



‘One Nearly Landed On My Finger’: A Forest Kindergarten In Rural New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Once a week, since March of this year, ten four-year-old children, their teacher and at least two parent helpers depart the kindergarten at 9:00 am and leave for a day in the ‘forest’. After a few minutes walk the group make basecamp at O’Connor’s Bush Reserve, in the small rural Wairarapa town of Greytown, and the reserve becomes the context for the kindergarten day. The Forest Kindergarten programme has its antecedents in extensive work undertaken by the teaching team under the general heading of ‘sustainability’. The following is a description of our sustainability story and the development of our Forest Kindergarten programme. I describe what a Forest Kindergarten day looks like, and include some early findings from our first experiences with the children in the bush. The teaching team feel the Forest Kindergarten programme compliments the sustainability focus, helping to re-connect children with nature in a real and practical way.

INTRODUCTION

*Morena ngahere me he nga manu ataahua
Ko Ranginui e te iho nei
Ko Papatūānuku e taktōtō nei
Whakapaingā tenei ra
Kia tina, Tina, Hui e Taiki e*

*Good morning to the beautiful forest and birds
I acknowledge Ranginui who is above
I acknowledge Papatuanuku who lies beneath
Bless this day*

I have been teaching at Greytown Kindergarten since the beginning of 2007. Greytown is a small rural town located in the south of the Wairarapa region. In 2007 the kindergarten had a two-teacher team. I was a new teacher, and the Head Teacher was new to her role. At that time the kindergarten environment included a few trees along the boundary line, two small grassy areas for the children to play on, but most of the surfaces were concrete and safety matting and there was very little in the way of natural features. Very early on we decided to engage in a process of ‘beautifying’ the kindergarten simply to increase the amount of green and natural spaces.

Within a couple of years we were a three-teacher team, and the kindergarten had a garden planted with carrots, lettuce, zucchini, tomatoes, an apple tree, strawberries and more. Children were fully involved in both the planting and the harvesting of the garden, and the teaching team are often able to organise cooking using produce from the garden. Fundraising efforts saw landscaping around the boundary lines of the kindergarten offering a variety of new surfaces such as stones, tree stumps, wooden benches and a variety of native plants.

Following further reorganisation in 2012, the complement of teachers became four, made up of myself, Catha Ritchie, Jenny Hansen and Denise Stone. This team conducted an in-depth self-review in the area of sustainability. Care for the environment had become a central component of a re-worked philosophy. Some activities reflecting the sustainability focus included processes for recycling food, plastic and paper waste, a worm farm, and policy and practices to reduce waste in children's lunchboxes. Meanwhile on-going improvements in the environment saw a children's whare¹ made from locally sourced manuka and floored with stones from the Waiohine River. An excursion was organised so that the children were able to collect the stones from the river themselves. The river is an integral part of the children's Pepeha² that is a part of our bicultural learning at the kindergarten. Finally, a water-storage system is now operational whereby rainwater supplies the children's sandpit via a hand pump, thereby eliminating reliance on the town water supply.

FOREST KINDERGARTEN

During the development of our sustainability journey, teacher Jenny Hansen became aware of the concept of Forest Kindergarten as outlined in an article by Kane and Kane (2011) and shared this idea with the team. All team members were very enthused with the notion and we began talking about how to develop such a programme at our kindergarten. We saw it as a logical extension of our sustainability focus. Kane and Kane note that such programmes had their origins in 1950's Norway and are now popular throughout Norway, Sweden and Germany – 'These schools have no walls – children are outside in the woods all day, in all seasons and in all weather' (p. 16). The team saw that an essential aspect of the Forest Kindergarten philosophy was to provide young children with the opportunity to re-connect with nature, and we valued this learning for our children.

¹ A house in the tradition of the indigenous Māori people of New Zealand.

² A list of places of significance to the local people as is the custom of the indigenous Māori people of New Zealand.



Photograph 1. Alexander and Isabella explore under fallen and rotten logs on the forest floor using torches. Spiders living on or near the ground captured their interest.

