

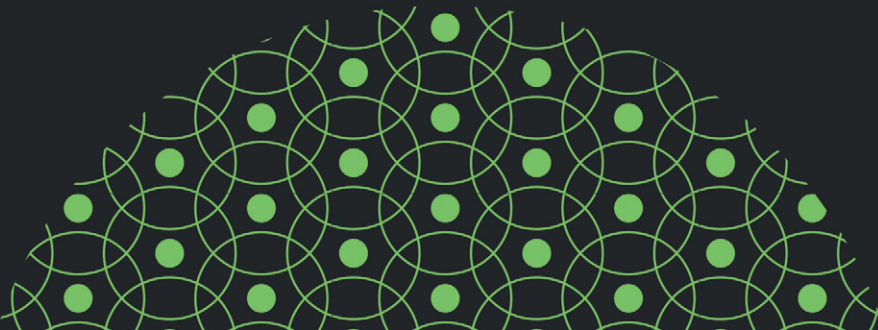


EMERALD POINTS

CONSTRUCTING FOREST LEARNING

A Pedagogy for Practice

MELANIE MACKINDER



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A Pedagogy for Practice

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For William.

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FOREWORD

This book explains the Pedagogical Model for Forest Learning, which is a dynamic relationship and interconnectedness between the three elements, adult, child and environment or ACE. Pedagogy is looked at in depth, specifically social pedagogy in Denmark, and how it relates to the pedagogical Model for Forest Learning. Here how adults interpret and enact pedagogy of Forest School, how children experience a pedagogy in Forest Learning and the similarities and differences between the two environments are explored, specifically how this impacts the users.

The inspiration for this book has come from the Danish inspired Forest Schools that are now across the United Kingdom. Visiting them sparked an interest in the ways adults and children were working differently in the outside environment. Through play and child-initiated activities children were exploring their environment and learning about themselves as well as nature. My first experience of Forest School came about when I visited the nursery and reception classes in a large primary school in Cardiff. Taking place outside, where there were several trees and shrubs, I saw some inspiring activities that engaged children as young as three years old. Centred around free play, the children explored their environment freely, whilst the adults facilitated the children in their choices. I was fascinated by the way the adults interacted with children, and how children interacted with each other, which seemed different to the way they might interact with each other inside. This experience felt very different to the ways of playing outdoors that I had previously witnessed in other schools, and akin to something I had always tried to create in my own practice. I was intrigued by what they called Forest School and wanted to know more. Since then, my investigations have taken me from Wales and the East Midlands of England, to Norway and Denmark. In my search to find out more about Forest School in England and Denmark I have gained a unique insight into what I refer to in this book as Forest Learning. It is these findings that I now want to share with you, in this book.

Included here is a short background of Forest School in England, and an explanation of Danish early years practice. Next to contextualise, there is a brief section on current early years context in England and Denmark. Case

study examples from each case are then used to provide context and illustrations of how each of the three ACE elements inter-relate. I have added some new perspectives such as social pedagogy and compound flexibility, as well as bringing some areas up to date, by including the revised Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum now used in Denmark. Wherever you are, and whatever your reason for reading this book, I hope you find it useful, and most of all enjoy reading it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To all the settings that I visited, thank you for your patience and support answering my many questions and for allowing me to collect the data used to write this book. Also, to my family and friends who have supported me throughout this book writing journey, thank you.

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INTRODUCING A PEDAGOGICAL MODEL FOR FOREST LEARNING*

DISPELLING THE MYTHS

Within the body of literature on Forest School there are many useful resources and books, but there are also some myths and common misconceptions. Alongside informative research reports, journal papers and ‘how to’ manuals that provide ideas for Forest School activities it can be difficult to identify supported information and substantiated facts about what for the most part has been a grass-roots approach to outdoor learning. Whilst Knight’s many books have gone a long way in explaining the principles of Forest School, and Williams-Sieghfredson (2012) has explained Danish Forest Kindergarten in English, there is yet to be published a book that compares Forest School in England with Forest Kindergarten in Denmark, or explores the underlying practice and pedagogy of Forest Learning in both countries. This book achieves both aims.

This is the story of my visits to a Forest Kindergarten in Denmark and a nursery school in England that uses Forest School sessions with their children. I make this distinction early on as for many, Forest School has become a generic term and many use it without fully understanding what it means or what it has come to now represent in England sometimes even romanticising the idea of outdoor learning in Scandinavian countries. Hereafter I use the term Forest School to refer to what is practised in England and Forest Kindergarten for the practices identified in Denmark. The term Forest

*This book was developed from the thesis, ‘Degrees of difference: A case study of Forest School in England and Denmark’, by Melanie Mackinder, University of Leicester.

