

Hanna Łoboda

Abstract of the doctoral dissertation

Forest kindergarten as an environment for learning and acting

Forest kindergartens have been operating in Poland for approximately 10 years. Both the level of awareness of their existence in society and the number of scientific studies conducted on them nationally remain low.

The limited number of publications in Polish on forest kindergartens is dominated by theoretical studies. Concepts implemented in such facilities in historically, culturally, and economically diverse countries are also presented. The few empirical studies are based on study visits, which took place primarily in the spring and summer months, when it was difficult to observe the potential difficulties of autumn rain or winter frosts. They primarily describe the benefits of attending a forest kindergarten for the health and development of children.

Given the wide research gap, I made the process of creating and functioning a forest kindergarten as an educational activity the subject of my research. The main research goal was to reconstruct this process, while among the specific goals, I highlighted the reconstruction of the process of creating a forest kindergarten as an educational and caregiving institution and the process of creating its community, as well as the reconstruction of the space and processes of education, learning, and action within the forest kindergarten. My overarching practical goal, in turn, was to popularize forest education both in the field of practice and in the scientific community.

The main research question was: What is the process of creating and operating a forest kindergarten? Due to the adopted interpretive research strategy, the specific questions were intended solely to sensitize me to certain problem areas, such as the kindergarten community, space, and educational processes, allowing for their modification or expansion.

Answers to the above questions were to be provided by a field study conducted according to the constructivist grounded theory method as developed by Kathy Charmaz (2009). I collected data using techniques such as participant observation at one of the forest kindergartens in Poland during its daily operations, open-ended interviews with teachers and parents of children attending the facility, visual techniques, and document analysis. The collected research material included nearly 200 pages of field notes, 21 interviews, over 2,000 photographs, and more than a dozen types of documents, including both internal records and media reports. The sampling was purposeful and multi-stage. It included the selection of a specific facility, theoretical sampling using the grounded

theory method during observations and interviews combined with maximum diversity in the sample of participating parents and teachers, and all existing documents relating to a given kindergarten.

I obtained consent to conduct the research from the Ethics Committee and the adults and children participating in the study.

The dissertation consists of an introduction, a theoretical section comprising three main chapters, a methodological and analytical section consisting of five chapters presenting the research results, and a summary. The work concludes with a bibliography and lists of boxes, figures, graphs, and tables, as well as an appendix containing lists of interview instructions and consent forms for the study participants.

In the first theoretical chapter, I present the historical and contemporary contexts of early childhood education in nature, including the state of forest kindergartens in the world and in Poland. The second chapter is devoted to different ways of defining nature as a space, place and learning environment, taking into account the space of Polish forest kindergartens. The last theoretical chapter concerns the processes of education, learning and action in forest kindergartens in theoretical and practical terms.

In the methodological part, referring to the transparency of the research, I present in detail the subsequent stages of the research process. I outline the subject of my research, the aim, and the research issues, as well as the adopted paradigm, method, techniques, and research tools, along with the rationale for their selection. I describe the multi-stage sampling procedure and the characteristics of the participants and the research area. A significant part of the methodological chapter is devoted to the research process. I also present ethical issues that are particularly important to me, particularly relevant given the participation of preschool children in the study. The final section of the chapter is devoted to issues related to my multiple roles in the field.

The analytical part is presented in five chapters reflecting the sequence of the process of creating and functioning of the studied forest kindergarten. It begins with a description of the institution's organization as a pedagogical and educational institution. Next, I show how the kindergarten community was built, what its space looked like, and what educational significance its individual elements had. The final two chapters are devoted to a complex reconstruction of the interwoven processes of upbringing, learning, and action. The final result of the analysis is an interpretative, grounded theory of (co-)creation and functioning of a forest kindergarten as an educational activity, also presented in the dissertation in graphic form.

The forest kindergarten where I conducted my research was established out of disagreement with the existing state of preschool education in Poland. Negative educational experiences from their own childhood and the search for alternative solutions by both the parents and the founder of the facility resulted in a feedback loop in the form of a co-created new space and community. It

turned out that its members did not always share the same values. However, they shared a common goal: creating conditions for children to grow and develop happily in close contact with nature. As it turned out, achieving this goal was possible precisely thanks to the values embraced by the founder and maintained by the staff – respect and community, not only between people but also between species.

Long-term participant observation, lasting throughout the seasons, allowed me to formulate conclusions indicating that the forest kindergarten space allows for "controlled" freedom of independent exploration. Children could freely arrange the space using both readily available natural materials and various objects and tools. At the same time, the space was kept within the confines of a secure fence and supervised by vigilant adults.

Sharing the kindergarten space with many other species, in turn, provided an opportunity for continuous observation of the cycles of nature, leading to a gradual shift away from the anthropocentric attitude that the children had already partially adopted during their homeschooling and socialization.

One of the most important discoveries were the answers to specific questions regarding the processes of upbringing, learning and action in the forest kindergarten and their determinants. The role of educators proved crucial in these processes, co-creating rules with the children that met their shared needs, providing discreet support, setting an example, and ensuring a safe daily and weekly rhythm.

The learning process in the forest kindergarten was multidirectional and multidimensional. Adult biographical learning occurred among the owner, other staff members, and parents. They gradually became forest teachers and parents, changing their lifestyles, transforming their vision of parenting, and simply adapting their homes to new forest needs.

Learning occurred among all members of the extended community, in every possible direction. Children learned from each other, but also taught their own parents, sharing with them their increasingly rich knowledge of nature. Parents drew on the experience of teachers/caregivers, and vice versa, and together, through experience and observation, they learned the essence of interconnectedness between humans and between species. In some cases, there was a noticeable shift away from consumerism and egocentrism towards a broader perspective and caring for others (not only human ones). The processes of education, learning, and action were thus permeated by a gradual shift toward the posthuman world of the Symbiocene.

The research I have conducted expands knowledge on the processes of creating and operating forest kindergartens, with particular emphasis on building their communities, organizing space, and the processes of education, learning, and action in such facilities.

The obtained results can be presented during conversations between kindergarten staff and parents, aimed at alleviating their concerns about outdoor education, and thus contributing to more frequent outdoor activities in traditional facilities, also during the colder months. They can also encourage teachers to increase the proportion of time spent outdoors with their groups. Many elements of the educational process described in this dissertation can be implemented in various types of educational institutions, both in terms of spatial organization, e.g. kindergarten gardens, as well as in the area of communication, rituals, integrating curriculum content and providing opportunities for experiential learning.

The results of my research can also be presented when lobbying for changes in legal regulations towards introducing Polish forest kindergartens into the education system, following the example of other European countries.

Keywords: forest kindergarten, outdoor education, alternative education, posthumanism pedagogy, grounded theory