Prince (2010) discusses how re-connecting children with nature is of importance even in New Zealand, where ‘... people pride themselves on an outdoor lifestyle and children do have access to beaches, parks and the great outdoors. However, this access is being eroded by the urban lifestyle trends of working parents and indoor entertainment’ (p. 275). Further, the future of those same beaches, parks, and the great outdoors has become an issue of great concern in New Zealand. Ritchie (2009) cites the New Zealand Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment:

Our dominant value systems are at the very heart of unsustainable practices. Making progress towards better ways of living therefore needs to be a deeply social, cultural, philosophical and political process – not simply a technical or economic one. (p. 1)

In response to this situation, Davis (2008), Prince (2010) and Ritchie (2009) draw on notions of the development of an ‘ecological self’ to persuasively make the argument that early childhood education has an essential role in re-establishing the relationship between children and nature. They refer to this as education *for* sustainability. Davis (2008) argues:

What must underpin the much-needed changes are world-views that embrace ‘Earth stewardship’ and the needs of future (as well as present) generations. Such world-views involve ecocentric – rather than purely anthropocentric – ways of thinking, acting and living that recognize that people are an embedded part of natural systems rather, than separate from them. (p. 19)

The teaching team felt the underlying notions of Forest Kindergarten connected with all four principles of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996), these being: the principles of empowerment; holistic development; relationships; and, family and community. The team also felt a number of goals in the Exploration Strand were pertinent to the Forest Kindergarten experience, such as the opportunity to 'develop working theories for making sense of the natural, social, physical, and material worlds' (p. 16). In particular, we thought that a Forest Kindergarten programme would provide a real and practical way of establishing a meaningful relationship between the children and a local community reserve that was of cultural significance.

Alongside the sustainability journey, the teaching team are aware of curriculum requirements to consider bicultural aspects of the learning. Ritchie (2003, 2009) reminds us that the commitment to bicultural learning is threaded through the early childhood curriculum, in the principles and strands as well as the reflective questions throughout the document. Through the Forest Kindergarten programme we hoped the children would become empowered to take a sense of guardianship (kaitiakitanga) of the reserve – to become the carers and nurturers of the reserve, now and in the future. The teaching team are aware that other early childhood providers in New Zealand are developing similar programmes. We resolved to become the first to 'give it a go' in our region.

OUR PROPOSAL

The team had to complete a number of tasks in preparation for taking our first group of children into the reserve. We realised the only appropriate place to conduct our Forest Kindergarten programme was in a reserve that was a few streets away from the kindergarten itself, called O'Connor's Bush Reserve. The team were required to supply the Rimutaka Kindergarten Association management team with a comprehensive risk analysis. We submitted a plan that included how children for the group would be selected, the ratios of adults to children, how safe areas and boundaries would be defined, contingencies for the walk involved, and a number of strategies for dealing with a variety of emergency situations.

Following this, the team made contact with the lead person in a local community group that takes responsibility for the reserve. This group, known as the Friends of O'Connor's Bush, take an active role in helping to preserve and improve the reserve. The lead person was excited about our proposal and interested in working with us. Prior to the implementation of our programme the kindergarten and the group facilitated a joint piece of work involving an excursion to the reserve. On this excursion, children and community members planted native trees in the reserve. This excursion helped to affirm the relationship between the kindergarten, the children, and the Friends of O'Connor's Bush. Subsequent such excursions have occurred on at least two occasions so that all children at the kindergarten are introduced to the reserve before becoming eligible for the Forest Kindergarten programme itself.



Photograph 2. Oscar making a 'house' with natural materials: 'I liked making a little house of sticks and leaves. Skeleton leaves were the roof. I found Kowhai seeds and they were food'.

The team then made a presentation to the local community board as another interested party in the reserve. The local mayor was in attendance and once again we were excited to find a receptive audience. In short order we were able to submit a 'memorandum of understanding' to the local council covering such things as the purpose of our programme, our use of the area, the times we were intending to visit, the size of our group and our approved risk management plan. Further information we included was recognising the special character of the reserve and the underlying goals of the local plan (South Wairarapa District Council, August 2007). This plan sits within the framework of the Reserves Act of 1977 and is required to '... provide for the use, enjoyment, maintenance, protection, preservation and development of the reserve' (p. 1). O'Connor's Bush is recognised in the plan as a 'heritage reserve' in which, 'The indigenous flora and fauna and natural environment shall as far as possible be protected' (p. 5). Our cooperation with the Friends of O'Connor's Bush in planting native trees helped to make our case. Finally, with all of this groundwork completed, we were able to plan our first Forest Kindergarten day.

