

The Cultural Position of Forest Kindergartens in Czech Society

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Abstract

This paper documents a standard qualitative research project comprising interviews and unstructured, non-participatory observation to investigate the cultural position of Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic. Due to the limited timeframe, this project focuses on two Forest Kindergartens in Prague – Hvězdy v lese located in Prague 6 and Lesnění in Prague 4 – to assess the motivations of people who engage with this form of alternative education in Czech society. Overall, using the theoretical framework of alternative education, this research project investigates Czech cultural appreciation for alternative education – specifically Forest Kindergartens – to attempt to answer the key research question: *What are the motivations for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic, and what place does this form of alternative education have in Czech society today?*

Keywords: Forest Kindergarten, Alternative Education, Traditional Education, Communist Control, Tramp Movement

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Introduction

The conceptual framework of ‘alternative education’ is the theoretical structure for this research project. Alternative education in its broadest sense covers all educational activities outside the traditional – and typically public/state-run – school system (it is important to note that the term is often associated with programs serving vulnerable youth who are no longer in traditional schools (Aron, 2006)). Another definition of alternative education is “an educational program or system that is separate from a mainstream educational program” (Merriam-Webster, 2022). As a framework, this broad definition of alternative education provides a way to consider the appreciation that a portion of Czech society has for methods of education outside formal, traditional systems. Notably, it is possible that this appreciation for alternative education has deep roots in Czech society given the work of Jan Ámos Komenský, a 16th/17th century Czech education reformer. Komenský believed teachers should “follow in the footsteps of nature,” meaning that they ought to tailor the educational environment to the natural thought processes of the mind of the child and to the way the child learns (Sadler, 2022). Komenský’s reformist education philosophy underscores the deep, cultural appreciation of Czech society for a more welcoming, tolerant, and child-centered educational environment.

A vast amount of research exists on the history of alternative education in the American education system (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Young, 1990). However, very little information exists on the history of alternative education in the Czech Republic, especially in English, even though portions of contemporary Czech society exhibit an interest in alternative forms of education, as evidenced by the Czech Republic’s pioneering attitude regarding Forest Kindergartens (Visegrad Fund, n.d.). Therefore, investigating the history of alternative education in the Czech Republic

both fills a gap in current education history as well as enables greater understanding of contemporary Czech society's outlook on education methods.

Context & Literature Review

Forest Kindergartens are an alternative to traditional kindergarten education. Classes are conducted outdoors all year long, providing children with an experience-rich environment. Children also attend various cultural events and visit certain public institutions, such as libraries and museums, throughout the year to enhance their experience-rich learning. Forest Kindergartens were originally popular in Germany and Scandinavia, where education in close contact with nature has been a common teaching method over the last century. The first Forest Kindergarten in the Czech Republic was established in 2008, and the Association of Forest Kindergartens formed in 2011 to promote Forest Kindergartens as a state-recognized, alternative form of kindergarten education – a goal that became a reality in 2016. The Association continues to act as a networking organization providing various services and ‘best practices’ resources for its members and lobbying for better conditions and acceptance within the social, political, and legal contexts of the Czech education system. Since 2016, the number of Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic has continued to grow; as of 2021, there were 200 schools, most of which are members of the Association of Forest Kindergartens (Association of Forest Kindergartens, 2022). In general, Czech Forest Kindergartens are guided by the following seven principles: Adventure, Fantasy and Imagination, Animal Allies, Maps and Paths, Special Places, Small Worlds, and Hunting and Gathering (Visegrad Fund, n.d.).

Notably, in the Czech Republic there is a difference between Forest Kindergartens and Forest Clubs. Forest Kindergartens are officially registered in the Czech Register of Schools and School Facilities. As legally recognized educational institutions, they must follow all

requirements and administration procedures under the Czech School Inspectorate and the Regional Hygiene Station. As registered institutions, Forest Kindergartens also receive some financial support from the state. On the other hand, Forest Clubs are not registered; rather, they operate simply as an informal civic organization. Therefore, Forest Clubs are under no obligation to comply with government requirements for schools (such as hygiene standards). They also, consequently, do not receive public financial support (Association of Forest Kindergartens, 2022). This study investigates Forest Kindergartens, not Forest Clubs. In terms of the cost of Forest Kindergartens for parents, these educational institutions are not as expensive as other types of private kindergartens (e.g., Montessori schools) given their low overhead costs (Scott, 2013). However, the cost of sending children to Forest Kindergartens is still much higher than sending children to public, state-run kindergartens (Integrační Centrum Praha, n.d.).

The first Forest Kindergarten examined in this paper is *Hvězdy v lese*. *Hvězdy v lese* is located in Prague 6 and is dedicated to education for sustainable development with a focus on inclusivity and respect for others. The school has a maximum of 15 children with two adult guides. Children can begin attending the school around the age of two and leave around the ages of six or seven when they begin compulsory schooling. All children attend school five days a week. On Friday, the older children (ages four and up) partake in an “excursion day,” whether that be to other city forests and parks or beyond the Prague city limits. Notably, unlike other Forest Kindergartens, *Hvězdy v lese*’s educational approach is based on Waldorf pedagogy, an academic methodology based on the educational philosophy of Rudolf Steiner that integrates the arts into learning and seeks to develop children in a holistic manner (LMŠ *Hvězdy v lese*, n.d.; Sunbridge Institute, 2022).

The second Forest Kindergarten examined in this paper is Lesnění. Lesnění is located in Prague 4 and concentrates on the use of nature as an educational environment throughout child development. The optimum class size is 16 children; however, this number fluctuates slightly depending on the day. Similar to Hvězdy v lese, the children are accompanied by two adult guides at all times, and the kindergarten is open five days a week. Lesnění is open a little longer than Hvězdy v lese, from 8:00am to 5:00pm (rather than 8:45am to 3:30pm), serving to make Lesnění slightly more accessible for working parents (Lesnění, n.d.).

In terms of research interests, I am interested in understanding the motivation of parents and teachers who have engaged with the Forest Kindergartens movement. I am also curious to learn if former communist control in Czechoslovakia impacted perceptions of alternative education in Czech society. I realize in-depth analysis into this topic is beyond the scope of this study. However, I believe that evaluation of interviews for this study could lead to rich, nuanced analysis of this topic. After the Velvet Revolution of 1989, some parents have turned to alternative forms of education (rather than wait for the slow reformation of the state education system) to find institutions that employ approaches other than rote memorization and other traditional teaching methods. Another possible and interesting source of inspiration for Forest Kindergartens is the history of Czech appreciation of and connection to nature (and how this connection to nature perhaps increased during communist control as Czech citizens sought to escape the scrutiny of government). For example, as mentioned above, Czech educational reformer Jan Ámos Komenský emphasized educational methods that were in accordance with the nature of the child (Sadler, 2022). The data analysis portion of this study addresses interesting historical and cultural aspects of Czech society.

Methodology

To carry out my research project, I conducted eight interviews with people invested in Forest Kindergartens in Prague. I interviewed three parents: two parents who send their children to Hvězdy v lese and one parent who sends her child to Lesnění. I also interviewed four teachers: three teachers who work at Hvězdy v lese and one teacher who works at Lesnění. My eighth interview participant, Radka Smith Slamová, is a doctoral student researching the motivations of parents who have chosen educational opportunities for their children within a specific track, such as alternative. I was unable to interview additional parents and teachers due to time constraints of the study; nevertheless, investigating two different Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic rather than one strengthened my research by ensuring a broader perspective and opportunity for data analysis. Additionally, I ensured that at least one of my interview participants is male (a perspective that is often difficult to obtain in the field of education) to diversify my data analysis. Overall, interviews were conducted with multiple people from different backgrounds to ensure incorporation of various perspectives and sources of data, thereby promoting the validity and reliability of my research project.

For both the parents and the teachers, the interview was semi-structured, and the specific focus of the interview was to understand why these educators and parents are drawn to an alternative education institution. I was also interested in including artifacts in my research, such as projects created by the children; therefore, during the interviews, I asked teachers if they were willing to provide me with these artifacts. The question sets are included in Appendix A, and full interview transcripts are included in Appendix B.

In addition to interviews, I also conducted one full day of onsite, unstructured, non-participatory observation at Lesnění and a tour of Hvězdy v lese. The observation at Lesnění was

flexible and focused mainly on observing the general teaching style and learning environment in the Forest Kindergarten. Adding this element of observation serves to enhance the validity and reliability of my research project by expanding my methods of data collection. Additionally, observation enabled me to learn how teachers and children approach and respond to alternative education teaching methods in the setting of a school environment. I conducted my observation after completing the majority of my interviews, which provided the opportunity for me to determine if the interview responses matched with observable activity at the school. (I was not permitted to conduct a full day of observation at Hvězdy v lese as they stopped allowing full-day visitors because they had too many visits. However, when I visited Hvězdy v lese for an initial tour and to interview teachers, I was able to observe how the kindergarten functions.)

Ethics & Bias

One primary ethical matter I considered during my research project is the confidentiality of those I interviewed. To address this ethical issue, I obtained informed consent from research participants as well as offered confidentiality for any participants who preferred this option. I also sent each interview participant a copy of the transcript I created from our interview to ensure open communication and transparency. Additionally, in terms of bias, I wanted to ensure that my interest in whether Czech appreciation for Forest Kindergartens is linked in any way to former communist control did not influence or bias the way I approached my interview participants or my observations. I was careful to avoid this inherent bias by not including any specific questions about this topic in my question set for interview participants. Finally, the Forest Kindergartens I studied – Hvězdy v lese and Lesnění – are kindergartens. Therefore, I was conscious of any legal requirements that I needed to consider before entering these school environments.

Presentation of Results

Name of Interview Participant	Relationship to Forest Kindergarten Community
Dr. Tereza Valkounová	Teacher at Hvězdy v lese
Johana Passerin	Teacher at Hvězdy v lese
Bara Novaková	Teacher at Hvězdy v lese
Martina Havlicková	Teacher at Lesnění
Marta Lopatková	Parent at Hvězdy v lese
Martin Hula	Parent at Hvězdy v lese
Lenka Kleger	Parent at Lesnění
Radka Smith Slamová	Researcher of parents who have chosen alternative education for their children

Several interesting themes emerged from my research regarding the key question of this study: *What are the motivations for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic, and what place does this form of alternative education have in Czech society today?* It is important to note that, as is the nature of qualitative research and given my small sample of data collection from parents and teachers through interviews as well as my observation practices, the following series of data analysis employs inductive reasoning to establish an extrapolated claim about Czech cultural appreciation for Forest Kindergartens/alternative education. Below are the four key themes that emerged from my research:

1. Alternative Education, Specifically Forest Kindergartens, as an Appealing Alternative to State-Run Kindergartens

All three parents as well as one teacher mentioned during their interviews how alternative education institutions, particularly Forest Kindergartens, offer an appealing alternative to the state-run, public kindergartens in the Czech Republic. For example, Martin Hula offers that a shared dislike for Czech public kindergartens unites those people that engage in different alternative education movements in Czech society – to include Forest Kindergartens, Waldorf pedagogy, Montessori schools, and homeschooling. One reason this mutual dislike exists is

because of the large number of children compared to teachers in Czech public kindergartens. Radka Smith Slamová and Bara Novaková also discuss this idea in their interviews as well. Slamová explains that Forest Kindergartens offer high teacher-to-child ratios, especially in comparison with the estimated ratio of 30 children and one teacher in public kindergartens (which starkly contrasts the small class sizes of *Hvězdy v lese* and *Lesnění*, as discussed above). According to Slamová, this high teacher-to-child ratio allows for Forest Kindergartens to adopt an individual approach to each child, which is especially important for parents who feel that their child is in need of special attention due to hyperactivity or sensitivity.

From the teacher perspective, Novaková explains that this high teacher-to-child ratio is not only appealing for parents but also allows teachers to perform at their best for the children (i.e., achieve a higher level of professional fulfillment as teachers). Novaková notes that, unlike in public kindergartens, the teachers at *Hvězdy v lese* are not exhausted all the time; rather, they have energy for their children and passion for what they are doing. Conversely, Novaková explains that the structure of public kindergartens does not allow teachers to perform at their highest level consistently. Similarly, Martina Havlicková mentions in her interview the idea that Forest Kindergartens not only benefit the children, but also the teachers. (Evidently, teachers seem to be satisfied with their jobs at Forest Kindergartens.)

Apart from the small class sizes, Forest Kindergartens also differ from state-run kindergartens in their educational approach, to include emphasis on values of community and respect for the children. For example, Lenka Kleger argues that public kindergartens typically maintain a “hierarchy” between the teacher and the children. Kleger prefers the “more friendly” and “more equal” relationship between teacher and child promoted at alternative schools. Kleger explains that this respect for children at Forest Kindergartens enables children to have more

freedom “to do what they want to do, when they want to do it, with whom they want to do it,” thereby encouraging a sense of personal responsibility and decision-making (L. Kleger, personal communication, April 27, 2022). This child-centered approach is greatly important to parents, to include Hula and Marta Lopatková who credit their children’s increased confidence and control – more so than other children who are not attending/did not attend alternative institutions such as Forest Kindergartens – to alternative institutions’ focus on and respect for children. In her interview, Slamová concludes that, from her research, Forest Kindergartens are inspired by “positive parenting,” which leads to a focus on disciplining practices that treat the child as an equal, a partner in the educational dialogue (R.S. Slamová, personal communication, April 13, 2022). Forest Kindergartens are careful about their approach to reinforcements and punishments, and they prefer to shape the child’s behavior through lessons in negotiation rather than command and control mentalities.

Additionally, in contrast to public kindergartens, Forest Kindergartens also place emphasis on promoting community among the parents. For example, as Kleger explains, “In the Forest Kindergarten, the parents meet in the garden, and they talk for some time.” There are also activities for parents, which is “very different in the state kindergartens [where] there’s no place for the parents to meet” (Kleger). Lopatková similarly explains that *Hvězdy v lese* also has many opportunities for parents to participate in the school community, such as through school celebrations, and Slamová emphasizes that Forest Kindergartens function with the idea that they are a “tribe” and that families enter into this tribe (Slamová). This incorporation of parents into the school community along with teachers and students provides a more “holistic” understanding of education to the children, a term that Slamová uses in her interview (Slamová).

While observing both Hvězdy v lese and Lesnění, I witnessed the community, respect, and small class sizes of which interview participants speak. For example, at both Forest Kindergartens there were two teachers for around 15 children. Additionally, the children felt comfortable approaching and speaking with the teachers, and the parents spent time conversing with both the teachers and other parents when they picked up their children at the end of the school day. Therefore, the reasons why alternative education institutions – specifically Forest Kindergartens – are appealing as an alternative to state-run kindergartens are indeed present at Hvězdy v lese and Lesnění.

2. Forest Kindergartens as Places of Simplicity and Cultivators of Imagination

Both parents and teachers describe Forest Kindergartens as educational institutions that offer simplicity that encourages the development of imagination and creativity in children. For example, Hula appreciates the fact that at Forest Kindergartens there are no plastic toys. Rather, children are encouraged to play in the outdoors with whatever nature might provide (e.g., sticks, stones, etc.). According to Hula, “The philosophy is that those simple objects are the best thing to develop children’s fantasy because it can be anything – a stone can be a variety of things. If you have a plastic car, then it’s just a car” (M. Hula, personal communication, April 26, 2022). Lopatková also discusses this idea in her interview. In her interview, Lopatková argues that there are too many distractions in daily life – including in her own life and that of her children – and she appreciates that Hvězdy v lese provides the opportunity for her son to step out of these distractions, even for a few hours a day. Lopatková acknowledges that it is impossible to completely avoid these distractions of modern life (such as TV and social media) – and she does not necessarily want to – but Hvězdy v lese provides her son balance between the chaos of

modern life and the “simpl[icity]” of nature (not just the forest) (M. Lopatková, personal communication, April 22, 2022).

Hula and Lopatková’s discussion of this simplicity links to Johana Passerin’s interview and focus on the appeal of “being natural and being in nature, being simple” (J. Passerin, personal communication, April 20, 2022). This simplicity and consequent fostering of imagination exists not only through the objects with which children play, but also in the pedagogical approach of Forest Kindergartens. For example, at Hvězdy v lese, both Novaková and Passerin explain that, rather than read from books, the teachers at Hvězdy v lese recite stories from memory, using creativity and imagination to aid them in the process. According to Passerin, this method of storytelling corresponds to the oral culture of children and puts the teacher at the “same level” as his/her children. This method also trains the children to be able to use the “powerful tool[s]” of imagination, which leads to creativity and independence (Passerin).

