

# Partnering for Outdoor Play: A Case Study of Forest and Nature School Programming in the Context of Licensed Child Care in Ottawa, Ontario

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## **Abstract**

*This case study examines the policy significance of a partnership between two organizations committed to improving children's learning and well-being through the delivery of a forest and nature school (FNS) program offered in the context of a licensed childcare program in the province of Ontario, Canada. The notion of the Anthropocene is taken as a theory and practice framework which emphasizes the urgency for developing new educational strategies that respond to the current moment of ecological crisis facing human and more-than-human planetary communities on earth. Methodologically, the case study is taken up through the lens of action research, wherein the leaders of the two partnering organizations participated as co-investigators of the project. Thematic findings of the study suggest that best-practice policy in early years FNS programs broadly include, among others, the following: understanding a continuum of FNS pedagogies, working to influence regulatory disconnections between built and natural play environments, and advancing social and ecological justice values through FNS programs.*

## **Resumé**

*Cette étude de cas examine l'importance stratégique d'un partenariat entre deux organisations vouées à l'amélioration de l'apprentissage et du bien-être des enfants par la prestation d'un programme d'école en forêt et en nature offert dans le contexte d'un programme de garderie agréée en Ontario, au Canada. La notion d'Anthropocène sert de cadre théorique et pratique pour souligner l'urgence de mettre en place de nouvelles stratégies éducatives qui s'adaptent à ce moment crucial de crise écologique pour l'être humain et les autres espèces qui peuplent la terre. Côté méthodologie, l'étude de cas est réalisée en recherche-action, les dirigeants des deux organisations partenaires participant au projet à titre de co-chercheurs. Les résultats thématiques de l'étude suggèrent qu'une bonne stratégie pour des programmes d'école en forêt et en nature pour la petite enfance devrait miser principalement sur les éléments suivants : comprendre que les approches pédagogiques de l'école en forêt et en nature forment un continuum, travailler à aplanir les différences réglementaires existant entre les environnements de jeu naturels et artificiels, faire progresser les valeurs de justice sociale et écologique grâce aux programmes d'école en forêt et en nature.*

*Keywords:* forest and nature school, early years education, outdoor play, licensed childcare

*Mots clés :* école en forêt ou en nature, éducation de la petite enfance, jeu en plein air, garderie agréée

## Introduction

The purpose of the case study is to examine the policy significance of a partnership between two organizations committed to improving children's learning and well-being through nature-based free-play within the context of licensed child care in Ottawa, Ontario. Experiences in nature and the outdoors characterized by rich, free-play opportunities are inconsistently embedded into licensed early years child care programs in Canada (Tanden, Saelens, & Christakis, 2015; Truelove, Vanderloo, & Tucker, 2017). Within the early years sector, there are inconsistencies not only in educator knowledge of play-based learning approaches (Rengel, 2013) but also in educator understanding about how play can be implemented within natural settings (McClintic & Petty, 2015). As a result of these disparities, children's overall health and well-being may be negatively impacted and significant learning opportunities may be missed (Massey, 2005; Malone, 2012).

The study reported in this paper explored forest and nature school programming (FNS) as one opportune pathway for filling gaps in early years licensed childcare programs' integration of nature-inspired, child-directed free-play opportunities. Many cultural factors underlie the current displacement of outdoor play-based learning (Gull Laird & McFarland, 2014; Kilkelly et al., 2016); the case study was designed with the intention to improve understandings of cultural considerations to support early childhood outdoor learning in the context of a partnership that can support grassroots systemic policy change through a licensed child care initiative. We hope that the case study findings will have regional impact by informing program improvement in the program under study. We also hope that there may be broader resonance of the case example, and that it may serve as a lighthouse program to be emulated in full or part elsewhere.

Forest and nature school is an umbrella concept for a breadth of approaches within a global outdoor education movement characterized by regular and repeated sessions in natural outdoor spaces. FNS sessions are implemented through child-directed pedagogical designs which operate within a "forest as teacher" mindset, and are delivered by educators trained in FNS pedagogy (Child and Nature Alliance of Canada [CNAC], 2014; MacEachren, 2013). This model is frequently regarded in popular culture as Scandinavian in origin; however, "forest schools" are prevalent throughout the world, and the Canadian movement of forest schooling documented in this paper draws from a range

of historical and contemporary models of nature-based education from Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. It is also, importantly, informed by the land on which it is situated, and the long and rich educational practices of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit people who have existed here since time immemorial (CNAC, 2014; MacEachren, 2018).

