

Forest and nature school in Canada: Growing a movement^[1]

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Social movements are characterized by a group of people who get together to advance their shared ideas, intended to bring about change. The York Region Nature Collaborative is working to be a part of the movement that helps bring back outdoor play and nature experiences to childhood because as Frost (2009) relates "during the short span of three or four decades, centuries-old freedom to play has evolved into a play and play environments crisis that threatens the health, fitness and welfare of children". With our partner, Toronto and Region Conservation, we recently hosted Forest School Canada's practitioner's course at the beautiful Lake St. George Field Centre. We are proud of our small part in this movement and we will look for ways to continue to support the growth so that we as a society create more opportunities for active play. The recently published Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play has solidified this mission to grow the movement.

In *Back to Nature and the Emerging Child Saving Movement: Restoring Children's Outdoor Play*, Dr. Joe L. Frost lists the many benefits of outdoor and nature play, calling them "remarkable and extensive". They include:

- Inner Peace
- Stress reduction
- Fitness
- Healing
- Mental Health
- Creativity
- Physical
- Emotional
- Intellectual
- Bonding with Nature
- Appreciation for Nature
- Heightened sense of beauty

Frost goes on to say that "unstructured experiences in nature are more beneficial than structured experiences and the benefits are universal across cultural and geographic areas" (p.4). He relates this crisis of the lack of outdoor active play in and with nature to more than a century ago when

"immigrants were swarming into the crowded slums of large eastern cities, and families from failing farms were joining them in desperate efforts to improve their lives through the oft-failing promises of jobs in industry. Disease, homelessness, hunger, and crime were rampant; orphans were everywhere; and thousands of abandoned children were surviving in the streets, shanties, and alleys while others endured long hours in factories. These same dangerous places were their play environments. Seeing the deleterious effects on children, charitable groups, government, concerned individuals, educators, and churches awakened to the plight of children and initiated a series of reforms to create a "Child Saving Movement".

Clearly it is time for a new movement to support children to thrive fully in the natural world. The forest and nature school movement is in its infancy in Canada but in other places in the world it has a longer history. Movements are expansive in scope and involve coordinated and preventative action by many. Frost states that there is no "quick fix" or "magic bullet" for resolving the play, fitness, and health crises for American children. Canadian children are in similar crisis situation as our neighbours to the south. The approaches must be multiple. For Canadian children, the forest and nature school movement is one approach.

There are other outdoor learning experiences aside from forest and nature school and these are valid approaches because the goal should be, in the pursuit of a movement, to have multiple approaches. Forest School is different from other outdoor learning experiences in two ways as described in the Forest School Canada manual.

One - Forest and Nature School takes place in the same setting on a regular basis over an extended period of time. This gives children the opportunity to learn a great deal about the area and enables them to develop a lasting connection with nature.

Two - There are some structured elements. The ethos of Forest School allows learners the time and space to develop their interests, skills, and understanding through practical, hands-on experiences. At Forest School, there is the freedom to explore, play, build, create, imagine,

and use their senses to experience the outdoor environment and engage with one another. Sustainability is woven into the culture of the classroom, and as nature becomes the third teacher, sustainability becomes the foundation on which both children and teachers stand.

The guiding principle at Forest School is that children are competent and engaged learners, and with guidance and support, are able to lead their own learning process in directions far beyond what an educator can initiate on their own. As indicated in the following list of principles, forest school does not necessarily have to take place in a forest.

Principles of Forest and Nature School:

- takes place in a variety of spaces, including local forests, creeks, meadows, prairie grasses, mountains, shorelines, tundra, natural playgrounds, and outdoor classrooms.
- is a long-term process of regular and repeated sessions in the same natural space.
- is rooted in building an on-going relationship to place and on principles of place-based education.
- is rooted in and supports building engaged, healthy, vibrant, and diverse communities.
- aims to promote the holistic development of children and youth.
- views children and youth as competent and capable learners.
- supports children and youth, with a supportive and knowledgeable educator, to identify, co-manage and navigate risk. Opportunities to experience risk is seen as an integral part of learning and healthy development.
- requires qualified Forest and Nature School practitioners who are rooted in and committed to FNS pedagogical theory and practical skills.
- requires that educators play the role of facilitator rather than expert.
- uses loose, natural materials to support open-ended experiences.
- the process is as valued as the outcome.
- requires that educators utilize emergent, experiential, inquiry-based, play-based, and place-based learning approaches.