I also observed the simplicity embodied by Forest Kindergartens during my day of observation at Lesnění, evidencing that this trait occurs not only in Hvězdy v lese. For example, when walking in the forest, the teachers stopped in an open area for the children to play for around 20 minutes. The children did not play with toys; rather, they used the natural landscape (such as stones and sticks) to occupy themselves.

3. Forest Kindergartens as Manifestations of Czech Cultural Appreciation for Nature

Notably, most interview participants discussed in their interviews the history of Czech cultural appreciation for nature, as well as connected this appreciation for nature to the effort to escape communist control in Czechoslovakia during the second half of the 20th century. For example, in her interview, Kleger mentions the “cottage” movement in the Czech Republic as an example of Czech cultural appreciation for nature (Kleger). According to Kleger, during

communism, Czech society was not allowed to travel outside the country, so people left the city for rural cottages. The freedom and independence that Kleger associates with the outdoors parallels Dr. Tereza Valkounová and Passerin's comments in their interviews. For example, Passerin mentions the Tramp movement in Czechoslovakia where people camped "in nature with minimal things, just a sleeping bag, some tarp, and cooking outside." Notably, Passerin explains that tramping was used as an escape during communist control in Czechoslovakia – it was a form "of passive resistance." For Czech society, being out in nature, away from the eyes of the communist government, was how they gained some sense of "freedom" and "real life." As Passerin explains, "Many parents who are now parents to little children, these were children of these people who were camping there" (Passerin). Therefore, this freedom and independence associated with the outdoors was arguably instilled in the parents who are now sending their children to Forest Kindergartens.

Notably, in her interview, Valkounová discusses the idea that alternative education is valuable because it provides parents with a choice as to where they will send their children, thereby encouraging them to "be active citizens" (T. Valkounová, email communication, April 23, 2022). According to Valkounová, this idea of diversity and freedom of choice promotes a democratic society, as opposed to when communism removed this freedom and responsibility from people to choose how their children were educated. The importance of alternative education and, more specifically, Forest Kindergartens, to promote independence and freedom also relates to another point that Valkounová makes in her interview – the idea that parents relate their memories of being outside to "freedom, adventure, connectedness to favorite places, friendship, etc." (Valkounová). The freedom that Valkounová references regarding parents relating to the outdoors echoes the freedom associated with the Tramp movement that Passerin discusses in her

interview. Notably, during my day of observation at Lesnění, I informally spoke with one father regarding this perspective on the nature of Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic, and he also brought up the Tramp movement and how it was an escape from communist control for Czech society.

Therefore, although it would need further study, both parental and teacher acknowledgement of Czech cultural appreciation of nature (which they connect to an effort to escape communist control) points to a connection between Czech love of nature, resistance to communist control, and cultural appreciation for Forest Kindergartens.

4. Forest Kindergartens as Privileged Institutions and Communities

One final key theme that emerged from my data collection was the idea that Forest Kindergartens are privileged institutions and communities. Notably, each parent mentioned this idea, but no teachers. It is interesting that parents are the interview participants who acknowledged this privilege while people involved in the system (i.e., the teachers at the Forest Kindergarten) do not recognize, or at least emphasize, the institution's elite status. However, the background of each parent helps to explain their ability to recognize their privileged position. For example, Lopatková works in the Faculty of Arts at Charles University and is involved in research focused on the LGBTQIA+ Vietnamese community in Prague. Therefore, her approach to life is arguably focused on recognizing privilege and inclusion issues. In terms of Hula, he was recommended by Lopatková and, therefore, it is likely that they have similar approaches to life. Kleger's background also helps to explain why she is more inclined toward recognizing the privilege of Forest Kindergartens. As a professional working at a non-governmental organization (NGO), her mindset is arguably also more focused on inclusion issues. Interestingly, in contrast

to Slamová's comment that Forest Kindergartens rarely acknowledge this "elitism," these parents openly share the privileged nature of these institutions (Slamová).

According to parents, this privilege associated with Forest Kindergartens yields both positives as well as negatives. In terms of positives, Forest Kindergartens encourage the development of strong and close-knit communities because parents who send their children to these institutions often have similar ways of approaching life (often from a privileged position, as acknowledged by the interviewed parents). For example, according to Kleger, one reason why Forest Kindergarten communities may be so strong is because parents have actively chosen to send their children to these institutions. Consequently, these parents have similar approaches to and values about life – they see Forest Kindergartens as "an enrichment activity" for their children, according to Slamová (Slamová).

However, as Kleger notes, these similarities also extend to financial circumstances of families. Similar to the comments by Hula, Lopatková, and Slamová (not a parent, but a researcher), Kleger explains that Forest Kindergartens are "quite expensive" (Kleger). As Hula explains, this price of Forest Kindergartens prevents many families from benefitting from what the interviewed parents view as a superior learning environment. Additionally, as Slamová explains, Forest Kindergartens require that parents purchase a large amount of equipment for their children, which is not always affordable for all families. (During my observations, I did indeed witness this need for considerable amounts of outdoor clothing, such as boots, coats, and hats.) Therefore, a negative of the privilege associated with Forest Kindergartens is that children exist in "some kind of bubble" of people who come from families with the financial means to send their children to Forest Kindergartens and who have similar values and ways of raising their children (Kleger). Interestingly, Slamová also uses the term 'bubble' when describing Forest

Kindergartens as “a very elite little closed social bubble environment” (Slamová). According to Kleger, this “bubble” is not positive; however, it is “better to start with a nice education, nice environment, and then have the crush sometime later on and see how they manage” (Kleger). The “bubble” that forms at Forest Kindergartens both allows children (and parents) to feel nurtured and part of community, but also prevents children from experiencing people who are different to themselves.

The privileged nature of Forest Kindergartens relates not only to the financial aspect of the institutions but also to the time commitment that they demand. For example, Slamová explains that Forest Kindergartens cater to parents who have more freedom with their work schedules, limiting the number/types of families who can send their children to Forest Kindergartens. (This comment relates more to the daily structure of Hvězdy v lese, which is open from 8:45am to 3:30pm, rather than Lesnění, which is open from 8:00am to 5:00pm, as discussed previously.) Similarly, Lopatková explains that not all parents have the availability and resources to participate in the school community in a manner sufficient with Hvězdy v lese’s demands (for example, not all parents can participate in the celebrations that Hvězdy v lese organizes or bake for the children – “it can be demanding” (Lopatková)). Therefore, although parents do indeed acknowledge the many positives (some of which extend from the privilege associated with Forest Kindergartens) of these institutions – so much so that Kleger explains in her interview that, despite the cost of Lesnění, and the time it takes to travel there, she does not regret the “great decision” to send her children to Lesnění – parents also express regret that these kindergartens are not accessible for everyone (Kleger).

Conclusion

This research project has worked to answer the paper's overall research question: *What are the motivations for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic, and what place does this form of alternative education have in Czech society today?* The project has also worked to fill a gap in current alternative education history in the Czech Republic and add to understanding of contemporary society's outlook on education methods. From parent, teacher, and researcher interviews, as well as methods of research observation, this project finds that motivations for Forest Kindergartens extend from Czech love of nature (which interview participants connect with an effort to resist communist control in Czechoslovakia during the second half of the 20th century – an interesting connection that would need further study) as well as the ability to offer an appealing alternative to state-run kindergartens, which often have large class sizes as well as lack the values of community and respect for children that both parents and teachers greatly value in Forest Kindergartens. Additionally, in comparison to other education institutions in contemporary Czech society, Forest Kindergartens are viewed as places of simplicity that help to develop creativity and imagination in children, fostered through the surrounding of the natural environment as well as the pedagogical approach of Forest Kindergartens. Finally, in comparison to other institutions (especially state-run schools), Forest Kindergartens are positioned as privileged institutions and communities, leading to both positives (such as strong community bonds) as well as negatives (such as children existing within a “bubble” of families with similar financial status and approaches to life). Overall, the findings from the data collected help to develop understanding of Forest Kindergartens as educational institutions that are valued and appreciated by those who have access to them.

Data collection during the process of this research identified potential areas of further study to deepen understanding of cultural appreciation for Forest Kindergartens in contemporary Czech society. For example, as mentioned previously, the connection between Forest Kindergartens, Czech love of nature, and resistance to communist control would need further study. Additionally, during Lenka Kleger's interview, she raises the idea of how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted cultural appreciation of Forest Kindergartens. According to Kleger, COVID-19 increased not only parental appreciation for Forest Kindergartens and their emphasis on having children be outside, but also teacher appreciation for outdoor learning. This question of how COVID-19 impacted societal opinions of Forest Kindergartens/outdoor learning provides an interesting opportunity for further study. Another unique insight that Kleger mentions during her interview is the participation of NGOs in Forest Kindergartens and how they work to support and provide resources for teachers (something Kleger focuses on most likely due to her work in an NGO that helps teachers learn how to teach more about nature, climate change, and the environment). Again, the question of how NGOs (another example of institutions that function outside of traditional structures) work with Forest Kindergartens provides an opportunity for further study. Finally, it would also be interesting to investigate to what extent parents and teachers in the Czech Republic think differently about alternative education from parents and teachers in the United States, such as differences in aspects that they value, etc. Evidently, the investigation of Forest Kindergartens – and, to a broader extent, alternative education – in the Czech Republic is a rich and nuanced topic in need of continued research and developed analysis.

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<https://www.lesnims.cz/stahnout-soubor?id=4357>

Appendix

Appendix A: Question Sets

1. Teachers:

- I. How do you define alternative education?
 - a. *Follow-up Question:* How do you think Forest Schools fit into this category?
- II. How would you explain the relevance (i.e., position, significance) of Forest Schools in the Czech education environment?
 - a. *Follow-up Question:* Why do you think parents choose to send their children to Forest Schools?
- III. What do you think the sources of inspiration are for Forest Schools in the Czech Republic?
- IV. Why did you choose to teach at a Forest School?
 - a. *Follow-up Question:* How do you think your experiences teaching at a Forest School have differed from if you had chosen to teach at another type of institution?
- V. Is there anything you would like to add that we have not discussed?
- VI. I am interested in including artifacts in my research project, such as teachers' course documents or projects created by the students. Do you feel comfortable providing me with these artifacts?

2. Parents:

- I. How do you define alternative education?
 - a. *Follow-up Question:* How do you think Forest Kindergartens fit into this category?

- II. How would you explain the relevance of Forest Kindergartens in the Czech education environment?
- III. What do you think the sources of inspiration are for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic?
- IV. Why did you choose to send your child to a Forest Kindergarten?
 - a. *Follow-up Question:* How important was “the forest”/nature when deciding to send your child to a Forest Kindergarten? Are other factors more important (like the atmosphere, activities, etc.)?
 - b. *Next Follow-up Question:* How do you think your child’s experience at a Forest Kindergarten has differed from the experience they would have had at another type of educational institution?
- V. Do you plan to continue to send your child to alternative education institutions (e.g., Montessori schools)?
 - a. *Follow-up Question:* What other options did you consider other than Forest Kindergartens for your child? What would have been your alternative?
- VI. Is there anything you would like to add that we have not discussed?

Appendix B: Transcripts

1. Dr. Tereza Valkounová (to note: the following transcript is Dr. Tereza

Valkounová's written response by email):

Ava Lundell's provided context and questions (AL): I am participating in a study abroad program during which the children conduct a one-month research project focused on an area of interest within Czech society.

For my research project, I am studying Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic. I am especially interested in understanding the motivations of people who engage with this form of alternative education in Czech society. Overall, this research project will investigate Czech cultural appreciation for alternative education – specifically Forest Kindergartens – to attempt to answer the key research question: *What are the motivations for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic, and what place does this form of alternative education have in Czech society today?*

For my research project, I am interviewing several teachers and parents part of Forest Kindergarten communities in Prague (such as Hvězdy v lese). I would like to interview you as a teacher at a Forest Kindergarten.

Below are a few specific questions I would like you to answer (please feel free to add as much as you want/go any direction you want with the questions):

AL: How do you define alternative education?

Dr. Tereza Valkounová (TV): My personal definition is based on the value of free and responsible = democratic society. Parents are responsible for their children (comparing to the socialist state that removes freedom and responsibility from people). Alternative education broadens the variety of options, brings plurality, and helps parents to be active citizens – make a

choice. In the context of sustainable development, plurality (or diversity) is one of the keys of change.

AL: How do you think Forest Kindergartens fit into this category?

TV: We rather fit Forest Kindergartens into a category of innovative education. The word alternative has in some levels dissonant connotation which prevents to be open for further discussion.

AL: How would you explain the relevance (i.e., position, significance) of Forest Kindergartens in the Czech education environment?

TV: Here the term “alternative” fits – it is not supposed to be major way of education. And it is nice to see that some regular kindergartens incorporate some Nature Pedagogy principles into their curricula.

AL: Why do you think parents choose to send their children to Forest Kindergartens?

TV: They mostly talk about the importance of Nature for a mankind and therefore for their children. They also often remember their childhood outdoors connected with positive experience of freedom, adventure, connectedness to favorite places, friendship, etc. And they see many benefits of everyday contact with Nature for healthy development of children.

AL: What do you think the sources of inspiration are for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic?

TV: In the beginning there was an article about Scandinavian education in a magazine, that was mentioned by many first founders of Forest Kindergartens. Then the Czech Forest Kindergarten Association was established and brought a lot of inspiration from Germany, the state where first FK was acknowledged in 1997.

AL: Why did you choose to teach at a Forest Kindergarten?

TV: It is a part of my all life vision – to be helpful for the Earth in a way that I am capable of.

AL: How do you think your experiences teaching at a Forest Kindergarten have differed from if you had chosen to teach at another type of institution?

TV: I would not teach in any other institution. 😊

AL: Is there anything you would like to add that we have not discussed?

TV: NO RESPONSE.

AL: I am interested in including artifacts in my research project, such as teachers' course documents or projects created by the children. Do you feel comfortable providing me with these artifacts?

TV: I am not sure, what do you mean? I have created a lot of materials, all in Czech. 😊

AL: The following is a question outside interview analysis: Are you comfortable with me quoting you?

TV: I am ok with that. ;)

2. Johana Passerin:

Ava Lundell (AL): Hi Johana! Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. I really appreciate it. Before beginning the interview, I first wanted to explain my research interests and why I have asked to interview you. I am participating in a study abroad program during which the students conduct a one-month research project focused on an area of interest within Czech society. For my research project, I am studying Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic. I am especially interested in understanding the motivations of people who engage with this form of alternative education in Czech society. Overall, this research project will investigate Czech cultural appreciation for alternative education – specifically Forest Kindergartens – to attempt to answer the key research question: *What are the motivations for Forest Kindergartens*

in the Czech Republic, and what place does this form of alternative education have in Czech society today? For my research project, I am interviewing several teachers and parents part of Hvězdy v lese's Forest Kindergarten community. Before asking my first question, I want to check if you are comfortable with me recording this interview? And are you comfortable with me quoting you?

Johana Passerin (JP): Yes.

AL: Okay, great. So, this is a very broad question, but how do you define alternative education?

JP: For me, I would rather use the term "innovative." Alternative... The definition is very simple, it's just alternative to some mainstream, to something which is more usual, used as a mainstream. So, alternative is something which is used by minority. But I would rather use the term "innovative," which means there are initiatives, people, schools, also hospitals, all fields which are considered to take care of people, working with people, taking care of other human beings, and they are looking for more human ways, more effective, and at the same time more human and up-to-date ways of doing things. So, of course terrifically there can be an alternative sickness, some attempt to make things more cheap, more effective, more efficient, but this is usually connected with something that goes away from humanity. And alternative and innovative is usually connected with something that goes along the way with humanity. Because technology and everything makes things more and more easy to do and more cheap, but more and more unnatural. But this is my point of view because I am in this innovative stream or grassroots movement which tries to move closer to humanity.

AL: I like that, that's a good way to describe it. And how do you see Forest Kindergartens fitting into this "innovative" education definition?

