The day begins with free play outside at Drumlin Farm’s Lincoln preschool.

THE EDUCATION ISSUE

Into the woods

The growing nature school movement is dedicated to getting young kids moving — and learning — outside.

By Melanie Plenda | OCTOBER 06, 2013

IN THE BACK OF THE FARMHOUSE at Drumlin Farm Community Preschool in Lincoln sit five chickens surrounded by a gaggle of preschoolers — eyes wide, waiting. The teacher opens the egg box door, and the students, staying slow and small like they were taught, peer in.

“And when they find an egg there,” says Paula Goodwin, director of the school, “we ask them to make a nest with their hand, and they very gently pass the egg from one to another. And it’s a very special time, because they don’t need a lot of special instructions except to look for a child whose hands are in the shape of a nest. So it isn’t a formal sharing lesson, but each child cherishes that egg and very gently passes it to the next person without question. It’s one of the magical moments in the school year. They are so generous with sharing the egg, and they may not have even learned each other’s names yet.”
Drumlin is a nature- and farm-based preschool, which means that rain or shine, maybe not sleet but definitely snow and temperatures down to 15 degrees, the 14 3- to 5-year-olds are outside learning math, science, language, and how to be curious. Visiting captive wildlife, doing farm chores, and taking part in planting activities provide opportunities for all kinds of learning. “Every child’s experience is different,” Goodwin says, “but generally it’s a sense of wonder at the animals they see and the plants around them and just being outside.”

The concept of nature-based education has been in fairly wide use throughout Scandinavia, Germany, and the United Kingdom for decades. It has just started to gain traction in the United States due in part to a best-selling 2005 book by journalist Richard Louv arguing that a lack of outdoor time is bad for kids. This children-in-nature movement has not only spurred the opening of dozens of nature-based preschools, kindergartens, and even elementary schools across the United States, but also legislation to fund such activities, policy changes at a national level, and even at least one teacher certification program in nature-based early childhood education.

At Drumlin, students show up every day dressed for whatever the weather brings and start with 45 minutes of free play outside. This is followed by a short transition period before the kids head back out to explore the varied habitats of the working farm and wildlife sanctuary operated by the Massachusetts Audubon Society on 232 acres. “It could be to a pond; could be to the top of the drumlin, which is a glacial hill; it could be...
to a meadow area or a small forest area,” Goodwin says. “We specifically try to focus on science-related, math-related, and language-related activities in the context of the natural world.”

Nature and a few academic basics are interwoven into a curriculum in which teachers notice what children are engaged in and create learning opportunities based on the kids’ interests. The teachers help foster curiosity and independence as the children develop self-help and socio-emotional skills, Goodwin says, and shared experiences encourage students to get to know one another and their community. This also means that, unlike in many traditional preschools that set aside specific times and spaces for language, math, and science instruction, there are no discrete classes in many nature preschools. At Our Secret Garden, a preschool in Newbury, science lessons include visits to the indoor nature center, growing food students will eat, and learning about composting with worms, says director Ellie Dawson.

When a class at Arcadia Nature Preschool in Easthampton goes on a walk or an exploration, its science, math, and language lessons may happen all at once as the children discover a caterpillar forming a chrysalis, for example, says Ruthie Ireland, a teacher and school co-director. They might talk about the science of life cycles, how great a distance the eventual butterfly will travel, and what the word “metamorphosis” means. If a child asks, a teacher will sit him or her down to practice writing “butterfly.” This may also turn into art projects and creative movement periods in which the kids don wings they’ve made and act like butterflies.

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THE CONCEPT OF NATURE-BASED EDUCATION started in Scandinavia in the late 1960s and early 1970s and spawned a few nature preschools in the United States. Arcadia was one
of those early adopters, opening at another Mass Audubon sanctuary in 1976.

But it wasn’t until 2005 that the concept really started gaining popularity in the states. That’s when Louv released *Last Child in the Woods*, introducing readers to his concept “nature-deficit disorder.” In the book, Louv writes about children losing their connection to the natural world and the detrimental effects, he argues, that the loss has on them. He cites research linking the lack of outdoor interaction with childhood trends in obesity, attention-deficit disorder, and even depression and suggests one antidote is to get kids back outside as much as possible.

“That was the kick-start to what we are seeing as a global wave of interest,” says Marilyn Wyzga, who is coordinator of the NH Children in Nature Coalition, a grass-roots campaign in the national nonprofit Children & Nature Network, as well as a wildlife educator for the Granite State’s Fish and Game Department. “There was interest before. Those of us working with children, especially in the environmental education field, noticed kids were spending less time outdoors and were less interested and knowledgeable about nature. But I think when that book came out and it started gaining notoriety, it started filtering into a lot of other fields.”

Early childhood educators embraced the nature movement’s message, Wyzga says. “Folks who work with little kids had this ‘aha’ moment at the idea.” Another factor was support from parents.

“In great part,” says David Sobel, a leading expert in nature-based education and professor at Antioch University New England, the trend “is a response to the digitization of children’s lives.

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The fact that kids have eight hours of screen time in one form or another each day, even early childhood kids, is shocking,” Sobel says. “And I think parents are responding to that and trying to compensate.”

“Lots of people report anecdotally that when kids go to school, having been in a nature preschool or a forest school, they are more ready for school — meaning that they have more self-discipline and ability to focus, have the capacity to refrain from immediate gratification, and those kinds of things,” Sobel says. He theorizes that this is because outdoor and forest schools excel at developing independence and confidence.

“In most conventional indoor preschools, the environment is really adult-regulated,” he says. By contrast, children in nature programs “learn how to regulate their own behavior. They develop greater competence in terms of social interactions, and social interactions become more collaborative.”

And that confidence also translates to a greater ability to problem-solve and think independently, Wyzga says, citing the work of Scottish researcher Claire Warden. By way of example, she describes a film clip Warden showed at a conference in September. A 3-year-old student at a forest kindergarten, dressed in rain gear and following her classmates, grabs a rope to try to make it up a muddy hill. She can’t do it. “She tries it again, can’t get it,” Wyzga said. “And you can watch her face. She doesn’t break down. She doesn’t cry: ‘Oh my God, I can’t do this. Somebody’s got to help me.’ ”

Instead, she spies two saplings spaced just far enough apart that she can fit between them, and...
uses those to get up the hill. “She figured it out,” says Wyzga.

There is considerable research on the physical benefits of these schools. Cited most often is a 1997 Scandinavian study (the movement there was 20 years old at the time). Researchers found absences from sickness to be 5 percent lower in nature preschools than traditional schools and that the gross motor skills of children in nature preschools were more developed.

Some members of Congress are so convinced that nature-based education is good for students, they’ve crafted the No Child Left Inside Act. Sponsored by a bipartisan team in the US Senate and House, the bill would fund nature-based learning and professional development.

“I believe all children, we all, have an innate love of nature,” says Ireland, who has worked in nature-based early childhood education since the ’90s and is a passionate advocate. “We need nature. We all love to be in it. And when we don’t have it, we just don’t do very well as human beings.” She adds: “I think the kids who come here, they are allowed to just blossom within that.”

Melanie Plenda is a freelance writer in New Hampshire. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.