

Defining Nature-Based Preschools

Rachel Larimore
Michigan State University

Submitted November 18, 2014; accepted September 8, 2016

ABSTRACT

Nature-based early childhood education. Nature-based preschool. Nature preschool. Forest kindergarten. Nature kindergarten. Waldkindergarten. Forest school.

These are a few of the program terms currently being discussed among early childhood environmental education professionals in the United States. Why is there so much discussion about the names now? Do the names mean the same thing? Why should early childhood environmental educators be concerned about defining the similarities and differences among these programs? The paper focuses in answering these questions, and also in reflecting what can be learned from other program definitions to enhance the current definition of nature-based preschools.

Keywords: forest kindergarten, nature-based early childhood education, nature-based preschool, nature preschool, preschool programs

History of Nature-Based Preschools

A review of the history might help to frame the discussion on defining nature-based preschools. The first nature-based preschool in the United States started at the New Canaan Nature Center in Connecticut in 1967, the second just nine years later was the Massachusetts Audubon Arcadia Preschool, and the third at Nature's Way Preschool at the Kalamazoo Nature Center in 1982 (Bailie, 2014). However, there has been a boom in numbers since 2000 that illustrates a growing interest in this educational approach. In 2012, there were approximately 20 nature-based preschools in the country (Bailie, 2012). Today there are 30 licensed nature-based preschool programs listed on the Natural Start Alliance website (2014) in addition to several nature-based early childhood programs that are not licensed (some referred to as forest kindergartens or forest schools). Cedarsong, which opened in 2007 in the state of Washington, claims to be the first Forest Kindergarten in the United States (Kenny, 2013). Considering forest kindergarten programs have been operating throughout Europe since the early 1990s, Cedarsong may be represent a new development in the U.S. (Sobel, 2014). As new programs are established, it's important to have a clear understanding of what programs fall under the nature-based early childhood education umbrella and the characteristics of each of those programs. Having a common language will help early childhood educators establish best practices, professional development needs, and research questions that need to be answered.

Recent Definitions of Nature-Based Preschools

Nature-based preschools have typically been defined as a licensed early childhood program for 3-5 year olds, with 25-50% of the class day held outside each day, nature as the driving theme of the curriculum, and nature being infused into the indoor spaces (Bailie, 2010; Green Hearts, 2014; Larimore, 2011a, 2011b; Moore, 2014). For clarification, it should be noted that "nature-based preschool" and "nature preschool" are used interchangeably in the literature. Recently, Bailie and Finch provided a definition of nature-based preschools on the Natural Start Alliance website. A detailed and expanded version on the definition is provided in Figure 1. Notice there is no

mention of specific ages or time spent outdoors, unlike the definitions of other early childhood environmental education programs.