JP: This is this grassroots movement which... I also read some studies and some authors on nature schools and Forest Kindergartens in Europe and America and how the Forest Kindergartens spread. They came from Scandinavia, and these countries were quite poor eighty years ago, but there were undisturbed traditions. There wasn't war, like, for instance, here. There was not war, and in Scandinavia they were left alone because they are far away, it's cold there, no industry, nothing interesting. So, they were left alone, and the traditions survived. And also, the tradition of being in contact with nature and to see the nature not as the enemy and not as someone to fight with and to take the resources from, but someone you work hand-in-hand with, and this philosophy and this tradition influenced people who started first Forest Kindergartens, I guess. This from Norway also influenced the Forest Kindergartens in Great Britain. And how I see it among the alternatives, I see it as a movement which tries to supply children something what is missing. And we don't miss technologies, we don't miss academic education. We miss free play, we miss real work, walking in natural environments, so nothing flat and predictable, but just forest – you have to concentrate on every step or else you will fall. Here or, you know, playgrounds with lots of rubber where all is safe... This is boring and predictable. So, the child learns zeal. I can also tell you the evidence, because every year I ask parents, "Why are you choosing this?" Every year since 2010, I ask, "Why did you choose this?" And I would say 80%, the answer is that they have very nice childhood memories connected with nature, like being with their grandmother somewhere in the cottage or farm or hiking with parents – nice emotional footprints. Nice memories, making nice memories. And they want their child to have such memories as well, but they don't have a grandma in the village anymore, they have no option to move away from Prague because they work here, so this is the only option for them because they have no possibility to provide their child contact with nature on a daily basis. So, they want their

child to also have these good memories and emotions about... Maybe there are other ways to make good memories, but I meet people who say their good memories come from contact with nature, and they want it also for their own child. Another thing parents say is that they believe this is a good environment for learning, because learning through experience is better than learning through pictures on a computer. This is what they believe, and I believe it as well.

AL: That's interesting, thank you. And this appreciation for nature that you mentioned is something that I've heard a number of times, too, and I've definitely experienced since I've been here the Czech appreciation for being outside and all this, and I think that this is something that links to a question I have about what you think the sources of inspiration are for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic?

JP: You mean books or culturally?

AL: Really anything, whatever your mind goes to.

JP: There are more links. So, first link would be also this cultural piece. It's called "natural rebirth" after the end of 19th century, so it was also connected with Romanticism. It saw the nature as beautiful again, as a source of artistic inspiration and health, they rediscovered nature as good for health, for instance for the treatment of tuberculosis and such. There were no antibiotics, so the only treatment was fresh air. After the Industrial Revolution and taking natural resources and coal and building train lines and steamers, nature was destroyed and human health as well. People started to recognize maybe we need nature for our own health, and they also started to use nature as a means to be healthy and strong. And here in the not yet existing Czech Republic, there were several societies which supported this sport movement and skiing and running called "sokol." And in this they say, "Healthy body, healthy spirit." So, this may be one of the roots, why here it's so popular. Then the other source is also Eduard Štorch, an author and

archeologist and he wrote interesting books about pre-historic times and he founded school in nature in the 1920s in Prague and it was running for around ten years and then stopped because of lack of money, but this guy, he taught only Czech boys [laughs] and they were walking around almost naked, just in shorts, working half-day, learning academic skills in balance with some physical activity and meaning for work, and it was all in nature, and they built for themselves some shelters and swimming and sunbathing, and this was all seen as healthy. And there was also in Czechoslovakia this movement of “tramping,” which is someone who camps in nature with minimal things, just a sleeping bag, some tarp, and cooking outside. People were escaping cities for weekends to be outside and just work freely.

AL: When was this movement?

JP: This was also the First Republic, which means 20s and 30s. And then it was not legal – it was seen by the system in the communist era as bad. People were still doing it, and this was also a way of passive resistance: “Okay, I have to go to work Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and then I can go and be in nature.” This is the freedom; the real life is there. And the settlements, the places still exist. You can go there and camp there. It’s just the fireplace and some shelter in free nature without permission, without supervision of anyone. And this was very strong culturally. And many parents who are now parents to little children, these were children of these people who were camping there.

AL: Okay... And they were the ones camping during communism?

JP: Yes. So, now we get children from people who are age thirty to thirty-five, so this means they were born just around the Velvet Revolution, just 1989. My colleague was born just four years after, she never experienced it. I remember it, I was fourteen when the Velvet Revolution turned everything upside down. So, I remember many obstacles and many absolute things, and

for sure I was attending a club... It was not Pioneer... There was an official government supported organization for young people and children called Pioneer, and this was inspired from the USSR and there were red scarves and blue shirts... And there were symbols and things really connected to communism, so I did not attend this. But I attended a club that went for walks and going for trips – it was like the underground scout. So, I personally have had such good childhood memories from this – being with horses on the farm. So, this is culturally, it is one stream. And, of course, there are books, many books which supported Forest Kindergartens here. But, for me personally, the main inspiration is Waldorf because there is also this strong emphasis on nature and being in nature – being natural and being in nature, being simple. So, for me, the way I got to outdoor kindergartens was through Waldorf, but this is not typical, I am not a typical teacher [laughs].

AL: Thank you for explaining all that, it's fascinating. And it's 3:16pm, are we okay with time?

JP: Yes, I think we're okay. I will go ask Bara if she needs anything... So, she's okay. She's very capable.

AL: Yes, she seems like she is! She's been with you for four years?

JP: Yes.

AL: And she said she was studying...

JP: She is actually studying still; she is making a doctoral thesis in religion, and the project is mythology and children. So, it's very... we are living in it here [laughs].

AL: Yes, she was saying that you have fairytale time where you tell stories not by reading but through your imagination.

JP: Yes, storytelling. Children are not able to read – they are an oral culture. They have to tell and remember, and their memory is something beyond fantastic. It blows my mind how they

remember every single word! I tell the same story every day, and of course I need to have it not in my memory, but in my imagination, which is very different. You need to train... One thing is to read, the other thing is to read aloud. It's completely two different functions. And the third is just to tell it from your imagination because you know the story from either reading it or someone told you, and then you are telling it and you are in contact with others, and you are on the same level – you are not on a higher level because of your ability to read. And there is a contact, and I say we are imagining it... The Czech word is, "I am putting it in front of me," when I translate it etymologically... It means, "To set something in front of yourself." And when I am doing the storytelling from my imagination, I am doing this in an invisible way, I am putting or setting something in front of us that's not possible to see, but it's possible to see with your inner-eyes, with your imagination. So, we are training children to be able to use this very powerful tool of imagination which leads to creativity and independence and ability to create something, first in your mind and then in reality. Very important thing, this storytelling!

AL: That's so interesting! And I think when you're not reading from a book but instead using imagination and creativity, it's probably more engaging for the children, too. And I'm also curious... You mentioned Waldorf schools and things like that, but how would you explain the position or relevance of Forest Kindergartens in the larger Czech education environment?

JP: Lucky, we are very lucky. Since 2016, the outdoor kindergartens are part of the system. Or, more precisely, they can be part of the system, or they can exist alone as independent, free kindergartens but without financial support from government. And they can choose, and they can happily exist beside the system. And many of them, or I would say approximately two-thirds of them, choose this option – to exist independently because there is more freedom in doing things and less administrative work... Many reasons. When you choose to be in the system, then you

have to meet some criteria, which are partly very useful for self-evaluation, but partly they are very... [laughs]. You know, doing things for doing things, and this is everywhere, like in university you do some objects just to pass the exam [laughs]. That's very similar here – you have to have papers just to have papers, you never take them out, you never use them. We as insiders know how we do things, and everyone does it the same way, but when someone from outside comes, then this person does not see this and needs a paper. I lose so much time doing these things! But, of course, we get money and when we pass some exam, when inspection comes and we meet the criteria, then we will get even more money. So, this makes us more sustainable for parents, and we want sustainability. Not only this sustainability from the point of view of nature, but also education for sustainable development. This has some parts like social, cultural, economic, and ecological (and I would add spiritual), and we need to be sustainable in all these parts. So, for instance, we want the child to come between the ages of two and three and stay with us until they go to school. We don't want the child going to another kindergarten, we want them to only go to ours. And the family is with us probably... It can be nine years because one child comes and then another... We now have two families who brought their first child some years ago and now they have here a second and they are expecting a baby. And this is what we want, the continuity, sustainability and continuity. We believe that we create a culture, and they care for it.

AL: So, all that paperwork you have to do is worth it because you do get money that allows you to keep...

JP: Yes. I am the one who is fully employed (fulltime, plus some hours [laughs]), and there are two people who are halftime (Bara and one colleague, a man). And then another colleague who is helping one day a week and also helping with administrative work, plus one woman who does

the economic and financial and legal and these papers... I'm not involved with finances [laughs]. This is not my field of interest, I am not good at it, I am good at pedagogy.

AL: Yes, it's just as good to know what you're not good at and don't enjoy as it is to know what you're good at and enjoy [laughs]. Is there anything you would like to add that we have not discussed?

JP: You asked about the position of Forest Kindergartens... I would say something about the Czech curriculum for kindergartens. We have something which is called Framework for Education and it is each specific level, primary school, secondary school... For each level of education there is this Framework for Education. And we are quite lucky with this because this is a compass which gives the direction and says the main goal of education is the development of the child as a personality and the development of competencies. And these competencies are named, but this is a framework, it is not given that you need to study this at a specific age, there is given which outcome or criteria at the end of kindergarten education you should meet, but there is no testing for kindergarten children, and no testing for primary. The first testing is in Class Five, but many schools (especially the alternative schools) are fighting that testing because there is evidence that testing does not improve the quality of education, it is just pushing teachers to train the children as monkeys to be clever enough to know which boxes to check and not to check. And this goes directly against the competence-oriented and personality-oriented education. But for now, we are quite lucky because kindergarten does not have testing, and each kindergarten can create their own school framework program. So, this gives you big freedom and, of course, big responsibility, because you have to create this framework program and the evaluation criteria for yourself and do it and prove it to the authorities. But I definitely like it and you can breathe with this kind of system. And the child goes to school in the year after she or he

reaches six, which is quite great comparing to the Anglo-Saxon system, but still, it could be better comparing to Scandinavia. And also, there they are pushing it lower and lower unfortunately given the economic system – it wants working people sooner and sooner. But we are quite in the middle, and you still can ask for postponing when the child is not ready, and this is also good. So, I have some international overview about educational systems and about alternatives and mainstream, so I would say we are still quite happy. I don't complain, and there is always something new, there are always challenges. You always have something in the system which is not ideal, but we are able to influence it because outdoor kindergartens do have an Association, and this is very important and helpful. Tereza, who invited you, we are working together there, and the Association saved the life of outdoor kindergartens [laughs]. In 2014, there was some proposal of a law which would set the rule that all kindergarten education needs a house, and the Association kicked this down, so we are so happy to have it. Not every outdoor kindergarten in the Czech Republic is a member because the membership costs some money of course, but kindergartens get support in the field of legislative, in the field of education, and in the field of networking, which means they can learn from each other, and they can inspire each other. And in the unity, there is a power. Of course, everywhere is a risk, nothing is ideal, but this is quite good to have members. For instance, during coronavirus and two years of lockdown, we got more members because they needed help and support and advice, they needed to know how to operate, and if they can operate because there were strange rules, for instance the registered kindergartens which are state-acknowledged, they could be open under some measures, but the societies not because it was too... It was a mess; nobody knew what would work and what would not, and people did not know what to do to not violate any law. So, members came and asked for help, so every time under crisis you get more members [laughs].

AL: Well, thank you so much! I see parents and children coming [laughs]. Thank you again.

3. Bara Novaková:

Ava Lundell (AL): Hi Bara! Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. I really appreciate it. Before beginning the interview, I first wanted to explain my research interests and why I have asked to interview you. I am participating in a study abroad program during which the students conduct a one-month research project focused on an area of interest within Czech society. For my research project, I am studying Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic. I am especially interested in understanding the motivations of people who engage with this form of alternative education in Czech society. Overall, this research project will investigate Czech cultural appreciation for alternative education – specifically Forest Kindergartens – to attempt to answer the key research question: *What are the motivations for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic, and what place does this form of alternative education have in Czech society today?* For my research project, I am interviewing several teachers and parents part of Hvězdy v lese’s Forest Kindergarten community. Before asking my first question, I want to check if you are comfortable with me recording this interview? And are you comfortable with me quoting you?

Bara Novaková (BN): Yes.

AL: Great! So, my first question for you is how do you define alternative education?

BN: Well, I kind of wish this could be part of the normal education. So, it’s kind of some opposite, or it’s kind of opposite to something that is agreed to be normal or ‘basic,’ which I think that most of the people have in their head that it’s inside a building. It’s how I remember school when I was little, but also the school how it looked like fifty years ago, it’s kind of the

same, I think. And the progress in different teaching methods and stuff is very little, I think. So, alternative is this, for sure. I don't know if that's enough...

AL: Yes, whatever you want to share is great! I think that's fascinating... I'm hearing you say that the term 'alternative' maybe shouldn't be 'alternative,' maybe something like this should be considered 'normal,' too.

BN: Yes! I feel a very strong opposite between the normal and the alternative, but it can be more hand-in-hand, it can be cooperative between the few styles.

AL: That's interesting, thank you. And going on from that, how do you think Forest Kindergartens fit into this category of alternative education?

BN: I think it's one of the branches. There are some Montessori schools that are considered alternative, there is the Waldorf part of pedagogy and teaching style, and there's also the Forest. And I think that we are trying to overleap the Forest and Waldorf because we are trying to be approved as Waldorf because we see each other as a Waldorf school (or we have some Waldorf basics). But maybe there are more branches than these three... I think there are more, like some kind of schools in communities. So, I think it's part of the alternative, but it's one way to look at it – to look at it through forest and through nature, I would say. Then you have the Montessori where you look at it through some different angle, for example... I will not describe the Montessori; I would say something wrong [laughs]. So, I think it's one angle to look at it.

AL: How would you explain the relevance, significance, or position of Forest Kindergartens in the Czech education environment?

BN: Well, it's hard for me to say because I am living in a social bubble where this is the normal way of how to do things because I also grew up in a family where the nature was a big part of our lives, and I feel that many Czech people have that during childhood. Even though the

education is the ‘normal’ one, there is connection with nature, like going to trips with parents and walking in the mountains and making fires outside. So, I think that Czech people really like forests in a “it’s fun to do that” way, but not many people can imagine that it’s the way to teach their children, like it can be a part of the education. So, I think there is a lot of Forest Kindergartens because we have the Association of them, but not many people around me know about it.

AL: That’s so interesting that you mention the Czech appreciation for nature and being outside because that’s something else that I was curious about, and I was actually hoping would come up naturally in these interviews because I’ve noticed over these past few months that being outside is so important. To hear you say that and acknowledge it is really interesting. So, you think that maybe part of the connection between Czech society and Forest Kindergartens is a love of nature?

BN: Yes, yes, yes.

AL: Is there anything you want to add to that?

BN: I think that’s it.

AL: Okay, that’s great! Thank you. And this is a follow-up question from that: Why do you think parents choose to send their children to Forest Kindergartens?

BN: Well, it’s hard for me to answer that because I’ve only met our parents, and I know that they chose us not for the forest but for how we do things here. The forest is just a really nice part of that, but it’s, like, one step ahead, like it’s not to choose the forest but to choose how you see everything and how you teach the kids to do everything. And it can be done in the forest, or it can be done in any kind of different environment. But I think that they also started to look for Forest Kindergartens because they a) really like nature and they want to build a relationship to

the nature for the kid, or they don't trust the basic, normal education that much – they don't like how it goes in normal kindergartens maybe.

AL: Do you have any idea about what they don't trust about the normal education system?

BN: I think maybe “trust” is not the right word. I remember my experience from the kindergarten. It was really crowded... They are not positive at all. It was a lot of kids and not enough teachers; the teachers weren't nice, and they didn't pay attention to us because there were so many of us and so few of them and they were tired. I don't remember them teaching me anything, I was just there playing with kids. I think that the parents choose us, or any other Forest Kindergarten, because they simply *want more* – they want more for the kids to learn here, because there is so much they can learn.

AL: That's really interesting because one other person I interviewed for my research project mentioned the same thing about how at other kindergartens, the child to teacher ratio is... There are so many children and too few teachers, and you just said the same thing. That's definitely a concern that's been coming up again and again. And here – correct me if I'm wrong – but you have around 15 children?

BN: Yes – 15 and two people.

AL: Yes, that's so much better.

BN: But it's not that we couldn't handle more – we don't have more because of the space. Because it's small here for the tables and stuff. It's about that we are taken care of as the teachers. We are not tired, we have energy and the power inside, we have it for kids. I could have the power inside or the energy today for more kids (we could have twenty), but I don't think that the system is taking care of the teachers.

AL: That's a really good point. So, if the teachers aren't taken care of, then they can't take care of the children.

BN: Exactly! That's one of the basics here. So, that could be a problem in the normal kindergartens.

AL: So, with this question I'm just really interested in what you think, and there's no right or wrong answer (and we've kind of already touched on this actually with the nature conversation), but what do you think the sources of inspiration are for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic?

BN: Well, the nature is obvious. It could also be, for example, during the pandemic times, it could also be the times spent more outside than inside (because I really think it's healthier). And... I just think we do the stuff a little bit differently. But maybe it's also, like, taking more care of the rhymes and the singing and the fairytales and stuff. But also, for example, the parents and the teachers want the kids to play with natural objects, not the plastic toys that there is so many. Some Forest Kindergartens also have animals, like we have the chickens. But many others have more, like goats or sheep.

