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Advantages and disadvantages of forest kindergarten in Czech Republic

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to describe advantages and disadvantages of forest kindergarten in Czech Republic from stakeholder's point of view. In the light of qualitative data obtained from semi structured interviews and observation in 3 forest kindergarten and document analyses we are answering of this question: What are advantages and disadvantages of forest kindergarten education from different stakeholder's point of view? We present this advantages and disadvantages as characteristics of forest kindergarten: aspects of the society (e.g. increasing the capacity of preschool education, man and woman teachers, experience of parents), parents' lifestyle (e.g. whole day children staying in nature, alternative education, food), educational areas (e.g. creativity, positive approach to nature, social behaviour, emotional development, development of both gross and fine motoric), children's' health (e.g. physical condition of children, immunity of children, environment of forest kindergarten), safety (e.g. risks, insect, small injuries, hygienic). In the conclusion we relate to existing empiric investigations and theoretical knowledge of the possibility to compare common kindergarten and forest kindergarten

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1. Introduction

During the last 5 years from the founding of the first forest kindergartens, about 120 organisations emerged in Czech Republic, taking care of 2500 children (in school year 2014/2015) they will take care and educate about 3000

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children). The concept of preschool education in nature is not a new one. During the first half the nineteen fifties in Denmark, Ella Flatau solved the inaccessibility of a kindergarten by taking her 4 children regularly for trips into the woods and when her neighbours joined, she founded the first forest kindergarten – vandrebørnehavn (compare. Häfner, 2002, 32-33; Bentsen, Andkjær & Ejbye-Ernst, 2009, 30). Danish approach to forest kindergartens (Williams-Sieghfredsen, 2011) spread into other countries. In Germany, the closest country to the Czech Republic with forest kindergartens and also with similar preconditions was a first forest preschool registered in 1993. Largely on that fact had a sharing the article from Ursula Friedrich – “Play and learn” published in 1991 (Häfner, 2002, 33). Nowadays in Germany operates over than 1500 forest kindergarten for 30.000 preschool children. In Sweden is registered over than 180 forest kindergarten (Robertson, 2008, 7). These countries we can mark as “the Mekka of forest kindergarten”, but the idea is starting to spread out very quickly and today we can find forest kindergarten, or institutions based on very similar idea in England, Scotland, United States, Japan, Switzerland, Finland, Norway, Latvia, Russia, Canada, Austria etc. (compare Häfner, 2002; Robertson, 2008; Miklitz, 2011; Knight, 2013).

How to define forest kindergartens (further mentioned as LMŠ = *lesní mateřská škola* in Czech), whose advantages and disadvantages we ask about? We agree with the definition of Knight (2009, 15-17), who states the following characteristics of forest kindergartens:

1. The setting is not usual one.
2. The Forest School is made as safe as is reasonably possible, in order to facilitate children’s risk-taking.
3. Forest School happens over time.
4. There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing.
5. Trust is central.
6. The learning is play-based and, as far as possible, child-initiated and child-led.
7. The blocks and the sessions have beginnings and ends.
8. The staff is trained.

2. Method

2.1. Purpose of the Study

Even though the number of forest kindergartens in individual countries grows, it is possible to observe endless debates in the media concerning the advantages and disadvantages of education in forest kindergartens. The aim of paper is to describe advantages and disadvantages of forest kindergarten in Czech Republic from stakeholder’s point of view. Research questions for the study is: “What are advantages and disadvantages of forest kindergarten education from different stakeholder’s point of view?” This is later defined by these two partial research questions:

- What are the disadvantages connected with children visiting a LMŠ?
- What are the main benefits of educating children in LMŠ?

2.2. Research Methods

The paper represents partial results of wider research project. We got the data by:

- a) Document analysis. These were mostly publications connected with forest kindergartens, experts’ articles, articles presented during the last 3 years in national media (newspapers, magazines, internet information servers, radio, television), web pages of about 10 forest kindergartens, stenographic record of the 23rd meeting of the Senate[†]. These were mostly publicly accessible informational sources.

[†] 24. 7. 2014 a Senate – upper house of the Parliament of the Czech Republic – meeting was held to debate the proposal of the law concerning provision of child care in a group of children. This proposed law is closely connected to the existence of forest kindergartens and the senators during the debate mentioned advantages and disadvantages of forest kindergartens.

