, in March 2016
- **Curriculum:** a comprehensive blend of environmental education and traditional, play-based preschool standards
- Spend time outdoors every day!
- **Goals:** to foster the growth of whole, well-rounded, happy children, and to inspire an appreciation for the natural world and a lifetime environmental ethic
- Two teachers\*\* are Montessori trained, so there are some Montessori materials & Montessori-type activities: for example, math and practical life areas, work mats, etc.
- Again, indoor play & snack first, then go outside to walk around, explore, climb rocks, and, at one point, all sit down with eyes closed to see what we can hear...

# DPNC LEAD TEACHER INTERVIEW

- The **benefits** of the Forest School experience:
  - Children are inspired to love & respect the natural world
  - Learn “typical preschool things” like self-control, social skills, & building community
  - But are inspired to learn further through exploration\*
- Teacher **practices**:
  - Teachers observe closely & modify environment\*
  - “We have started thinking about being ‘nature mentors,’ rather than being **didactic teachers**”
  - Teach children how to explore & behave safely
- **Again**, practices seem to align w. short-term goals, but...



# BENEFITS OF OUTDOOR EXPERIENCES



- A growing body of research suggests that high-quality outdoor early experiences benefit young children in many ways
- **In sum**, outdoor play, *especially in natural environments*, has the potential to benefit children's physical, cognitive, emotional & social development, as well as their health & overall well-being, self-regulation skills, and attention.
- [See Bohling-Phillipi (2006), Chawla (1999), Louv (e.g., 2008, 2012, 2016) Nat'l Wildlife Federation (2013), Sobel (1999, 2004), etc., etc.]
- **If** these kinds of experiences are valuable, perhaps even *necessary* to children's well-being, **don't all young children have the right to attend programs with such a range of benefits?**

# VARIATIONS IN ACCESS TO 'FOREST SCHOOL' & NATURE PRESCHOOLS IN NORTH AMERICA...AND QUESTIONS

- As lovely as these schools/experiences are, what I have seen (in person & on-line) is that almost exclusively affluent\*, European-American children have access to such programs...
- The 2017 survey mentioned in Slide 3 showed that *some* student populations, **especially ethnic & racial minorities**, were underrepresented in nature-based programs
- For example, only **3%** of students in nature preschools and forest kindergartens were reported to be African American and **7%** to be Hispanic. [In comparison, the latest U.S. Census found that **15%** of children under 5 were African American & **25%** were Hispanic.]
- The survey found similar underrepresentation of **students with disabilities and dual-language learners**.
- Again, if there are so many benefits\* to such programs, shouldn't **all** children have access to them?

# WHAT \*ARE\* THE U.S. CULTURAL VALUES THAT MIGHT LEAD TO SUCH SEGREGATED EARLY EDUCATION/EXPERIENCES?



- My not-so-humble suggestions:
- Social class & racial divisions, hyper-individualism, a me-first orientation, an economic & political system that prioritizes corporations & those who are already wealthy, a disrespect for public land accompanied by a dangerous disregard for climate change, unwillingness to ratify the CRC, fear of litigation, etc., etc.
- What do **you** think? How does/Does this apply to England?

# \*WHAT CAN/SHOULD WE DO IF WE ARE TO BUILD JUST & RESILIENT COMMUNITIES?

- For instance, at a conference in Vermont (in New England/northeastern U.S.) I was very excited to learn that **all** Upper Valley Schools have access to “high-quality, place-based ecology (PBE) education”
- And that they work w. educators, administrators, & schools across the region to help them get the resources they need to meet their PBE goals
- Impressive, but (unfortunately) it’s **by far** the most comprehensive effort that I’ve come across...although the *Natural Start Alliance* and *Child and Nature Alliance of Canada* are other examples
- Other efforts? I’ll share a few, then ask you for yours!



# A FEW EXAMPLES



- Some (a few) **schools** are offering one-day-a-week outdoor education or allowing children to attend local forest schools one day/week\*
- This depends, in part, on **state** regulations as well as **individual** school interest & efforts
- A few **cities**\* are starting to address this: Seattle, Washington has a new ‘Every kid in a park’ collaborative which addresses some of the barriers that keep low-income children from accessing public lands
- Part of the city’s website is devoted to Environmental Ed & outdoor learning, including a section on preschools & day camps with a focus on nature and the outdoors!
- And the University of Washington sponsors the **Fiddleheads Forest School, “Seattle’s pioneering outdoor preschool program”**
- There are a few **North American universities** that have moved in this direction, including Ryerson University (Toronto) where ... *The outdoor playground is another learning environment for the children, and teachers plan meaningful learning opportunities to extend the children’s knowledge of nature and themselves.*
- And, in the U.S., **some education professors** are doing what they can...\*\*

# WHAT I HAVE TRIED TO DO IN MY CLASSES...

- My main job responsibility is to teach UG classes in Early Childhood/EI Ed
- These include (1) *An Introduction to ECE*; (2) *Diversity, Inclusion, & Equity in EC classrooms*; & (3) *Families & Communities*
- Syllabi are not exactly carved in stone, but we have VERY little latitude
- Also, little support from colleagues or admins, although we have a new interim Dean...
- So, **I make changes subversively**: I include a “nature photo” in every class agenda or PowerPoint
- Intro. to ECE students have 2 **nature-based assignment options** (Letchworth State Park & Cumming Nature Center) & a retired teacher shares a local Outdoor Classroom
- And, especially in the Intro. class, I constantly **contrast the outdoor experiences** of young children in Sweden & Iceland\* vs. those of kids in the U.S.

WHAT ARE **\*YOUR\*** EXAMPLES?  
WHAT ARE YOUR QUESTIONS?



# THANK YOU!

You give me hope! And we need hope to keep moving forward, especially in difficult times.

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