Children’s education in ‘good’ nature: Perceptions of activities in nature spaces in mobile preschools

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Abstract
In the Nordic countries, there is a culturally rooted understanding of nature as a ‘good’ place for children. The aim of the article is to deconstruct this understanding by exploring how different mobile preschools – buses that bring children to different places on a daily basis – relate to nature spaces and children’s learning and well-being in them. Based on critical theorization of place and the nature/culture divide, we argue that, while there exists an idealization of nature within the mobile preschool tradition, the ways that nature is viewed as ‘good’ for children differ depending on the children’s ethnic background and residential area. The results show that compensatory ideas are especially vivid when it comes to migrant children who live in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods. Education in nature, aiming at freedom and agency, brought forward in the preschool curriculum in the Nordic countries, seems more reserved for children who already have the right kind of cultural background and language. The ‘other’ children, however, are more likely to receive an education aiming to compensate for something perceived as missing – that is, the ‘right’ kind of capital regarding ‘nature’.

Keywords
‘good’ childhood in nature, migrant children, nature/culture divide, outdoor education

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Introduction

This article addresses the concept of ‘the outdoors’ in relation to nature as a place for childhood and children’s education. The point of departure is that the outdoors, especially nature, is often perceived as a ‘good’ place for children. This is especially the case in the Nordic countries, where educators in general have a positive attitude towards nature as a place for children’s learning, development and well-being – attitudes which are connected to a strong belief that this is achieved through children’s sensory experiences of various phenomena in nature. The idea of placing young children in nature is also emphasized within the educational traditions and school curriculum, which in turn is connected to historically and culturally anchored and endorsed ideas about the ‘good’ outdoor life in nature. This is a rhetoric connected to a romanticized and idealized conceptualization of nature, and a healthy outdoor education correlating with Nordic national identities (Änggård, 2010; Gullestad, 1997; Halldén, 2009, 2011; Jordt Jørgensen and Martiny-Bruun, 2019; Klaar and Öhman, 2014; Mårtensson et al., 2011; Norðdahl and Jóhannesson, 2016; Sjöstrand Öhrfelt, 2015). The rhetoric of ‘good’ outdoor education is also common in the Western world in general, where ideas of nature in particular are connected to positive values regarding children’s learning, health, development and awareness of environment and sustainability (Ernst, 2014; Kernan and Devine, 2010; McClintic and Petty, 2015; Waller et al., 2010). The outdoors is often contrasted with assumed-negative aspects of the indoor childhood of today, such as low physical activity, obesity and digitization (Maynard, 2007; Stephenson, 2002; World Health Organization, 2019; Zink and Burrows, 2008).

Various authors argue that the conceptualization of nature positions the outdoors and nature as neutral, pure and authentic spaces, separated from human presence. Nature is also often contrasted to the urban, which is considered to be a socially more complex and tensioned space. This nature/culture divide has, however, been challenged with arguments that nature is not just self-evidently real and cannot be located outside human experience (Duhn et al., 2017; Massey, 2005; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2013; Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo, 2016; Taylor, 2011, 2013; Zink and Burrows, 2008). In this article, we take a starting point in this critical theorization of the nature/culture divide by looking at the phenomenon of mobile preschool, which refers to a preschool on a bus that brings children to different places on a daily basis. Previous studies show that it is especially ‘nature’ that is highlighted as defining the ideal places for the buses to travel to (Balldin and Harju, in press; Gustafson et al., 2017; Gustafson and van der Burgt, 2015). However, we argue that while there is an idealization of nature among teachers in terms of children’s learning and well-being, the ways in which nature is viewed as ‘good’ for children differ depending on the children’s socio-economic and ethnic background, as well as where they live. The aim is to discuss this difference by exploring how different mobile preschools relate to nature spaces and children’s learning and well-being.

Our point of departure is that places visited by the mobile preschool are always inscribed with meaning and order, as they cannot be located outside human conventions, intentions and activities (Massey, 2005). The understanding of any place that the bus visits must therefore draw on the links beyond that particular place. We therefore ask questions such as: How is nature connected to children’s education and well-being, constructed within an early childhood education practice with a specific aim of being outdoors? How do understandings of childhood affect the activities in places visited, and by that the children’s education?