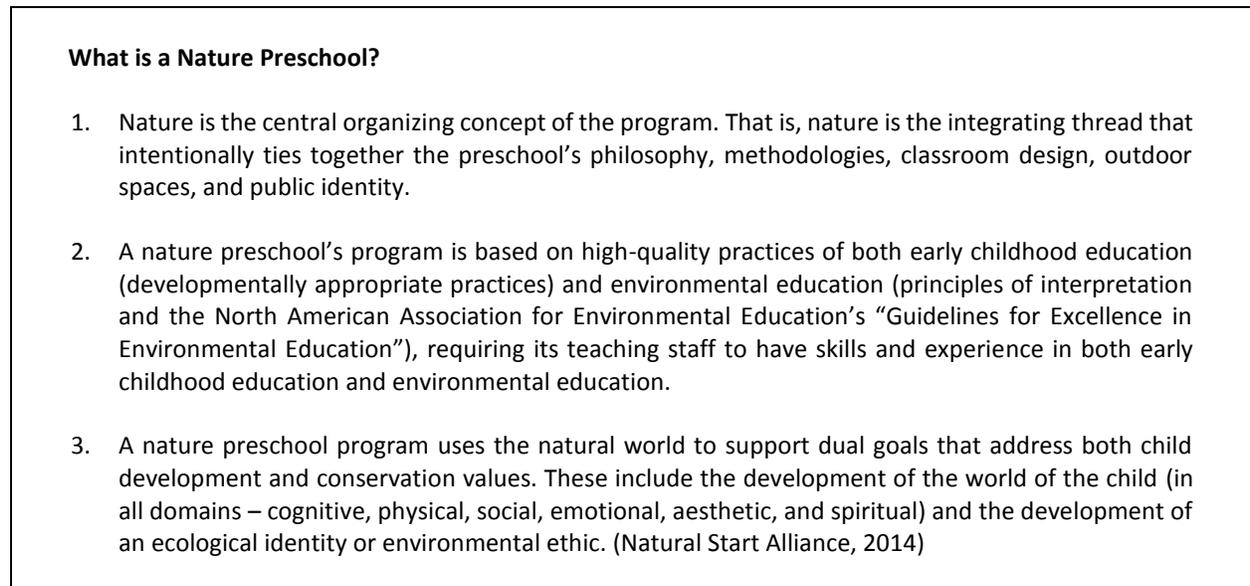


Figure 1. *Bailie & Finch's Definition of Nature Preschools (Natural Start Alliance, 2014).*

Comparing Nature-Based Preschools to Forest Kindergartens and Forest Schools

Forest kindergartens have been defined as educational programs which provide daily outdoor experiences for children 3-6 year olds, with limited or no indoor facilities. Children in such programs tend to spend 70-100% of their time outdoors, in a nature immersion experience, in which the curriculum emerges from the daily activities (Fritz, Smyrni, & Roberts, 2014; Kenny, 2013; Moore, 2014; Sobel, 2014; Warden, 2012). Forest kindergartens are sometimes known by other names including "waldkindergartens" or "nature kindergartens" (Fritz et al., 2014; Sobel, 2014; Warden, 2012).

Forest schools, yet another early childhood environmental education program type, take children to a nearby natural area on a regular basis for half to a whole day at a time, are more broad in the ages they serve with some even extending beyond early childhood, involve public schools, and have the goal of building a relationship with a particular natural space through regular visits over time (Andrachuk et al., 2014; Maceachren, 2013; Moore, 2014; Warden, 2012). How long these visits occur varies among programs, but Knight (2013) suggests six weeks minimum and adds that many forest school practitioners recommend a minimum of 10 weeks. Either way the emphasis is clearly on several weeks of regular visits not just once or twice a school year, or even a visit once each season.

Noting the similarities among the programs, Sobel (2014) proposed that nature preschools and forest kindergartens are the same genus, but different species. Keeping with this notion of taxonomy and adding forest schools to the mix, perhaps *early childhood environmental education* is the taxonomic "family," where nature-based early childhood education is the "genus" for the two separate "species" of nature-based preschools and forest kindergartens, and forest schools are another genus—nature-enhanced early childhood education (Figure 2.). "Enhanced" indicates that forest schools use the outdoors in some regular fashion, while daily use of the outdoors is a core characteristic of nature-based schools. All three programs, however, focus on connecting children to the natural world at the early childhood level (0-8 years old) using pedagogy that is developmentally appropriate. Whether a nature-based preschool, forest kindergarten, or forest school there is no question they share a common

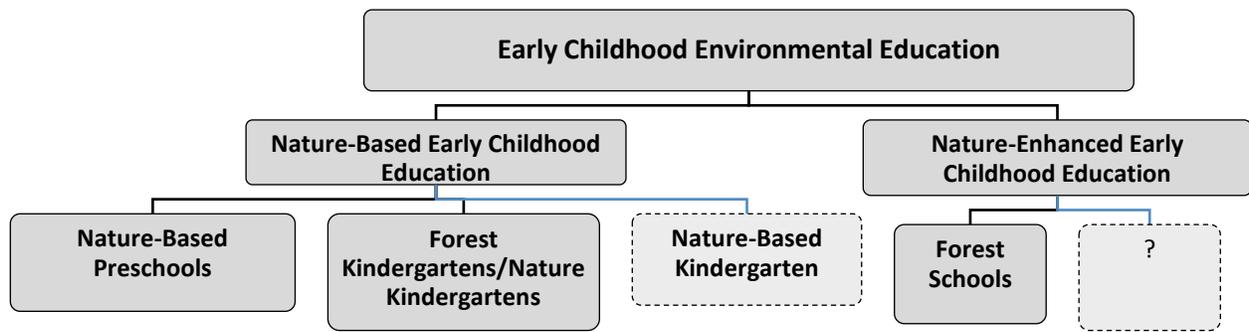


Figure 2. Taxonomy of nature-based preschools which builds on Sobel’s (2014) notion that nature-based preschools and forest kindergartens are two species of the same genus.

belief in the value of children having frequent outdoor experiences as part of their high quality education in order to support their development, as well as build a lifelong connection with the natural world.