Learning is used to refer to the best practice taken from both examples and in the Pedagogical Model for Forest Learning suggested here.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

At the heart of this book is a Pedagogical Model for Forest Learning, with pedagogy at its centre. This theory came about through analysis of the data collected during two case studies, one in Forest School in England the other in a Forest Kindergarten in Denmark. First by looking separately at adult's interpretations of Forest pedagogy, children's experiences of Forest pedagogy, and both the environments, then through comparison, a dynamic inter-relationship emerged.

This study identifies that the three elements, adult, child and environment or ACE are highly influential in Forest Learning. However, their close, inter-connected relationship makes them so powerful, yet difficult to separate. For the purpose of the book, each ACE is written about separately. The order is not any indication of importance rather a structural device. First the environment as the place where everything happens. Next the adult's role in constructing and scaffolding, both the physical and learning environment. Then a chapter on the child and their experiences of the environment and an explanation of how they construct their own play environment and experiences.

Considered worthy of its own chapter, social interactions and relationships are ideas that can be seen throughout the dynamic, inter-relationship between the three ACE elements, and therefore significant for Forest Learning. Themes of pedagogy, social pedagogy, play, constructivism and flexibility of the environment are also explored in relevant places throughout.

Literature was used to gain some theoretical understanding of Forest Kindergarten in Denmark and Forest School in England and a basic knowledge of the origins of Forest School, which is summarised in the following chapter. In England this usually means a weekly session, whereas in Denmark Forest Kindergarten happens all day, every day. Then to find out more about pedagogy and practices each case was visited. By visiting each case it was possible to experience and observe what was happening, and then ask questions of those most central to the practice, the practitioners and pedagogues, as well as the children. What follows is a brief outline of the approach used to collect data.

To study each case in detail and in particular the social context and gain an insight into the practices and pedagogy of each, two settings were used as cases for this study, one in England and one in Denmark. Research methodology uses case study to explore two settings as cases, to explore the pedagogy, principles and philosophy of each in practice (Yin, 1994). Five days were spent collecting data in each setting. This investigation of Forest School and Forest Kindergarten required an in-depth look at what was happening. Interested in the social situation in each case, and to gain the best information questions were asked of those central to the experience, which here was the children and adults involved (Stake, 1995).

Each case involved the participation of four children and two adults in each case. In Forest Kindergarten the two pedagogues interviewed and observed were Signe and Max, and the three children, Erik, Soren and Amelia took part. The observation of Max involved many children. In Forest School, three practitioners Lucy, Ben and Ava, were the main adult participants. Grace, Holly and Jack were the three child participants, although Adam become involved in the observed, adult activity. Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants and setting. Signe also translated the children's Danish into English.

A series of practical yet informal approaches such as walking interviews, photo tours, conversational interviews and observation with field notes similar to the Mosaic Approach were the main tools applied to gain the best information (Clark & Moss, 2005, 2011). This provided a unique perspective of the social situations and relationships between the adults and children involved. This study asked children to take photos of their favourite places, the places where they played often and those places that were important to them. In addition, throughout all my visits I kept a journal where I reflected deeply on my experiences (Denscombe, 2010). The next stage involved observing children playing, with follow-up interviews with the children that also involved photoelicitation. Lastly, the adults were interviewed using an informal approach (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). To maintain consistency prepared questions were used, but the relaxed approach and rapport built with the participants over the week provided space for follow-up questions. The result was detailed information from each pedagogue and practitioner that provided the specific flavour of each setting. To try to understand and explain what was happening a constructivist lens was applied to analyse the data.

PEDAGOGY

The practices of early childhood professionals, pedagogues in Denmark and practitioners in England are all influenced by pedagogy. Consequently, how pedagogy is understood and enacted can have a significant effect on children's experiences of Forest Learning. However, there are many, sometimes contrasting understandings of pedagogy and specific differences in pedagogical approach between England and Denmark.

Pedagogy can be considered to be the art, science and craft of teaching, whereas curriculum is the knowledge, skills and values learnt by the children (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). In England in the 1990s, when Forest School was in its infancy pedagogy was 'seldom used in English writing about education' (Watkins & Mortimore, 1999, p. 1). Consequently, pedagogy remained broadly defined, in part due the reluctance of practitioners to discuss it (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). Conversely, in other European countries where pedagogy is more clearly articulated, such as Denmark early years provision is pedagogically driven. Social, cultural and political values, alongside theoretical ideas have also shaped how a child is viewed, the best way to educate children and how the pedagogue can best deliver this vision (Wall et al., 2015).