- b) We also added to our research semi-structured interviews and observations from three Czech forest kindergartens, which will help us in finding answers to the question of our research. We made the interviews in the following three forest kindergartens:
- i. LMŠ in the hills. This is a forest kindergarten founded by a citizen action, started in September 2012, which has two classes of around 15 children (for children 2 to 4 years and for children from 3 to 7 years), which is open for children every working day throughout the year on the periphery of a town with around 100000 inhabitants. 7 pedagogical workers (all women) take care of the children and educate them in turns. Children have a small cottage for their belongings.
 - ii. Integrated LMŠ. This is an integrated forest kindergarten (shares kitchen and dining room with a common kindergarten and the pedagogical workers work both in the common kindergarten and in the LMŠ. Children have a caravan as their base. The forest kindergarten is open since September 2010, in a natural park on the edge of a large city (more than one million inhabitants) and offers care of children of the preschool age of 3 to 7 years. There are two classes for 15 children that are open 3 and 2 days a week. 1 pedagogical worker and 1 assistant take care of each class. 5 pedagogical workers – women and 2 men take turns in the classes.
 - iii. Small LMŠ. This is a forest kindergarten run by a public benefit company in a smaller town (around 20 thousand inhabitants) since September 2013 in the valley of a local river. A group of around 15 children aged 3 to 7 years is based in a heated yurt. There are two pedagogical workers taking care of the children (2 woman, man as lecture in afternoon hobbyty).

Every time we made the interviews with the managers of the forest kindergartens and in the Integrated and Small LMŠ with teachers. These were semi-structured interviews lasting for 30 to 40 minutes. We had questions prepared in advance, but we also asked about things that were interesting for us in the context of the interview. We recorded all the interviews and took notes at the same time. Participants were assured of anonymizing of the interviews and ethical dealing with the record.

Involved observation was made by Zuzana and Lucie in May and June 2014, when they visited LMŠ for one day and observed the children in their activities for a full day (roughly from 9:30 in the morning to 15:30 in the afternoon). During the observation, the researchers took field notes and written down all important facts they met here and that were connected to the theme of the research. They hadn't a preformed observation sheet for the observations, they only kept with the theme of the research. The observations took place in the environment of LMŠ and in the cases of LMŠ in the hills and Small LMŠ in the woods, where the pedagogical workers led the children.

We coded the field notes and interviews after transcription together with documents. The codes were not determined in advance and they were gradually formed and changed based on the gradual analysis and individual data sources to provide us with answers to the research questions. We used the MAXQDA 10 software to analyse data sources. Using open coding, we reached 45 codes that we organized into categories (e.g. development of children in nature environment, increasing immunity, development of sensomotrics, positive attitudes to nature, development of social competences, men participation in preschool education, safety of children, question of readiness to school attendance, hygienic standards) that had some connection to the partial research questions. At first we coded independent on each other and then compared the agreements. Later we discussed the differences in codes and individual categories. We sought common consensus in the discussion. We used analytic induction for the coding and identified the things that repeated in the data. We later described these in the findings.

3. Findings

From the qualitative data, we identified many partial advantages and disadvantages of education provided by LMŠ, which we gathered into the following more general characteristic. It is obvious, that whether an individual characteristic of LMŠ is advantage or disadvantage depends on the point of view. The things that are an obvious

advantage for one person (e.g. conditions in LMŠ that do not fulfil all the strict hygienic rules) others can consider a disadvantage that must be eliminated by enumeratively set requirements. Individual characteristics are also mutually interconnected, but to emphasize their importance, they will be discussed individually. And last but not least, for every individual a concrete characteristic of education provided in LMŠ could have different intensity and importance. For us the important ones are those that are closer to social pedagogy and we will discuss these more extensively. These are the following characteristics:

A. Societal aspects. Increasing the capacity of preschool education, education of 2 to 6 years old children not only by women, but also by men, positive approach of parents, mostly positive articles in media informing about LMŠ, increasing number of theses about LMŠ, positive experience of parents and society with LMŠ is the advantage of LMŠ that we as a whole denote Societal aspects.

