

Origins of Forest School and A British influence on outdoor learning

Forest school was aided by inspiration from the open air culture ('frulitsliv') led in Scandinavia that they employ in early years education. In the early nineties nursery nurses from Somerset returned from a trip where they had visited these outdoor, child-centred/play-based nurseries. So impressed with what they had seen they started their own 'Forest School' in their local college. It was so successful that in 1995 the college developed a BTec in Forest School and started to offer it to early years practitioners. In 2000 Wales and a variety of local authorities in England took up Forest School –working with local colleges to deliver the training. 3 years later trainers with the support of the Forestry Commission in Wales, developed the Open College Network (OCN) qualification

At the same time a network of practitioners held the first ever national conference at which a UK definition of Forest School was formulated:

'An inspirational process that offers children, young people and adults regular opportunities to achieve, develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a local woodland environment.'

Forest School is now wide spread and although the programme was transferred from Scandinavia two people who deserve attention as having an influence are the McMillan sisters born in London in the 1800's they were amongst the first to recognise the benefit of outdoor play in this country.

In the early 1900's Rachel and Margaret McMillan started a clinic to treat children that had become sickly through deprivation. In 1911 using their belief that the outdoors was good for children's health they founded a boys and girl camp schools in a garden in a churchyard in Deptford and children learnt, ate and slept outdoors. In 1914 the scheme had proved so successful that they moved to a new site and started an open air nursery. After the death of her sister in 1917 the nursery was renamed the Rachel McMillan nursery school and soon became the largest nursery school in the UK. The Hadlow report in 1930 records the average day as follows;

"Breakfast is served at 9 o'clock. the morning is spent in handwork occupations or in play either in the garden or shelter if the weather is inclement. Between 11.30 and 12 noon the children sit down to a two course dinner after which they are ready for their midday sleep. The afternoon activities consist of free play, music and games. Tea is served at 4 o'clock and between 5 and 5.30 parents arrive to take their children home. The school is visited once a week by one of the LCC doctors and a council nurse attends daily for an hour. Breathing exercises, massage and sunlight treatment are given where necessary".

Summary

Today their legacy lives on and the Margaret McMillan house is part of [wide horizons](#) The focus on academia that is today a standard part of a nursery's day was completely absent in the McMillan's approach the children were simply left to play with the promotion of positive, mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health of the children in their care the McMillan's sisters goal, something, I believe it shares with the Forest Schools of today.