Clarifying the Nature-Based Preschool Definition - Some Examples & Variations

Notice the new definition presented by Bailie and Finch does not mention specific ages, does not outline parameters regarding outdoor time, and does not say indoor facilities are required. That raises the question, is this new definition too inclusive in its approach? A farm-based preschool program such as the Aullwood Farm Discovery Center in Dayton, Ohio, a Head Start program operated on the nature center property, would fall under this definition. After all, it uses nature education (in a farming context) as its organizing theme and uses high quality early childhood practices to meet developmental goals under the framework of Head Start requirements. However, so would the Natick Community Organic Farm’s Forest Gnomes program, which also uses nature as the overall organizing concept, and self-describes on their website as emphasizing “physical and social development and personal growth” (2014). Yet on the same website they call themselves a waldkindergarten.

There are significant differences between these two programs. The Aullwood program is licensed where Natick is not. The Natick program also has very limited indoor facilities and the students spend almost the entire time outdoors. So it seems the new definition may be too inclusive and there are critical elements from the original definitions of nature-based preschools that may be important to keep. These missing items include being a licensed early childhood program, 25-50% of the class day held outside each day, and nature being infused into the indoor spaces (which implies there is a significant classroom facility space). Being licensed may not be necessary, but it does mean the program meets a minimum set of standards related to developmentally appropriate practice (e.g., student to teacher ratios, teacher education levels). The time range and presence of an indoor facility helps distinguish programs from the immersive, almost entirely outdoors forest kindergarten model. Would the definition Bailie and Finch provided be more appropriate as the definition of the broader umbrella of nature-based early childhood education rather than nature-based preschools specifically?

A Solid Definition Provides a Professional Foundation

All of this discussion clarifying the definition of nature-based preschools may seem like an exercise in splitting hairs and leave many people asking what value there is in establishing a solid definition. Nature-based preschools are a relatively new school model and yet growing quickly. An established definition will provide the foundation to help guide the establishment of a professional association, professional development needs for program teachers and administrators, research needs, and the establishment of best practices.

Some of these professional efforts are already underway, and understanding what is and is not a nature-based preschool will help guide those initiatives. Related to a professional association, Natural Start Alliance has been the

home in the United States for connecting nature-based preschools since 2013. However, its mission is broader with a focus on being a coalition of parents and educators who connect young children to nature and care for the environment. Should there be a professional association specific to nature-based preschools? Or perhaps one that serves both nature-based preschools and forest kindergartens? Antioch University now offers a graduate certificate program for nature-based early childhood education including both nature preschools and forest kindergartens (2014). There are a host of potential research questions related to nature-based preschools and/or forest kindergartens. For example, when discussing the differences of nature-based preschools and forest kindergartens David Sobel referred to a cognitive readiness mindset and the initiative/resiliency mindset that distinguish the two programs (2014). He explains cognitive readiness mindset as focusing on formal literacy and numeracy, where initiative/resiliency mindset focuses on allowing children to solve problems on their own. Are these two mindsets mutually exclusive? How much outdoor time creates the initiative and resiliency he mentions?

Having a clear definition that strikes a balance between being inclusive, but not too inclusive is critical in establishing a foundation for moving the nature-based preschool profession forward. Yet it seems there is still some work needed to refine that definition. Perhaps the three components of the Bailie and Finch definition listed above could serve as the start of professional principles—which expand on the basic definition and further guide the professional needs just mentioned. Forest kindergartens and forest schools both have very basic program definitions and yet most of the literature also provides expanded principles and guiding elements (Andrachuk et al., 2014; Kenny, 2013; Knight, 2013; Warden, 2012; Forest School Association, 2014). These definitions and principles could serve as a framework for establishing best practices of nature-based preschools.