AL: And you mentioned the rhymes and the singing and things like that. So, do you guys have a fairytale every day?

BN: Yes, and that's also one of the differences maybe, that we are really storytelling the fairytales to the kids, like we don't read it – it's all based on the living images in our heads. So, if I want to tell a fairytale, like Cinderella for example, I really need to think about it first because I need to picture all the images that the Cinderella is going through so I can tell it right, and also, it's living in me, so it's much better than just reading some sentence in a book that I don't maybe understand that well. So, if I'm thinking about it and picturing it, and then I tell it to the kids, it's

a really different experience than reading. We are kind of strict about it... There are some kindergartens (Forest ones) that read, and it's definitely okay, it's just that this is really our thing. And also, me and my colleague (Johana), she's telling the fairytale right now, we are really into narrative myths, stories, and fairytales.

AL: How cool! So, you must know a lot of fairytales [laughs].

BN: She's [Johana] better [laughs]. She knows so many of them!

AL: That's so cool. Okay, I'm conscious of the time – we're on our last question set. So, why did you choose to teach at a Forest Kindergarten?

BN: I believe that it kind of chose me. I was working in a pub, and I was just really sad because it wasn't making sense. I was thinking, "This is not the purpose for me," and it wasn't everything I could do in this world. And then one of the parents here, because we knew each other from school, she just texted me, "Hey, there is an open place at this Forest Kindergarten, I think you should be perfect for it," and then I just came here, and it all clicked. So, I just asked for, "Universe, give me job that has some purpose," and it just came, and it really clicked.

AL: And what gives you that purpose and meaning here?

BN: Well, I couldn't be working here if I didn't like, or even love, my life. So, a person in a Forest Kindergarten and working with kids has to really be straight and bright and in love with their life, because if there's something wrong with me, then I cannot teach the kids. So, for some people it can also be the reason to get better because you cannot lie to the kids, they see everything, they see how you are really.

AL: And how do you think your experiences teaching at a Forest Kindergarten have differed from if you had chosen to teach at another type of institution, like a Montessori school?

BN: I think I could still maybe be there because I really like to work with kids, but I wouldn't be that satisfied, I wouldn't be that motivated to do a lot in here. It wouldn't be that big of a priority for me, I think, because I'm really happy here and everything makes sense. Therefore, I am happy in my life as a person as well and, therefore, I really want this place to be even more better, more beautiful, everything working. So, it's like a circle. So, in a different place it wouldn't be that good, maybe I would also leave to find another job, like it would maybe after a few years be really exhausting in a different type of school if they didn't take good care of me as they do here. I think I would probably then do something with my doctoral studies.

AL: And how long have you been working here?

BN: Four years.

AL: Is there anything you would like to add that we have not discussed? Is there anything you think is important for me to know?

BN: There is a lot that is important [laughs]. Maybe you can also ask Johana because they can change, and you can just ask her a few questions. I don't think she will have time for all of them, but maybe you can just ask... I don't know if it suits your...

AL: Oh yes, I can stay.

BN: Okay. She can tell you the big, important things. Maybe one thing that's worth... One thing that Johana says is that we are two teachers here for the 15 kids, but the nature, the forest and everything outside is like the third teacher. So, everyday we go to the forest or even in the garden, we let the nature show us something new and then we adjust to it or react to it. I don't know... the trees are turning golden during autumn, so then we say, "Okay, now we work with that" with crafting or fairytales or everything. So, we let the nature be the third teacher, a little unpredictable maybe [laughs], but she's there, and she's teaching us really big and important

lessons sometimes... Or, we see a dead squirrel, so we talk about it, maybe we make a funeral if the kids want, and we talk about that, and that just happens because of nature.

AL: Yes, how interesting. That's great, thank you so much. And I am interested in including artifacts in my research project, such as teachers' course documents or projects created by the children. Do you feel comfortable providing me with these artifacts?

BN: Yes, we just made some snakes if you want to see them [laughs].

AL: Perfect! Thank you so much!

4. Martina Havlicková:

Ava Lundell (AL): Hi Martina! Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. I really appreciate it. Before beginning the interview, I first wanted to explain my research interests and why I have asked to interview you. I am participating in a study abroad program during which the students conduct a one-month research project focused on an area of interest within Czech society. For my research project, I am studying Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic. I am especially interested in understanding the motivations of people who engage with this form of alternative education in Czech society. Overall, this research project will investigate Czech cultural appreciation for alternative education – specifically Forest Kindergartens – to attempt to answer the key research question: *What are the motivations for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic, and what place does this form of alternative education have in Czech society today?* For my research project, I am interviewing several teachers and parents part of Forest Kindergarten communities in Prague. Before asking my first question, I want to check if you are comfortable with me recording this interview? And are you comfortable with me quoting you?

Martina Havlicková (MH): Yes.

AL: Perfect, thank you. Okay, so my first question for you is really broad. And I'm just kind of curious, how do you define alternative education?

MH: My definition... It's quite difficult. Maybe it's some... Another way how to educate children. It could be lots of ways. It could be lots of possibilities. It could be all of those things you do with children... I don't know... I don't want to be much more specific because alternative education could be anything.

AL: So, I'm hearing you say, like, very broad. There's a huge spectrum.

MH: You can educate children by Montessori method. My children are attending some Montessori school. There are also Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic also.

AL: Yeah. And leading on from that, you mentioned Forest Kindergartens and you teach at a Forest Kindergarten, so how do you think Forest Kindergartens fit into this category of alternative education?

MH: I think it's possible, but like another alternative education it's very difficult, because you have to invent your own way. And the biggest problem I think in alternative education is there is plenty of parents which like to have their children educated by plenty of ways. The teachers like to accommodate their educational process and it's very difficult because there are no rules, there's no firm...

AL: Like guidelines?

MH: Yes. You can do it by your own, and it's quite fantastic, but it's a difficulty, you are not sure what ways schools and teachers are using, and how the children behave in this school because it's quite a problem when children are very free, and there's plenty of noise in these schools and it's difficult to educate in such a mess [laughs].

AL: Yeah, thank you, that makes sense. And this is also a broad question, but how would you explain the relevance or position or significance of Forest Kindergartens in the larger Czech education environment? So, you mentioned Montessori schools. What's the relationship of Forest Kindergartens to this larger Czech education environment? Does that make sense?

MH: Yes. I think Forest Kindergartens are not accredited, so they are not real schools here, they are only some groups. The parents of children make some special agreement together and... There's no responsibility on the teachers, only on the parents. It's very free and there's no control on these schools at all, because they are not real schools, they are only educational groups. So, that's a big problem and if I sent my children to such a school... I don't want to because I'm not sure what I will find there [laughs]. The problem is that there's plenty of free-minded teachers, but I don't believe them at all [laughs]. There's plenty of free-minded children, free-minded parents, and free-minded teachers, and no rules [laughs].

AL: That's interesting. When there aren't really these rules or structures or guidelines, it's hard to trust that your child is being educated. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And I'm also interested in thinking about why you think parents choose to send their children to Forest Kindergartens?

MH: It's many reasons. Sometimes they strictly don't want to send their children to state schools. It's their decision before they visited some kind of school, they decided before because they don't like this style of education. And it's... I don't like it, but there are plenty of parents in our kindergarten which thinks in this way, to not send their children to some state school because they'd like some new, some amazing, some better, something better for their children. And they don't realize they could also get some anarchy, a kind of anarchy, that children can do whatever they want, and the children are not so... My children are not so... They don't have so much skills to educate themselves because they are children. They like to play, they like to talk, they like to

do the easy things much more than the hard things and the things they have to pay attention to.

So, they have some bad experiences from their childhood. It was me who got these experiences. I don't like it, so I choose for my children Montessori school. But it also has its own problems, its own difficulties.

AL: Yeah. And you mentioned the issues with the state schools. What are those issues?

MH: The strict way of teaching, the whole bunch of children talking about one thing in one time, they are pushed to learn the things together. And they are waiting for the part of the ones which are not so fast in the teaching process. And it's hard because they can't go further... It's... Sorry, my son is asking me for something [laughs]... They like some individual process, and they get it, but it has its own difficulties and problems.

AL: Okay, one of the things that I've heard other people say is that they really appreciate how the class sizes at non-state schools are smaller because state schools have really big class sizes. Is that something that you've heard?

MH: Yes, that's definitely an issue. They are much, much smaller group of children and there are more teachers, maybe two or even more in one class. It's great. I think it could be every class. It's a big problem – there are lots of children and a few teachers.

AL: Interesting, thank you for explaining that. The next thing I'm curious about is what do you think the sources of inspiration are for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic?

MH: Yeah, I think definitely it's the scout group. Plenty of guides or teachers in the Forest Kindergartens are from scout groups. Because it connects the nature and to be with children, to care about them, to teach them something, to lead them, to push them to be on their own. So, this is really the one. And what I think... In our kindergarten, we like to live with the child from our kindergarten, to talk and to be with them as we are with our own children, children of our own

family. It's like nature being with them. We talk to them as we talk to our children or partners or family members. When we cook our meal, we cook together. Or when we are going, we try to do this with the children.

AL: And can you please just briefly explain the scout movement and the history of it?

MH: Yes. It started as a group only for boys. It has a basement in some army skills, like to survive in nature, or even to join the army, to guard our country before some enemies...

AL: Like soldiers?

MH: Yes, like soldiers. To be a good soldier, to respect the older ones or the higher ones, it's on the ground of this group. But it changed, it changes still. In the beginning of the 20th century, there were some first scout groups in Czech Republic. When we started our camp in the Czech Republic, there was also some movement of first scout groups. So, to survive in nature and also to be able to take care of myself and to take care of another one.

AL: I like that. Yeah, like the values of making sure you're okay, but then also looking to other people and making sure that they're okay.

MH: Yes, and make some responsibility for the others.

AL: Thank you for explaining that. And this is getting more personal, but why did you choose to teach at a Forest Kindergarten?

MH: I like to be in nature with children. I like to find my job similar to be as scout leader. When I was in scouts I liked it so much, I think about it how to make some job which will have some similarities with this. So, I like to be in nature with children, I like to be with children. When I studied psychology, I totally think about to be a children psychologist, maybe at school or maybe somewhere else. So, for me, to be with a child, it was the clear thing.

AL: That was your clear, professional path [laughs]. And how do you think your experiences teaching at a Forest Kindergarten have differed from if you had chosen to teach at another type of school, because you'd still be working with children, but how is working in a Forest Kindergarten different?

MH: I don't know if I'd like to be a normal teacher. To do these things, it's far more difficult, I think. There are more children, in many groups there are far more children, and you can't choose at all, so there are plenty of children from families which are not familiar with mud and dirty and go to the forest when it's raining [laughs]. They say their son can't go there because it's raining. It's really difficult to speak or to make some agreement with this parent. I don't know... It's far more difficult when the children are in a small room or in a room at all. They make lots of noise, and they are more aggressive on each other because they can't go somewhere else to be alone when they're sometimes angry with someone or sad. They don't have their own space or their own place to go. In the forest, they can go to another tree and sit down and just think.

AL: They have a lot of room to go and be by themselves.

MH: Yes, a lot of space. I think it's better for the children and so it's better for the teachers, to be with them in nature.

AL: Yes, I like that. Good for the children and good for the teachers. I think that's a really good point. That came up in another interview when I was interviewing a teacher at another Forest Kindergarten. She said that it's really great for the kids, but the teachers are also able to be outside all day and they have more energy from that to be with the children. So, it's not just the children but also the teachers. I think that's a really good point. And is there anything else you want to add or share with me that we haven't talked about yet?

MH: No, I don't think so [laughs].

AL: That's okay! Well, Martina, thank you so much. I know how busy your day is, so I really appreciate you talking to me in the middle of your afternoon. You've been so helpful. So, thank you so much!

MH: Thank you!

5. Marta Lopatková:

Ava Lundell (AL): Hi Marta! Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. I really appreciate it. Before beginning the interview, I first wanted to explain my research interests and why I have asked to interview you. I am participating in a study abroad program during which the students conduct a one-month research project focused on an area of interest within Czech society. For my research project, I am studying Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic. I am especially interested in understanding the motivations of people who engage with this form of alternative education in Czech society. Overall, this research project will investigate Czech cultural appreciation for alternative education – specifically Forest Kindergartens – to attempt to answer the key research question: *What are the motivations for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic, and what place does this form of alternative education have in Czech society today?* For my research project, I am interviewing several teachers and parents part of Hvězdy v lese's Forest Kindergarten community. Before asking my first question, I want to check if you are comfortable with me recording this interview? And are you comfortable with me quoting you?

Marta Lopatková (ML): Yes.

AL: Okay, so my first question is how do you define alternative education?

ML: These days, and the past year maybe (and it's going to take one more year at least), I am discussing schools and where to put my son into school. And lots of people would say that

alternative schools are schools where you don't really learn and where you just play around, don't do much, the schools where kids don't really learn anything. But the answer for this question is the problem of the current state education system in the Czech Republic, because it's still very conservative, it's still very similar to what I experienced, what my mom experienced, and what her mom experienced actually [laughs]. It's basically the same model. It's a lot of memorizing, not like in Vietnam or China or Russia, but still a lot of memorizing... You know, I am a teacher at a university, so I know that the easiest thing is frontal education, just stand around and say, "It was like that and like that," and it's easy, but it's not effective at all. And the thing is that in Czech education, there are some little "first ships" that are trying to float to different waters and trying to find different ways, even in state education, which is great, and those schools where the situation is like that, where they are trying to apply some new, innovative teaching methods, they're two little and it's impossible to get there. So, the Czech system is still very conservative, and whatever is slightly different from this traditional point of view that you have to memorize stuff, sit at a desk and right down everything... Like, you're just sitting for five hours [laughs], and every hour they give you a ten minute break, and then another hour – you just sit like that for nine years, or twelve years, or fourteen years. Like, whatever is kind of different is kind of alternative for them. I don't really know what is alternative for me... I think there are some kind of these schools that also exist in the Czech Republic, not many, but there are some because people are trying to look for some alternative of this conservative system. So, there are also some schools that are for me a little bit too... Not open, but with no regime, no structure, too loose. Kids can say what they want to learn, but too much extent for them. I don't mind if kids organize themselves somehow, but I think there must be some kind of rules, and in some cases the rules are very loose or too loose for me, but it may work for other parents. For

me, alternative depends on from what point of view, you know? For me, it's alternative from the traditional system, from this very conservative way of teaching, which we still really have here, unfortunately. But we also have different levels of alternative. For example, for many people our school, our kindergarten, would be very alternative, but I don't think it's very alternative at all, I think it's like normal... Of course, it's alternative from the traditional school, but the kids have rules there, they have to do stuff there, they have to follow the rules, it's not like they can do whatever they want. People often also imagine that the kids are just running around, nobody does anything, they can't concentrate on anything because they don't do anything, they're just running and climbing the trees, sort of like that.

AL: So, I'm hearing you say that, for you, the idea of something being 'alternative' really just means that it's different from the state education system, which is very conservative.

ML: Yes. It's, like, using innovative methods of teaching, for example. For me, that would be even to some extent respect for the kids, because they didn't really have any respect for us when we were little. And at the same time, it doesn't really mean that we will do whatever they want, you know. We will respect them at certain times... For example, we respect their personalities; we know he behaves like that, but there is a reason for that and let's try to figure it out. It's not like, "You are being a bad boy" and that's it. "You are going to get a black point, and if you have five points you will get five marks," which is the worst mark, for whatever reason. So, being kind of a nice environment where they're nice to each other, you know. That's also kind of alternative in a way, you know. There are some alternative schools in the Czech state system, but it's really hard to get there.

AL: And I think you mentioned this when you were talking, but you're a professor, is that correct?

ML: Yes. Faculty of Arts.

AL: Oh, okay! What's your area of expertise?

ML: I do Vietnamese Studies.

AL: That's so fascinating! What university do you teach at?

ML: Charles University.

AL: Wow, I had no idea! Sorry, that's not related to the interview at all, but I was just curious because you mentioned it [laughs]. So, we were just talking about your definition of alternative education, and we kind of touched on this, but I'm curious, can you elaborate on how you think Forest Kindergartens fit into this category of alternative education?