Same as Ellou Flatau in the city of Sölleröd in the nineteen-fifties founded the forest kindergarten because of lack of places in preschool institutions (compare Häfner, 2002), this cause was one of many for founding around 120 viable LMŠ in 5 years in the Czech Republic, which will in the school year 2014/2015 have capacity of around 3000 children. And this increase of capacity of preschool education was considered to be a clear advantage also by the politicians in the Senate, one example of many is from the speech of a social-democratic member of the Senate: *Forest kindergartens in the system of preschool education filled a gap the state was not able to fill. They not only offer an alternative built on regular stay of the children in nature, but they also allow the women, whose children didn't get into the state kindergarten because of capacity reasons, to re-enter the workforce market.*

There were, according to the ministry of education statistics, 28583 employees working in the Czech preschool education, out of which 132 (0,46 %) were men. But many forest kindergartens, which aren't in these statistics, have a rule, that the pair of pedagogical workers that is always present, consists of a man and a woman. Václav Šneberger (cofounder of the Open fathers league[‡]), comments this situation: *Men open the world for children in a different way than women and institutional education fundamentally lacks the participation of men. They are as necessary as women for healthy development of children.* (Při záchraně lesních ..., 2014).

During last three years there were many final theses at universities, both bachelor and master and even one doctor (Ph.D. thesis), that deal with the theme of education in forest kindergartens, influence of nature on education of preschool children etc. (e.g. Bolehovská, 2013; Fajkusová, 2012; Héčová, 2012; Honzlová, 2013; Kapucianová, 2010; Kazmiřová, 2013; Krylová, 2012; Kulhánková, 2012; Martínková, 2013; Morávková, 2013; Oprchalová, 2011; Syrová, 2012; Šedová, 2013; Špačková, 2013; Uzel, 2012a; Uzel, 2012b; Vošahlíková, 2012). The society is relatively well informed about LMŠ, as found Fajkusová (2012) using a research with questionnaire spread over the internet by snowball effect, when she gathered opinions from 479 respondents (86 % women; from the age point of view: 1st quartile = 25 years, median = 30 years, 3rd quartile = 36 years). From 26th February to 6th March 2012 she learned, that 43 % of respondents would choose for their children a combination of LMŠ and common kindergarten and 10 % would choose only LMŠ, which shows positive approach of respondents towards LMŠ.

B. Parents lifestyle. Children staying in nature, inspiration by alternative education, different type of food are advantages that the parents often cite when asked why they put their children in LMŠ. They are often parents who have different lifestyle than mainstream society and that wish their children to be educated in a similar way.

Eduard Štorch already in 1929 (50-55) writes about positive influence of education of children in nature on their health, but also from the pedagogical point of view. He refers to researches concerning taking up weight, haemoglobin tests showing positive influence of staying in nature, improving the grades and shortening of education because of higher efficiency. At present Blair (2009, 35) based on both qualitative and quantitative research of positive influence of nature on children education (especially by school gardening) gets to the following conclusion: school gardening can improve students' test scores and school behaviour and Gardens can improve the ecological complexity of the schoolyard in ways that promote effective experiential learning in many subject areas, particularly the areas of science, environmental education, and food education. Also the teachers in our LMŠ speak about

‡ <http://ilom.cz/>

positive influence of children's stay in nature on the approach to it: *Everything we have here, we for example try for them not to have much waste in their boxes, sacks, etc. Everything is sorted by children. They know all, every flower here, they know. For example this meadow here, it is protected, so they know we have to take care of it, that they cannot just run all over it. ... We feed the pheasants. And so on. We talk (added by authors), why it makes sense to take care of nature, and what does the nature mean for us* (teacher from the Integrated LMS).

LMS don't exist in a vacuum, but they are influenced by different pedagogical trends focused on children (compare Knight, 2009, 61-63). Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852) made teaching aids and toys from natural materials, and also encouraged children to stay outside, where they should occupy themselves by creating and discovering. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) came with the idea of active learning and open ended learning. Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) used in his teaching the rhythms of nature and lifecycles, he also worked with the concepts of imitation and exercise. Maria Montessori (1870-1952) applied repeating for learning and also used natural materials for teaching aids. Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994) in Reggio Emilia established approach, that there is a belief that children have rights and should be given opportunities to develop their potential and to teaching young children puts the natural development of children as well as the close relationships that they share with their environment at the centre of its philosophy. Also the community support and involvement of the family is used here. Environment is considered to be the "third teacher" similarly to LMS. Children are also viewed as social beings and a focus is made on the child in relation to other children, the family, the teachers, and the community rather than on each child in isolation. (Gandini, 1993)

In Czech LMS, the lunches are often transported from restaurants or canteens (mostly "healthy food" restaurants, vegetarian restaurants or food from farmers markets) and the food is either organic or from local suppliers. Children usually bring their snacks from home. When this is not the case, we know from the observation of LMS in the hills, that this is another activity that to some extent reduces the possibility to take pedagogical care of the children and stresses the pedagogical workers, when they prepare the snacks. Children often take part in preparing the food, cleaning up and washing the dishes.

