

EIS Report for Page Scholarship, October 2011

Teacher Profile

Ros Marshall is a part-time nursery teacher at Liberton Nursery School-Edinburgh, and a Forest School Leader. Ros has been teaching at Liberton for 11 years. Her interest in nature play for younger children has flourished since she became involved in Forest Schools. The children at Liberton Nursery School benefit from a continuous Forest School Programme, and an outdoor area at the nursery with many opportunities to play naturally.

Report

Gaining the EIS and ESU Page Scholarship to America was a great honour and a highly satisfying experience both professionally and personally. It allowed me to visit America for a period of 3 weeks, in order to research different models of outdoor learning provision for young children-particularly those of nursery age.

The subject of study that I had applied for was-**'To look at outdoor learning and sustainable development education within the nursery and primary sector. To visit play grounds that have been transformed by school communities, and to find out how they are used by learners. Finally to look at the link between outdoor play and learning and the health of both children and the planet.'** In summary looking at how different education models can help children and their families make a life long connection to nature.

The two models I was really interested in were models that don't exist in Scotland to any great degree. The first being schools having their own **'Garden Educators'** as part of the staff team. These are educators who maintain the school garden, take environmental lessons and supervise nature play sessions. The second model is of **'Nature Pre-Schools set on nature reserves'**. These nurseries often share a joint building with The Ranger Service, and have access to acres of nature reserve land and all the benefits this brings.

My application was informed by knowledge I already had about outdoor learning in America and general approach to being outdoors. I had already been influenced by the following writers Richard Louv and his seminal book-'Last Child in the Woods' and Sharon Danks writing about schoolyard transformation in her book 'Asphalt to Ecosystem'. Other campaigns and networks that I was keen to find out more about were the 'Leave No Child Inside' campaign, The Children and Nature Network, The San Francisco Green schoolyards Initiative and The Centre for Eco-Literacy. I also knew that that there were many other exciting initiatives to find out about.

Once awarded the scholarship the project of actually getting to America involved 3 separate stages:

- Planning which for me involved a lot of internet research, e-mailing schools and teachers, sorting out accommodation and making travel arrangements in order to schedule a full visit programme.
- Travel in America -my time table allowed me to visit schools-5 garden educators at the schools/gardens they worked in, 4 nature pre-schools on nature reserves, 2 environmental educators-one from a national park and one from 'The Highline

Park' in New York, 1 construction Playground in Berkley, and attend 1 conference. These visits varied from ½ a day to 2 day visits

- And finally once back in Scotland collating all the information I had collected, sorting through hundreds of photos, writing reports and speaking to friends and colleagues about my experiences.

I travelled from West to East across America, starting in San Francisco and making my way across to Chicago, Milwaukee, Michigan and New York and Connecticut.

I was inspired by every centre that I visited, but feel that in a short article it would be best to concentrate on 2 schools that I particularly enjoyed visiting-one from each of the models I spoke about earlier.

Rooftop School in San Francisco is an elementary school in an urban setting; it has a well established garden area to the side of its main playground. The garden and its linked education programme are run by the schools garden educator. The school has a good outdoor ethos, helped a little by the kind Californian weather! With a morning circle time for the whole school and assemblies being held outside. The role of 'Garden Educator/co-ordinator' is not uncommon in San Francisco schools, and I was lucky enough to go to one school that had 2 garden educators in place. Funding is an issue and some are paid for by the district and some by parent's groups. The garden educator at Rooftop School takes every class for a half-hour lesson per week. However children can also access the garden to be a helper, to eat their lunch and for nature play sessions at play times. Some children visit the garden at least 4 times a day. The lessons vary from plant anatomy and general botany, life cycles, ecosystems, geology to gardening skills. The children keep journals and record what they see and learn in the garden. They are true young scientists and naturalists. Running alongside this is the nature play programme-which is almost more beneficial than the planned learning. During these sessions children make mud rivers and dams, decorate trees, make flower soap, go bug hunting, make water tornadoes and role-play in the beautiful surroundings. They are then scrubbed up and sent back to their afternoon classes-what could be better? I felt sure that these children were physically and mentally replenished and ready for their studies. I observed this sort of outdoor learning at four schools in San Francisco, and could quickly see the huge benefits for children This is what the school aims are for the garden-'Rooftop School Garden Program enriches the district mandated science curriculum through hands on activities in the school garden'