ML: Yes. I'm not sure, but I think for... It's an alternative from what we have, from state kindergartens, which very often (of course, not all of them), very often those kindergartens, they don't have any specific program they use, just go there and do stuff like we did, like cutting something and coloring something. And I don't mean a program like Waldorf education or Montessori, I just mean having a program saying, for example, "We want kids to be nice to each other, these values are important to us. And we try to reach these values through..." So, of course, it's different from the classical system... But I think probably most people you would ask who don't have kids in Forest Kindergartens would say it's a complete alternative because they are outside all day, they are outside when it's raining and it must be horrible for them. And they don't have any toys there, which is kind of weird for them as well. So, it definitely fits in this alternative category, and it is alternative from classic kindergartens.

AL: So, people who are outside of the Forest Kindergartens community may view it as more alternative than it actually is.

ML: Yes. I think it is alternative in a way, but I don't think it's as alternative as people see it very often, because they don't know it.

AL: That's interesting. My next question is also kind of broad, but I'm just interested in what you think. How would you explain the relevance or significance or position of Forest Kindergartens in the Czech education environment?

ML: I don't really know about its significance... I think it's very important to have those types of schools. I think it's important to have different alternatives you can choose from, because I totally understand that not everybody will want to put their kid through the kindergarten that we have, not everybody wants them to be outside all day – there are people who are scared of cold, for example, and there are people who don't want to participate in this community school (which can be kind of demanding, I understand that – if you have three kids, for example, you don't really have time to do that, to participate in all those celebrations, sometimes you bake something for kids, or make some costumes, or bring jars of water everyday – it can be demanding). I think it's really important to have a choice, and I think the kindergartens this time are more and more popular, because I think some people (and of course, I live in a bubble like everybody), but I think in my bubble people are realizing more and more that they kind of need some sort of nature and they need to be touched in the simple things. I think sometimes I feel (and a lot of people around me feel) that there is just too much of everything, too much information, too much stuff, too many things, too much of everything. And, you know, I'm not against toys or anything, we have all those things, and my son watches TV shows or sometimes series on Netflix. Of course he does! He has Legos and is a normal kid, but I think we all have this at home, so we don't need to have it at kindergarten. And if I have a choice, he can spend all day outside – for me, the best things, like climbing trees and planting something, just being

outside and having fun with his friends, I think it's great. And I like the simplicity of the school, I like that they have just rope, and they play with the rope, and it can be anything they want, and they still can imagine it. And you actually know that when you meet kids which don't have this, which are covered with toys and plans and programs and activities since they are two or something, they really cannot play like that anymore. So, it really changes. And I know it will change as well as he grows up and gets older, it's going to change as well in elementary school. But I think when he is three, four, five, six, I think it is great to have that if you can.

AL: Yeah, I love that. It's such a great point that, you know, we already have all these distractions at home and that's, like, okay and unavoidable. So, if you're able to, if you have the ability to send your child to a kindergarten that doesn't necessarily have those distractions, it's a good few hours of their day where they're kind of outside of that. It provides that good balance that I think is so important for childhood development.

ML: Yes, I'm not against toys or TV or whatever, I'm fine with that, it's a part of life. I also have Facebook and Instagram and all of that, and it's okay. But I don't want to be addicted to it. And it's okay for him to watch TV and do stuff like that, but it's also really great if he can just be okay by himself in the forest or wherever with his friends and have, like, a knife and sharpen new wood [laughs]. It's great that he can do that. So, I think it definitely has a place in the Czech educational system, and I think it's getting more and more popular because it is getting more and more accessible because there are more and more schools which are opening which is great. And I think people also in the cities, it's the same with the lifestyle, you keep working, working, working to get, like, two weeks of vacation somewhere during the summer, and then you have the two weeks of vacation and it's like, "Okay, now we should have fun and enjoy it." It's just

too much. And I think for parents of kids growing up in cities, this is also great – the kids can really get connected to normal things. I think it's just natural.

AL: Yeah, I love that. The theme that I keep hearing is balance, just having that balance in your life... [Baby cries] Oh, do you need to...

ML: Yes, he just got stuck [laughs]. One second...

AL: Now will you be sending him to the same Forest Kindergarten?

ML: Oh, definitely. The only thing which I'm actually kind of... I'm trying to find an elementary school for my son. We have very horrible English education in the Czech Republic. At elementary schools, the kids usually start learning English when they are nine or seven or something like that, which I think is way too late. And the only thing... I think I will definitely send him to the same kindergarten, the only thing I would be probably thinking of to change is that it would maybe be good to have a bilingual or maybe English kindergarten just to learn English at school.

AL: Yeah, because the sooner you start learning a language the easier it is and the easier it is to be bilingual. That's a good point. And actually, this leads so perfectly into a question I was planning to ask you later in the interview, but I'll ask you now, and we kind of already talked about it, but do you plan to continue to send your children to alternative education institutions, like Montessori and things like that? Do you plan to continue in this pattern or no?

ML: You know, I'm not quite sure. One thing is finance. For example, bilingual, Montessori schools that are accessible for us location-wise, they're quite expensive, it's like 20,000 crowns per month, which is like more than twice as much as kindergarten, plus he [points to baby] would be in the private kindergarten, so it's actually quite a lot. And also, the thing is I want my kids to be connected to 'normal' people, people of all kinds, not just people who have enough

money to send their kids to these schools, you know. I want them to kind of have a whole picture of the society, which they will not get anyway because every school is chosen by the same kind of people, but still, it's a little bit more... When you have an expensive, private elementary school, people go there because they have money to pay. But I am definitely trying to find some alternative within the state education system, like there are Waldorf schools, but I am not quite sure – the type of person is a bit too much for me, it's kind of hard to... If you find out it's not exactly what you want, it's kind of hard to switch to the normal school because they have a specific way of learning. For example, to get into high school might be kind of tough from a Waldorf elementary school. But I think I am definitely trying to find an elementary school even within the state non-private sector which is kind of friendly, open, and using those innovative methods of teaching, for example, and has some specific program and some values. I think education is not just about educating and teaching, but it's also about raising people. And, for me, it's important that the elementary school... You know, kids spend a lot of time there, and I want to have some idea what kind of people they're going to turn my child into, in a way. They also raise him. I want them to raise him to be a good person.

AL: Yeah. Children are at school for the majority of their day, and the people they're surrounded by, including the other children and also the teachers and the values of the community, that shapes a child for sure. So, it sounds like you're more focused on the values of the school community as opposed to finding an alternative that fits the definition of alternative. You're more focused on what the values of the school community actually are.

ML: Yeah. And you can see this clash between parents who want their child to go to school that creates successful applicants, who will get to the best high school. And then you have those people who are alternative, and they don't care, and they want to play and blah, blah, blah. And

it's not like that. It's not that I want my child just to play and he doesn't have to know anything – I want him to have knowledge. But at the same time, I can't imagine it's impossible to get this knowledge in a fun way, something that is more fun, because my school wasn't fun at all (it was actually quite horrible) [laughs].

AL: Yes, you want something different for your children. Again, I know I said this, but the theme of balance is coming up again and again. I like that. And with your first child, when you were looking at other kindergartens to send him to, what other options did you consider other than Forest Kindergartens? What would have been your alternative?

ML: It was actually quite a drama, because he went to this little club since he was eleven months, like twice a week, and it was just a play group. And then he was almost three and I knew it's just not enough for him, he needed to move on to do something more advanced, because there were little kids (like really little, like one year old), which is nice for some time but, you know, I wouldn't let him there another year because it was not enough... And he was born in September, which means that when he would be entering kindergarten, he wouldn't be three years old, which is a huge problem in the Czech Republic because it's almost impossible, especially in big cities like Prague, to place your kid into kindergarten when he's not three. And also, I was looking for some kindergartens around, and if there was a great kindergarten nearby, I would probably put him there, but it wasn't. All the kindergartens around didn't say anything about who we are, what are our values, what we do. Or, for example, they didn't have websites – I mean, come on, we're in the 21st century! It was kind of strange [laughs]. And then I found this Waldorf kindergarten, which is kind of close by, and it looked amazing. It had all those things about who we are, what we do, and why do we do that. And I really liked its program, and I really liked that they had kids of all ages in one class. I went there to the Open Day sessions...

And there is this problem that kids who are five years old, they have to go to kindergarten for one year, and it wasn't like that before, which means that very often kids from alternative schools which don't have this accreditation have to go to state kindergartens for one year, and lots of people from alternative schools will choose this Waldorf kindergarten because it is a state kindergarten, and they have to accept because he is five and they will stay there for a year. And with this system, they are very sad about that, you cannot accept kids who are almost three or three because you have to accept those kids who are five. So, I asked if it would be possible for my child to get there (he's not even three, he will be three in September), and they said it's almost impossible. So, you have this idea of mixed classes with kids of different age groups, but in reality, it's not really like that because they cannot accept them. So, I was just searching around, and I just found this Forest Kindergarten, and I always liked the idea, but I didn't know that there would be any nearby. I knew there were some in Prague 6, but it was too far away so I didn't really think about it. And then I found this kindergarten and thought, "Wow, this seems kind of cool!" So, I just wrote them a message and then I got information... And actually, I went to Thailand when there was an "Experience a Day like a Kid at School" and I sent my husband there and he was totally shocked, he was like, "You can't be serious." It was from 9:00am to 4:00pm, so they really spent the whole day in kindergarten holding hands and singing songs, and he had a hangover [laughs]. But he went there, and he loved it, and he got accepted. So, that's how we ended there.

AL: What a cool story [laughs]. That's definitely a long process and journey, but you ended up at a good school.

ML: And I didn't know that! I thought I would just say, "Okay." But it wasn't like that. I had no idea it was challenging to get there.

AL: Yeah, that's interesting. Thank you for explaining all that. And my next question... I'm so sorry, I see that we're past our time. Do you have a little bit more time?

ML: Yes, sure.

AL: Thank you. Just two questions left. Again, broad question, but what do you think the sources of inspiration are for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic specifically?

ML: I think a lot of it is Johana – you met Johana. She is really a big inspiration for all kindergartens or Forest Kindergartens because she's also very active in the Association of Forest Kindergartens and she also gives special lectures or seminars about how to build a Forest Kindergarten, etc. And I think the ideas are pretty much very similar to Scandinavian and Germany kindergartens and Waldorf education... And a lot of stuff comes from Waldorf education, even though, for example, not all Forest Kindergartens are Waldorf Forest Kindergartens, but still there is an emphasis on the cycles of the year, which is natural because you live outside so you can see trees changing and grass going yellow or something, so it's just kind of natural to have this life cycle, which is very typical for Waldorf education. And I think really just inspiration from abroad, from Germany, from Scandinavia where this tradition is much longer and where it works quite well. And also, because there is this Association... I think you met Tereza before...

AL: Yes, I did.

ML: And she founded this Association before, and they're friends with Johana. So, I think this Association, their seminars are very supportive, it's kind of what, to a certain extent, definitely shapes how Czech Forest Kindergartens are and what they look like.

AL: Interesting, thank you. And you've talked about why you chose to send your child to a Forest Kindergarten, but I was wondering, given the name "Forest Kindergarten," how important

was “the forest”/nature when deciding to send your child to a Forest Kindergarten? Are other factors more important (like the atmosphere, activities, etc.)?

ML: For me, the nature was definitely important, but it doesn't have to be forest for me. I'm very happy that kids can, for example, grow stuff... They have these gardens, and they do stuff in the garden so they can see that actually it's not just, like, you buy onions cut into pieces (like in the U.S. very often), but here you have to grow the onion and peel it and cut it. It's not just that simple that you can grab it and use it, but someone actually has to grow it. So, for me the nature is important, but it doesn't have to necessarily be the forest, it can be any other type of nature (for example, cultural nature, like a farm or something like that, it doesn't have to be a wild forest or something). But nature is definitely important.

AL: Thank you! And last question, how do you think your child's experience at a Forest Kindergarten has differed from the experience they would have had at another type of educational institution?

ML: I think it is very different actually. We very often go on holiday with lots of kids – for example, we just went to the mountains with 50 people, and 20 of them were kids. So, I can actually see how different he is, and there are some things which really differ. For example, I think he's very much... He knows what his limits are, he knows how far he can go, what he can lift. So, I think he's very used to being outside, so simple things like he knows when he climbs up the hill he has to, you know, hold something so he doesn't slip. When you see him and other kids running around the forest, it is a little bit different because he just knows how to orient there. He knows that, for example, this piece of wood might be slippery or something because he has this experience. And I think he can really play with... I think he has this imagination where every piece of wood can be whatever you want, and he kind of seems to be a little more childish

in this way... It's not being childish, but it's having imagination that kids of his age who go to normal school usually don't have anymore. Some of them of course have it, but many of them don't have it. And I think all kids in our kindergarten have it because they are just used to playing with simple things.

AL: Yes, that's so interesting because when I was speaking to Johana, she was also talking about the imagination and creativity that their teaching style tries to instill in the children, and it sounds like it's working and that it's effective because you're seeing it in your child, too.

ML: Yes, it is. For example, our kids are not allowed to take any kids to kindergarten. And it's not about having toys, it's about how it brings a different element to this environment, and kids, you know, start a fight about it because they want to have it, so just no toys. And it works, it's not a problem. It means there are no Legos or Spiderman costumes... We have no costumes. They are not kind of allowed, it's not said allowed like that, but the kids don't wear superhero T-shirts, none of them. And you don't have this aggressive environment where they keep shooting each other. Of course, they fight, and they play when they shoot, and it's not a problem, but I think it's not that aggressive. When I see other boys especially, they very often are fighting, like fighting in a very violent way. And kids at our kindergarten don't do that. Like my son, when he's with other kids, he does that too sometimes, but very often he doesn't enjoy it and does something else because it's not fun for a long time. And I think kids from other kindergartens don't do that because it's just... When they fight, they have this rule that when they say, "It's enough, it's not a game for me anymore," they stop. And they really do that, they really stop. Of course, sometimes someone will start crying because someone got pushed, but I don't think they are that violent or aggressive to each other here. And I'm not quite sure why, but it's just not. They are kind of nice to each other here. And it's not all the time, and they can fight together,

and they have some problems and misunderstandings, but it's really kind of different, they are very often being nice to each other which I like. And also, when they are... You have really small kids who are two years old or two and a half, and they are taught to help each other. And, of course, they don't do it by themselves, but when they see other kids who are older do it, they do it, too. Everybody has his position in the certain hierarchy, and it kind of works. I think it's great.

AL: That's great. And how old is he?

ML: Five and a half. So, he will stay at kindergarten one more year, and then he will go to elementary school. Because it's again the problem with kids who are born in September. If he was born in August, he would probably go to school next year, but he was born in September, so it will be one more year at kindergarten. And I think this is actually okay for him, he will be mature when he is there.

AL: And when was your newborn born?

ML: This September also.

AL: Oh, so another September baby [laughs]!

ML: Yes [laughs].

AL: Well, Marta, thank you so much. Is there anything you would like to add that we have not discussed?

ML: If you need to get more details about anything, just send me an email, I can answer. I'm doing research and I'm doing interviews as well, so I know how hard it is to get interviews.

AL: Thank you so much!

6. Martin Hula:

Ava Lundell (AL): Hi Martin! Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. I really appreciate it. Before beginning the interview, I first wanted to explain my research interests and why I have asked to interview you. I am participating in a study abroad program during which the students conduct a one-month research project focused on an area of interest within Czech society. For my research project, I am studying Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic. I am especially interested in understanding the motivations of people who engage with this form of alternative education in Czech society. Overall, this research project will investigate Czech cultural appreciation for alternative education – specifically Forest Kindergartens – to attempt to answer the key research question: *What are the motivations for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic, and what place does this form of alternative education have in Czech society today?* For my research project, I am interviewing several teachers and parents part of Hvězdy v lese’s Forest Kindergarten community. Before asking my first question, I want to check if you are comfortable with me recording this interview? And are you comfortable with me quoting you?

Martin Hula (MH): Yes.

AL: So, my first question is quite broad. How do you define alternative education?

MH: Well, that’s a really hard question, because there are lots of alternatives here you can choose from. All of them are quite minor, I mean there are not a lot of schools but there are a lot of types of schools in low numbers. So, for me alternative is something which is not in the official education system because we have all been raised in these same environments because there were no alternatives when we were young, and I think that most of the people who are considering alternative education are not really extremely happy with how the classical education looks. And alternative is just... It can really be anything, from Forest Kindergartens and Waldorf

pedagogy to Montessori and on the other side, you can have some kind of crazy Christian schools, and you can also have homeschooling here. And also, for me, alternative is used by people who are ambitious parents who want to have their kids in the top universities and be really ambitious about the education of the kids and they will have to work a lot, it's also for me an alternative. So, it can be a range from really two different extremes that attracts different people with different backgrounds completely. But what I think is in common is that they are not happy with the way mainstream education looks like in the Czech Republic.