A MORNING IN THE FOREST

The day begins at 8:00 am for the teacher leading the Forest Kindergarten programme for the day. Stored in the shed is a trolley laden with equipment including a tarpaulin, cones, notebooks, pens and pencils, digital cameras, a mobile phone, whistles, cups, and containers with necessities for the adults such as tea and coffee. Water bottles are filled for the children and a flask of hot water for the adults. Next comes a rack with a full range of wet weather gear and high-viz vests suitable for the conditions. Added to all this gear is a first aid kit, a chemical toilet and a tent which all go on the trolley. Along with the wet weather gear each of the children have a bag of their own. Into this are packed notebooks, pencils, a torch, magnifying glasses and their own lunchboxes and drink bottles. Getting all this gear from the kindergarten and into the reserve is a challenge.

As much of the gear as possible is packed and readied before the children arrive. Upon arriving at kindergarten from 8:30 am, children and whānau check in with the lead teacher and help the children with their bags and wet weather gear. As much as possible, the children are encouraged to take responsibility for their own gear and possessions. By 9:00 am the group, made up of the lead teacher, two parent helpers and 10 children, are ready to leave for the forest.

The group have a walk through the town to get to the reserve. The children, with fully laden bags, must negotiate two pedestrian crossings, traverse the main street and then turn left onto the road that takes them to the reserve. Everyone must cross the road another two times before entering the reserve. Carrying the bags is challenging for the children, however, most children are remarkably persistent in continuing to use them. The group then turns into a road that enters a local campground and there, just to the right, is the gate into the reserve. Before entering the reserve the teacher leads a Karakia, acknowledging Ranginui and Papatuanuku and thanking the forest and its inhabitants for receiving us. During a rainy visit to the forest, teacher Jenny Hansen noted that the group '*... said our blessing before entering into the forest. Children related a lot during the morning to Sky-Father [saying] he was crying*'. As Ritchie (2009) explains:

Māori perceive Papatuanuku, the Earth Mother, and Ranginui, the Sky Father as their ancestors, an ancestry which is shared with plants and fellow creatures. This represents another dimension of intersubjectivity, one which recognises that our destiny is intimately/ ultimately bound up with the destiny of the Earth. (p. 2)

The karakia and the children's ease of understanding and relating to Ranginui gives effect to the bicultural nature of the learning through the Forest Kindergarten programme.



Photograph 3. Esse and Riley make some alterations to the forest floor to help make a sofa for their house.

Finally, the group now enters the reserve. After only a few short weeks the children already take responsibility for much of what happens next. One child will place a cone at the southern-most end of the boundary area. The children often then go ahead and take their bags off in the designated 'basecamp' area. Even by just the second week, teacher Denise Stone noticed how, *'Children knew where to set up basecamp and where to put the cones ... Children knew to put out the tarp and had something to eat'*. A child will then take responsibility for laying the next cone at the northern-most end of the boundary. Before morning tea ends an adult, usually with help from the children, will set up the chemical toilet and the tent. The children learned quickly how to manage the guy ropes for the tent and have, at times, taken sole responsibility for ensuring the tent is set up. One of our parent helpers noted down the words of a child who talked about helping set up the tent, saying, *'I pushed the peg down with my hands, I didn't use the hammer or my foot'*. Children often take pride in their ability to use the equipment competently.

From the end of morning tea the children are then able to explore the natural environment of the reserve. At this point the morning really becomes 'free play' in the forest context. Children are able to freely explore the environment, on their own or in small groups. The children can, and often do, go off in different directions. The teacher and parent helpers take on different roles according to the learning happening for children. Sometimes a teacher becomes a participant in a game, and sometimes the teacher is an observer as children explore different aspects of the environment. Sometimes the teacher

will provide support, such as when children were exploring hanging ropes (made at the kindergarten) on tree branches to make a swing. Children are able to take care of their own needs, such as toileting whenever they need to or return to basecamp for water or food. Free play continues for as much of the morning as possible before camp is packed away and the group returns to the kindergarten at lunchtime.

