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Forest Nursery Schools and the Need for Health and Ecological Education Among the Youngest

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ABSTRACT

The degradation of the environment, and also the trend in contemporary lifestyle which is adverse from the point of view of society and connected with restricting physical activity, result in new requirements faced by the organisers of preschool education. These requirements are relevant, first and foremost, to the development of environmental and health awareness of the young generation. Traditional nursery schools take the above-mentioned issues under consideration while drawing up and implementing their curricula. Nevertheless, those curricula fail to solve the problems of health, such as, for instance, posture defects, vision defects, a low level of the development of communication competences, and the feeling of alienation. In the light of the outlined needs, the conception of forest nursery schools, which is dynamically developing in the countries of the Western Europe, but not only there, is a proposal worth considering. This conception has reached Poland as well. In this article, the outline of the history, the philosophical-didactic foundations of forest nursery schools, together with the development of them all over the world and in Poland, are presented.

Introduction

In the face of rapid development of knowledge and technology in the 21st century, education encounters many new challenges. One of these challenges is the need for health and ecological education. These areas are not equivalent, but they remain interdependent, since the man is a part of a wider ecosystem.

Thus, ecological and health education have become a part of modern educational sciences. Jolanta Szempruch writes:

Behaviours of children, adolescents, as well as adults, that result from lifestyle promoted in developed countries, connected, for example, with unhealthy diet, disadvantageous ways of spending free time, dressing, smoking, alcohol drinking or drug using, constitute an alarming phenomenon. (Szempruch 2012: 136)

However, the list of dangers is longer. The cited author also points out passive forms of spending free time, reluctance to physical exercise and motor activity, the tendency to stay indoors for a long time – most often in front of a TV and computer screen, and difficulties in family, peer and social communication (Szempruch 2012: 136).

Modern adolescents face new dangers – alienation, cyber-bullying, obesity and much more. Sue Palmer, in her work *Toxic Childhood*, considered the lack of physical activity and limited social contacts as the main reasons for young generation problems:

In a global culture, in which the citizens are wealthier, healthier and more privileged than ever in the human history, children grow unhappier every year. From the disgruntled and discontented, they become depressed and dysfunctional. We seem to be raising a generation with nothing to love but its own attitude problems. (Palmer 2015)

In turn, Richard Louv, in his book entitled *Last Child in the Woods* (Louv 2005), diagnosed the problems of modern adolescents: more and more time spent in front of a computer or TV screen (nowadays it also includes a mobile phone), the lack of physical activity, and general alienation from the natural world. These factors constitute the “nature-deficit disorder,” which, according to the author, is troubling modern adolescents.

Since “children are the creators of their health, and, in a wider perspective, they are participants of actions concerning health” (Kołodziejczyk, Konieczna 2004: 73; Woynarowska, Małkowska-Szcutnik 2017: 251), there is a need for health education from an early age. Family home plays a significant role in this regard. Thus, health education is a part of the process of health socialisation, that is the acquisition of skills and behaviours that help to improve health in the interaction with parents, family members and other people. Yet, because of parents’ engagement in professional career,

the role of preschool educational centres is growing. Traditional nursery schools are introducing elements of ecological and health education. Also, new projects taking into consideration these needs are appearing (Ochnio, 2005: 307-309). In one of these projects we can read:

The child's health is not supported by the fast pace of life, bad nutritional and hygiene habits, too little motor activity of the society, and the parents' lack of time to look at the child and its needs attentively ... Childhood is the period of human life when the attitudes that determine the man's present and future actions are shaped– also the ones regarding health. (Koter, Kozłowska 2003: 3)

Thus, searching for new inspirations and solutions that put greater emphasis on these branches of science is purposeful. Forest nursery schools offer such a solution. It is worth looking closer at their assumptions and functioning in the context of ecological and health education challenges.

The origin and development of forest nursery schools

The term 'forest nursery school' was first used in 1954 in Denmark. In the literature on the subject various names are in use: *outdoor education*, *adventure education*, *experimental education*, *waldkindergarten*, *woods school*, *forest school*. According to the assumptions of the creators of the forest preschool pedagogy, "a forest nursery school is a nursery school in which the proportion of the time spent outdoors to the time spent indoors constitutes about 80% to 20%" (Romaniak 2019).