C. Education areas. Taylor et al. (1998) found in their research that children living in greener environment (with more vegetation) have more creative forms of play. Burdette and Whitaker (2005) state that outdoor environment supports creative thinking, because it is more varied and less structured. Similarly positive approach to nature, development of social behaviour, emotional development, development of both gross and fine motoric are positively influenced by LMS (compare Lettieri, 2004). The statements of pedagogical workers from our researched LMS confirm this. Children from LMS and common kindergartens are according to teachers from these schools similarly prepared for elementary school and reach similar grades (compare e.g. Gorges, 2000; Häfner, 2002; Vošahlíková et al., 2012, 63-65).

D. Children's health. Regular movement of children outdoor, various moving activities lead to better physical condition of children in LMS (Vošahlíková et al., 2012, 46). Bell (2008) for 3831 children aged 3 to 16years, in researching the dependency of green and population density on the BMI[§] of children and young people found that children and young people living in greener districts had lower BMI, probably because of higher physical activity and time spent outdoors. Apart from good physical health and strengthening of immunity of children (by being outdoors in all weather –warm and cold, rain and snow) brings also improvement of mental health. Wells and Evans (2003) found that children from relatively "green" environment better live through difficult situations, such as divorce of the parents, arguments in the family or in school, etc. Combination of the nature environment, permanent stay outdoors, specific food, creating relationship with nature, lead to the creation of healthy lifestyle of children. But it is a question up to what extent low quality environment of LMS (in the centre or in the vicinity of large towns), with higher values of pollutants, noise, dust, etc. have possible negative influence on the health of children in comparison with children in common kindergartens.

§ BMI = Body Mass Index

E. Safety. Risks connected with potential dangers are solved by risk and accident prevention. (compare Williams-Siegfredsen, 2011, 56-58). Most LMSŠ has therefore its own directives, rules for working with risks (e.g. LMSŠ in the hills – Directions for crisis). But it is still possible that an unexpected event happens, such as in March 2014 in Říčany u Prahy, where 3 children got lost (and were quickly found). But those involved later praised the risk plan and professionalism of the teachers who immediately solved the situation (Lesním školám chybí..., 2014). This is not so often the case of common kindergartens that they are praised for solving crisis situations. In LMSŠ the children even though stronger protection more often get ticks, and boreliosis connected with it, insect sting (Weishaar et al., 2006). There is also higher occurrence of small injuries like scratches, swellings, splinters (Vošahlíková et al., 2012, 43-46). Similarly the hygiene of children is solved by directives, while in the Czech Republic the Association of LMSŠ tries to push through reduction of hygienic regulations for kindergartens given by the ministry of health. During the discussion in the Senate, it was possible to notice arguments for reducing the hygienic regulations (against sterile cleanness) i.e. more free approach to the hygiene of children in the ration 5:1 to keeping the severe status quo.

4. Conclusions:

Points of view of stakeholders of forest kindergartens are different. Our findings are mostly in compliance with the known facts, that education provided in LMSŠ is comparable to the common kindergartens (e.g. Lettieri, 2004; Závěrečná zpráva..., 2012). LMSŠ also help the development of movement abilities and creativity comparable or better than common kindergartens (compare Kiener, 2004). LMSŠ have positive compensation influence on civilizational deprivation of children (compare Gorges, 2000). LMSŠ solve shortage of places in common kindergartens, gather more and more sympathizers from parents, journalists, politicians, but also university students. In Czech Republic they specifically offer meeting not only women, but also men in preschool education. Parents put their children to LMSŠ also because of their lifestyle and positive relationship with alternative education, which they consider to be better than education provided by common kindergartens. Because of risk prevention, pedagogic workers in LMSŠ got professionalized and use risk management approaches. Even though in the text advantages clearly prevail over disadvantages of LMSŠ, it is clear that in a specific LMSŠ, things mostly depend on individual people, what education they will offer to children, so that it is beneficial for their future development.

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