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Book Review

Understanding the Danish Forest School Approach, Early Years Education in Practice by Jane Williams-Siegfredsen

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Understanding the Danish Forest School Approach, Early Years Education in Practice

Jane Williams-Siegfredsen

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The key to this concise and timely book is in the word 'Understanding' in the title. Unlike many other books which explore learning and teaching outside and in particular the role of forest schools, Williams-Siegfredsen contextualises forest education within the broader context of pre-school education in Denmark. This is significant as Denmark from the perspective of forest school practitioners in the UK is the home of this particular approach to outdoor learning. Also of note is that the author is one of the original group of lecturers from Bridgewater College who in 1993 took their students on a study trip to Denmark where for the first time they encountered a "skovbornehave' (forest kindergarten)," (Williams – Siegfredsen, 2012, p.1). It is out of that experience that forest school as we know it here was born. This book is grounded in the exploration of Danish philosophical approaches to learning rather than setting out a 'how to' guide to forest school activities and is all the richer for that.

The book is divided into six chapters which create a rich context for understanding how forest education came about and how it articulates with the rest of early years education in Denmark. There are two features which stand out, firstly that being and learning outdoors is not something which is peculiar to being in school or pre-school settings but is part of a long standing 'pedagogical and political' approach to life in Denmark known as "friluftsliv", or 'fresh air life,' (ibid, p.7), and is not confined to young children. From the 18th century in Denmark it has developed as a philosophy for all ages which permeated the workplace through the introduction of annual days out to natural places to relieve the stress of industrial labour and was introduced to the school system in the mid nineteenth century through Frobel's kindergarten approach to learning. The second key feature of understanding the place of forest education is the role of the pedagogue and the importance of this role is underlined by the inclusion of a chapter entirely devoted to explaining why. It becomes clear throughout this book that it is not being and learning in a forest per se which enriches the lives of children but the work of highly skilled professional pedagogues whose philosophical approach to education 'transcends the division between 'child care' and 'education,' as pedagogy regards care as inseparably linked with learning, health, and social and emotional wellbeing.' (ibid, p.33).

This contextualising approach is continued in the author's exploration of learning environments in early years settings in Denmark, and again highlights some of the overlapping practices and attitudes to outdoor learning in standard Danish kindergartens which have been developed around the 'four elements of air, fire, earth and water,' (ibid, p.47). Outdoor contexts are designed to provide opportunities for digging, adventure play, lighting fire and whittling sticks whether part of what we would understand as a forest school setting or not. What differentiates the two examples of a rural nature kindergarten and an urban kindergarten with a forest group from other kindergartens is the extended opportunities for children to play and learn spontaneously within a forest setting for either part of or a significant proportion of the day. What makes these learning environments different is the intense focus on the natural world and the role of risk and challenge which Williams-Siegfredsen sees as 'vital' (ibid: 54). It is not that risk and challenge are absent from other pre-school settings, rather that these come to the fore in forest contexts. For example there are more opportunities to work with forest tools such as knives, axes and saws than there would be in other outdoor settings.

The author also contextualises the social and political reality of kindergarten provision generally and nature kindergartens in particular, which highlights many of the same issues of provision as would be encountered in the UK particularly the role of the private sector in securing the future of forest kindergartens.

This book is designed for both student and experienced practitioners with an interest in developing their skills in outdoor pedagogy. Although badged as Early Years, its focus on philosophical approaches to learning and the inclusion of reflective questions at the end of each chapter make it relevant to all educators in both formal and informal settings. In addition to the reflective questions the author has included summaries of recent research on the impact of nature kindergartens and its relationship to the wider Danish concept of 'udeskole' which relates to outdoor learning in the primary school and beyond. (Bensen et al, 2009).