AL: And how would you describe the mainstream education in the Czech Republic?

MH: You mean focusing on kindergartens or elementary schools?

AL: Kindergartens.

MH: Kindergarten typically here is inside in a building, in a group of same age kids, there are usually about 30 of them and there's one teacher, sometimes two, it depends... But in the classical ones it's like this. Sometimes they are going outside, but only in nice weather [laughs]. And they usually lack some deeper focus on the kids and it's more like child keeping than actually education, or something like that.

AL: Like babysitting rather than teaching?

MH: Yes... Well, I am maybe being too harsh. And also, even though the system is the same everywhere, there are very big differences between kindergartens and also between elementary schools, because it depends on the teachers, on the headmasters, so the quality is really unpredictable. So, what is good is that we have free kindergartens that are guaranteed by the state from the age of five or six years, younger children sometimes have problems because there are not enough places in kindergartens here. But it works nice and it's cheap and it's for everybody which is great, but usually you have to go to the school which is closest to your permanent

residence, and you can't choose much, and you never know what the quality is – this is especially a problem with elementary schools because we've been through this with our older kid.

AL: Thank you! And you were describing that spectrum of alternative education. Where do you place Forest Kindergartens on this spectrum? How do you think Forest Kindergartens fit into this category of alternative education?

MH: Well, it depends because there is also a big diversity among Forest Kindergartens. For example, the kindergarten where we have our kids (just one kid now, but we used to have both there), it's more like "hardcore" Forest Kindergartens, and they really focus on the educational level. They are also inspired by the Waldorf pedagogy. But some other kindergartens are more, like, normal babysitting but outside [laughs]. So, it depends. But what is in common is that they think that children should be outside, and the outdoors is the best place for the development of children, that they are somehow training their resilience, but not in a way like a bootcamp or something, not like this [laughs]. They are used to that sometimes it's raining, and you have to put your coat on, and it's okay. Sometimes it's freezing, sometimes it's hot, and you have to adjust to those circumstances in a very natural way. And I also think that what is important is the free play for kids without any toys, they just use the things that are around in the forest, like branches, stones, sticks, rocks. I think that the philosophy is that those simple objects are the best thing to develop children's fantasy because it can be anything – a stone can be a variety of things. If you have a plastic car, then it's just a car.

AL: Yes, I like that. Yesterday I went to a Forest Kindergarten to observe for a day, and we were outside, and the children had time to play outside with no toys, and they were completely fine because they went around and played with stones and sticks and things like that. And I think it

really helps develop imagination in a child, and creativity. And that was something that was really cool to see. So, it definitely relates to what you were saying.

MH: Yes, and what I also want to say is that, from the point of view of the parents, they feel that it's important to have the connection with the outer world and that nowadays children are very often indoors all the time, and the time they are spending outdoors is really limited. This is, for me, one of its greatest assets, is that I know my kid will be six hours a day outside in a friendly, welcoming, and quite natural environment.

AL: And you said you have two kids?

MH: Yes.

AL: And you sent both of them to a Forest Kindergarten?

MH: Yes.

AL: Cool, thank you. And this is also a broad question, but how would you explain the relevance, position, or significance of Forest Kindergartens in the larger Czech education environment?

MH: It's still just a minor issue. I don't know how many of the Forest Kindergartens there are, maybe, like, 200 in the Czech Republic, and I would say that there are at least ten times more "normal" schools, so just a few percent of the... But, on the other hand, I think that, especially in the last years, there are more... For example, four years or five years ago when my daughter (my older kid) went to the kindergarten, it was completely unknown for the general public, they had no knowledge about what a Forest Kindergarten is and there was a lot of prejudice against this. But nowadays, I think that even in the general population, people, or at least people with kids, know what a Forest Kindergarten is, they know somehow what to expect from it, and it's more accepted, more in the mainstream, also in the media. I think that it's already been in some pop

culture. For example, I've been watching a Czech miniseries which is quite famous, and one of the characters was running a Forest Kindergarten. So, it's in the mainstream. So, if you ask people here what it is, they will be able to at least tell you what a Forest Kindergarten is nowadays. So, it's more known, but still if you come to the number of kids which are educated in Forest Kindergartens, it is really low.

AL: And what do you think has changed within the last four or five years? Why have they become more known?

MH: Well, I think it's very good lobbying and advertising... Advertising is probably not a good word, but, you know, spreading the word of the Association of Forest Kindergartens. They also have social media. For example, there used to be a nice photo-story in one of the main online news servers in the Czech Republic called "A Day in the Kindergarten," and the Association sent photographs and stuff. So, I think it's working media, and also working with the authorities, like the Ministry of Education, and the Association is doing a really good job.

AL: Yes, the Association has come up a number of times. And what do you think the sources of inspiration are for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic?

MH: Well, it's again I think the being in touch with the environment, with nature, is probably the most important thing. And also sometimes... I don't want to be ageist, but most of the parents are older than we are, for example, and they have some kind of nostalgia for their childhood, like, "When we were kids, there were no computers, and we were always outside playing," and they want to rebuild this great childhood that they used to have in their eyes without all those things for their kids, too. And also, I think that nowadays the security situation in Europe right now might also play a role. I think that people might be more open to have this kind of... That your kids will be more resilient to conditions that are unpredictable and that are

sometimes not 100% friendly, and they will be able to deal with it in their life. Maybe a similar idea to Scouts.

AL: Yes, so the idea of children being able to take care of themselves?

MH: Yes.

AL: Interesting. And this is kind of along a similar line, but why did you choose to send your children to a Forest Kindergarten?

MH: Well, there were many factors. First, we tried a normal... Not normal, but a “better” kindergarten for our daughter when she was around two and a half or something, so we tried for just two mornings a week to get this special, cool, extremely expensive kindergarten, which was supposed to be one of the best, and it was awful! It was so wrong in all aspects for me.

AL: Interesting. And it’s supposed to be one of the best?

MH: Yes, but I think it’s maybe the best for a certain kind of parent, like maybe for those ambitious ones, and it was not for us at all. They treated the parents like clients, and the kids are clients, and they had to show us each day in what ways our kids can be developed and educated and what kind of activities they did and what they created. And it was too organized and no space for free play or imagination. The two year old kids had to be prepared to be developed in all skills because it will help them have a good job and raise money, and this is really not something that I would like to have for my kid because I would like my kid to have a childhood. Also, we were, like, the only ones who were not driving in SUVs [laughs]. So, we were trying to find something else, and the kindergarten that was closest to our house was a classical one and we were not very excited about it. And then we found that there is this kindergarten at Bílá Hora which is close to our place, and it was really, really nice. So, we met the people outside in Hvězda, which is a forest/park which is there, and we were walking our dog there many times

and we saw the kids outside and it seemed really lovely. So, we decided that we could try to get the kids there, and it was a great decision. And now I'm so attuned to Forest Kindergartens that, for me, it seems some kind of strange to think that my kids will be all the time inside.

AL: Like when they go to elementary school?

MH: Yes, and also in a normal kindergarten. To imagine that my kids will be inside, and maybe for an hour or an hour and a half they will be in a garden or somewhere walking, it's just so strange [laughs]. And I see that the kids are very happy there. For example, we come home from the kindergarten, and they say, "Can we just stay outside and play in the garden?" And I think they were just outside all the time, and they say, "We just want to be outside." And I'm like, "Okay." Or during the weekends, they ask, "Dad, can we go outside?" And I say, "Yes, but it's raining." So, they just get their raincoats, there's no problem there [laughs]... So, for them, it's normal to be outside and to know that there are different types of weather and temperatures that they don't care. It's just, like, "Where's the problem?" And, for me, this is something really great, I like it, I like that they can climb on the trees and play in the mud, and they don't feel disgusted when they have dirty hands. For me it's something really important, especially because at university I studied biology, and so I'm really close to living creatures and being outside and it's something that is important for me, and to have those outdoor kids is great.

AL: That's a really good point. And what does your partner do?

MH: She used to study religious studies of old North Vikings and Celts and stuff, and now she's running a gallery.

AL: Oh cool, thank you. And you mentioned the nature aspect of Forest Kindergartens and how parents connect with Forest Kindergartens because of that love of nature, so I'm hearing you say

that “the forest”/nature is a huge part of why parents choose Forest Kindergartens. Is this correct?

MH: Yes, and also for me the other special thing is... It depends on the Forest Kindergarten, but there is not only the forest but also the garden. And they are growing their own vegetables and herbs, and even in our school they have their own field of barley I think, and they do it each year in the cycles (I think this is a specialty of our kindergarten because it's inspired by Waldorf pedagogy). So, for me it's also important that they see how food is made – it's not something you buy in a store, but you can see how you can plant a seed and then it grows, and you have to take care of it and harvest it. For example, with the barley it's good because each year they sow the new grains, and they watch it grow, then they harvest it, they beat it, and then they grind it in a mill, and they make their own flour and then they make their own bread. So, it's from the grain to the bread and they see the whole process in a very natural way and it's really great to see all those things. For me, it's important to see how it's quite hard work and it's not easy to have food.

AL: Yes, and it probably makes them appreciate it more.

MH: Yes. And to understand what it means, not only with plants but also with animals. Sometimes they see dead animals somewhere and for them it's normal to see that the animals are being born and they are dying, and for me this is important to see that this is life, and this is the cycle of how it works in the world. There's no need to try to protect them from the bad things, but be in a safe space, safe environment with someone they can trust and rely on, and they can lead them through all those aspects of life, which is for me probably the best thing.

AL: Yeah, that's great. And this kind of goes on from that, but how do you think your children's experiences at a Forest Kindergarten have differed from the experiences they would have had at another type of educational institution?

MH: I think that it would be... For example, the schoolmates of my daughter (because she's already in school), most of them were not in Forest Kindergartens. And obviously if you look at my daughter you couldn't point out that she went to a Forest Kindergarten, but I think that the differences are quite subtle, but somehow the information of the whole character is a bit different. Like for her, it's no problem... Like I said, the resilience, but not only that she would be able to endure some bad conditions, but that she's more free and she is maybe more self-confident in what she's doing, she's somehow more connected to her own body and she knows what she can do and what she cannot. For example, I'm not afraid when she climbs a tree or jumps somewhere because she knows her limits and she knows what she's capable of and what she's not. So, this is also something that I think is a consequence of being educated in a Forest Kindergarten.

AL: That's great, thank you. When I was speaking with Marta (the woman who put me in touch with you), she said the same thing about how her children, when they go on trips with other families in the mountains, she can see how her children know their bodies better and know their physical limits, so I think it's interesting that you pick up on that as well. I'm looking at the clock, and it's already been 30 minutes. So, this is the last set of questions. You mentioned you have a daughter and a son?

MH: Yes.

AL: And your son is currently in kindergarten, but your daughter is in elementary school?

MH: Yes.

AL: Have you chosen to send your daughter to another type of alternative education institution for elementary school, like Montessori?

MH: Well, we were thinking about it, but for us the most important thing was that the school should be a reasonable distance from our house because we didn't want to spend an hour a day driving [laughs]. And for us it seems that it is more important to be at least somehow closer to the house because when she gets friends they will live nearby. So, there were actually three options for us, and we tried a Waldorf school which is really close to our house, and it would be logical to make this step from a Waldorf inspired kindergarten to a Waldorf elementary school, but no [laughs]. We went to the Open House, and we were... I know many people (like my relatives) who have kids in Waldorf, and the Waldorf is great, but it can be fundamentalist. They are too dogmatic, and they say that if Rudolf Steiner, the founder, said something 100 years ago, it still applies today, but sometimes it doesn't. And for us when we went there, the atmosphere wasn't for us [laughs]. And we saw the teacher of the year, and no way [laughs]. She was too dogmatic. And sometimes being spiritual is good, but sometimes it's too much, especially for us – we are not too much into that stuff. So, no [laughs]. Then there was the option for a classical elementary school which was the closest to our house, but we didn't want that either because it was just too... It was like the time was frozen, it looked the same way as when I was at elementary school like 20 or 25 years ago. So, no [laughs]. And the third option was a classical state-run public school, but with good references and this Step by Step program, which is an addition to a classical elementary program where they have some extra hours working a little bit different than normal.

AL: So, kind of like an alternative education system within the public system.

MH: Yes, something like this. But it's more like how I think normal public schools should look like, and I think everybody would be happy with it because we have a good headmaster and we

have a great teacher of our daughter, so we are really happy there. It's a normal school for everybody, but just well run.

AL: And do you plan to send your son there as well?

MH: If possible, yes. But there is a problem here because you are not meant to choose an elementary school... Well, you can but it's overcrowded so they won't accept you if you're not in a district of a few streets around the school where you have the best chance to get inside. For example, we had to change our permanent residence... It's really horrible. But, yes, hopefully we will be able to send our son there, too.

AL: I hope so! Fingers crossed that you can [laughs]. Well, thank you so much. Is there anything you would like to add that we have not discussed?

MH: Well, the only thing here that is important to know is that usually the Czech Republic educational system is free, but the kindergartens are private, so it's not free. I think this is a drawback of the Forest Kindergartens because not all parents can afford to have their kids there. And I would love to see some kind of development in the future that it will be more... That maybe the classical kindergartens can be more inspired by the concept of Forest Kindergartens and just spend more time outside, and I would love to see more of a convergence of the classical kindergartens towards the outdoors.

AL: And when you say the "classical kindergartens," those are the free, state-run kindergartens?

MH: Yes.

AL: So, just having something like a Forest Kindergarten more accessible for parents who can't necessarily pay for it?

MH: Yes.

AL: That is something that has come up in other interviews – the financial side of it. And it's not just the cost of tuition, it's also the cost of equipment, like coats and hats...

MH: In our kindergarten, which is also specific, it's a small group, it's only 14 kids for two teachers. And the group is diverse in age, there are kids from two years to six or seven. So, there are mixed age groups where the younger ones can learn from the older ones and the older ones can take care of the younger ones. And this is something that you normally don't have in the classical kindergartens because they are all the same age. So, this is really great for us. For example, it meant that for a year or two, both our kids were in the same kindergarten. Very often you have parents who have more kids there, so there are, for example, only ten families at the kindergarten and there is this sense of community, which is also really great for us. We know the parents and we know the kids, so this is something I would add. But you were asking about the accessibility... Yeah, I don't know what to say. It sucks [laughs].

AL: Yes, it's a problem everywhere [laughs]. Well, thank you so much, those are all my questions for you! Thank you so much!

7. Lenka Kleger:

Ava Lundell (AL): Hi Lenka! Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. I really appreciate it. Before beginning the interview, I first wanted to explain my research interests and why I have asked to interview you. I am participating in a study abroad program during which the students conduct a one-month research project focused on an area of interest within Czech society. For my research project, I am studying Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic. I am especially interested in understanding the motivations of people who engage with this form of alternative education in Czech society. Overall, this research project will investigate Czech cultural appreciation for alternative education – specifically Forest Kindergartens – to

attempt to answer the key research question: *What are the motivations for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic, and what place does this form of alternative education have in Czech society today?* For my research project, I am interviewing several teachers and parents part of Forest Kindergarten communities in Prague. Before asking my first question, I want to check if you are comfortable with me recording this interview? And are you comfortable with me quoting you?

Lenka Kleger (LK): Yes.

AL: So, my first question for you is really broad. How do you define alternative education?

LK: I guess it would be education that differs from the common education style we have in the Czech Republic. Other than the mainstream or the most common education style or approach.

AL: Perfect. And how would you describe the mainstream education approach?

LK: Especially when speaking about Forest Kindergartens, I think what's very typical for the Czech educational system is that it's taking place indoors. The kids spend most of the time indoors. This is one thing that I find very important. It's more... Definitely a hierarchy. In general, there's a big hierarchy between the teacher and the children, and this is a big difference between our kindergarten or even alternative schools where my other kid goes at the moment. So, there's more friendly relationships, more equal, the teachers are not above the kids.

AL: So, there's this hierarchy where teachers are above the kids. That's interesting. And how do you think Forest Kindergartens fit into this category of alternative education?

LK: Well, I think Forest Kindergartens are responding to the demands of some parents who want some change, who want to have their kids outdoors, want their kids to be raised in a more respecting way or friendly way and perhaps for the kids to have more freedom in their choices. Of course, it differs. I don't want to generalize mainstream education or the common education

system in the Czech Republic – there are a lot of differences between different schools and kindergartens and so on. But yeah, my experience with the common Czech indoors kindergarten is that it's much more driven by the teacher. The teacher decides now this activity starts, now this activity ends, now we do this, and you will do it in the way that was set and so on. While in the Forest Kindergarten, I think the kids have more freedom to do what they want to do, when they want to do it, with whom they want to do it.