NOTICING CHILDREN'S PLAY

After just two or three weeks the children began to give names to certain specific areas of reserve. One area became a 'house' where copious photographs and notes have been taken of complex socio-dramatic role-playing or shared pretend play (Dockett & Fler, 2002, p. 54). We've recorded how children re-live the social rules from their own homes in their reserve house, such as asking their guests to remove their shoes before joining them in the 'lounge'. I recorded a play episode in the reserve house in which a child, I., reminded her friends, *'You have to knock before you come in'*. O. comes in and then says, *'It's just so rainy out there.'*, *'You can stay the night then'*, I. replies. *'You're supposed to take your shoes off'*, I. reminds her new guest. And later, *'If you go out you need to shut the door'*. The teaching team resist the temptation to add to the play as one might expect in the regular kindergarten environment, as the *'... focus is on play using only what is found in nature'* (Kane & Kane 2011, p. 16). Our parent helpers have become aware of our teaching approach, as noted by one of them when she wrote: *'It was fascinating watching B. and O. acting out real life in the forest. [A] fallen tree was a car, a branch was a door, sticks were toothbrushes'*. In the reserve house the fallen tree is the sofa and the over-hanging branch the TV. Other areas the children have named, and return to regularly, are the 'see-saw', the 'waka', the 'submarine', and the 'mudslide'. One of our parents recorded, *'It is wonderful to see the kids coming up with new games and houses each week but also going back to their original play areas'*.

Children do take note of the natural phenomena around them. There has been great interest in the piwakawaka (fantail) birds that often follow the group through the forest. A parent recorded a child explaining, *'Four piwakawaka's flew around us and over us, stopped on logs and branches looking at us'*. A parent recorded how, *'K. found a very friendly fantail which followed him through the bush chittering and flitting from tree to tree'*. Teacher Jenny Hansen recorded, *'Children noticed four piwakawaka flying and observing us while having morning tea'*. A child was recorded as saying, *'Fantail birds flew over us when we were eating morning tea. One nearly landed on my finger!'*. Another child said, *'I saw a fantail, it put its tail out. It kept following me'*. Children often use the kupu Māori³ to name the birds and some have learned to quiet themselves in order to observe the birds for longer than a few moments. It's truly magical to see how close the inquisitive little birds come to the children's eye level as they observe each other in a place they both share.

Other creatures the children often observe are spiders and worms. The children share ideas and working theories to explain the behaviour of these creatures. From my notes, the children shared ideas about how worms *'make*

³ Words and vocabulary of the indigenous Maori people of New Zealand.

dirt and how this helps *'make things grow'*. Student teacher L. noted how children observed funnel web spiders, and teacher Catha Ritchie recorded one child saying, *'If it's not [a] spider web ... it just lives in a hole and it's poisonous and it bites you'*. A parent recorded two children hitting a fallen log with sticks when one warned the other, *'... don't break the spider's house, that keeps them warm'*. From the beginning, many of the children have become very interested in what they call the 'skeleton' or 'fairy' leaves. These are leaves in the final stages of decomposition found on the forest floor. I recorded one child offering an explanation for the leaves, saying, *'All the green came off'*. The children regularly place these leaves into their notebooks and many have made their way back to kindergarten. The children also often notice moss, lichen and fungi on the trees and the forest floor. Observations of the spiders and the fungi on the forest floor are indeed suggestive of the children developing their own working theories for making sense of the natural world of the reserve.



Photograph 4. Riley walks along a large fallen tree. Sometimes this is a great waka taking the tamariki on journeys all around the world.

As their time in the reserve nears its end the children are called back to basecamp for more kai (food) and to work in their notebooks. Adults work alongside the children and offer provocations to encourage the children to talk about their experiences in the reserve. Children often add drawings of things that have happened over the morning. On my last visit to the reserve I recorded a number of complex socio-dramatic stories that included characters as diverse as clowns, sharks, and a baby lion. The parent helpers are also encouraged to write something of their perspective of the experience and this provides a rich source of parent voice, alongside the notes from teachers. After recordings are made, basecamp is packed away, the toilet and tent are packed away, and the group makes its way back to kindergarten, returning by lunchtime in time for those children leaving at that time to be picked up by whānau.

EARLY FINDINGS AND BENEFITS

The teaching team feels the Forest Kindergarten programme is having a significant impact, and is indeed re-connecting children with nature. We now hold a collection of notebooks – with children’s voice, parent’s voice, and teacher’s voice, and a collection of digital photos – that provides abundant evidence of children’s learning in the context of the forest. These collected observations have permitted the teaching team to gain some perspective on the kinds of play children are engaging in whilst in the reserve, and record children’s changing attitudes and patterns of behaviour. For example, on his first visit one child said the forest was *‘dark and scary’* whilst another said it was simply *‘awesome’*. Another said the totara tree was *‘scary ‘cos it’s so big!’*. Our notes show how some of the children initially struggled with trips and falls often resulting in tears. However, these impressions soon gave way as the children became more familiar and confident in their surroundings. More recent observations clearly show that the children have become more resilient, more likely to pick themselves up and carry on if they fall.