In Canada, we are fortunate to have Marlene Power as a leading champion of the Forest and Nature School movement. Marlene is a passionate environmentalist and outdoor enthusiast who has been spearheading the movement for close to a decade. In 2012, she became the founder and Executive Director of Forest School Canada (FSC). As of January 1st, 2015 Forest School Canada has amalgamated with the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada, resulting in Marlene being appointed as Executive Director of CNAC. Now FSC is a major program area of CNAC. The mission of FSC is to foster rich learning experiences, ecological literacy, and healthy living by connecting children to nature through the use of the Forest and Nature School model in the early, primary, and secondary years. The vision is leading the movement.

Our vision is for all Canadian children to play and learn in local forests, creeks, meadows, prairie grasses, mountains, and shorelines with a wise and skilled educator who understands the power of play and child-directed learning and how this can contribute to a more sustainable world

As Zabe MacEachren states in her 2013 article *The Canadian Forest School Movement*, it was Marlene's intention to begin to create a network for support, education, and accreditation for concepts associated with the FS movement in Canada, including offering practitioner courses. After a round of pilot courses, the Lake St. George site represented the launch of a revised, updated and improved version. I had participated in one of the pilot courses, in Huntsville in 2014, and I had the incredibly good fortune to be able to spend two days with the Lake St. George practitioners in June 2015. The experience was amazing and I could see how much work and thought has been put into this course to support the educators taking it. *The Forest and Nature School Manual - A Head, Heart and Hands Approach to Outdoor Learning* was published in 2014.

Forest and Nature School practitioners are now a sector in the educational world but there is a way to go to achieve professionalization. To become a practitioner who adheres to a standard of practice and is recognized by the public for the work being done, involves a process. As an early childhood educator of a certain age I can relate to the process of certification of Forest School practitioners. For a field to gain professional status, it must actively and collectively pursue professionalization. Fromberg (1997) identifies distinct characteristics of a profession which include ethical performance, a high level of expertise and skill, a body of knowledge and skills not possessed by lay people, considerable autonomy in practice and entry to the profession, commensurate compensation, and a professional organization. These dimensions differentiate a professional role from other types of occupations. Early childhood education as a profession is in process. In Ontario, professionalization in terms of the existence of a regulatory body has been achieved but commensurate salary is still an issue. Whitebrook (2002) suggests that the benchmarks in professionalization include defining a distinct and exclusive body of knowledge, establishing training and certification processes, increasing political influence, and increasing the economic well being of its members. In other parts of Canada and the world, early childhood educators are still on the road to become professionalized. Having a nationally accepted set of occupational standards has been identified as a key factor in the professionalization of the sector. The development of occupational standards by the people doing the job enables them, rather than outsiders, to define acceptable professional behaviour and knowledge, skills, and abilities required for competent practice, enabling them to take ownership of their occupation (Doherty, 2003). In Ontario, I can remember in the late sixties, early childhood programs were just being offered in community colleges. Fifty years and counting for early childhood educators but for forest and nature school practitioners (including those who are early childhood educators) the countdown has just begun. Certification is a system for recognizing an individual's level of education, experience, or competence to practice, and is conferred with the confidence of the occupation and the public. Certification status signifies that the individual meets established occupational standards of knowledge, skills and abilities. Certification may or may not be voluntary. For many occupations, the law requires that only those individuals who are certified may offer themselves to the public as practitioners of an occupation (Ogston, 1999).

Recently Marlene posted these comments on Facebook and she reiterates the need for a slow and steady approach. I know that there are educators and early childhood educators who want to take the practitioners course and would like to see it offered more often. Others want an accredital model to be in place immediately but time is needed. In Marlene's words:

"We are working towards an accreditation model, the first step towards this being our practitioners' course, and the second being collaboratively developing standards of best practice. The aim of the accreditation is to support regional [and a national] community of practice, and 'quality' Forest and Nature School. It's not to create a cookie-cutter approach, or to limit the amazing things that are unfolding in individual programs across Canada. This process is not a fast one, but it's a beautiful one!!!!

This year we have redeveloped the course curriculum, and I'm very happy to share that last week we launched this new course and got some really great feedback. We're going to be learning and tweaking in this phase two pilot process, but feel ready now to begin working on best practices. In the fall we're also launching a new website, and will be able to better communicate with folks from coast to coast, and highlight champions in various regions, through this new interface. Can't wait!"

Waiting takes time. Let's give the movement a chance to grow while we champion the cause in our own contexts.

Related links:

- [Back to nature and the emerging child saving movement: Restoring children's outdoor play](#) [3]
- [Participaction position statement on active outdoor play](#) [4]

Region: Ontario [5]

Tags: curricula and pedagogy [6]

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