### Theory and Practice Framework: Thinking Through Forest-Inspired and Forest-Integrated Early Years Outdoor Play in the Anthropocene

The Earth is undergoing a period of rapid and irreversible change. Nobel Prize-winning scientist Paul Crutzen (2012) theorizes that we have entered the “Anthropocene,” a new phase in the planet’s evolution created through human activities that “have fundamentally and permanently changed the planet’s biosphere” (as cited in Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015, p. 509). According to Crutzen, human activities have resulted in “the acidification of oceans, the depletion of the ozone layer, fundamental changes to the earth’s carbon, phosphorous, and nitrogen cycles, climate change and the rapid loss of biodiversity” (p. 509). These interlocking environmental crises provide strong evidence of a transition into the Anthropocene. Meanwhile, human societies, and our education systems as social microcosms, have in many ways grown apart from the planet that sustains us. This separation is evident across Western social systems, with child care as early years education being no exception. Human–nature dichotomies make addressing the pressing ecological problems facing human existence that are bound up in the Anthropocene more difficult, and we propose through this project that forest-inspired and forest-integrated early years education is one promising avenue for building human capacity for ecological problem-solving in the Anthropocene.

Never before has the field of early childhood education been so crucial in supporting “unbound emergence” (Nxumalo et al., 2018)—the learning that arises from children’s unstructured play in the “more-than-human” world (Abram, 1996). FNS, then, can play a critical role in the developing landscape of early childhood education in the Anthropocene. This landscape can be more than a reactionary response to environmental crises. Within it, we can reconfigure our mindsets and actions and seize this eventful naming moment of Anthropocene as one of transformational opportunity (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015). In so doing, we can reimagine our surroundings not in terms of “state of emergency,” but rather in terms of “energizing *urgency*” (Lakind & Adsit-Morris, 2018, p. 32), the latter of which promises a more hopeful, inspiring way forward. Such a reconfiguration also provides increased opportunities for children to build agency (Lakind & Adsit-Morris, 2018, p. 36) because it encourages them to imagine and create their own future in a dynamic relationship with the more-than-human. In such a scenario, they are co-collaborators with the more-than-human world rather than burdened saviours of our damaged planet.

The precarious state of our planet demands immediate and radical transformation of educational systems, especially for young children living in North America (Nxumalo et al., 2018, p. 449). As Payne (2018) notes, sustainability has come to be regarded critically, “as little more than an increasingly hollow slogan in education” (p. 125). Therefore, there is a need for “rewilding concepts into revitalized theory building and research development” (p. 126), a call which has been taken up by Nxumalo, Vintimilli, and Nelson (2018) and other members of the Common Worlds Research Collective (<http://commonworlds.net>). This collective and those who embrace its vision advocate that by building on existing practices from emergent curriculum, educators can understand the child within their more-than-human surroundings, help them to nurture strong relationships, and teach them about their interconnectedness with all things so they can better understand the impacts of their actions on the human and more-than-human world.

For the purpose of this case study, the Anthropocene serves as a contextualizing moment in which FNS in the context of licensed child care in Ontario is currently unfolding. The Anthropocene as a framing idea appeals deeply to the case study partners at the level of their mission statements, which each have underlying commitments to child, family, and community well-being. In the following section, we introduce the organizations partnering to develop the pilot licensed child care forest and nature school program, and we describe the context of the case study.

## Case Study Background

Two partnering organizations form the foundation for this case study: The Child and Nature Alliance of Canada (CNAC) and Andrew Fleck Children’s Services (AFCS). CNAC is a national organization whose mission is to connect children and youth with the outdoors through advocacy, policy development, professional learning programs, and delivery of child and youth programs regionally. Efforts to carry out this mission are grounded in the Ottawa Forest and Nature School. AFCS is a not-for-profit children and families service provider operating a suite of early years and family focused programs (including licensed child care and licensed in-home child care) in Ottawa. The Executive Directors of each of the partnering organizations are Marlene Power (CNAC) and Kim Hiscott (AFCS). Kim and Marlene are co-investigators in the case study and co-authors of this paper.