Our early findings suggest children are returning regularly to areas of play that have meaning for them. Complex socio-dramatic role play occurs in the same areas of the forest week-after-week suggesting children enjoy revisiting the places of their learning and continue to extend the learning on subsequent visits. Teacher Jenny Hansen notes how, *‘Children have taken to using the forest resources to support their imagination and role play[ing]’*. Catha Ritchie writes: *‘Social competencies are a highlight, observing children extend their skills in verbal communication, resilience, exploration, taking risks, making discoveries, developing strong relationships, autonomy and leadership’*. I have been impressed with how quickly the children have become comfortable in the forest, and take responsibility. For example, when a new child came along for the first time a group of children took care of that child, showing her into the forest and helping her settle at basecamp; proudly showing her all the different areas the children have thus far named.



Photograph 5. Riley and Khalia write some notes after their morning in the forest.

We have evidence the children are connecting with some of the creatures of the forest, in particular the piwakawaka that often accompany them in their play, as well as creatures such as the spiders and worms. Our notes demonstrate how children are sharing ideas about these creatures and developing their own working theories to explain what they are observing. This also goes for other aspects of the forest environment, including the trees and plants of the reserve, the fungi, mushrooms, moss and lichen that the children observe as they explore the forest floor.

If our collected notebooks have provided substantial evidence of the benefits of the Forest Kindergarten programme, then they have also proved an invaluable tool for evaluating the programme. The team have encountered a number of issues and problems in our particular version of Forest Kindergarten. There are issues with the bags which have proven to be inadequate and annoying for the children, complicating the walk. Indeed, early on, one of our parents noted, *'I do think there needs to be something done about bags as the children found them very difficult to carry – they keep falling off their shoulders'*. The bags will have to be replaced. The team are concerned at the sheer amount of gear required to make the programme successful. One possible solution to this issue that we are currently exploring is to have a locked box at the reserve itself so that some of the gear can be stored, thus removing the need to transport the total quantity of gear every week.

We are also currently in the throes of thinking about what role and importance the walk has in terms of the goal of re-connecting children with nature. It must be acknowledged that the walk to and from the reserve takes a

lot of time and places a great strain on the children. On the whole, the children are quite resilient and are often uncomplaining about the walk. However, as the winter has gone on, some of the children have expressed negative views of the walk. If the focus of the programme is being *in* nature, then the walk takes away from that part of the experience in the time and effort taken just to get there and back. The team will have to arrive at a solution that balances both the legitimate views of small and young children who are struggling with this aspect of the programme and the commitment to the values of the programme itself.

CONCLUSION

We are excited about the Forest Kindergarten programme at the kindergarten and committed to problem-solving the issues we are experiencing. I believe we can conclusively say we are helping children to re-connect with nature and early findings tentatively suggest we are helping the children to build resiliency and to develop an ecocentric identity through the Forest Kindergarten experience. We are currently undertaking a more formal research process to critically examine the learning we think we are observing and hope to report on this later this year.

To conclude, I would like to quote at length from one of our parents about the impact our Forest Kindergarten programme has had for her child. This child is a quiet and introverted boy, whom in his time at the kindergarten has been observed to mostly engage (quite happily) in solitary play. This is what our parent wrote in a letter this year to the teaching team:

K. has really enjoyed the Forest Kindergarten programme. K. is a very self-contained little boy and sometimes finds it difficult to fit in with large groups of children during normal kindergarten days. He has really appreciated having an activity which is special for him and a small group of his peers and the programme has helped him form bonds with other boys his age.

K. also enjoys the forest environment. He has grown up on a farm and is confident being in plants, mud, trees and natural obstacles. He loves going on little adventures in the forest and this familiarity means that sometimes he is able to lead games with the other children and show them how to do tasks (for example, putting up the tree swing [and] toilet tent). His confidence with other children has benefitted a lot from this programme. The forest is somewhere he experiences where his skills in problem solving, building and imagination are really valued.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DYLAN BRAITHWAITE

Greytown Kindergarten

I first studied education at Victoria University in the 1990s, completing a Masters Degree in 1995. I spent the next few years overseas, mostly in Canada, where I married and began a family of my own. On returning to New Zealand I worked mostly from home for Massey University and the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, whilst being primary caregiver to my children. Through my experience taking my children to their different early childhood settings, and having volunteered on various kindergarten committees and boards, I decided to go back to school, completing a B.Ed (Early Years) in 2006. I began working at Greytown Kindergarten the following year.

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The Greytown Kindergarten Teaching Team



Back (L to R):
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