The origin of forest nursery schools is related to Scandinavia. In these countries, the relation between people and nature is strong and promoted, and its tradition is very long. A Scandinavian proverb says: "There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing." In the 1950s a Dane Ella Flatau inspired other parents by walking daily with her children to the woods. Independently, Goest Frohm created the so-called Skogmulle in Sweden. This name derives from the Swedish word *skog*, which means wood, and *Mulle*, a fictional character invented by Frohm, who introduces children into the knowledge of nature. Currently, there are over 200 forest nursery schools in Sweden. This pedagogy established itself not only in the Skogmullenetwork, but also in traditional nursery schools, where children spend a few hours outdoors regardless of the weather (Christ, Preuss 2018: 152; Romaniak 2019).

The idea of forest nursery schools has also developed among our Western neighbours. In Germany the first Waldkindergarten was established in 1968, in Wiesbaden, by Ursula Suben. She did not obtain the official authorities' approval, therefore her establishment was a private initiative. The idea of the organisation of educational-didactical

classes in the woods was not understood at that time, just like during the next two decades. In the 90s, in Flensburg, Petra Jäger and Kerstin Jebsen proceeded to promote this idea. They wrote the first article on this subject, and they published it in the magazine *Spielen und lernen* [Play and Learn], in which they presented their project “kindergartens without walls and doors” (Janik 2015: 134). Their elaboration fell on fertile ground and within a decade in Germany about 800 forest kindergartens were created (Pieprzyk 2015: 121-134). Also, the Waldkindergarten movement developed, which led to establishing the national Forest Kindergarten Association. In 2012 it already counted 1000 establishments throughout the whole country (Romaniak 2019).

In the same year in Germany another association promoting forest kindergartens was created. It was called Roots and Wings [Wurzeln und Flügel]. On the website we can find the motto of the association: “when children are small, give them roots, when they are big, give them wings.” The aim of the association is to provide children with movement and to shape their body awareness (for example by running on uneven surfaces with natural obstacles); to make children experience things with all their senses (e.g. through manual works in the garden, contact with plants and animals in different seasons, stimulation of senses through nature – for example the rustle of leaves, the singing of birds, the sound of rain, the touch of hairy caterpillars, sharp cones, prickly bushes or soft moss); to make them familiar with the rhythm and life of nature (staying in the forest and shaping a positive attitude towards nature); to make them understand that imitation is an important form of learning; to teach decision-making and allowing them to speak; morning talks in the circle (sharing one’s feelings, games, songs, plays); the observation of the principle of silence (for concentration and inner peace); physical and psychological reinforcement (staying outdoors facilitates body and spirit toughening), etc.

The organisation also conducts courses that help adults understand children and adolescents. The project aims at providing children with higher self-confidence, as well as holistic social and communication competences at an early stage of education. In the kindergartens and schools the association has the possibility to reach out to all the children, and to carry out an effective prophylaxis. The emphasis is put on the development of self-confidence, empathy, safe behaviour, respect and attention. These are important foundations that also play a significant role in the areas of preventing violence, addiction and child sexual abuse (Janik 2015: 134-136; Romaniak 2019; www.verein-wurzelnundfluegel.de/UeberdenVerein.html; access: 16/06/2019; www.wurzeln-und-fluegel.ch; access: 16/06/2019). Scandinavia and Germany have set an example to other European countries. For instance, the Czechs are benefiting from their experiences, and recently the concept of forest nursery schools has also appeared in Poland.

The development of forest nursery schools in Poland. Basic assumptions of preschool outdoor education

In Poland the development of forest nursery schools is at the initial stage. It concerns both the status of related studies and their quantitative development. It is sufficient to mention that the first Polish studies in this regard did not appear until 2012 and 2014 (Palamer-Kabacińska, Leśny 2012; Bąk et al. 2014). In 2014 there were only three forest nursery schools which functioned part-time. Their development is not facilitated by the legal situation. The functioning of forest nursery schools in Poland is regulated by the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 28 August 2017 on types of other forms of preschool education, on the conditions of creating and organising such forms, and on their ways of functioning – pursuant to article 32, §11 of the Act of 14 December 2016 – Education Law (Journal of Laws of 2017, item 59 and 949). They are treated as a form of alternative education. In this context, it is worth to look at the example of the Czech Republic: when, within five years, as many as 120 establishments of this type were opened, the act on preschool education has been changed and nowadays forest kindergartens have the status of nursery schools just like traditional establishments (Christ, Preuss 2018: 153). What is more, contrary to the Scandinavian countries, in Poland the traditional model of child-raising does not assume toughening of the body according to the principle “a healthy mind in a healthy body,” but it overprotects children against unfavourable weather conditions. Such protectiveness sanctioned by the tradition constitutes a mental obstacle, which is more difficult to overcome than the above-mentioned legal situation.

