Preschool without walls [1]

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Source: The New York Times
Format: Article
Publication Date: 29 Dec 2015

AVAILABILITY
Read online [2]

EXCERPTS

Three-year-old Desi Sorrelgreen's favorite thing about his preschool is "running up hills." His classmate Stelyn Carter, 5, likes to "be quiet and listen to birds — crows, owls and chickadees," as she put it. And for Joshua Doctorow, 4, the best part of preschool just may be the hat he loves to wear to class (black and fuzzy, with flaps that come down over his ears).

All three children are students at Fiddleheads Forest School here, where they spend four hours a day, rain or shine, in adjacent cedar grove "classrooms" nestled among the towering trees of the University of Washington Botanic Gardens.

The program, in its third year, is less than seven miles from Microsoft, which means some parents sit in front of computers all day inventing the digital future, while Fiddleheads children make letters out of sticks or cart rocks around in wheelbarrows.

Founded in 2012 by Kit Harrington, a certified preschool teacher, and Sarah Heller, a naturalist and science educator, Fiddleheads is part of a larger national trend that goes beyond Waldorf education, which has long emphasized outdoor play, even in inclement weather.

There's the Chippewa Nature Center in Midland, Mich., founded in 2007, where children wear hats and mittens during daily outdoor sessions in the frigid winter months. At the All Friends Nature School in San Diego, which became a nature preschool in 2006, children often spend mornings making sand castles at the beach. And at the Drumlin Farm Community Preschool in Lincoln, Mass., founded in 2008, children learn to feed farm animals, grow vegetables and explore the farm's many acres of wildlife habitat.

Whether the schools are emerging in reaction to concerns that early education has become increasingly academic or simply because parents think traipsing around in the woods sounds like more fun than sitting at a desk, they are increasingly popular.

The Natural Start Alliance, founded in 2013 in response to demand from a growing number of nature preschool providers, now counts 92 schools that deliberately put nature at the heart of their programs, and where children spend a significant portion of each day outside, according to director Christy Merrick. That's up from 20 schools in 2008, when Patti Bailie, a professor at the University of Maine at Farmington, counted them as part of her doctoral research.

A typical day at Fiddleheads starts at 9 a.m., with Desi, Stelyn, Joshua and fellow students zipping up waterproof suits so they can climb on, and sometimes slip off, sopping-wet logs; create secret forts under dripping boughs of bright green, and examine squirming earthworms in grubby hands.

Students go on "listening walks" with their teachers during which they stand in a circle with their eyes closed and name the things they can hear, like wind and rain, when they don't talk. The children also eat lunch, sing songs and occasionally squabble under the open sky and towering trees.

Desi's mother, Judy Lackey, 34, is pleased. "It's just a magical place," she said. "In indoor spaces, teachers have planned everything. Here, you never know what you're going to see."

While the children are carefully supervised by trained teachers, the school has a choose-your-own-adventure attitude toward learning. So when students first placed one of those closely examined earthworms in an empty toy watering can during a recent visit, it prompted a conversation with a volunteer teacher, Marnie O'Sullivan, about what kind of homes earthworms might most enjoy. (Hint: not a plastic watering can.)

"We kind of just think and find what we want to do in our head, and we just do it," Stelyn said.

There are rules, and Stelyn, one of the oldest in the class, is quick to explain them: "If we see a bug, we are careful not to step on it. If we see a pretty leaf, we pick it up and put it in our magic spot."

Walking alone onto the park road (despite its ban on car traffic) and pretending sticks are swords are also forbidden. But such rules and a few others leave room for plenty of adventures.

There's carting around rocks in wheelbarrows, playing at being (sword-less) pirates, examining trees split by lightning, digging in wood-chip piles to make child-size "nests," finding an unknown seed and dubbing it a "nothing berry," and running up and down hills. The most popular word at Fiddleheads is "notice," as in, "What do you notice about this fallen log?" and "I notice mushrooms."

"Some days we're setting up and we hear eagles calling to each other, and we run out and look up," Ms. Harrington said. "Kids are the best at sharing in joy and wonder."

Or as Adele Miroite, 3, said, her little hands wrist-deep in a wood-chip pile, "I love school."

Fiddleheads is one of at least 18 similar preschools founded in the greater Seattle area since 2005, according to a recent story in ParentMap, a local parenting magazine. And 18 apparently are not enough.

There are 51 children on Fiddleheads' waiting list and 143 on a list for next year's spots, Ms. Harrington said. That's after the school more than doubled its enrollment to 50 students in two classrooms this year from about 20 in just one classroom last year. And students' parents, to judge from a small collection picking up their children on a recent afternoon, aren't off-the-grid types. They include lawyers, chief financial officers and television producers.

"I don't know if we're hitting a tipping point yet, but maybe," said Prof. Bailie, who got her start as a teacher at an outdoor preschool program at the Nature Center at Shaker Lakes in Cleveland. At the time, she knew of only about a half-dozen schools in the entire country trying something similar, she said. These days, she teaches a class specifically for would-be preschool teachers who aim to work outside.

Prof. Bailie thinks the pushback against standardized testing and growing concern about young children spending too much time on touch-screen devices has helped the market for outdoor schools. She also credits the best-selling 2005 book, "Last Child in the Woods," by Richard Louv, which helped popularize the idea that children should spend as much time as possible in the outdoors.