The conceptualization of place, nature and childhood

According to Massey (1994, 2005), there have historically existed underlying assumptions of places as closed, coherent and integrated entities, which are particularly vivid when it comes to
‘nature’ and ‘the countryside’. Nature, Massey (2005) argues, is often contrasted with urban living in cities; in this contrast, nature is seen as docile, maintaining its given forms and positions, while culture, on the contrary, is seen as inherently dynamic, self-transforming and challenging. This is what is usually referred to as the nature/culture divide. For Massey (1994, 2005), however, all places, including nature, are formed by the juxtaposition and co-presence of particular sets of social interrelations and the effects they produce. The proposition is that the social interrelations are wider than and go beyond the area being referred to in any particular context as a place. Places are thus inevitably unfixed and by their nature dynamic and changing. From this point of view, nature is involved in the same ‘new’ spatiality as the city, that is, thrown-togetherness, the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now (Massey, 2005: 140). This is in line with Taylor (2011, 2013) who argues that nature and culture cannot be separated – the imagined pure and perfect nature, separated from human cultural interference, does not actually exist.

According to Taylor (2011), the essential and idealized conceptualization of (singular) nature, associated with authentic, pure and coherent entities, is often correlated with the idea of the pure, vulnerable and innocent child. The moral authority of nature thus lends weight to the truth of claims of childhood innocence, which within outdoor education is connected to two especially well-established discourses in relation to children and nature. One is connected to a romanticized and idealized conceptualization of nature, correlated with the idea of the pure, vulnerable and innocent child. Here, the focus is on nature in the child, that is, nature as a ‘neutral’ and optimal place where children can be themselves and live out their feelings, identities and reactions. This includes a nostalgic view about original belonging, well-being and nature as something to discover and protect. Another well-established discourse is the child in nature, which is more focussed on learning, education and socialization. This discourse has its origin in an Anglo-Saxon educational approach to learning by doing and focuses on nature as an educator (Halldén, 2009, 2011; Sjöstrand Öhrfelt, 2015; Taylor, 2013). Taylor (2013) argues that the two discourses depend upon the binary logic of the nature/culture divide, which displaces children from their actual material world and positions them as needing protection from that world. Instead of this separation, Taylor (2013) wants to deromanticize the relationship between nature and children by shedding light on children’s significant and worldly relations (relationships, positions, material and embodied experience), which, she argues, have implications for the connection between nature and children’s education.

A study on mobile preschool

This article is based on a research project carried out from 2016 to 2018 that focussed mobility, informal learning and citizenship in mobile preschools in Sweden. Mobile preschools exist in about a dozen municipalities, and although some are private, most are organized by the municipalities (Gustafson et al., 2017; Gustafson and van der Burgt, 2015). They were introduced in Sweden in 2007 in order to mitigate an acute lack of space in existing preschools, but mobile preschools have also gained popularity because of the opportunities they offer for outdoor play and learning. Common routines are to leave the preschool yard at 9:00 a.m. and return at 3:00 p.m. The preferred locations are outdoor places; forests and wooded recreational areas in particular are highlighted as the ideal environments for children’s play and learning (Ekman Ladru and Gustafson, 2018; Gustafson et al., 2017; Gustafson and van der Burgt, 2015). The opportunities that the mobile preschools are assumed to offer are mainly connected to two different ideas – complementary and compensatory. The complementary idea is based on a belief that the mobile preschool is an experience-based complement to regular preschool education. This is because it is believed to complement regular preschool pedagogy by offering a variety of learning environments and enabling
experience-based learning. The compensatory idea is based on the mobile preschool being a tool for integration and for children’s participation in society, and a way to compensate for inequality between different societal groups and the consequences of residential segregation for children and families (Gustafson et al., 2017).

The empirical material stems from ethnographic fieldwork in three mobile buses located in three different municipalities. One is the ‘Tommy bus’, which is a mobile section of a stationary preschool located in the medium-sized mid-eastern Swedish town of Uppsala. During the fieldwork, there were 20 children (aged 4–5) enrolled in the bus, with three pedagogues. The Tommy bus is located on the outskirts of the city, in a homogeneous middle-class neighbourhood with terraced houses, and almost all children have ethnic Swedish parents. Another participant in the fieldwork is the ‘Wolf bus’, a mobile section of a preschool located in the medium-sized city of Malmö. It operates in an inner-city district that is a heterogeneous area in terms of the residents’ ethnicity and socio-economic background. The Wolf bus had 16 children aged 3–5 enrolled during the fieldwork, with three pedagogues, and the children’s background varied regarding ethnicity and socio-economic background. The third participant is the ‘Orange bus’, located in a Stockholm multi-ethnic and low-income suburb with many high rises. During the fieldwork, 17 children (aged 3–5) were enrolled and all but one had two foreign-born parents, and many of the parents were newcomers who did not yet speak Swedish.

