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School's Out: Lessons from a Forest Kindergarten

Directed by L. Molomot; produced by R. Richter. Oley, PA: Bullfrog Films (2013).

Reviewed by Rachel L. Severson, University of British Columbia

Every day, rain or shine, children in the Forest Kindergarten in the Swiss town of Langnau am Albis tromp into the woods for the school day. The 36-minute documentary, *School's Out: Lessons from a Forest Kindergarten* (2013), directed by Lisa Molomot and produced by Rona Richter, chronicles the experiences of these children as the seasons change from autumn to winter to spring. Forest Kindertgartens emerged in Sweden in the 1980s and have since spread to many countries, including Norway, Finland, the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, Japan, Canada, and the United States. Outdoor kindertgartens provide children with the opportunity for unstructured outdoor play, to gain experiences in nature, and to develop a sense of their own capacity and competence.

Swiss parents can opt to enroll their children, ages four through seven, in the two-year Forest Kindergarten (*Waldkindergarten*) as part of the public school program. As the documentary explains, "There is no reading, writing or math. The curriculum [in Switzerland] is the same for the indoor and outdoor kindertgartens." Instead, children sing, listen to stories, and, for children in the Forest Kindergarten, play freely in the woods where they climb trees, splash in the creek, play on a tree swing, and engage in imaginary play. In Switzerland, academics begin at age seven, two years after the typical U.S. child; however, Swiss children are on par academically by the time they are 10 years old.

In increasingly risk-averse societies, it might seem surprising that children in the Forest Kindergarten are given tremendous latitude and independence. They often play out of sight of the teacher and learn to use knives, saws, and hammers, as well as build fires. Some Swiss parents expressed initial concern, but found that their children were very competent and learned to manage the risks. As one parent explained, "She has to learn, she has to be able to make mistakes." Research suggests that "risk taking in play helps children test their physical limits, develop their perceptual-motor capacity, and learn to avoid and adjust to dangerous environments and activities" (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012, p. 3136). Children in the Forest Kindergarten are expected to walk themselves to and from school. After school, four-year-old Cedric is seen getting off the bus, walking to his building, getting the key from his bag, and riding the elevator to his apartment—all by himself. His mother greets him with dry clothes and a warm meal. While one mother expressed her fear of letting her daughter go to school on her own and admitted to following her the first few times, she found that her daughter was fine and "felt so grown up" being able to go to school on her own.

The film juxtaposes the Forest Kindergarten with a typical U.S. kindergarten in New Haven, Connecticut. The contrast is striking. Children in the traditional kindergarten spend the bulk of their day inside following a routine schedule comprised of morning meeting, reading workshop, writing workshop, special activity (music, art, gym), lunch, recess, story time, play, math, and closing meeting. Ann Donnery, the New Haven kindergarten teacher, explains in the film that as academic expectations have changed, recess has been reduced. She notes that many children in her class have underdeveloped gross motor skills and will likely have difficulty with fine motor

skills, such as manipulating writing instruments. This observation is born out in research in which children of five to seven years old in a natural play environment demonstrated significant gains in motor development compared to children in a traditional playground (Fjørtoft, 2001). Donnery is also concerned that typical kindergartens do not allow for the development of a sense of wonder and exploration that emerges so readily in natural settings. Along these lines, one parent in the Forest Kindergarten recognized her daughter now plays a lot more with very little (e.g., sticks and pine cones), needing fewer toys and using her imagination so much more. Outdoor play also provides rich fodder for the development of important social skills. Dr. Marcy Guddemi, Executive Director of Gesell Institute of Child Development, describes in the film that playground interactions allow for children to learn to negotiate conflict and problem solve.

Back in Switzerland, winter arrives and with it sub-freezing temperatures and snow. Bolstered by warm drinks and proper clothing, the children appear indifferent to the cold as they sled down hills and over jumps. As winter gives way to spring, the children in the Forest Kindergarten sing as they walk in the rain and delight in splashing in puddles. Parents admitted to feeling bad for sending their children out into the inclement weather, but remarked that not only were their children perfectly fine, they were not at all resistant to going outside. What is more, many parents reported that their children were never sick during the school year.

The lessons learned from *School's Out* are that children appear to thrive in outdoor natural kindergartens. Children gain valuable motor and social skills that contribute to their well being and flourishing. Dr. Willy Krauthammer, a Swiss Neuropediatrician interviewed in the film, observed that children in Forest Kindergartens, compared to their counterparts attending indoor kindergartens, are more aware of their environment, have better motor skills, and have no issues with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. These children also develop the capacity to manage appropriate risks and gain a sense of their own competence to navigate the social and physical world. *School's Out* makes a compelling case that Forest Kindergartens provide a model for how educational environments can support children's optimal development.

References

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