

Wild Child



Rio program takes play-based learning outdoors

Shelby Anderson

When kindergarten teacher Sarah Noguee started teaching at Rio Elementary School she was surprised by all of the standards and assessments required for kindergarten students. She wanted to make a change but didn't have a specific idea in mind.

"Play is so important for young children, but with the standards as high as they are, it has gotten pushed to the side in kindergarten," she said. "I wanted to change that, at least for the students in my classroom. I knew there had to be a way to meet the standards while still respecting children's right to be children."

As she researched alternative learning options for young learners, she came across "forest kindergartens." As she learned more, she fell in love with the idea. Forest kindergartens, which are more common in European countries like Denmark and Germany, are a type of outdoor learning where students go outside, no matter the weather, and are encouraged to play and explore the natural world.

"It highly values children's natural curiosity and desire to make sense of the world," Noguee said. "It is an approach that looks at the whole child — socially, physically, emotionally, cognitively, and academically. The forest kindergarten

approach believes that nature is the greatest teacher."

In Europe, many forest kindergarten programs take students outside all day, every school day. In Rio, the outdoor days are held on Mondays. But, true to the philosophy of forest kindergartens, Noguee's students spend the entire school day outside at the Rio School Forest and brave almost all weather elements. This past school year, her students only missed one day during the winter because of extreme cold. (Noguee keeps a bins of extra hats and gloves in her classroom).

■ Getting Started

In March 2016, Noguee and Becky

Bender, an early childhood teacher, began talking about a forest kindergarten program in Rio. The school district had an extensive and underutilized school forest. They sat down and developed the program and talked through some of the details like transportation and safety.

Later that school year, Bender and Noguee took their idea to the administration and school board and were given the green light to make it happen.

"The administration and board have been extremely supportive," Noguee said. "They loved the idea of starting to use our forest again and saw the potential of getting our youngest kids outside more. I am



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extremely grateful for how supportive they have been — this wouldn't have happened without their support.”

“I was in support of getting Project Wild Child going the moment Sarah and Becky presented the idea to me,” said Rio Elementary

School principal Craig Vetter. “The idea of getting our youngest students out in nature while providing learning experiences tied to our curriculum is something we all see as a win-win situation.”

With that, Project Wild Child was launched in the Rio Community School District. One of the positives

of the program is that there are not many costs associated with outdoor learning. In Rio, the only major expense was transportation. However, the teachers were able to secure two grants that cover the cost of busing the students to and from the school forest.

■ A Day in the Forest

During one of the forest days in early May, the learning started almost as soon as the students stepped foot on the forest path. Nogee stopped her students every so often to have them listen for a bird call, examine a plant, and once to point out some poison ivy.

When the students got to the outdoor classrooms, they voted on whether to start at the “bottom” or “upper” classroom. The students voted for the “bottom” classroom and started their day with unstructured play time. Nogee likes to start with unstructured play time to help the students get out some energy. Students climbed on a lean-to fort they had built earlier in the school year, others started an impromptu game jumping off a log and over some water. Needless to say, a couple of kindergartners got wet. Others

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Project Wild Child MISSION STATEMENT

Rio Community School District

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Our vision for the Early Learning and Kindergarten students is to allow them the opportunity to connect with nature on a regular basis; to grant them permission to learn through play; to help them establish their place in the natural world; to indulge their natural curiosity and turn it into a love for learning; and to foster 21st century skills outside the classroom walls.

examined plants, bugs or anything else they could find.

After unstructured play time, the students moved to the “upper” outdoor classroom outfitted with a fire ring and some concrete tiles laid into the ground that students had decorated. The kindergartners formed a circle around the fire ring and Nogee read books while they had their morning snack.

“We want to keep it strictly play-

based,” she said. “We want to give them time to explore but we are also following and developing learning standards.”

The more structured learning typically takes place in the afternoon. After lunch, students have a learning activity, such as writing about what they are observing in the forest or doing a math lesson related to the school forest. However, Nogee and other outdoor learning advo-

cates emphasize that learning takes place during the entire day. That learning is evident even during the unstructured play time. Students learn how to play together, communicate, and engage in discussions. Some students work together to



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build a fort. Others engage in more imaginative play like setting up

“stores” where they sell imaginary or real items. Others have created “zoos” with snails and other critters.