Pedagogy refers to a set of instructional techniques and strategies used to enable learning to take place, shaping how the pedagogue or practitioner delivers this vision. Although based on years of scientific and cognitive research into how 'we' learn, pedagogy can be elusive as it is often 'taken for granted' (Jensen, 2011, p. 141). Pedagogy is closely related to the values and beliefs accepted in a particular society, enshrined in law and embedded into practice making them difficult to separate, see or talk about as they can be implicit (Jensen, 2011). To provide stimulation and motivation teachers should apply their pedagogical knowledge creatively as part of a dynamic process or interaction between the adult, learner and environment. Pedagogy should reflect their specific circumstances, the unique needs of individual children and any different or specific environmental factors.

Play and exploration should be at the heart of early years provision (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). With the exception of Waite, Davis and Brown (2006), Forest School pedagogy has not always been explicitly expressed and theoretical ideas tend to dominate literature (Leather, 2018). Looking back Waite, Bolling and Bentsen (2015, p. 4) identified 'fuzzy evaluations of implemented Forest School programmes' that 'reaffirm(ed) anticipated benefits' rather than unravelling the how and why of pedagogical principles or theoretical underpinning (Scott et al., 2003). The result is a limited

understanding of why particular activities and ways of working are used (Waite et al., 2015). In England, pedagogy is defined quite broadly, closely aligned with curriculum and often involves an instructive approach (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), whereas in Denmark early years pedagogy is in direct opposition to practice that involves ‘teaching’. In Denmark the idea of social pedagogy is strongly articulated, as well as being evident in the Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum (MCE, 2020), and is an established part of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Previously Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) have identified pedagogy as being made up of interactions of these three elements, adult, child and environment. Further, Waite and Pratt (2015) identified people, place and purpose as core elements of outdoor play.

In England, pedagogy is often conflated with curriculum, meaning that provision is closely associated with educational outcomes, and frequently involves an instructional approach, resulting in the curriculum driving the way practitioners operate in any given circumstance (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). Whereas in Denmark early years provision is pedagogically driven and does not involve adults teaching anything (Wagner, 2003). Although shifts in thinking have since occurred, there remains a legacy of curriculum dominating provision and pedagogy in England, whilst in Denmark the reverse is true. Knight (2012) identified a lack of understanding of a pedagogy of outdoor play, and the reluctance of Forest School practitioners to discuss and develop a pedagogy for practice in England, as the biggest barrier to developing better outdoor provision including Forest School. Therefore, it is important that there is agreement over a pedagogy for Forest Learning that can be applied in practice. Referred to as social pedagogy in Denmark, the principles of early years provision have evolved out of a set of unique political, social, and cultural values, into a vision that is rooted in the Nordic Social Welfare Model (Jensen, 2011). Alongside political and theoretical ideals, social pedagogy is key to understanding early years practice in Denmark.

SOCIAL PEDAGOGY

In 1844, Karl Mager, a German educator, coined the term social pedagogy (Kronen, 2001). Holistic in nature, social pedagogy encompasses the ‘theory of all the personal, social and moral education in a given society, including the description of what has happened in practice’ (Winkler, 1988, p. 41), identifying a close link between education and the resolution of social problems in society (Hamalainen, 2003). Social refers to the individual, the group, the

community and society and their interrelationships (Cameron & Moss, 2011, p. 9). Unlike in the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), in Europe the term pedagogy is used beyond the classroom, and often includes children's overall development (Petrie et al., 2009). Therefore, social pedagogy is about bringing up children in the 'broadest sense' (Petrie et al., 2009). Highly responsive to individual needs, social pedagogues work with children in a range of contexts including kindergarten, schools, care and youth work, combining education and care, many services are involved in this distinctive approach to practice so that can be highly responsive (Petrie et al., 2009). However, social pedagogy is fundamentally a political practice, so that each country will have their own understanding and emphasis to reflect each unique and distinctive situation (Kornbeck & Jensen, 2009).

As social pedagogy is dynamic and should reflect the unique set of circumstances and situation, there is no one understanding of social pedagogy (Kornbeck & Jensen, 2009). However, there are some common principles and values pertaining to social pedagogy that have shaped how the child is viewed, the best way to educate young children and the best way for the pedagogue to deliver this vision (Petrie, 2013). Pedagogic theory and the main principles of social pedagogy start with humanistic values that include children's rights beyond legislative requirements and is based on democratic values (Petrie et al., 2009). Respecting children as 'fellow human beings' they are positioned as experts in their own lives, ensuring that a child's point of view is expressed, and their voice heard is fundamental (Petrie et al., 2009, p. 7). In addition, children should be able to express themselves with their bodies as well as show their feelings (Jensen, 2011). Pedagogues hold an unconditional regard for the intrinsic value of human beings and consider that the child develops holistically (Petrie et al., 2009). Consequently, the pedagogues work to create a physical and mental environment to meet children's needs.