### *The “Pilot Program”*

The case study explores a partnership between CNAC and AFCS that has developed over a roughly 10-year period (~2008–2018) and has led to policy implementation in the form of a shared memorandum of understanding (MoU). The MoU led first to a commitment on the part of AFCS to have a number of their

staff trained and certified in CNAC's forest school practitioner training and certification program, and later to the joint operation of a licensed, preschool-aged FNS child care program. The partners' initial vision for offering a pilot licensed child care FNS program was for a fully immersive program where preschoolers would spend five days a week in FNS while attending licensed child care. Over a roughly three-year period (2015–2018), AFCS and CNAC worked to realize this vision, in consultation with Ontario Ministry of Education officers who were reviewing the program for licensing under the province's *Child Care and Early Years Act* (2014).

It became clear that costs associated with building a facility that would satisfy licensing requirements in an immersive forest environment outstripped available financial resources. However, unwilling to give up on their commitment to the value of FNS, the leadership teams at AFCS and CNAC implemented program design compromises to overcome regulatory barriers (e.g., standards for indoor facility design, outdoor play space). In the ultimate pilot program delivery model, up to 16 children attend the licensed program three days per week in a child care centre and two days per week at the Ottawa FNS. When based at the child care centre, educators bring FNS elements into the indoor classroom and outdoor play spaces, and children also make daily visits to nearby nature within walking distance of the centre to engage in inquiry-based play (e.g., a grove of mature cedar trees on the back half of the school yard adjacent to the child care centre; mud puddles that sometimes form at the juncture of the school soccer field and the asphalt play surface). Across all five days of the week (child care centre and FNS days), educators leading the pilot program have participated in CNAC's FNS Practitioner Course. For the purposes of licensing, the two days of weekly immersion in the forest is considered a field trip, even though it is a regular and repeated program element. Two days per week of field trip was the maximum that could be negotiated with the Child Care Quality Assurance and Licensing Branch of the Early Years and Child Care Division within the Ontario Ministry of Education. This arrangement represents 40% field trip and 60% programming within the licensed facility and respects the ministry's interpretation of the regulations that at least 50% of programming on a weekly basis be conducted within the licensed facility. While the program delivery model at the time of launch in September 2018 falls short of the vision of fully immersive forest and nature school, CNAC and AFCS are pleased to be offering the pilot program as a means of demonstrating proof of concept that might lead to greater regulatory flexibility for forest and nature school as licensed child care in Ontario in the future.

Throughout the design and implementation of the pilot program, CNAC and AFCS maintained a deep concern for questions of *why?* and *how?* they were approaching FNS integration and immersion programming. This reflective practice gave rise to the notion of a *forest and nature school continuum* as a conceptual tool for understanding the pilot program. This idea is addressed in greater depth in the findings section.

## Methodology and Methods

The project is viewed methodologically through the lens of collaborative action research (Jacobs, 2017), and it follows the method of an interpretive case study (Stake, 1995). The process of researching was developed as a collaborative enterprise between CNAC, AFCS, and the principal author as a collaborative research partner (Flynn et al., 2016). As critical action researchers, we follow Fine (2018) in her assumption that action research transcends a tool kit of strategies for documenting research and forms an epistemological stance through which researchers are agents of positive socio-ecological change.

Data collection strategies included a series of six semi-structured focus group conversations (Feldman, 1999) as well as document analysis of the partnership memorandum of understanding. Focus group conversation data comprise the dominant data source in this paper, with the MoU offering background and contextual support. Conversations ranged in size from 3 to 15 participants. Of the six conversations, three were detailed exchanges among the three first authors of this paper (Blair, Kim, and Marlene). These form the bulk of the data presented herein, given the CNAC/AFCS Executive Directors' shared expertise on the policy history of the pilot FNS project. One conversation was a large campfire circle discussion with Blair, Kim, Marlene, and a group of staff from both CNAC and AFCS. This conversation allowed for broader organizational input into the practice implications of the policies that enabled the pilot FNS program to exist. There were, however, some limitations in the depth of discussion because of the larger number of participants. The three remaining conversations were walking interviews (Lynch & Mannion, 2016) around forest school and child care centre spaces. These walking conversations are less dominant in the data presented here, but they provided important contextual background that significantly informed the findings.