The approach of the fieldwork was ethnographic, since it involved the researchers being on the bus, taking part in the everyday life there. The fieldwork also involved having an open-ended approach, a reflexive attitude and the use of several different methods, all of which are aspects of an ethnographic approach (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The methods used were participant observations of daily activities, field notes, video recordings, formal interviews and informal talk. The analysis has focussed on how the teachers talk about the places they visit, and on observations on how they structure the daily activities. We have thus analysed both the teachers’ ‘sayings’ and ‘doings’. Common destinations for the three buses are large, green, wooded recreational areas with footpaths, parking, toilets and sometimes indoor facilities like a cabin with tables and chairs. The analysis has, therefore, been delimited to these recreational areas. In the first part of the ‘Results’ section, we discuss the teachers’ construction of nature as a ‘good’ place for children’s education, while the second part focuses on activities in nature based on views about the children and the children’s needs.

Results

The construction of nature as a ‘good’ place for children

The positive attitude towards nature that generally exists in the Nordic countries is also evident in the three mobile preschools. Large recreational areas are a common destination for this reason. The convenience of having access to amenities such as parking and indoor facilities is one reason for visiting such areas, but they are also seen as preferable learning environments because of the flexibility that they offer regarding green and wooded areas. These and similar areas are assumed to be giving the children firsthand learning experiences, as one of the teachers from the Wolf bus explains:

Yes, anything . . . moss! If you sit in a room indoors and read a book, ‘There’s this thing called “moss,” how do you explain that to a child who’s never seen moss? ‘Yes, it’s green and it grows on rocks’ [laughter]. But our children can see moss, feel it, smell it, taste it, and they want to do that. And then they get firsthand experience. And that’s how it goes with everything. And then they’ll get it. Hopefully they’ll learn a little respect for nature.
Here, the idea is that the children on the bus get significant educational experiences because they can involve all their senses while gaining knowledge about and respect for nature. This is clearly embedded in a Swedish outdoor education context, emphasizing the educational benefits of breaking up the classroom and moving the teaching outdoors, preferably to nature (Halldén, 2011). One assumption related to the idea of moving out to nature is that nature provides authentic material. The teachers on the Tommy bus, for example, explain, when asked how they managed to engage with the curriculum without having access to the educational material available in the stationary sections, that they use natural material as educational material: ‘nature is our material’. Besides the more ‘obvious’ use of nature as material – to learn about insects, plants, trees and nature processes such as natural cycles – the observations also show many examples of outdoor education practices such as the use of branches and trees in different shapes and sizes to work with maths, for example. However, in the Orange bus, the discourse around nature as beneficial for children’s learning is not as explicit as in the other buses. It is present, but rather than being focussed on children’s sensory learning, the focus is on how children learn to appreciate the beauty of the outdoors by looking at the landscape while walking through it. In their everyday use of recreational areas, ‘nature’ is constructed mainly as a ‘beautiful and healthy place’. This is thought to be important in particular for the enrolled children since they live in a multicultural neighbourhood that the pedagogues discuss in terms of being an environment that is boring, neglected and not safe for children’s outdoor activities. To be able to ‘come out and see something else’ is seen by the teachers as beneficial for these children.

The focus on ‘firsthand learning experiences’, ‘significant learning experiences’, ‘real and authentic nature material’ and ‘nature’s beauty’ is in accordance with the child in nature (or nature as educator) discourse, with its focus on authentic learning in and about nature. However, it is also connected to the discourse of the nature in the child, that is, nature as a place where children can be themselves and live out their feelings, while separated from their own worldly context. Both discourses are related to a romanticized and idealized conceptualization of nature, correlating to a distinction often made between the indoors and outdoors, both by the teachers on the studied buses and in outdoor education literature in general (Maynard, 2007; Stephenson, 2002; Zink and Burrows, 2008). According to Zink and Burrows (2008), outdoor education literature is rich with reference to the educative power of being outdoors, especially nature. They argue that the outdoor, compared to the indoor, often is constructed as a simpler, more straightforward and uninscribed space for children’s learning experiences. The teachers on the three buses similarly contrast the outdoor to the indoor by referring to regular ‘non-mobile’ preschools as being indoor-based and that the children attending these are thereby missing out on important experiences. Through comments such as, ‘the kids miss so much by always being indoors’, and ‘certainly they’re doing activities [indoors], but they aren’t outdoors learning to see things’, the outdoor is often spoken of as a scientific resource and a better learning environment than the indoor. However, it is also seen as a space that offers more freedom, as one teacher on the Wolf bus comments: ‘They [the children] have greater freedom, I think, than the children in an indoor preschool. Freedom with responsibility, because when we go somewhere, it’s rarely fenced’. Here, the outdoor is related to as a ‘free space’ where the children can independently explore the uninscribed places. The teachers thus mark a divide between the indoor and outdoor, which, according to Zink and Burrows (2008), is strongly not only embedded within the nature/culture divide but also connected to the two discourses around children and nature.

