

A Systematic Review of Forest School for Early Childhood Education in China: Lessons Learned from European Studies from a Perspective of Ecological System

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Abstract : Forest school - an outdoor educational experience that is undertaken in an outdoor environment with trees - becomes an emerging field of early childhood education recently. In China, the benefits of natural outdoor education to children and young people's wellness have raised attention. Although different types of outdoor-based activities have been involved in some pre-school of China, few study and practice have been conducted in terms of the notion of forest school. To comprehend the impact of forest school for children and young people, this study aims to systematically review articles on the topic of forest school in preschool education from an ecological perspective, i.e. from individual level (e.g., behavior and mental health) to microsystem level (e.g., the relationship between teachers and children) to ecosystem level. Based on PRISMA framework flow, using the key words of "Forest School" and "Early Childhood Education" for searching in Web-of-science database, a total of 33 articles were identified. Sample participants of 13 studies were not preschool children, five studies were not on forest school theme, and two literature review articles were excluded for further analysis. Finally, 13 articles were eligible for thematic analysis. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, there are some findings, on the individual level, current forest school studies are concerned about the children behavioral experience in forest school, how these experience may relate to their achievement or to develop children's wellbeing/wellness, and how this type of learning experience may enhance children's self-awareness on risk and safety issues. On the microsystem/mesosystem level, this review indicated that pedagogical development for forest school, risk perception from teachers and parents, social development between peers, and adult's role in the participation of forest school were concerned, explored and discussed most frequently. On the macrosystem, the conceptualization of forest school is the key theme. Different forms of presentation in various countries with diverse cultures could provide various models of forest school education. However, there was no study investigating forest school on an ecosystem level. As for the potential benefits of physical health and mental wellness that results from forest school, it informs us to reflect the system of preschool education from the ecological perspective for Chinese children. For instance, most Chinese kindergartens ignored the significance of natural outdoor activities for children. Preschool education in China is strongly oriented by primary school system, which means pre-school children are expected to be trained as primary school students to do different subjects, such as math. Hardly any kindergarteners provide the opportunities for children and young people to take risks in a natural environment like forest school does. However, merely copying forest school model for a Chinese preschool education system will be less effective. This review of different level concerns could inform us that the localization the idea of forest school to adapt to a Chinese political, educational and cultural background. More detailed results and profound discussions will be presented in the full paper.

Keywords : early childhood education, ecological system, education development prospects in China, forest school

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