Data analysis was conducted by transcribing audio recorded interviews and coding transcripts during multiple iterative rounds of listening and reading. Codes were assigned based on a provisional coding strategy (Saldana, 2015). They were then organized into themes that are reported herein; however, because of word count limitations and a focus on policy in this paper, only the themes most relevant to early years FNS policy are reported below. The memorandum of understanding was similarly coded, and codes were integrated into the larger dataset of interview data. Coding was completed by identifying codes within transcribed documents, using the comments feature in MS Word, and then copying all instances of each code onto sticky notes that were colour-coded, based on the conversation they were drawn from. The codes were then sorted and re-sorted by the first author to develop themes. The resulting themes were then provided to the broader authorship collective to verify and revise.

The project was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Board at Trent University. Ethical considerations attended to in the planning of the study

included the challenge of focus group confidentiality (managed by offering opportunities for private interviews as needed) as well as the mitigation of social/professional risk in a focus group where both employers and employees were participants (managed through an informed consent letter and an oral focus group preamble).

## Findings: Enabling Forest and Nature School Opportunities in Licensed Child Care Contexts in the Anthropocene

The purpose of this case study is to review aspects of CNAC/AFCS's pilot licensed childcare FNS program in order to identify policy conditions that allowed for the successful development of the pilot FNS licensed child care program, and through which similar programs elsewhere might flourish. Through our data analysis, we propose that the following seven policy themes promote effective FNS program development within the CNAC/AFCS partnership. Themes are presented in the order of their conceptual prominence within the data analysis; prominence was judged qualitatively by the researchers, and not by quantitative strategies such as code-counts. As a result of this research design choice, and because of the nature of qualitative research more broadly, our values and assumptions about FNS are inherently present within the findings. Knowing we could not write our selves out of the findings, we endeavoured to practise researcher reflexivity in order to maintain awareness of our own presence in the data (Chase, 2005; Iannacci, 2007). Still, there may be blind spots, and we encourage readers to approach our take-aways with a critical gaze.

### *1. A Forest and Nature School Continuum*

A keystone finding of this case study is the articulation, through dialogue, of a continuum of forest and nature school program delivery options spanning from all day, everyday immersion in forest/nature to an integrative forest/nature school practice in which elements of FNS pedagogies may be integrated into otherwise indoor (or traditional fenced outdoor play area) programming. Participants (both organizational leaders and frontline educators) described conceptual understandings and practical pedagogical strategies that point to a continuum heuristic as a useful workaround strategy in the face of policy barriers that may limit opportunities for immersive FNS programs, despite the evidence-supported benefits of such learning experiences (Kuo, Barnes, & Jordan, 2019). As a workaround strategy, understanding FNS in a continuum provides an opportunity for educators and programmers to attend to the urgency of the Anthropocene even where it may not be possible to implement immersive FNS practices in “all or nothing” ways. In our first conversation, Marlene described a nature continuum in terms of its importance for reinforcing the principle of regular and repeated access to nature that is fundamental to FNS:

There are forest school programs that are on school grounds, like a patch of three trees, and then there are programs like ours [Ottawa FNS], in a really immersive woodland space, um, downtown Ottawa.<sup>1</sup> So, it takes place in what we call the nature continuum, in really diverse spaces. It's the regular repeated experience in the same natural space is a really, really core piece of the work. (Focus Group A)

In another conversation, Kim described the time split in the pilot program between child care centre days and days spent immersed in the forest. She echoed Marlene's articulation of the significance of regular and repeated access, even when an immersive experience isn't available:

So we're going to have the < <immersive forest opportunity> > here [Ottawa FNS]... and then, the other 3 days we'll be using the nearby nature, that's you know, the edge of the field where the school is, and so they'll create their own repeated and regular access space. (Focus Group B)

The notion of an FNS continuum was further nuanced in a large focus group conversation with educators, where Brenda,<sup>2</sup> a consultant to AFCS's network of home child care providers, highlighted the value of accessing nature in communities where children live:

And, we're going to local wooded areas, or strips of trees, or whatever we can find that's within that area. So... that's a challenge... 'cause we're constantly having to look at the space a different way. It's like, can we do something here? Is this a good spot to be able to do it in? And then sometimes you'll find a forest and it's just like "Aaaaah!" And you have climbing trees, and you have tall grass, and all these beautiful places. And so, that in a way is also a challenge but it's also a really cool thing for us in the home child care department because we have that ability to be mobile and to find those little nuggets or locations that are in their community. And we know, because they've told us, that they go back to when we're not with them.