Refining Definitions While Acknowledging Common Ground

Coming to agreement on program definitions and acknowledging differences among programs is useful in improving our professional techniques and guiding our professional supports such as training and research. As was illustrated above, there are clear differences between nature-based preschools, forest kindergartens, and forest schools. That being said, the strength of early childhood environmental education as a whole will come from finding common ground in the elements that unite the various “species” discussed here. There is common ground in the belief that outdoor exploration time is valuable and all have similar approaches and philosophical foundations. Recognizing the significant program differences while at the same time finding common ground allows programs to learn from each other, to help each other in overcoming shared challenges, and perhaps most importantly—spread the word about the shared belief on the need to connect children to the natural world. After all, a young child jumping in a puddle is magical no matter the name of the program that provided them with that experience.

References

- Andrachuk, H., Edgar, T., Eperjesi, P., Filler, C., Groves, J., Kaknevicus, J., Lahtinen, R., Mason, J., Molyneux, L., Morcom, L., Petrini, G., Piersol, L., Power, M., & Young, J. (2014). *Forest and Nature School in Canada: A Head, Heart, Hands Approach to Outdoor Learning*. (R. Carruthers Den Hoed, Ed.).
- Antioch University New England. (2014). Nature-Based Early Childhood Education Program. Retrieved from <http://www.antiochne.edu/teacher-education/nature-based-early-childhood-education-program/>.
- Bailie, P. E. (2010). From the one-hour field trip to a nature preschool : Partnering with environmental organizations. *Young Children, 65*(4), 76–82.
- Bailie, P. E. (2012). *Connecting children to nature : A multiple case study of nature center preschools*. (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Nebraska–Lincoln). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1266824736?accountid=12598>.
- Forest School Association. (2014). What is Forest School? | Forest School Association. Retrieved October 18, 2014, from <http://www.forestschoollassociation.org/what-is-forest-school/>.

- Fritz, R. W., Smyrni, K., & Roberts, K. (2014). The challenges of bringing the waldkindergarten concept to North America. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 24(2), 215–227. doi:10.7721/chilyoutenvi.24.2.0215
- Green Hearts. (2014). Nature preschools. Retrieved October 18, 2014, from http://www.greenheartsinc.org/Nature_Preschools.html.
- Kenny, E. K. (2013). *Forest kindergartens: The cedarsong way*. Vashon, Washington: Cedarsong Nature School.
- Knight, S. (2013). *Forest School and Outdoor Learning in the Early Years* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Sage.
- Larimore, R. A. (2011a). *Establishing a nature-based preschool*. Fort Collins, Colorado: National Association for Interpretation.
- Larimore, R. A. (2011b). Nature-based preschools: A powerful partnership between early childhood and environmental education. *Legacy Magazine*, 22(3), 8–11.
- Maceachren, Z. (2013). The Canadian forest school movement. *Learning Landscapes*, 7(1), 219–233. Retrieved from <http://www.learninglandscapes.ca/images/documents/ll-no13/maseachren.pdf>.
- Moore, R. C. (2014). *Nature play & learning places: Creating and managing places where children engage with nature*. Natural Learning Initiative and National Wildlife Federation. Retrieved from http://natureplayandlearningplaces.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Nature-Play-Learning-Places_v1.2_Sept22.pdf.
- Natick Community Organic Farm. (2014). "Forest Gnomes." Retrieved from http://www.natickfarm.org/Pages/Public_Programs/Forest_Gnomes.html.
- Natural Start Alliance. (2014). What Is a Nature Preschool? Retrieved from <http://naturalstart.org/tags/nature-preschool/what-is-a-nature-preschool>.
- Sobel, D. (2014). Learning to walk between the raindrops: The value of nature preschools and forest kindergartens. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 24(2), 228–238. doi:10.7721/chilyoutenvi.24.2.0228.
- Warden, C. (2012). *Nature kindergartens and forest schools* (2nd ed.). Perthshire, Scotland: Mindstretchers Ltd.