However, in recent years, a large increase in the interest in this kind of establishments has occurred. As Magdalena Christ and Agata Preuss state, in 2018 in Poland there were 34 kindergartens inspired by the idea of forest nursery schools (Christ, Preuss 2018: 153). Varied social organisations, institutions connected with alternative preschool education, or nature lovers, are getting more and more involved in the organisation and promotion of such places. The reason for such growing popularity is the increase in the society’s environmental awareness and in the number of families pursuing an eco/bio lifestyle. The growth of interest in forest nursery schools is mainly related to the higher awareness of dangers related to the lack of contact with nature, as well as the benefits from living close to nature, and to the parents’ dissatisfaction with the offer of traditional nursery schools which encourages them to search for alternative solutions.

The organisers and educators of forest nursery schools in Poland draw their inspiration from various sources. Justyna Romaniak, at the beginning of the text: *Forest Nursery Schools – Without Walls, Open to Nature*, raises the question that is probably asked by parents who meet the idea of forest nursery schools for the first time:

“A nursery school without walls and ceilings, where children spend time almost exclusively outdoors, where the adults don’t control, but assist them, where there are no traditional toys, and children play with what they find on the ground and what they build themselves... Sounds unbelievable?” (Romaniak 2019). This question contains the basic characteristics, and, at the same time, the basic principles of child-raising in forest nursery schools. The quotation draws attention towards the philosophical inspiration of the organisers, in which a child is treated as a partner and a subject of upbringing, rather than a passive receiver of didactic-educational procedures, and the educational process takes place in natural, not artificial, conditions, with the kindergarten as a didactic-educational laboratory. This type of opinion can be found in the pedagogical belief of John Locke, who in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* postulates body-toughening and treating a child as a partner; as well as that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the author of *Emile, or on Education*, which is a manifest of natural pedagogy. In his work, Rousseau put the emphasis on developing natural predispositions and interests of the child, rather than forming them according to the ideals and purposes of education adopted from outside, that is, imposed by adults.

A lot of forest nursery schools benefit from the philosophy and methodology of work with the youngest children elaborated at the beginning of 20th century by Maria Montessori (Guz 2006). In 2014 the first forest nursery schools were created beside Montessori primary schools in Przyłęków, Krzyżówki and Koszarawa Bystra. The next were opened in Warsaw – they included nursery schools: “Leśna Droga” (Forest Path) and “Leśne Przedszkole” (Forest Kindergarten).

The pedagogy of Maria Montessori has a lot in common with forest nursery schools. What makes both innovations similar? The concepts are for mixed-age groups, which enables multilateral development of both younger and older children. The younger ones learn cooperation and more mature forms of participation in a group, and they acquire knowledge and skills by means of imitation of children who are a bit older. The older ones, in turn, learn different forms of communication, not only with peers, but also with younger friends. Both younger and older children improve their independence, self-confidence, sense of efficacy and capacity for decision-making. At the same time, they show empathy, patience and capacity for directing actions of others. In the pedagogy of the Italian representative of the new education, gardening, plant care and animal farming is important, which naturally brings the concept close to the idea of forest nursery schools. Another common element is emphasizing the importance of the child’s individual work. According to the idea of Maria Montessori, teachers in forest nursery schools encourage children to do their work independently, at their own pace. The factor of concentration – which was highlighted by Montessori and practised, among others, during the so-called silence lessons – is also present in forest nursery schools and it is easily achieved thanks to the fact that children have the

possibility to release their energy while playing in the forest. Also, resignation from traditional toys is the common denominator of both preschool education concepts. However, while in the Montessori method we are dealing with didactical materials elaborated by adults, in forest nursery schools children only use natural toys, such as trees, sticks, chestnuts or acorns. Just like in Montessori kindergartens, in forest nursery schools a lot of attention is paid to the development of self-service skills by the children. Such skills include: getting dressed, hygiene activities, meal-preparing, animal care, fishing, building a shelter or a tree house, putting up a tent, lighting fires, distinguishing between edible and poisonous plants and mushrooms, etc.

Another concept used in forest nursery schools is *flow learning* of Joseph Cornell – an American nature educator, as he defines himself. In his publications and courses, he teaches how to become a successful teacher and guide to the world of nature. The theory of *flow learning* includes four phases:

1. Enthusiasm teaching: getting the child involved into a physical activity.
2. Focusing attention on the subject or experience, which leads to openness.
3. Offering direct experience due to which the child intuitively senses the meaning of the activity.
4. Sharing inspiration, fostering the atmosphere based on the previous activities, fostering group bonds on the basis of forest reflections (Barlow 2010: 23-24).