Brenda's assertion that children report re-visiting nearby nature spaces that they have attended during child care programming suggests the value of understanding FNS as a continuum of nature-based pedagogies. The continuum features varied indoor and outdoor environments, along which the key pedagogical commitments of regular and repeated access to nature, and a child-centred, inquiry-based learning process are consistent.

## *2. Indoor/Outdoor Disconnection in Regulation: Square Peg, Round Hole*

You know, square peg is like the indoor building. And, a lot of our legislation has been built around that concept of four walls... What is it going to take to align outdoor play, forest and nature school... with the licensing that maybe has been designed and built with a different worldview... with the indoors kind of at the forefront? (Marlene, Focus Group C)

Much of the dialogue about provincial regulation focused on prescriptive requirements for indoor space. For example, Kim shared:



The licencing does obligate you to have that interior space, with play materials, program rooms, set up, um, and it seems to me that that's something in... what... we're envisioning, will not be very well used, so it seems like an additional expense for not much... value. (Focus Group A)

This highlights the requirement to develop and maintain costly indoor facilities even though an FNS program ideally makes little use of such spaces. This reflects a disconnection between FNS program designs and the assumptions embedded in Ontario's *Early Years Act* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). The regulations within the *Act* are predominantly relevant to indoor and outdoor built space and have little to offer as regards what a well risk-managed FNS environment should look like in the context of licensed child care.

Marlene highlighted an important aspect of this misalignment, noting that while regulation demands predetermined requirements for indoor and fenced-outdoor learning environments that are expected to be relatively static, the FNS model under which CNAC/AFCS operate equips educators with skills to make judgements about dynamic outdoor learning environments, using risk assessment frameworks:

So... supporting educators to navigate situations on the ground, on the spot when children are playing, and so the framework is going to outline... risk management practices, and risk benefit assessment, and we're hoping to, over the next 3 to 5 years, like, establish that framework as... a best practice, or, maybe even see about embedding it within legislation. (Focus Group B)

This represents a significant shift in thinking about risk management that is not currently accounted for in provincial regulation in Ontario.

Disconnections between the regulatory framework of licensed child care in Ontario and FNS programming leave the leadership and frontline teams at CNAC and AFCS concerned about the challenges of mainstreaming FNS through licensed child care. Moreover, they are hindered in their attempt to implement educational responses to the Anthropocene. However, findings of the case study show that both organizations are eager to help regulators understand the context and benefits of FNS, with a particular focus on risk assessment. Findings also underscore the capacity for FNS practitioners to manage risk in outdoor environments in ways that would mirror the level of safety and supervision that regulations mandate for licensed child care in Ontario.

### *3. Social and Ecological Justice Values*

Equity of access to FNS programs is an important social justice value for both CNAC and AFCS. This shared commitment is documented in the organizations' MoU: "Both CNAC and AFCS are committed to enhancing equity and access to the outdoors for all families attending or using their services" (p. 2). This statement is based in a joint understanding of the financial burden that child

care costs often present to families. It is likewise grounded in the realization that programming in the vein of forest and nature school is often offered as an alternative or specialty program. As such, it is priced at a higher tier than more conventional child care programs and includes additional financial investments that are not associated with indoor child care (e.g., cost for all-weather outdoor clothing, additional laundry costs in time and money). Kim elaborated that:

Child care in itself is expensive, you know, it's not an effectively funded, per se, experience.... So, the cost can be quite expensive for families and that's just not completely comfortable for us... we would like the program to be affordable to everybody... wouldn't it be wonderful if everybody could decide where they want their children to go.... So, you know, we're paying attention to that as well... it's one of the challenges. (Focus Group A)

In Ontario, many early years forest and nature school programs are offered through exemptions from the *Early Years and Child Care Act*. That positioning supports the annexation of FNS as alternative or special interest. Programming FNS as licensed child care offers a degree of mainstreaming that could allow the program to be priced comparably to conventional child care and/or to permit access to sources of program funding that could increase access to families across the income spectrum. Marlene drove this point home:

My really keen interest in this licensed child care program, and the partnership in general; Kim and AFCS are working in amazing communities, with amazing families, and amazing children that we want to reach. And, we want to demonstrate that forest school and nature-based early learning is not this kind of... posh alternative program for... families that can afford it... but that really it is accessible, and applicable, and valuable for all children and families. (Focus Group B)

In the foregoing, Marlene articulates in plain language the social justice value position entrenched in the CNAC/AFCS partnership MoU cited above—a position which is justified by environmental education literature that documents ways in which environmental crises within the Anthropocene are disproportionately experienced by groups who are marginalized through inequities such as classism, racism, and sexism (Norgaard, 2012) and who have been historically marginalized from outdoor and environmental programming like FNS (Ambreen & Berger, 2016; Gibson-Wood & Wakefield, 2013).