Mr. Louv argues passionately in his book that children should play and explore the outdoors in the same unstructured ways their parents and their grandparents did before them.

While reducing childhood obesity (8.4 percent of American 2- to 5-year-olds are obese) by increasing physical activity is a prime argument in support of outdoor play, Mr. Louv suggests that the need goes beyond exercise. Today's children have fundamentally lost touch with nature, he said.

"Nature deficit disorder describes the human cost of alienation from nature," he wrote. Among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties and higher rates of physical and emotional illness, he writes.

Though they all try to address this "nature deficit disorder," not all of the new nature preschools are quite as natural as Fiddleheads, which belongs to a type of school usually described as a "forest kindergarten," characterized by having no indoor space other than an emergency weather shelter.

Many nature preschools, like Chippewa in Michigan, do have indoor facilities. Prof. Bailie and the Natural Start Alliance both count as nature preschools those in which students are outdoors for a significant portion of their day and in which the focus of the curriculum is the natural world.

Some preschool providers still think time indoors can be a valuable addition to an outdoor-focused day (and some children may prefer it). There's also the practical matter of getting licensed. Many states won't allow a school without a building to receive a license, and unlicensed schools can usually operate only for four hours a day. In fact, that's a requirement in Washington state and it's one of the reasons Fiddleheads is open only until 1 p.m.

Then there's just the practical requirements of spending all that time outdoors. Children need the right clothing, which can be expensive. And even for the die-hards, sometimes it's just not really safe to have children under 5 playing outdoors.

At Drumlin Farm Community Preschool, where it can get quite cold, the director Jill Canelli uses several overlapping sets of guidelines to determine when it is too cold, windy or icy to go outside.

If the temperature, with wind chill, is below 15 degrees Fahrenheit, for instance, the children have an indoor day. That guideline is based on an Iowa Department of Public Health publication, Ms. Canelli said. And if the local school district cancels because of snow, the preschool will usually close, too.

"Safety is first," she said, adding that parents have asked why their children weren't outside on a given day and she's had to explain Iowa's safe-temperature guidelines to them. "Children can't learn if they're not safe."

Safety notwithstanding, Deborah Stipek, an education professor at Stanford University who studies early education, is not a booster of the outdoor preschool model. "I have a feeling that this is a flash-in-the-pan idea," she said.

Professor Stipek pointed out that excellent natural materials can be provided to children indoors and that setting times when they can freely choose between activities like blocks, art projects and dress-up allows for plenty of self-determined "adventures." And while she is a strong believer in the benefits children get by spending time outside, she is skeptical of the idea that spending the whole day outside is necessarily better.

"I don't see benefit of being outdoors doing the same activity as you'd be doing indoors," Professor Stipek said.

But for the administrators of Fiddleheads, the benefit of children doing the same thing outdoors that they could have done indoors is as clear as a babbling brook.

"When I taught indoors, every material had a learning goal," Ms. Harrington said of the various items she would put out for her students to play with when she was a Montessori preschool teacher. "Here, the entire classroom is a material. Certainly, the materials we set out are that way, but this classroom has so much more to offer."

Though there is plenty of evidence that playing outside lowers the risk of obesity, improves balance and agility, calms high-energy children, reduces stress, improves self-regulation, aids healing and soothes the soul, little research specifically on outdoor preschools has been conducted in the United States. (There is more in Scandinavia, where they are popular.)

Ms. Harrington and Ms. Heller hope to help change this by opening their school to researchers. The first study, set to start in January, will look at how much children in outdoor schools move compared to children at home or in traditional preschools. The lead researcher is Dr. Pooja Tandon, a pediatrician at the University of Washington Seattle Children's Research Institute.

Most nature preschools are private; tuition at Fiddelheads is $760 a month. But some programs, like the Chippewa Nature Center in Michigan, have begun to work with their school districts. Students in the nearby Bullock Creek School District can now attend "nature kindergarten" and even "nature first grade" at their regular public elementary school.

And a few city schools have even taken up the forest school mantra. Students at the Brooklyn New School in the Carroll Gardens neighborhood of Brooklyn now spend every Wednesday outside in nearby Prospect Park (as long as it's not raining).

Back in Seattle, Andrew Jay, a former Audubon Center director and nonprofit entrepreneur, thinks it's far past time to take advantage of the low facility costs of outdoor-based programs and open them up to a broader range of families. He is planning to open nine outdoor schools based in Seattle City Parks in the next two years.

"A city park is the most democratic space" for a school, Mr. Jay said. "The nature part is amazing. But what hooked me was making it available to all."

Mr. Jay got the official go-ahead to operate his schools on city land from the parks department in October, and now he's trying to get approval from the city's education department to qualify for funding as a local public preschool program.

Back at Fiddleheads, several children huddled around Stelyn, who was holding a treasure. With her blond hair trailing to the edge of her bright yellow rain jacket, she held out a "nothing berry" for all to see.

"I want to see the inside," 4-year-old Rowan Wessels said.

"O.K., but don't break it any more than that," Stelyn said, pointing at a nick somebody had made with a rock.

Rowan peered closely at the soft white center of the mystery berry and exclaimed, "It looks like ice cream!"

-reprinted from The New York Times
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