AL: That makes sense. So, in more mainstream kindergarten classes, there are more rules and structure, and then in Forest Kindergartens, there's a little bit more freedom for the children to do what they want. But would you also say that there's still structure in Forest Kindergartens as well?

LK: Yes, at least at our Forest Kindergarten there is. There is a structure of the day, there are some rules that the kids have to follow. I think that there must be some rules and some structures or else it would be completely confusing for the kids and there would be rebellion [laughs]. So, I guess the kids need to have some rules, but they also need some freedom for themselves to decide and choose.

AL: Yes, it's a good balance between freedom and rules.

LK: Yes.

AL: And this is also a pretty broad question, but how would you explain the significance or position or relevance of Forest Kindergartens in the larger Czech education environment?

LK: I think it's really considered an alternative approach at the moment, it's still something that a minority of kids attend the Forest Kindergartens. But there's a big boom on it, I see that there is a lot of demand from the parents who would like their kids to stay outdoors. And I have a feeling that it was very much boosted by the COVID pandemic. I could see it all through the educational

systems, that the teachers... It wasn't pleasant to be indoors with the masks and so on. So, teachers started to seek more outdoor activities and people started to think more about that it's actually nice to be outdoors, you can be in the fresh air. So, I can feel some shift in this direction.

AL: Oh, that's really interesting. With your job as someone who works with teachers, you were able to see how teachers were feeling during the pandemic, and so that's where this is coming from?

LK: Yes. We have a project that's called Lessons in Grass, which is a set of activities for teachers on how to teach any subject basically outdoors. There's, like, mathematics outdoors and laboratories outdoors and arts outdoors and anything else. Just simple, short activities on how you can shift your teaching from the classroom to the forest or meadow or whatever. And before COVID, it was successful – it was only for Czech teachers, so I'm talking only about the Czech teachers. They were interested, they responded to it, but during COVID you could see a complete increase of interest, so many people attending the webinars, so many people downloading the activities, so we could really see the difference.

AL: Yeah, that's really interesting. I like that. And I'm also curious, what do you think the sources of inspiration are for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic?

LK: So, I will start with parents. I think for parents what's inspiring is mainly this "mouth-to-mouth" [laughs]. Sharing of experience. You know, someone tells you, "Well, we have a kid in the Forest Kindergarten, and we are so happy about it, it is so good, and we recommend you do the same." And this is one way that I think parents get motivated or inspired about such idea. And some bad experience, I would say. Parents are not happy with the kindergarten they are at, for example, and they are searching for some change. And as they start searching, they discover there is some Forest Kindergarten nearby... So, I would say these two things. And for the

teachers, when they search for inspiration for their teaching, there are several NGOs or organizations, like environmental education organizations (we are one of them) – there are many regional organizations that are trying to support teachers... Even running some workshops for the kids, but also providing inspiration for the teachers. There is also this Association of Forest Kindergartens, I think this is a very important source for teachers and those who are running the kindergartens.

AL: Thank you. And do you think there's anything about the history of Czech society or cultural appreciation for nature? Do you think any of that has to do with the inspiration for Forest Kindergartens?

LK: I think we have a strong tradition with these cottages... I don't know if you've heard of it [laughs].

AL: Yes, I have [laughs].

LK: Many Czech people have a weekend house called a cottage, so if you want to go for a weekend somewhere to the nature, you very often visit your own weekend house, which is usually somewhere in the nature or some village. So, this comes from the communism. We were not allowed to travel outside of the Czech Republic, so people were searching for ways how to spend time somewhere else but home. So, this "cottaging" tradition started. I think this is one perhaps starting point. And I don't remember the numbers, but there is some research in the Czech Republic about nature and the behavior of people when it comes to protecting nature. So, in this research it usually shows that the majority of Czech people like nature, they consider it as a very important thing. They are very open to protect nature, to do things for nature. But in reality, they don't do that much [laughs]. There is quite a gap between the willingness and the reality.

AL: That's funny [laughs]. That's so fascinating what you mentioned about the cottages, I've definitely noticed that. I've been here now for around three months and on the weekends, people just leave, and they go to their cottages [laughs]. And do you have a cottage somewhere?

LK: Yes.

AL: And how often do you go?

LK: Actually, not that often. Well, it's my parents' cottage. So, my parents go there more, almost every weekend, and now they're retired so for the summer they go there.

AL: Wow, that sounds amazing [laughs]! Is it in the mountains or something?

LK: It's a place between the Czech Republic and Moravia, if you just travel east on the highway between Prague and Brno, it's like halfway let's say. And it's a little village which was... The cottage used to be quite at the edge of the village and surrounded by the forest, but it's not actually anymore because in the Czech Republic we have this calamity of bark beetles. So, the forests are being cut down. At the moment, it's a cottage surrounded by some kind of meadow or cut forest [laughs].

AL: Because the trees were cut down [laughs]. Well, that's still amazing [laughs].

LK: Yeah, it doesn't seem like nature, but still, you can see how the new forest is growing.

AL: Yeah, you can see how it's growing, that's very cool. I'm sorry, that was not related to my interview questions, I was just curious [laughs]. And you mentioned you have two children. Is that correct?

LK: Yes.

AL: And one of your children is at a Forest Kindergarten, and the other is not?

LK: I have a daughter. She's eight years old and she used to go to Lesnění as well, to the Forest Kindergarten. But she's at school now. And then we have my son... I think you met him; he goes there all days.

AL: Yes, I'm sure I met him [laughs].

LK: Yes, he was there, but of course there are so many kids [laughs]. And yes, we are so happy with it. For my eight year old daughter, she attended the Forest Kindergarten and then in the winter she was feeling cold or something. And there is a normal indoor kindergarten maybe 50 meters from the place where we live. So, every morning when we used to go to the Forest Kindergarten, she said, "Mom, I want to go to this indoor kindergarten where there is warmth and it's close and they are playing on the carpet" [laughs]. So, she was begging for it so long that for the last year of kindergarten we split it. So, she went for two days to the Forest Kindergarten and for three days to the common kindergarten. And I have to say after a few months, she was begging, "I don't want to be in the indoor kindergarten, I want to be at Lesnění all the time."

AL: That's really interesting. Did she tell you why? Did she explain why she wanted to go back full time?

LK: I think one reason was for sure that when she entered the kids knew each other from the years before and she was new, and she wasn't there even for the whole week. So, it took her some time to get part of the group. She's not so fast, she's kind of an introvert, she needs time to get to know the kids. But she didn't like the rules, I have to say. They were changing clothes, for example, all the time. In the morning, they were supposed to come in some outdoor clothes, change for the indoor clothes, then they went outside so they were supposed to change clothes again, then come back for lunch and change the clothes again, then change to pajamas for sleeping, then change for outdoor clothes again. And she was like, "I don't want to do that, we

are changing clothes all the time.” Even when they went to the garden (they have quite a nice, big garden I can say), but they were not allowed to get dirty, for example. And she was used from Lesnění that she just gets dirty if she wants to play with the mud or play with dust, trying new materials. And there it was quite a problem, I have to say. It was something that was very important for me, and I knew it was going to be a problem, so I asked the Director before she started attending the kindergarten, and she said it was no problem, that it was all good if she got dirty. And then we were hearing from the teachers that she was playing with the dust, and it was no good [laughs].

AL: Yes, I definitely noticed that when I was there for a day. When we were walking in the woods, the children played with stones and sticks and mud, and they were touching snails and slugs, and they loved it! And I think it was amazing, that connection with the environment that’s around them, and they’re not afraid of it but they embrace it. And I think I definitely noticed that. And why did you choose to send both of your children to a Forest Kindergarten?

LK: Because I think it’s very important that they spend time in nature. They can learn so much in nature just by being there, by using all the senses, like touching the slug, for example – it’s a sensation. You can smell, you can see how the seasons are changing over the year, you learn how to dress for different temperatures, if it rains or if it’s sunny. So, all this, I think it’s very important. Somehow, I think that’s the only time when the kids can really do that because in the school, they’re already indoors and it’s very, very difficult to find a school that takes kids outdoors for a lot of time. So, perhaps they will now be indoors for the elementary school, for the high school, for the university. It’s all the same. Then working. Maybe they will work outdoors somehow, but most likely they will spend most of their life indoors, and so this is a great chance

how to remember for the life that nature is here, it's important, it's actually a nice place to be at, it's not something scary where you might get cold and wet.

AL: That's such a good point. When a child is in kindergarten, those are fundamental years for development. So, if they're in nature that whole time, they will grow up with that understanding, and it's so true, that is one of their only times to be completely in nature because after that you're in school and then you go to college and then you're at a job. It is a really amazing thing that they can spend a couple years just outside all the time. And so, it sounds like nature was a huge deciding factor in why you chose a Forest Kindergarten. Were there any other factors that were maybe as important, like atmosphere or activities that they did?

LK: Yeah, definitely. It was also about more respecting approach, about more freedom. I kind of anticipated that when I went to see the kindergarten, I actually liked how the teachers were talking with the kids, how they behaved, what they allowed them to do. And also, the fact that there are fewer kids in the class. So, just 16 (it used to be 15) kids, and it's up to 30 kids in the common kindergarten and there are less teachers, like two teachers in the morning, but most of the day there's one teacher. I don't think you can kind of somehow work individually with the kids too much because one person cannot work with 30 kids.

AL: Yeah, that's interesting. That's a theme that has come up in a lot of other interviews is the size of the classes and that individualized approach. And I'm also curious, how do you think your children's experiences at a Forest Kindergarten have differed from the experiences they would have had at another type of educational institution?

LK: I'm not quite sure what you mean...

AL: When you see your children, both the child who's in the kindergarten and then also your eight year old daughter, how do you think that their experiences at the Forest Kindergarten were

different from if they had been sent to another kindergarten? You've already kind of talked about this, but is there anything that you'd want to add?

LK: It's difficult to say because once they were there, I can't say how it would be. But the short experience that we have, we can compare actually for my daughter. My son, he attended Lesnění all the time, so for him, I cannot really compare how he would feel at the other environment. But for my daughter, she just didn't like it, and I didn't like it either, I have to say. I was kind of stressed from it after some time because it's much more about some kind of ranking... They are kind of testing the kids all the time, like they are drawing a picture and you're supposed to draw nicer, and if they don't it's not okay because their hand is not ready for writing in the school and so on. So, they are doing these little diagnostics all the time. And if your kid doesn't pass the diagnostic, it's a problem. So, for Sarah, for example, we were in trouble all the time [laughs]. The teacher was coming in and she was saying one day that her hand was not loose enough for writing, that's too bad. The next day she said she could not move when we do exercises, she's not able to turn her hands around, she's not doing well. But, in my opinion, she's a normal girl. The teachers in Lesnění would say she's fine, when she's running in the forest, she doesn't have any obvious problems with movement. So, I had a feeling there's too much stress on these diagnostics, and the kids have to fit according to some tables and some expectations that a kid should be. But I don't know, maybe the kid is not ready to do something yet, maybe it will be ready to do it half a year later. What's the problem [laughs]? Everyone is different. This is something that is also stressful for me. I don't want to be testing them all the time. I want them to be good, I want them to learn things, but not to push it. I had a feeling of pushing too much.

AL: Yeah, they're so young. And I think it's interesting that your daughter and you as a parent both had negative reactions to the "normal" school. That's interesting. So, your daughter is eight

years old. Have you sent her to another alternative education institution like a Montessori school? Where is she at right now?

LK: Exactly. She's at a Montessori school.

AL: And why did you choose to send her to Montessori school?

LK: Somehow, I think once you start with alternative education you won't stop [laughs]. You learn that the approach can be different and more friendly, more open, and this is what we search for in the schools that are nearby to the place where we live. She should be in the Czech system... Your kid is supposed to be in the nearest school. They keep a place for your kid. So, I don't like this school. I don't think it's progressive. I don't think it's changing the education style according to the needs that we have now for the education. So, I didn't like this school at all. So, we were searching, and we got this recommendation for this Montessori school where actually the kids from Martina also attend there. So, she told us that it was a good school, that she liked it, she described the approaches and the things that they do there. And I really liked it.

AL: And are you planning to send your son there as well?

LK: Yes, he starts in September.

AL: Okay. When you were looking at kindergartens, what other options did you consider other than a Forest Kindergarten? There was the one that was really close to your house – were there other kindergartens that you considered?

LK: Yes, we went to see those... I would call it common kindergartens. We went to see these common kindergartens that were close to where we live, and then we went to see Lesnění and I think even one more Forest Kindergarten, and we much more liked Lesnění to common kindergartens. There was also... An important thing was the money, I have to say, because it was quite expensive for a family to pay for the Forest Kindergartens. For the common kindergarten

it's free, it's part of a free education system in the Czech Republic. So, that was one important thing when we were deciding whether we really want to pay for this, because you know that your kids will be going there for another five years. It's a lot of money. So, this was the biggest minus for choosing the Forest Kindergartens, but then we thought let's go give it a try because we really liked it, and we thought we will just try a Forest Kindergarten for one year for the starting and then we will go back to the common kindergarten which is for free and it's also much easier for the transportation. We have to take a car and travel around ten to 15 minutes to Lesnění from our place, or take the bus which takes, I don't know, half an hour, but if we went to the close kindergarten, it would just take five minutes walking, so that's also a downside. So, we thought we'll try for one year and then we'll change. And then we couldn't change, we liked it so much [laughs]. So, we thought we will just do it somehow [laughs].

AL: So, despite the travel time and the finance side of it, you still chose the Forest Kindergarten?

LK: Yes. I have to say it was such a great decision. I don't regret any money spent or any time spent for traveling, even though it's some kind of difficult sometimes and sometimes it's annoying. You have to plan a lot, like who's going to go pick up. But still, I don't regret it. And I forgot to say one more thing. What is important for us personally, and I think for many people in Lesnění, is the community – you have the community of the Forest Kindergarten. It's very different in the state kindergartens, there's no place for the parents to meet so much. You have to come there, there's little room where you should be quiet when you're picking your kid. In the Forest Kindergarten, the parents meet in the garden, and they talk for some time. There are many activities... Now we have this Earth celebration, and Air celebration, some events for the parents or even the grandparents. And you don't have that many of them in the common kindergarten. So, that's a big difference. And for me, this is something very important. We met many nice

people at the kindergarten, we became friends. We are still meeting with them even though they are now somewhere else. We find that important.

AL: Thank you so much for sharing that. I really appreciate it. And is there anything else you want to share with me that we haven't discussed yet?

LK: I think there's one thing... It's about the community that maybe what people like about the Forest Kindergartens is... You know, you choose it. So, most likely the other parents who choose the Forest Kindergarten, they will have similar approaches to you, similar values, similar life values. So, perhaps this is easier to become friends, to create a community once the people are kind of on the same wave, while in the common kindergarten it's all the different types of people that send their kids.

AL: Yes, that makes sense. When the parents have actively chosen to send their children to a Forest Kindergarten that means that they all have similar values and similar approaches to life in certain ways. And then that helps the community come together. That's a good point.

LK: Just one thing to add. Sometimes I'm not sure if this is only positive. That for the kids, they live in some kind of bubble. We send them to the Forest Kindergarten where they meet these nice behaving kids from parents who are very focused on their kids, who take care of them, who invest all the money in traveling to get them to the best Forest Kindergarten that they could find. So, it's kind of a bubble. So, I am always thinking one day they will leave this community and meet other kids that maybe are not so lucky, and they are having some harder lives and are not behaving so nicely to their friends or to the kids around, maybe it will be kind of crush for them. But I still think it's better to start with a nice education, nice environment, and then have the crush sometime later on and see how they manage [laughs].

AL: Yes, when they're older [laughs]. That's a really good point, that bubble. That's also something that has come up in other interviews, is the bubble that can form. Thank you so much, this has been so helpful.

8. Radka Smith Slamová:

Ava Lundell (AL): Hi Radka! Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. I really appreciate it. Before beginning the interview, I first wanted to explain my research interests and why I have asked to interview you. I am participating in a study abroad program during which the students conduct a one-month research project focused on an area of interest within Czech society. For my research project, I am studying Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic. I am especially interested in understanding the motivations of people who engage with this form of alternative education in Czech society. Overall, this research project will investigate Czech cultural appreciation for alternative education – specifically Forest Kindergartens – to attempt to answer the key research question: *What are the motivations for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic, and what place does this form of alternative education have in Czech society today?* As I explained in my email, Dr. Jana Straková is my Advisor for my research project. Dr. Straková shared with me that you conducted research on parents sending their children to alternative schools in the Czech Republic. I think you would be a great person to speak with regarding the Czech Republic's approach to alternative education and, more specifically, Forest Kindergartens. Before asking my first question, I want to check if you are comfortable with me recording this interview? And are you comfortable with me quoting you?