In this section, we have discussed the rhetoric about the outdoors, especially ‘nature’, in the three mobile buses, and its embeddedness in the nature/culture divide. The divide incorporates a specific perception of children and childhood, which correlates with the idea of a child in need of being saved from the human world (culture) by the sanctified space of pure nature (Taylor, 2011,
2013). This perception of nature and childhood will be discussed in the next section in relation to the activities of the three preschool buses.

**Different education in ‘good’ nature for different children?**

The rhetoric embedded in the nature/culture divide discussed above is interesting to ponder in relation to the activities at the places visited by the three buses. Earlier research on mobile preschools shows that different mobile preschool practices – different preschool buses – make up different local mobility cultures (Ekman Ladru and Gustafson, in press). These local mobility cultures are closely entangled with not only the ways that teachers engage in safety work but also the practices of the mobile buses. While the rhetoric about ‘nature’ in the three studied buses is very much in line with how nature is constructed in discourses on childhood and nature in early childhood education, the way they ‘do’ nature in their everyday practices is both similar and quite different. There is one significant difference between the studied buses – a difference related to the views of what the enrolled children need in terms of learning and well-being depending on ethnic background and residential area, which in turn is connected to the activities at the places visited. The Wolf bus and the Tommy bus have similar activities. On the Tommy bus, for example, the ways ‘nature’ – or perhaps more accurately the outdoors with all of its nature–culture entanglements – is used are reflected in the local mobility culture of the bus. This culture is characterized by the children, during diverse activities and free play, being allowed to move around freely within an often quite large, demarcated area and appropriate the place with their movements and chosen spots. Here, the statement that ‘nature is our material’ extends to the children on the bus, who are allowed to pick up, explore and play with all kinds of living and non-living natural material, as long as they do not hurt living things or themselves. Nature is related to a sense of freedom, which particularly concerns assumptions often related both to freedom of movement (to run, climb, hide) and to a sense of security based on learning through mastery of this freedom. This practice is also distinguishable in the Wolf bus, especially regarding free play, which in the Nordic educational context is considered of value in its own right (Halldén, 2009, 2011; Jordt Jörgensen and Martiny-Bruun, 2019; Wagner and Einarsdottir, 2008). On the Wolf bus, the free play is often related to a sense of freedom of imagination that the forest and wooded areas in particular are assumed to offer (Halldén, 2011), as one of the teachers explains:

> We’re out in the forest for the most part. Fairy tales and trolls, they [children] are into that. Troll paths, and here they [trolls] live, there’s so much imagination and knowledge that you can use.

The way the teachers explain the reasons for why they prefer the forest is, as in the quotation, in accordance with the idea that the children can be moved to another world where they are free to live out their imaginations. Nature, as the forest, tends here to represent the life-giving and a ‘good’ place for children to be themselves (Halldén, 2011; Taylor, 2011). The sense of freedom is also connected to an idea of the competent child. On the Wolf bus and Tommy bus, this is, for example, related to the fact that the teachers rarely express commands such as ‘no’, ‘don’t do that’ or ‘stop’. Instead, they support the children’s play by ‘following’ and asking questions instead of explaining, and only intervening when conflicts or other behaviours needing adult intercession occur. These are values associated with a strong Nordic tradition related to the competent child; that is, the child as an active social actor and co-constructor of culture and society (Emilson and Johansson, 2009; Gilliam and Gullöv, 2017; Klaar and Öhman, 2014; Puroila et al., 2016).

However, the practices differ on the Orange bus. While ‘nature’ is viewed as ‘good’ for young children’s learning and development, the things that the children on the bus are supposed to learn from nature differ to some extent from the other two buses. Besides the focus on teaching the
enrolled children to appreciate the beauty of nature, the practices are related to the children’s physical activity. We have previously discussed walks in line in mobile preschools, not only as ways to get from one place to another but also as ‘important social and learning spaces’ (Ekman Ladru and Gustafson, 2018: 87) with a lot of space for play and playful movement; however, the walking tours from the Orange bus merely serve to increase children’s physical activity. The walking tours are assumed to be an important practice since the children living in the suburb where the bus is based are thought of as not being physically active enough. During the walks, the children are supposed to hold hands with another child (their ‘hand friend’) and walk. The group walks take up space on the footpaths, and the children are supposed to keep in line, keep up with the group, not lag behind and not leave the footpath. The children are also not allowed to pick up anything from the ground. Picking up natural material such as branches, fallen fruit or insects is seen as too ‘risky’, rather than as a learning opportunity. Hence, ‘nature’ is constructed as simultaneously ‘healthy’ and ‘beautiful’ and also as ‘risky’ for the children on the bus – contrary to the idea of ‘freedom’. Therefore, staying on the footpaths and engaging in ‘proper walking’ characterized the local mobility culture of the Orange bus. While health and physical activity, and the need for children to engage in this, is also in focus on the Tommy and Wolf buses, the practices differ at the Orange bus. Their activities can be contrasted with the two other buses, where the physical activity is very much related to children’s free play.

