Forest Kindergartens: The Cedarsong Way by Erin K. Kenny
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Forest Kindergartens: The Cedarsong Way

Erin K. Kenny (2013)

Nature-based early childhood education has been a growing movement in the United States since the mid-1960s and has had the most significant growth in the last ten years with programs popping up at nature centers all over the country. While that was happening, nature-immersive types of programs, generally referred to as forest kindergartens, have been flourishing throughout Europe and in recent years, Asia. Despite a growing nature-based early childhood education movement, the forest kindergarten didn’t appear on the scene in the U.S. until 2007. The arrival of this program, its success, and the publicity it has received is undoubtedly due to the program’s founder, Erin Kenny.

Kenny has a bachelor’s degree in environmental education from Evergreen State College and a Juris Doctorate in environmental law from the University of Washington. While her initial dream was to be a lawyer for an organization like Sierra Club, her professional path went a slightly different direction. In 1996 she established the non-profit American Forest Education Foundation. She then moved to Vashon Island in Puget Sound, where after a variety of nature-based teaching roles and publishing a book, A Naturalist’s Journal, she decided to establish an outdoor preschool. The Cedarsong Preschool opened in 2006 with the “commitment of no less than two-thirds outdoor time.” However, her real vision was to have an entirely outdoor preschool, which she made happen in 2007 by establishing the non-profit Cedarsong Nature School under the umbrella of the Ancient Forest Education Foundation. The result was the first forest kindergarten in the United States.

Someone new to the nature-based early childhood profession might ask what the difference is between a forest kindergarten and a nature-based preschool. Kenny does a nice job early in the book defining forest kindergartens from her perspective and distinguishing them from nature-based preschools. As I read Kenny’s definition the biggest distinction for me is the idea of full nature immersion. As she says, “Nature immersion is defined as unstructured free time in nature resulting in an intimate, deep, and personal connection to the natural world” (4). The book title clearly focuses on forest kindergartens and Kenny explains in the preface that her goal in writing this book was to “inspire and empower others to create authentic nature immersion experiences for young children, whether as parents or educators.”

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There is no question that this book is inspirational, primarily because it is full of Kenny’s passion for connecting children to the outdoors. The book is divided into three main parts and it is in the second part, where she addresses the forest kindergarten curriculum, where I think the most inspiration can be found. A big part of this section of the book is devoted to the four seasons and a beautifully written explanation of what the teachers and children had done each month of those seasons. This is the section where I found myself being able to really get a sense of what happens every day in the program. I felt like I could see the children splashing in puddles, smell the woods, and hear the laughter of the children and teachers. Whether brand new to the field or a seasoned professional, any reader is sure to find inspiration and joy in this section of the book.

As one of those seasoned professionals I was so thrilled when I learned Kenny had written this book. There have been other forest kindergarten resources published in Europe, but this is the first U.S. publication on the subject. I was looking forward to learning more details on how this program operates in the United States. I was hopeful this book would, as Kenny proposed, empower nature-based early childhood professionals in the U.S. by providing a clear picture of a typical day; explain how this philosophy can be implemented elsewhere in the country; and acknowledge and help address the barriers that exist for nature-based preschools, and even traditional preschools, to implement a forest kindergarten approach. Unfortunately, when it came to making readers stronger and more confident to create this kind of program I think Kenny fell short. I still have many questions about the logistics of the Cedarsong program, such as the number of children served, how often the children are there, and the number of teachers with each class. There was mention of a 1:4 ratio, but I don’t really know how many kids have been or are in the program. I also don’t have a clear picture of the facilities. There was mention of a five-acre facility, but is there a shelter in case of thunderstorms or is class cancelled that day? What about storage space for exploration equipment? Essentially, I was hopeful there would be more explanation on “how” the Cedarsong program functions in addition to the explanation of the philosophical “what” and “why.”

Another disappointment, which probably would have been avoided with an outside editorial review of the manuscript, is the lack of citation of research referenced and lack of acknowledgement of the similar nature-based early childhood efforts occurring in the United States. Once the reader was inspired there was no direction provided on where to turn for additional information—whether it be the citations of research mentioned in the text, publications relating to forest kindergartens in Europe, or publications or websites of other nature-based preschool programs in the United States.

Despite a few shortcomings this book does make a significant contribution to the profession by serving as a voice for nature-based early childhood programs in this country and by illustrating the forest kindergarten approach being effectively implemented in the United States. As the U.S. nature-based early childhood profession matures, Kenny’s book will serve as a significant resource for defining forest kindergartens versus nature-based preschools. I think it will also be a
resource as we venture into more philosophical discussions and defining best practices as a profession. Among these discussions may be: how much of the “traditional” early childhood education approaches should be included in a nature-based program? Should the pendulum swing more towards early childhood or more towards environmental education or land perfectly in the middle? As a nature-based early childhood profession where do we stand on children and teachers being able to accurately name organisms? What is our professional stance on handling of wild animals—hands-on or hands-off approach? Should families be screened before attending or should programs be open to all families and work to accommodate the needs of those families? I very much appreciate all of the efforts Kenny put into writing this book, and look forward to seeing where the forest kindergarten movement, and nature-based early childhood education in general, goes next in the United States.

Review by Rachel A. Larimore

Rachel Larimore is Director of Education at Chippewa Nature Center in Midland, Michigan where her responsibilities include administration of all youth-related programming including the Center’s nature-based preschool. She received a bachelor’s in natural resource recreation and tourism, a master’s in park and recreation administration, and is currently a doctoral candidate in the department of community sustainability at Michigan State University.