Radka Smith Slamová (RSS): Yes. And I actually did a little prep for this meeting. I think I'll be better talking about the questions that relate to the parents, but if you want, we can go from the top to the bottom, but I definitely have more material about the parents.

AL: Thank you for letting me know. Yes, we can move through the questions, and share whatever you can/say whatever you want to say. So, like you saw, the first question I have for you is how do you define alternative education?

RSS: I don't have a strict definition, but I think of it as education that focuses on developing the whole individual, so it does not focus more on the cognitive side, but it is focused on physical, social-emotional, spiritual development. And which facets are emphasized depends on the specific alternative approach.

AL: That's great. So, I'm hearing you say alternative education is a holistic approach to education, looking at the whole child.

RSS: Yes, to educate the individual. So, if someone's already really good at some physical things, perhaps the education of that individual will push his boundaries in the social area if they're not so good at that, for example.

AL: How do you see Forest Kindergartens fitting into this definition that you've given me of alternative education?

RSS: I actually only know Forest Kindergartens through the parents. I have never been to one, so I don't actually know what happens in there. But I definitely think it belongs to this category of alternative schools because, from what I've heard from the parents who seek them, they are really focused on social and emotional development and the physical, really trying to be a healthy environment for the child to grow in. And cognitive, of course. They always emphasize all these activities they do with the branches and stones and things, and so holistic for sure.

AL: I mentioned that yesterday I met with a teacher at a Forest Kindergarten. She invited me to the school and invited me to look around, and it was the first time I had ever been to an education environment that looked like that. There were gardens everywhere and a chicken coup,

and it was beautiful! And I think that the way that you've described alternative education in terms of the emotional development and the physical development, being at the school yesterday I definitely saw that holistic approach. So, even though you said you only know these schools through the parents, I think what you've said definitely resonates for me having already seen a Forest Kindergarten. So, the next question that I sent to you and that I wanted to ask you was how would you explain the relevance of Forest Kindergartens in the Czech education environment?

RSS: They seem to be filling a gap in the educational market. They provide... I think of them as a middle step for some families in between having their child with them and sending them to a more institutionalized setting. But this is only because of the parents I have talked to. A lot of the parents in my research are believers of "attachment parenting," they are really attentive to their child's needs ever since its born, and they cannot imagine sending the child off to a public daycare when they are three where it's a much more... They imagine it's a much more rigid environment with very strict rules and no special attention given to the child's needs or the family's unique values. So, at least the families I have spoken with, which is only actually six of the participants I have in my research had considered Forest Kindergartens (so a small sample) and then I know three other friends very closely who chose the Forest Kindergartens (so a pretty small sample), but they think of it in terms of how their child is not ready for a traditional, institutional setting yet, but they are already three and are in need of meeting some peers and having some structured activity, and so where do I send them? The Forest Kindergarten is usually a more affordable option compared to some other daycares that they consider, like sometimes Montessori can be really expensive, or Waldorf is not always available. It depends on what's available.

AL: Thank you, that's helpful. And that actually does go to a question that I had planned to ask you later on, but because you've touched on it, I was curious about if you found any information on what options parents considered other than Forest Kindergartens for their children? What was their alternative? It sounds like you found a little information on this.

RSS: Yeah, so the parents I talked to though are not representative of all the Forest Kindergarten parents because these parents are still interested in a public primary school, so it may not be the homeschooling kind of parents. So, the parents I have in my research are open to almost any alternative to regular public daycare. They are very concerned about the high teacher-to-child ratio in public daycare. They say it's 30 children to one teacher (I think it's a little bit less usually because some of them are sometimes sick), so any kind of kindergarten that appears to provide a more individual approach can look appealing. For example, in my research, one parent was considering a Montessori private kindergarten, but it's too expensive for her and it's too focused on achievement, like the kids are working in the kindergarten, they always have development activities, it's too structured for her, and she also was considering some other type of kindergarten that is not called a Forest Kindergarten but is outside. So, that's a parent who likes nature and likes being outside. And then I found someone else who even tried an English high-achievement where they really drill things into the children and then realized that it's too much, they don't like the parents there, so they switched to a Forest Kindergarten which is a completely different environment. And then a lot of the parents attend these informal groups, it's not a kindergarten care that happens every day, but maybe they consider some group for children that have activities twice a week.

AL: And do these informal groups have a name?

RSS: No, it's usually, like, something in the area. It's not even registered as an institution, but it's some parent who provides some activities. And a lot of parents in my research are still open to public kindergartens, they just want to delay it slightly until the child becomes able to, for example, speak, or until they seem somehow ready to enter the institutional environment.

AL: Okay, that's interesting. And this is the question that I had attached to what we're talking about regarding if you found any information in your research on whether parents who send their children to Forest Kindergartens continue sending their children to alternative education institutions (e.g., Montessori schools)? Is there a pattern?

RSS: So, this would be really great to ask the teachers because from my research I only know about the parents who already are considering a public school, so I don't know about the other parents. So, I actually can't tell you quantitatively, but the parents in my research, if they had a really good experience in the Forest Kindergarten, then they tend to seek something that slightly resembles the Forest Kindergarten. But in the primary school there is not a wide range of primary schools that are like a Forest Kindergarten, they don't continue the same thing. For example, they consider a Waldorf classroom, or a Montessori classroom. But there is also another group of parents who even select a regular public school, but they want it to be a smaller school, for example, so there is some community, or the school prides itself on the family atmosphere, individual approach. So, in this sense, it resembles the Forest Kindergarten... Or the school says they spend a lot of time outside.

AL: So, I'm hearing you say that the size of the school is something that keeps coming up for parents, like the number of children in the classroom compared to teachers and how that impacts the community of the school. Is that what you heard a lot from parents?

RSS: Actually, it's not necessarily the size of the classroom, but the size of the school. Like, it could be a big school but small classes. But the parents are really scared of the big institution, they really dislike the taste of their child enrolling in a grade that has A, B, C, D classes. And they somehow imagine that if it's a smaller school, it will naturally become a homier environment, even though they may later find out that there's 28 children in one class – they are often surprised. For example, the people who choose a Waldorf classroom, they think it will be a nice, really close, individual approach to children, and then they find out that the classes are just as overcrowded as any other class.

AL: Interesting, thank you. I'm sorry we jumped around the questions a little bit, but it just seemed more relevant to what we were talking about. We can kind of jump back to the beginning a little bit. I was wondering what you think the sources of inspiration are for Forest Kindergartens in the Czech Republic. I know this isn't exactly what you researched and what you studied, but from your general knowledge and understanding of education in the Czech Republic where do you think this inspiration comes from for Forest Kindergartens?

RSS: Like the pedagogical approaches?

AL: Yes, as well as the parental desire to send their children to Forest Kindergartens and the teachers who decide to teach at Forest Kindergartens. So, both pedagogy as well as cultural appreciation for Forest Kindergartens.

RSS: Well, I can tell you what the parents hope for, but I don't know if it's what they actually find when they go [laughs]. Some of the parents in my research are inspired by the “unschooling movement” where they believe that if you follow the child's interests, if you surround them with interesting stimuli, they will naturally absorb knowledge. And that's why you don't really have to have any sophisticated things (like the Montessori equipment), because in the nature they will

discover the patterns that are important for their learning. And some of the Forest Kindergartens are inspired by the Waldorf pedagogy, but only some of them, and they usually openly declare it. There's also a lot of focus on traditions that are linked to the regular, yearly cycle, and it even looks like they somehow even invent traditions – they rediscover the old traditions of the old days because they know that childhood is very linked to rituals, and they feel like the traditional public schools don't respect the yearly routine. And then I think there is a lot of inspiration from “positive parenting,” a lot of focus on disciplining practices that treat the child as an equal, a partner in the dialogue. They're really careful about reinforcements and punishments, and they prefer to shape the child's behavior through negotiation. And I still see a lot of links to attachment parenting with the parents who choose these schools. For example, how is the parent to the child treated when they enter the community? In a regular public daycare, parents complain that they have to hand in the child and leave. For example, the Forest Kindergarten in my town allows the parent to stay the first two hours for as many weeks as necessary until the child learns to leave their mother. So, some kind of tribal... I don't know if there's a name for it, but the idea that we are a tribe, the family is a tribe, and you enter into our tribe, there's a ritual... Things like that.

AL: Those words “tribe” and “ritual,” that's very interesting. So, Forest Kindergartens show this appreciation for the tribe of the family and welcoming that tribe into their own tribe, and parents appreciate this respect. Is that kind of what you're saying?

RSS: Yes, but I'm not quite sure that they will actually encounter it. That's what they think they will get there when I talk to them.

AL: So, the next question I had for you we've already kind of discussed, and that next question was why you think parents choose to send their children to Forest Kindergartens. And within

that, how important do you think “the forest”/nature is for parents sending their children to Forest Kindergartens? What kind of role does that aspect play?

RSS: I can't actually quantify or compare this because I'm a qualitative researcher and I don't have the sample to give you the comparison really. But for the few people I have in my research, they all feel close to the nature. It's a pre-requisite for even considering Forest Kindergartens because they get the child muddy, and you have to be available to wash the clothes and be excited about being outdoors and doing the “salve work” there on the weekends – you have to like that [laughs]. That's a pre-requisite, but I don't think it's necessarily the main reason that parents send their children to Forest Kindergartens. For the parents I talked with, the individual approach to the child was very important. Some adults, they want to give their child to an adult who will try to treat them as well or even better than they do, so they try to compare these different educational options and Forest Kindergartens often say very explicitly on their website that this is a very important priority, that no matter who your child is we will try to integrate them into our tribe. So, parents hope that if there is a smaller child to teacher ratio, this will already have a higher chance of happening. And then, maybe more than the forest, I think the parents are often health-conscious, they are living a healthy lifestyle, some of them really do not want to be feeding their child the food in the public kindergarten (which is not very healthy, not so many vegetables). So, this is a big issue – some of the parents really like that the food is vegetarian in the Forest Kindergarten, or they can provide their own snack or something. They can have some control over the food that the child consumes. And then also as part of the healthy lifestyle, these families spend a lot of time moving, being outside, so they just don't want to send their child somewhere they feel is sterile. The public kindergarten often actually has very long stays outside, too, but it might be in a schoolyard that has a little fence, and the kids are just

running around in the fenced yard. The parents just want the child to be, like, dragged in the forest and experience the real outside. And for the individual approach to the child, I think this is a really important one because most of the parents in my research, they thought their child had some unique characteristics which made them not so easily compatible with the public kindergarten. For example, a stubborn child who doesn't want to follow orders without a nice, peaceful conversation. Or a very sensitive child who has some psychosomatic problems before they have to enter any new environment. Or also children who show signs of hyperactivity where if they are inside for longer than one hour, they start to hit all the children around them, so parents want to make sure they get their outlet in the Forest.

AL: So, what I'm hearing is that there are a lot of factors that play into why parents are interested in Forest Kindergartens. So, a pre-requisite is that parents do enjoy nature, but they also like having the control over what their child eats and they like the health-conscious approach of Forest Kindergartens, but they also like the smaller school environment and the community. And for parents who also feel like their children have some special needs (like if they are stubborn or hyperactive), the Forest Kindergarten checks that box and makes the parent feel more comfortable that their child is getting what they need. Is that a good summary of what you've said?

RSS: Yes, but I do want to point out that I also talked to some of the parents after they already sent the child there, and it's not always how they imagined it. For example, the Forest Kindergarten may say they are going to be great in building the relationship with the children, but then the teachers can sometimes be just sitting in the forest and enjoying the nature, not having the skills to actually implement these promises. So, it really depends on institution to institution.

AL: Interesting, that's good to know. And this is more of a personal question, so if you don't feel comfortable answering it that's okay, but if you have children, would you send your child to a Forest Kindergarten? Why or why not? How do you approach this having done this research?

RSS: [Laughs] Yes, it's quite interesting for me. I have two children who are quite young, so I was selecting kindergartens for them already, and I did not choose the local Forest Kindergarten, but it might be partly because of the specific one we have. I didn't choose it because I kind of link it to some hypocrisy, I consider it a very elite little closed social bubble environment that I have a slight distaste for just because of how elite it is and how little it acknowledges this elitism. For example, my friends told me that they showed up to the information meeting and the teachers told them that they need to have expensive equipment (like expensive soft-shell jackets for children) in order to have this ticket to play in the forest. And this cost is completely unaffordable for most of the population. The one we have here is not government subsidized, it's entirely funded by the parents, so it must turn out to be a very exclusive social group who is able to somehow gather those resources. So, as a researcher who is interested in educational equity, I would just find it slightly disturbing selecting this environment because of these traits. But, at the same time, I do like some of the parts of what I think they offer. If it was a more mainstream environment (for example, if the public daycare adopted some of these practices), I would of course welcome it. I think it's wonderful if children go on a long walk in the forest and if there's fewer children per teacher. If the teachers are all these excited, driven people who love nature, that sounds good [laughs]. But, at the same time it doesn't sound good enough to convince me. I think as a parent I am very privileged because I can give my children a lot of the experiences that some people feel like they have to pay the Forest Kindergarten to have. I send my children to a more traditional kindergarten, and then I can pick them up and go to the same forest and let them

do their free playing with me because I do not have to do a full-time job. I come from a very privileged position.

AL: That's really interesting, and also shows self-awareness. It's really fascinating to hear how you think about it in terms of your own children and your research and educational equity background. That's really fascinating, thank you for sharing. So, the last formal question is (and we've already kind of touched on this) how do you think a child's experience at a Forest Kindergarten differs from the experience they would have at another type of educational institution?

RSS: Do you mean at any other kind of institution, like even Montessori?

AL: However you want to approach the question. It could be from any other institution including Montessori or Waldorf, or in terms of alternative and then another type of institution.

RSS: I think a Forest Kindergarten is probably healthier physically for the child compared to most institutions because their big value is to be outside no matter what, so the children probably learn to push their physical comfort zone I imagine much more. I'm not so sure if they are pushed as much to push their other comfort zones. For example, socially I do think that the adults that are in charge of them might be mimicking the same communication practices as their parents, so they may not encounter very different approaches from an adult. I do think that if, for example, the parents send their child to a public kindergarten, there might be teachers who treat their child very differently from how they're treated at home (which happened, for example, to me with my children [laughs]). So, a child that behaves a certain way at home, if sent to a public kindergarten, they might behave differently from home. And I think with the Forest Kindergarten there is probably continuation between the home practices and the institutional practices. In the Forest Kindergarten, they may grow healthier self-esteem, that's how I imagine it, but I think

they may not develop the same skill to function in an environment that is not completely understandable. For example, some of the public kindergarten rules may not be completely understandable to the children, they are set by the institution, and yet they have to learn to somehow function within that framework, and I think that's also a life skill that will be perhaps helpful as they continue through the educational hierarchy.

AL: So, there are definitely a lot of positives, but there are also some challenges that could stem from having your child at a Forest Kindergarten. Thank you so much, this has been so fascinating. Before I turn the recording off, I want to ask if there is anything you would like to add that we have not discussed?

RSS: I want to add a little about parents who, in my research, choose a Forest Kindergarten. I really think they are unique in that they don't depend on institutions with their work schedules. I think a lot of them have the freedom to only work part time or pick up their child at 4:00pm. I think it's not a very general sample of the population because of this flexibility that they need to have because the Forest Kindergartens are not very welcoming of normal work schedules (they usually close at 4:00pm, they have their summer holiday off). So, the parents in my research who chose a Forest Kindergarten chose it as an enrichment activity for their child, it's not like "I have to put my child somewhere and which one is the best of the options I have." And many of them actually even have the decision placed slightly by the child. They say, "Look at this environment, do you feel ready to enter, do you want to go?" And only if the child said "yes," they would respect the child's decision and send them there. They take the child's needs as the peer partner in the decision-making. I also wanted to say the reasons why parents choose Forest Kindergartens has to do with family values. Parents feel like regular kindergartens don't respect their family values, like many of the parents are minimalists, they are against consumerism, and

they have some distaste of plastic toys and entertaining the children just so they're quiet and not for the purpose of meeting their potential.

AL: That's so interesting! So, the idea of Forest Kindergartens not being very flexible for working parents... This inflexibility limits the number of parents who have the option of sending their children to Forest Kindergartens.

RSS: I do really think this. And I think the kindergartens do it sometimes intentionally. They're so committed to doing what's best for the child that they run for as long as they think that is good for the child, not the parent. But, at the same time, I think this is what makes them in my mind so hiddenly elitist because some people are single mothers who just don't have that option.

AL: Yes, that's very true. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me – I really appreciate it!

RSS: Thank you!