#### *4. Organizational Alignment and Developing Capacity*

Study participants shared the importance of working together to align organizational aims with available funding in order to achieve a depth of impact through forest and nature-based programming that can operate within the parameters of licensing regulations. It became clear through the case study that this kind of alignment takes significant time. Marlene explained that in its early days of operation, CNAC was in a position of “really big dreams, [and] very little

capacity” (Focus Group A). The organization was aware that through developing a long-term collaborative project, there would be an ability to build capacity together. Marlene explained further that:

When I reached out to Kim in the beginning, it was with that vision in mind, that we were eventually working towards a licensed childcare program, and very quickly we started talking about the synergies and collaborations that could happen with that new facility and that new program. And, from those conversations, we developed a memorandum of understanding, and started carving out what the partnership would look like. That... went to both of our boards, and... we had huge endorsement from our board, and we were able to move forward. (Marlene, Focus Group A)

Kim corroborated these details:

I was able to go to our board and say, Okay... we have this collaboration, if we're going to move it forward, we need to invest in the development of our staff... And, they approved that. And so, that was... planting their feet and saying, yes, they actually did agree... And we can say we're doing this not just because it's the flavour of the day, or there's an opportunity for funding, or there's an interest, it's actually a commitment from our organization. (Focus Group A)

Across these statements, it can be understood that the CNAC and AFCS have agreed to align their work in order to implement and scale up innovative programs that address unmet community needs, including the need for educational responses to the Anthropocene.

### *5. Forest and Nature Pedagogies: Seeing is Believing*

Participants (organizational leaders and front-line educators) emphasized that policy which supports FNS programming in the context of licensed child care must be designed with an understanding of the pedagogy that defines FNS. Participants demonstrated a remarkable fluidity with concepts from the literature that frames FNS pedagogies, such as: regular and repeated access (Knight, 2013; O'Brien, 2009), child-led learning (CNAC, 2018; Gray, 2016), child competence (Maynard, 2007), and “risky play” (Brussoni et al., 2015; Harper, 2017, 2018). They used these concepts as they talked about their work. What is more, they did not evoke these concepts uncritically as mere educational wordplay or sloganeering. Rather, the participants explained that their practice of FNS pedagogies has uncovered empirical evidence of the value of FNS approaches for children’s learning. Diane articulated this nicely in regard to risky play during a focus group with educators who had recently completed FNS practitioner training:

*Blair:* Could you articulate some of those benefits [of risky play]?

*Diane:* Gross motor, coordination, spatial awareness, determining the level of risk for themselves... and, it's great for us as practitioners, as educators, to actually be

saying those things, and then actually seeing them happen. And, you're kind of going "See? It happens!"...and then the providers seeing it, and then the parents seeing it, and they're like "Wow!, you're right, that is true." They *will* stop when they feel they're not secure, or they *will* not go as far as you think they will... They'll stop before then in most cases, right? So it's just letting them... proceed and take those risks for themselves. (Focus Group C)

Another educator, Rachael, chimed in to support how risky play helped to shift adults' thinking about children's capability:

I think that it's a mindshift, because that adult, whoever they are in that child's life, instead of right away thinking something bad is going to happen if a child picks up a stick, climbs, whatever.... I think that's the biggest mindset change that we've seen in our play groups... not to expect the worst, or something negative to happen, but to actually, kind of see what's gonna happen.... 90% of the time it's a positive moment. It's a skill-building moment.

