



Ways into Hinchingsbrooke Country Park by Deb Wilenski with Caroline Wending

Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination Fantastical Guides for the wildly curious

A review by Jan White

This book records a highly perceptive piece of work with young children. It is written for the people who visit the park and also for people who want to explore the remarkable minds of children, to deepen their thinking about childhood and education, and for educators trying to work out how to be with children in the outdoors. It illustrates on the one hand, how being outdoors in a natural environment can be powerful for children and their thinking, and on the other, how to harness the special nature of the outdoors and how to work outside with young children.

This small book is many things. It is an enquiry into the remarkable imaginative state of childhood. Children take their imaginations seriously: real and fantasy are purposefully intertwined as a way of exploring the world, the self and relationships, as an authentic way of discovering and making meaning together. Perception and processing in the child's mind (child-think) is so different to the adult's: through this study we clearly see this at work and witness how it is supported and maintained rather than turned into adult-think. Deb's thoughtful language takes us deeper into interpreting children's dialogues and actions; and deeper into understanding and appreciating the power and complexity of what is taking place. I recommend therefore that this short book is read through first to get the feel of the journey, and then read again slowly, delving into the layers of what is being told.

It is also serious research into the phenomenon of being outdoors, in nature, and as a child. Why do we take children into woodland? And, importantly, what can we take back from this into everyday provision and practice? Some things stand out in this research. The elemental imperatives of mud, water and wood. The intensely three-dimensional nature of woodland, sky and below-ground. The multiplicity of ways into and through the woods, and the layers of existence and discovery to be found there. That physicality is so important and that physical and imaginative journeying are inseparable, making children powerful, adventurous and brave. And perhaps most of all, the ease with which children respond to and find identity with the atmosphere and feelings, the features, objects and processes in natural environments – and the ease with which they share and communicate this with each other. The research makes a very strong case for using natural spaces for outdoor experiences, or strengthening the 'wildness' of on-site outdoor and indoor provision. As children got to know and gave identity to their place in the park, they built their own identity from being in it – "I was there".

Thirdly, it is a study into the pedagogy of being in the outdoors with young children, revealing many important pedagogical elements. What children did in the woods, as they discovered their own ways and places, was what made them part of it. Free and uncluttered by equipment and adult agendas, the visits were repeated over a long period of time and in changing conditions that

uncovered different aspects of the wood's personality, offering 'new lands' which the children encountered with enthusiasm, collaboration and courage. Adults who 'walk alongside' children, present, attentive and available, can listen more intensely to what children are telling. What is clear here is the effort in the adults' thinking and understanding, and therefore an exciting awareness of what is really going on for the children.

Finally, it is an exploration into linkage and continuity between practice outside in a visited place and inside where everyday learning takes place, showing us how to connect children's outdoor and indoor experiences so that they build upon each other. Intentionally bringing the worlds and wildness of the woods into the classroom substantially influenced the nature of 'indoor' learning experiences, and harnessed what that environment could provide for revisiting the real and fantastical place that the park was becoming – stories, research, drawing, projection, sculpture and so on.

During this project, the children became acutely interested in the idea of 'doors' as a way of launching new imaginings, stories and ways of being in this place. Doorways as thresholds and portals are about freedom, excitement and adventure. In these woods anything is possible and children know how to find it. In revealing this place "as it has never been known before", this insightful and exhilarating book offers a doorway for everybody and anybody to discover the outdoors as it has never been seen before.

Jan White, Sept 2013

Ways into Hinchingsbrooke Country Park is available from [Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination online shop](#).

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