

No such thing as bad weather, just bad clothes

NZCA chief executive Nancy Bell reports back on her visit to the EECERA conference in Norway and provides an insight into Scandinavian ECE.

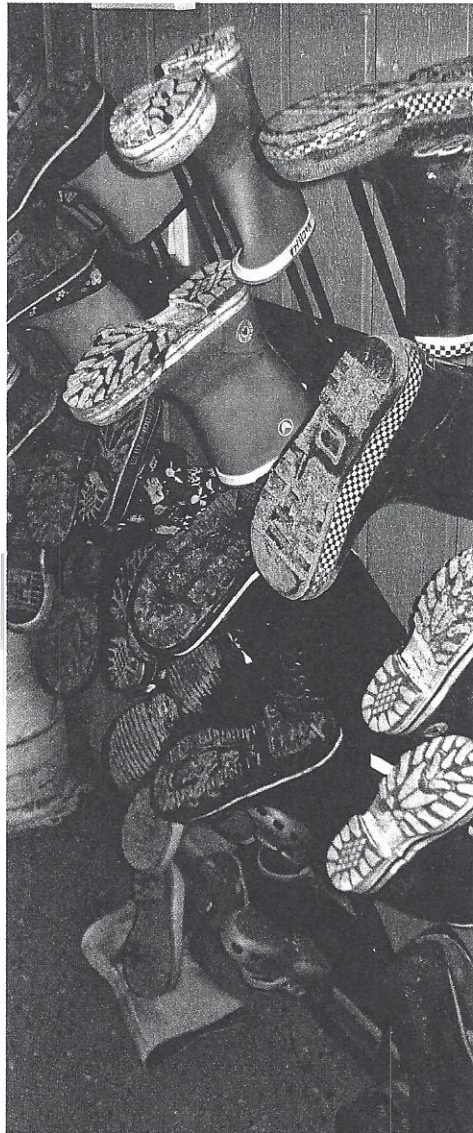
This title says it all, when I and other EECERA conference participants visited a barnehagen (early childhood education centre) in September this year in Stavanger, Norway. Although we were in the middle of the European summer, it rained constantly for the five days of our visit. Walking to and from the conference venue each day, I became accustomed to being soaked to the skin.

On visiting the barnehagen, we quickly learned that the inclement weather was no deterrent to outside play. At every early childhood setting, children were decked out in gumboots and full wet weather clothing each day in order to play outside, no matter what the weather.

This makes sense when you understand that it rains for half of the year in Norway. It was explained to us that the Norwegian people, used to rain and cold, value independence and stoicism. From this comes the expectation that children will be raised to be resilient and resourceful. Norwegian educators also believe in the value of the natural environment, so plan for children to be outdoors as much as possible. This happens right from the start, with the babies put outside in prams to sleep during the day, even when the temperature is well below freezing.

The barnehagen I visited was close to the university and located on five hectares of land in which the children (aged six months to seven years) roamed freely throughout the day. Children played in a large sandpit and there were the usual climbing frames, swings and large boxes and planks as well as trolleys. The barnehagen had a number of small pets, and wild deer bordered the fence that demarked the forest beyond.

There is still considerable interest in Europe in what are broadly termed "forest preschools", and we heard of a range of different models. Some of these involve children playing in the forest all week, others have children moving between a more traditional environment and a nearby



forest for parts of the week only. One local programme took children out in fishing boats once a week and involved children in all aspects of catching, cleaning, filleting and selling the catch. Once again, the weather is no deterrent to participation.

Norway has invested significantly in ensuring that every child who wants a place in an early childhood education service can access one, most of which offer full

day programmes. The government is now moving its focus to examine quality, with a government white paper being developed for public discussion early next year.

The teachers we spoke to were still getting to grips with Norway's recently introduced curriculum guidelines for early childhood education. Each service is required to create an annual plan that outlines how they will implement these guidelines. There are seven essential learning areas to be covered, and teachers spoke of the challenges of ensuring children engage with the whole curriculum, whilst respecting their choices. Keeping the programme child-centred was a strong value evident throughout all of the barnehagen.

The new curriculum requirement that children participate democratically in decision-making about every facet of their ECE experience was widely discussed. Teachers were uncertain how to understand and cater for the preferences of children and families of different ethnicities and religious beliefs. This became one of the conference themes, with presenters raising questions about how best to put democracy into practice in the programme. Should children be asked to vote on the day's programme? If so, what about the one child from the minority position whose wishes differed?

Such conversation appeared to me to be reasonably typical of the European educational context, and participating as an antipodean from "down under" was interesting, given our New Zealand commitment to a bicultural curriculum document.

I was very pleased to have had the experience of attending the EECERA conference, which included over 600 participants from 36 countries. I did make a mental note, however, that should I ever be so fortunate to travel there again, a full set of wet weather gear would be a necessary purchase.