Marlene and Kim also described an empiricist *seeing is believing* stance regarding the power of FNS pedagogies. Kim began by talking about the first time that she was invited to see programming at the forest school. She declared, "just seeing it is an endorsement!" (Focus Group A). Marlene circled back to this point later in our conversation in relation to convincing external stakeholders about the value of FNS based child care programming: "My approach has always been to just invite people here... Like, if it's like, < < *what will children do when they're in the forest?* > >, and my response is... come...! Come and see...! And seeing very much is believing" (Focus Group A). This notion of seeing is believing is valid in terms of how children learn within the FNS model, as well as in terms of how adult stakeholders are convinced of the potential for FNS as a mainstream program opportunity through licensed child care. Jickling (2009) describes this kind of emotional understanding that often arises from nature-based learning experiences: "I *felt* it long before I understood it.... I felt something that transcended words and even memory. It was an embodied, know-it-in-your-bones kind of knowledge" (p. 166). Jickling gives credence to the kind of knowledge outcomes that forest school can produce. Still, advocates must persist; if a know-it-in-your-bones understanding was enough, FNS would already be mainstreamed into the regulatory framework of licensed child care, and the Anthropocene-urgency suggested through our theory/practice framework would be relaxed. Such a future is not out of reach, as other jurisdictions have moved in recent years to reimagine regulation in ways that embrace different kinds of opportunities for safe and effective early years programming (Perlman, Howe, & Bergeron, 2020, this volume). The findings of the CNAC/AFCS FNS case study suggest that, in order to continue advocating for regulatory change, it is necessary to integrate the kinds of emotional understanding that many people experience in response to FNS exposures with large-scale, clinically designed research knowledge

(cf. Brussoni et al., 2018; Kuo, Barnes, & Jordan, 2019) that shows positive health and behaviour effects of FNS.

### *6. Training and Professional Development for FNS Educators*

The risk aversion associated with the regulatory “square peg, round hole” disconnection described above is directly related to training available to early childhood education workers broadly, and FNS educators more specifically. Indeed, the genesis of the partnership between CNAC and AFCS was in large part a shared desire to initiate training that would increase early childhood educators’ professional capacity to deliver outdoor education. Kim described the significant commitment that AFCS made to providing CNAC’s Forest School Practitioner Certification as a strategic priority benefiting the whole organization:

Since I’ve been at AFCS, one of my goals was to make sure that there was connection amongst our programs... because before, we had a lot of programs happening but they were happening in isolation. So, one of our goals was to... provide professional development and career development opportunities for our early childhood educators.... We really felt that we needed to do work to provide professional development between programs. So... the forest and nature practitioner course was a key piece of that. Because now we’re doing something that, it’s touching every one of our programs. It’s not just for our licensed program, or just for our children’s inclusion program. So that was pretty key. (Focus Group B)

Front-line educators who contributed to the case study shared the range of positive impacts that the practitioner certification had for them. Carol, a program manager, described reconnecting with the fun that she used to have as an educator:

My job prior to the... practitioner course was turning into paperwork, paperwork, pick up this, do this, make sure all the Ministry requirements are done, and the fun has kind of gone out of it for a little bit. And now, getting back to this, I’ve always loved being outdoors and being able to get outdoors with the children, and share that love of nature with the children, and seeing them enjoy it has really revitalized me. (Focus Group C)

This perspective shift was a common thematic focus among the AFCS staff who had taken the certification. Another participant, Patti, shared how her understanding of play-based learning had shifted during the training:

There was a structure, and one of the children was taking it down, and the educator entered into the play to redirect, and that was my moment of “Oh, I’ve been redirecting wrong...!” That was kind of like “Ahh, I’ve gotta enter into their level and come at it a different approach,” and when I did it, I was getting different results. (Focus Group C)

A third educator, Joanne, shared how the practitioner certification helped her communicate to others about FNS, to revise policy, and to innovate her ideas and practices as an early childhood educator:

Doing this training has enabled me to model and to speak to providers and parents about forest and nature school.... We've also embedded a lot of the philosophy, the approach in our newsletter, it's in all of our policies, but we've even highlighted it in our outdoor play policy... it's all stemmed from the training... all of these really cool things that help us to be innovative and to be trying this approach. (Focus Group C)

Discussing the practitioner course as part of the CNAC/AFCS partnership, Marlene drew on her experience to comment on sector-wide concerns regarding educator preparation for outdoor play in general, and play-based learning more broadly:

Part of the challenge is around teacher-training. And, you know, our... degree/diploma programs, and like whether or not we're really supporting our educators to leave school.... Prepared to support play? Or with an understanding of play theory?, and understanding of... ecological assessment and their impact on the environment with students.... It's been a particular challenge over the last ten years.... There's maybe a... mismatch in terms of preparation, like demand for programs like this [referring to FNS], and how prepared we are on the ground to deliver and teach in this kind of setting. (Focus Group A2)

Marlene's concerns here echo critiques raised in the literature (Leather, 2018) on FNS practitioner training and the degree to which FNS educators may be prepared to teach with a pedagogical intentionality informed by historical, cultural, and philosophical underpinnings of FNS in Canada and globally. Currently, CNAC's FNS practitioner training course is one of the only options (beyond short workshops) for FNS-specific training in Canada that provides a depth of learning. Elsewhere in our discussions, Marlene shared that every practitioner course that CNAC offers fills to capacity, often within minutes of registration opening.