My second example is from the nature pre-school on a nature reserve model. I spent 2 days at The **Schlitz Audubon Nature Pre-school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin**, not far from Chicago. I was so pleased that I chose to spend 2 days at the centre, and in my dreams plan to go back again as a volunteer for 2 weeks. This nature pre-school shares an Eco building with the nature centre. The pre-school has three classrooms, each reflecting the environmental interests the nursery is centred upon. There are three outdoor areas, all slightly different and each woodland based. Each class also had it's own maple tree, for making maple syrup in the autumn. The staff and children can access 185 acres of diverse habitats. Other nature nurseries I visited kept bees and hens.

When the children arrive at The Schlitz Audubon Nature pre-school in the morning, there is a notice on the classroom door saying what clothes they need to wear that day. As part of the curriculum children are given 'dressing instruction' so that they can dress independently. They are then taken to their outdoor area for that week to start their nursery session. I observed children involved in good nature play at this

time. After $\frac{3}{4}$ hour play, the children gather for an outdoor circle time and then go out on a hike. Hiking is part of the routine of all the nature nurseries I visited. These hikes are often quite adventurous to swamps, ravines, lake Sides and such like. The daily hikes are enjoyed hugely by the children, who are immensely knowledgeable about the environment they are in. Time is given at special places on the walk to play or use natural features such as climbing trees, sliding poles and mud patches. Once the hike is finished children come back to the main building for snack and a short play before they return home.

I had huge admiration for the teachers at this centre who were so knowledgeable, and sensitive to children's needs. This particular nursery had done a lot of research into how natural play supports young children's brain development. Staff were very keen to chat about their practice and to exchange views, we had 2 lunchtime meetings for discussion. We are continuing to e-mail each other about nature play.

I have tried to draw together what I have learnt from my visit to the USA in the following summary.

- Pre-schools in America and nurseries in Scotland have very similar influences, for example-Reggio, Katz, Louv. Also very similar concerns about an outcome lead curriculum for young children
- Having garden educators to cover large parts of the curriculum using outdoor learning, seemed an excellent model and something that we could draw from in Scotland
- Nature pre-schools on Nature Reserves seemed to be the perfect form of education for young children. I wondered if any organisation such as the Forestry Commission or Woodland Trust would take this thought on board?
- There are many different possible approaches to 'greening up' a playground
- Having one organisation encouraging families and children to use the outdoors is being very effective. Many states have taken on 'The Leave No Child Inside' message, and have translated this into the provision of outdoor opportunities for all
- Approaching learning through a Garden Based Curriculum such as in California's-'A Child's Garden of Standards', seems a good approach
- American outdoor teachers were keen to know more about Forest Schools, teaching woodland skills to younger children, and the whole notion of challenge and risk.

I thank the EIS and the ESU for this fantastic opportunity and would like to finish with a quote from The Centre for Eco-Literacy in San Francisco. It is the four guiding principles to being 'Smart by Nature' for teaching in an eco friendly and sustainable way. I saw much evidence of these principles in my travels.

- Nature is our teacher
- Sustainability is a community practise
- The real world is the optimal learning environment

- Sustainable living is rooted in a deep sense of place

References that I have found useful

Books

Richard Louv-'Last Child in the Woods' -Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder. Algonquin Books 2006

Sharon Danks- Asphalt to Ecosystems, Design ideas for Schoolyard Transformation. New Village Press 2010

Arden Bucklin-Sporer and Rachel Kathleen Pringle-How to Grow A School garden, A Complete Guide for Parents and Teachers. Timber Press 2010.

Websites

Centre for Ecoliteracy-www.ecoliteracy.org

Children in Nature Network-www.childrenandnature.org

San Francisco Green Schoolyard Alliance- www.sfgreenschools.org

Green Hearts Institute for Nature in Childhood- www.greenheartsinc.org

Braininsights-www.braininsightsonline.com

Schlitz Audubon Nature Centre-www.sanc.org