“A lot of the time they don’t realize they’re learning,” Nogee said. “It’s something that is happening naturally.”

Nogee also provides the students with a number of “tools” — like potato peelers, string, shovels, and saws. While some people may be surprised to hear that the kindergartners are allowed to use saws, Nogee said it’s about giving trust and responsibility to the student.

“When they’re able to use something they perceive as dangerous, they rise to the occasion,” she said. “They learn they can make safe choices, that they can help each other be responsible, and they are valued and trusted. I think that’s one of the most important lessons we can teach our children — that we trust them to make responsible choices.”



Volunteer Lonna Brooks tends the class’s fire.

The fact that the use of hand tools develops fine motor skills is an added bonus.

The day also includes an afternoon snack, usually cooked over a campfire tended by one of the adult volunteers. The snack has included goodies such as hotdogs, popcorn,

bread on a stick, smores and other fun foods. Nogee and her students usually close the day by doing group writing about the day. But each forest day’s schedule can be a little different — there is no set schedule, which allows the teachers and adult volunteers to follow the children’s interests.



What the Students Have to Say...

What is your favorite forest memory?

Beau: “When snow fell down on my head.”

Sawyer: “I actually have two. One of my memories is when me and Alaina played Alicorns and the other is when me and Alaina played Foxicorn.”

Luka: “When I thought the swing was scary but actually it wasn’t.”

Brody: “Catching the wormy thingies from today. I forgot what they are.”

Rory: “My favorite memory was building the teepee.”

Colton: “When my mom came and she helped me build a mouse trap.”

Kaelyn: “My favorite thing was when it was snowing and Kiley and Luka and my mom came and we built snowmans. Little snowmans and big snowmans. And Luka put all her clothes on the snowman. Even her coat and her gloves and everything that she had. And she was cold.”

Logan: “When my mom came to the school forest and it was really fun.”

Cole: “Me and Hope were having fun at the forest and we had tools and dugged up a deep, deep hole and we planted plants in it.”

— Taken from Sarah Nogee’s classroom blog, missnogeek.blogspot.com



■ So Far So Good

The program has been featured in the local television news and newspapers, garnering positive attention for the school district. Most importantly, Vetter said he has gotten good feedback from the parents.

“Our parents have been very supportive of the program,” Vetter said. “Honestly, I did not receive any negative feedback from anyone. The parents I talked to were excited about the idea of their children getting a chance to learn in nature.

Each week, a parent volunteers to

go to the forest and help watch the students. Jeff Becker, who is the Rio police chief and had a son in Noguee’s class, volunteered to help with a forest day in May. He said that his child looks forward to the outdoor learning day, “It’s his favorite day of the week.” Parents also donate coats, boots, mittens, hats and other supplies to help support outdoor learning.

Another volunteer, Lonna Brooks, emphasized how much learning takes place. “It’s a fantastic program,” she said. “The kids learn so much out here. They don’t spend enough time outside.”

Citing the positive feedback he has gotten from parents and teachers, Vetter said he would encourage other districts to pursue outdoor learning programs.

“The teachers talk about the opportuni-

ties their students have to collaborate with others while also building their problem solving skills,” he said. “Additionally, they believe their students are much better behaved in the forest and that carries over to the classroom the rest of the week. These are all great positives that I am sure would be welcomed in any school.”

Of course, it’s not easy to start a new program like Project Wild Child. It takes dedicated staff and some resources. However, Vetter said opportunities like Project Wild Child are exactly what students need.

“Every school and district wants to do well in reading and math every year,” Vetter said. “What will set schools and districts apart is the unique opportunities we provide to our students and families. Project Wild Child is one of those unique opportunities.” ■

Shelby Anderson is editor of Wisconsin School News.

For more information on the Rio Community School District’s Project Wild Child program, visit kindergarten teacher Sarah Noguee’s blog at missnogeesk.blogspot.com.