J. Cornell gives some practical guidelines, examples of exercises and games in the work: *Sharing Nature with Children*, part 1 and 2 (Cornell 1979). It has been translated into 20 languages, unfortunately not into Polish. Cornell started the foundation “Sharing Nature Worldwide,” which helps children all around the world to get closer to nature. In 2017 the organisation appeared in China, where it was welcomed with great interest. The course for educators was attended by as many as 1500 participants. It shows an enormous increase since 2000, when Cornell visited the country for the first time. Six hundred people participated in the 4th China Nature Education Forum in Hangzhou, including the representatives of the government, universities and environmental protection organisations. It might be expected that the idea of forest nursery schools will soon develop in the most populous country in the world (*The Inspiring Growth* 2019).

The next source of inspiration for forest preschool pedagogy is Waldorf education. The summer day camps for children in Krakow, as well as kindergartens opened in Wyrzy in Silesia and Dębowy Dom (Oak House) in Bielsko-Biała are a great example of its implementation. They are based on Waldkindergartens and Waldorf education experiences.

The organisation that aims to integrate all Polish projects compliant with the idea of forest nursery schools is the Polish Institute of Forest Nursery Schools founded in 2016 in Białystok (see lesneprzedszkola.pl; access: 28/07/2019).

Regardless of the concepts used – Montessori, flow learning or Waldorf – the organisers and recipients of forest nursery schools emphasise the positive influence of the educational process held in the forest on physical, psychological and social development of the child. Within the first of the above-mentioned areas, it is worth mentioning good motor development, a smaller number of children with posture and vision defects than in traditional kindergartens, as well as a better immune system. Within psychological development, “forest children” manifest better skills of logical prediction of the effects of their own actions, they see the cause-effect relationships of the observed phenomena, they are focused, and they are better at evaluating risk in the surroundings. In the area of social functioning, outdoor education in mixed-age groups facilitates the development of communication competences, empathy, problem solving, persistence in performing tasks, cooperation, and making friends.

The location of forest nursery schools is an important feature. The infrastructure aims at ensuring the contact with real nature. Such kindergartens are located in the natural environment, most often in the woods. The children are provided with shelters – buildings embedded in a forest landscape. If a shelter is a house, it is made of clay and its roof is thatched. Usually, however, such shelters are simple tents, yurts, etc. The daily schedule includes hiking. The children are given a cart with blankets, tilts and change of clothes. They also carry their own rucksacks with something warm to drink and a snack. The process of direct experience of the world is directed by pedagogues, who are, at the same time, nature lovers (Romaniak, 2019; Christ, Preuss 2018: 153).

The current circumstances – such as the weather on a given day, the season, etc. – and spontaneous games, in which children get involved, constitute the basis of the curriculum. Children can play whatever they want. The games consist in outdoor activities: running, jumping, climbing, overcoming the obstacles, such as branches or fallen trees, steep slopes or puddles. Therefore, it is impossible to avoid falls, cuts, scratches, bruises or mosquito bites, however, it is a part of adventure. The children succeed, but they also fail, and they draw conclusions from all experiences.

The forest preschoolers have the opportunity to experience changes during four seasons. They may observe the natural phenomena, as well as learn the laws governing them. Their daily contact with nature shapes ecological attitudes, such as respect and care for its resources. Also, spending time in the forest gives them the opportunity to talk about human existence – it encourages the children to look for their place in the world and acknowledge their responsibility for other living organisms (Guz 2005: 155).

Conclusion

Forest nursery schools are a new phenomenon in Poland. Nevertheless, within the last five years, a large growth of interest in such establishments has occurred. In a short time, over 30 of such nursery schools have been opened, scattered throughout the whole country, and generally concentrated around big cities such as Warsaw, Krakow, Gdańsk, Silesia or Białystok. It seems that their development is facilitated by the changes in the social awareness of environmental and health knowledge. The youngest generation of parents, having grown in a free country after 1989, is open to the world and to the latest pedagogical achievements, and it pays much attention to their children's health and their responsible attitude towards the use of the planet's resources. Such knowledge and competences are provided by forest nursery schools. It is expected that during the next few years further development of this concept of preschool education will take place, which will also lead to the modification of the core curriculum for this level of education towards stronger presence of pro-health and pro-ecological contents.

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