Not only is there a difference in pedagogical understanding between England and Denmark, the addition of social pedagogy needs to be considered. In England, little has been known of social pedagogy until recently, whereas the main principles of social pedagogy are embedded in Danish early years care and education. Consequently, any comparison of Forest School and Forest Kindergarten cannot ignore the influence of social pedagogy on practice in Denmark, and its absence in England.

Children's rights are placed at the centre of social pedagogy, which some argue this makes it a political practice (Kornbeck & Jensen, 2009). Each country will have their own unique context and understanding and expression of children's rights that reflects their unique situation (Kornbeck & Jensen, 2009). Even though there has historically been an interest in social pedagogical

ideals, in England these are more aligned with social care practices rather than early education. Where there are different social care practices, and a different relationship between care and early education resulted in little traction with the social pedagogical ideas (Petrie, 2013).

A PEDAGOGICAL MODEL FOR FOREST LEARNING

Pedagogy in Denmark and England, and therefore in Forest Kindergarten and Forest School is expressed differently, and has been influenced by different priorities, values and beliefs which means it is socially constructed. In Denmark, ECEC including Forest Kindergarten is informed by social pedagogy and the revised curriculum now has a strengthened pedagogical element. In England the opposite is true. Practice is more strongly influenced by curriculum, with pedagogy evident but less overt (Wall et al., 2015). Over time views and beliefs in each country have evolved so the context of ECEC in Denmark today, is different to that of the 1990s, the time when Forest School ideas were *borrowed* (Phillips & Ochs, 2004). Further, ECEC in England is different today, 30 years after Forest School was created. Since inception in the 1990s Forest School has grown and developed, gradually becoming absorbed into English and UK society, culture and early years education. However, it has now become something different to the original Danish Forest Kindergarten experienced back in 1990s Denmark and brought to England. In the early days little was written about Forest School pedagogy, meaning that practice spread through observation, experience and word of mouth. It has taken more recent work to begin to unpick and establish a pedagogy for Forest School.

By comparing the two similar yet different practices of Forest School and Forest Kindergarten for the first time, this theory has identified that pedagogy is at the core of Forest Learning (Fig. 1). Interactions between adult, child and environment are central to pedagogy (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002), and the core elements of outside play pedagogy are people, places and purpose (Waite & Pratt, 2015). Here, using a constructivist theoretical lens, this Pedagogical Model for Forest Learning has presented a new perspective.

Fig. 1 shows how the ACE elements are connected to each other and triangulated around pedagogy at their core. The interaction of each ACE with pedagogy is vital, whilst the *two*-way interaction between all three elements provides unique and distinct interpretations and enactments of Forest Learning.

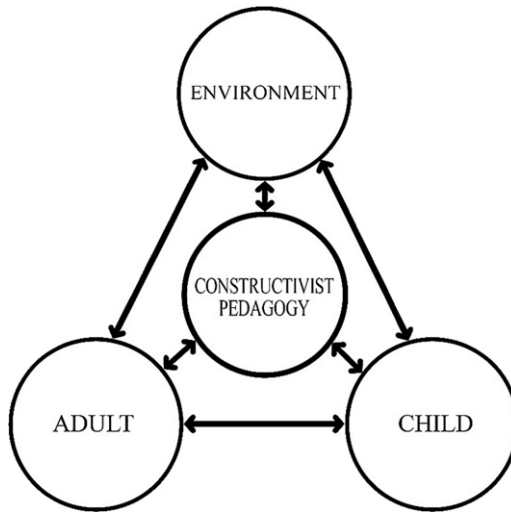


Fig. 1. A Pedagogical Model for Forest Learning.

The ACE elements are equal. No one is more or less important than the other, hence the triangle representation. Each is influenced by, and influence each other, and pedagogy. These dynamic interactions contribute to the construction of Forest Learning. Through dynamic interactions and inter-relational interactions between ACE (Fig. 1) such as inter-subjectivity, experiences are actively constructed and co-constructed between the adult and child, creating different experiences and form the pedagogical underpinning of Forest Learning. It is in the space in between these interactions, actions and inactions that pedagogic activity is created and enacted.

This pedagogical model positions the adult as actively constructing Forest Learning *for* and co-constructing Forest Learning *with* children using an equal power balance where possible so the children can be involved in their learning. Children are positioned as active participants, who through play make decisions for themselves, create their own experiences either on their own, with friends or with adults to scaffold them. They use the natural environment to inspire and motivate their play. The environment is seen as a valuable resource. As a natural phenomenon it is a feature that the outside landscape is subject to seasonal changes and the weather, which can change slowly over time or can be instant.

All three elements combine in an active and dynamic relationship, although at times three-way interactions means that at different times each may have greater influence, interact more dynamically or create stronger connections. For example, when adults lead an activity using nature, the adult and