The contrasting examples on how nature is ‘done’ differently through the activities of the mobile preschool buses, and how this is connected to teachers’ views of the children on the bus and their families, are in line with findings in an interview study with civil servants and heads of preschools responsible for managing existing mobile preschools throughout Sweden. The study shows that the compensatory idea – the mobile bus as a tool for integration and a way to compensate for inequality – is most common among those who work with buses that are based in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods. They have a strong sense of mobile preschools being able to counteract deficiencies in children’s living conditions by taking them outside their neighbourhoods and giving them access to ‘nature’ (Gustafson et al., 2017).

Discussion

In this article, we have used the phenomenon of mobile preschools to explore the Nordic countries’ culturally rooted understandings of nature as a ‘good’ place for children. The aim has been to deconstruct this understanding by discussing how different mobile preschools relate to nature spaces and children’s learning and well-being. The point of departure is, as Massey (1994, 2005) argues, that there have historically always been attempts to fix the meaning of places, to enclose and defend them; this is especially the case regarding ‘nature’, which is perceived as authentic and a source of stability, separated from the urban and the social. However, for Massey (1994, 2005), places, including nature, are always in the process of becoming, constructed by the relationships within them and interrelations with elsewhere – derived, in large part, from the specificity of its interactions with the ‘outside’. Her point of view is in line with others who argue that nature cannot be located outside human experience and separated off from the social (Taylor, 2011, 2013; Zink and Burrows, 2008). The results of this study show that the fixed image of nature as a ‘good’ place for children’s learning and well-being, and thereby the nature/culture divide, is reproduced within the mobile preschool traditions. In relation to this, the three studied mobile preschools show clear similarities. This image of nature can also be applied to Swedish preschool education in general, where there exists a romantic view of nature as a place where childhood can be ‘lived out’. This correlates with the concept of the competent and autonomous child, which has had great impact on the preschool curriculum in Sweden as well as on more widespread ideas of childhood in the Nordic countries (Gullestad, 1997;
Halldén, 2009, 2011; Norðdahl and Jóhannesson, 2016). The image signals a view of nature as a stable and context-free space, separated from the social and urban world. It also signals an idea of ‘free’, active and competent children, learning in and about nature, at the same time they are protected from the outside world.

However, the ‘good’ education in nature seems not to mean the same thing for all children. The results from this study show that this can mean different things for different children, which in the case of the studied mobile preschools is connected to the ethnic background of the children enrolled and where they live. Neither does the concept of the competent child seem to apply to all children. The results here, as well as from previous studies on mobile preschools (Gustafson et al., 2017), show that the purpose of the education seems to differ depending on who is to be educated and why. The compensatory ideas are especially vivid when it comes to migrant children who live in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods, which is line with other studies (Åkerblom and Harju, 2019; Jordt Jörgensen and Martiny-Bruun, 2019) that show that the image of the competent child brought forward in the Nordic countries, for example, in the preschool curriculum, clashes with views on what migrant children need. Education in nature aiming at freedom and agency seems thus more reserved for children who already have the right kind of cultural background and language, while the ‘other’ children seem to receive an education aiming to compensate for something perceived as missing – the ‘right’ kind of capital regarding ‘nature’.

An important conclusion from this study is that outdoor education, as in mobile preschools, is strongly embedded in narratives about places and childhoods. This, and the fact that the values and practices of mobile preschools are deeply intertwined in the preschool curriculum, the time-spatial organization of regular preschool and activities that are common in preschool (Balldin and Harju, in press), corresponds with arguments that nature as a place is negotiated and constructed through interrelations and interaction beyond its particular geographic borders (Massey, 1994, 2005; Taylor, 2013). This more fluid and subjective interpretation of nature is important to consider in relation to early childhood education; there is otherwise a risk that the romantic idealization of nature, often taken for granted in the Nordic countries, could deny children’s real-world relationships (Taylor, 2013), and position ‘other’ children (e.g. migrant children from multi-ethnic neighbourhoods) as different, with different needs and thereby needing a different education.

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