In response to this deficit in professional development, CNAC and AFCS recently expanded their partnership. Under their revised agreement, AFCS will assume full responsibility for the day-to-day operation of the Ottawa Forest and Nature School. While CNAC will still provide support for these programs, and the Ottawa Forest and Nature School will still serve as CNAC's demonstration site, divesting from the daily operation and staffing of the school will free up resources and permit CNAC to invest more in its national training programs and develop its positioning as a national thought and practice leader in the area of FNS.

### *7. Individual Actors as Champions*

The significant roles of individual champions at all levels of organizational function became apparent as the case study progressed (including educators in the field, executive directors, boards of directors, and Ministry of Education staffers who license the program). While successes in developing and implementing a licensed child care program in the context of FNS are a result of the collective persistence of individual actors—from grassroots to

executive—they are especially a consequence of the tenacity of the two executive directors.<sup>5</sup> As operational leaders of their respective organizations, Kim and Marlene catalyzed individual and institutional value commitments to early years outdoor play that transformed into a persistent force toward intentional action. This energy allowed the pilot licensed FNS program to exist. As policy leaders, they continue to initiate and sustain CNAC/AFCS's sense of urgency about an educational response to the Anthropocene because they recognize that many contemporary approaches to early childhood education, while well intentioned, do not go far enough in preparing early learners to develop agency that can respond to the local and global needs that will arise during their lifetimes. Our sense of this finding is not that individual drive is a primary factor in successful program implementation, but rather that passionate individuals contribute to organizational energy and synergies that foster effective policy development and FNS program implementation.

### Summation and Next Steps

As a developing branch of environmental education theory and practice, FNS offers potential as an early years educational response to the ecological challenges of the Anthropocene (Payne, 2018). We believe our reporting herein and further cycles of action research in our case study support this development, both in terms of clarifying policy aspects that may enable FNS pedagogies in practice (e.g., understanding a continuum of FNS pedagogies, advancing social and ecological justice through FNS) and as regards naming barriers that have been faced in designing and implementing an FNS program in the context of licensed child care in Ontario (e.g., regulatory disconnections between indoor/built and natural play environments).

In the face of regulatory barriers, the CNAC/AFCS case study of the collaboration to launch the pilot program offers a strong ethos of hope for, and action toward, mainstreaming FNS. However, that same hope is debased by the ongoing challenge of offering quality FNS programs that satisfy Ontario's regulations under the *Child Care and Early Years Act* (2014). The Act largely fails to recognize important contexts of FNS, especially regular and repeated access to natural outdoor space (as opposed to built facilities) where children lead their own play and learning with guidance and support from FNS-trained educators. This sentiment should not be interpreted as a rebuke of regulation. Case study participants spoke positively about child care regulation and regulators. They also expressed a willingness for FNS to be appropriately regulated in ways that acknowledge the context and goals of FNS to promote the learning and well-being needs of children, families, communities, and the planet.

At the time of writing, the CNAC/AFCS licensed child care FNS program is within its first year of operation. Primary data collection for this paper occurred in the months before the program launched. Further cycles of action research

are planned to understand the policy and pedagogical impacts of the program as it develops. We anticipate more fully exploring the notion of the FNS continuum as an important heuristic for the mainstreaming of FNS in Canadian licensed child care and early years programs. We also foresee potentially extending the range of participant voices in the case study to include children who participate in the pilot licence program, and their parents.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Marlene's example here references an urban child care centre in downtown Ottawa that enacts FNS programming in an urban environment.
- <sup>2</sup> All participants, with the exception of Kim and Marlene (co-investigators), are identified using pseudonyms.
- <sup>3</sup> While Marlene and Kim served as co-investigators in the case study, this assertion is drawn from Blair's analysis of focus group transcripts and document analysis. It is not derived directly from statements made by the executive directors.

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