

## **Didactic sensitivity to children and place: a contribution to outdoor education cultures**

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# Didactic sensitivity to children and place: a contribution to outdoor education cultures

## Abstract

There is a tendency in European education policy to emphasise *more and better* deliberate learning outcomes. The tendency is criticised for taking an instrumental view of education (Biesta, 2010, 2016, 2020a; van Manen, 2008) and threatening children's self-governed play opportunities (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019). However, self-governed play outdoors is perceived as educationally important, notably within Nordic early childhood education. This paper aims to contribute to the international debate on what constitutes good education by investigating an outdoor education culture framed within the context of Nordic early childhood education. We investigate the research question of *what characterises teachers' outdoor didactics in self-governed play and growth as these appear in a Norwegian nature kindergarten?* The theoretical framework builds on 1) perspectives on *Bildung* as playful self-formation (Løvlie, 2002; Steinsholt, 2010) and 2) a relational perspective on children's self-governed outdoor play as a way of integrated dwelling and growth through intimate *correspondence* with environments (Ingold, 2000, 2007, 2018). Data were generated through ethnographic fieldwork in a public Norwegian nature kindergarten that emphasises children's outdoor play as educationally important. Nineteen children aged 4 to 6 participated. The fieldwork drew on participant observation, including playing with the children and on-site conversations. Using the theoretical framework as a lens, the educational culture is conceptualised as *didactic sensitivity*, which entails the teachers' delicate sensitivity and responsiveness towards children and place. The teachers act professionally by creating unique, thoughtful, responsive, and situated conditions for children's autonomous growth in natural environments.

Keywords: play, nature, place, children, early childhood education, outdoor education, didactic sensitivity

## Introduction

There is a tendency in European education policy to emphasise *more* and *better* deliberate learning. The climate around education policy is influenced by politico-economic policies that emphasise concepts such as lifelong learning primarily in favour of producing human capital and economic growth over democratic and humanistic values (cf., Biesta, 2010, 2016).

Criticism of the marketisation of education is made by researchers in different fields, including early childhood education (ECE) (Moss & Urban, 2020), physical education (Evans & Davies, 2015) and education in general (Biesta, 2010; van Manen, 2008).

Parallely, researchers argue that outdoor play in a natural environment confers substantial benefits of promoting health and development (Brussoni et al., 2015). It provides a site for the children's growth (Sanderud et al., 2020) and is at the core of the Nordic kindergarten tradition (Kragh-Müller, 2017). Additionally, Pimlott-Wilson & Coates (2019) argue that outdoor play and learning develop skills valued by governments that request *more* deliberate learning. Nevertheless, children's play in ECE settings are increasingly organised and legitimised for specific purposes, such as improving cognitive, social, physical, and emotional development (Broadhead et al., 2010). Children's play is increasingly influenced by digital play forms (Edwards et al., 2020), standardised play equipment, and risk-reducing measures (Ball et al., 2019).

There is a growing body of research on *ways to facilitate* and *justify* teaching and learning that is place-responsive (Wattchow & Brown, 2011) and play-based (Knight, 2009). Common to these approaches is that they value experiential learning and teachers' professional judgment and practical knowledge-in-action. Professional know-how is one essential characteristic of experienced and sensitive teachers (van Manen, 2008).

This paper aims to contribute to the international debate on what good education is by investigating an educational culture within the Nordic tradition that emphasises outdoor play.

The Nordic tradition treats children as competent, regards local natural places as having pedagogical potential and perceives teachers as professionals.

Against this background, this paper explores the research question of *what characterises teachers' outdoor didactics in self-governed play and growth as these appear in a Norwegian nature kindergarten?*

We discuss and conceptualise the teachers' practical knowledge-in-action in the outdoors as *didactic sensitivity*. By articulating implicit qualities of the teacher's praxis, we make it accessible for researchers and practitioners while contributing to the international debate on what constitutes a good education.

### **Background and context: the 'learnification' of kindergarten**

One dominant rhetoric in education policy in many European countries, including Norway, is dominated by a free-market logic centring on what (economic) profit society may gain from investment in education. This logic is influenced, among others, by the OECD and James Heckman. The *Heckman Curve* (The Heckman Equation Project, 2019) shows how investment in the early years will deliver more profit in terms of human capital than investment in older students. *Human capital* here refers to citizens who possess skills to produce and invent, such as for industrial application. At the core of this concept is the aim to *secure* learning outcomes through *standardised* and *evidence-based* learning programmes (Biesta, 2020a). The Heckman Curve and political fear of low scores on international comparative student assessment studies in schools, such as TIMSS and PISA, may have combined to lead to an increased focus on *learning outcomes* in school and kindergarten - what Biesta terms as 'learnification'. Within this climate, questions about *what* to learn and *why* to educate are eclipsed by emphasising how children may learn *more* and *better*.

However, this one-sided focus on learning is directionless without specifying the *what* and *why* of education (Biesta, 2010).

Moss and Urban (2020) criticise the OECD for a narrow and predefined understanding of what is essential to learn in kindergarten. They argue that the OECD's solutions are insufficient to meet contemporary social challenges such as the current climate crisis and, let us add, pandemics and differing needs among children.

A consequence of learnification is that many kindergartens - such as in Norway - have been instructed to implement standardised learning programmes (Pettersvold & Østrem, 2019). Instructing such implementation indicates that policymakers and kindergarten owners want to control and implement programmes that supposedly *work*. Biesta (2016) questions the premise of standardised learning programmes by arguing that it is impossible to control what learners will learn.

The utilisation of standardised learning programmes differs from *the Nordic kindergarten tradition*, which values children's self-governed play in natural environments as educationally important. It is based on a socio-educational approach to learning that assumes that learning occurs through self-governed play, exploration, and social processes. However, the Nordic tradition is perceived to be under pressure by the increased emphasis on narrow academic learning outcomes (Kragh-Müller, 2017).

Inspired by Biesta (2020b), we understand *education* as oriented towards socialisation into cultures and values, shaping children into independent subjects, and transferring specific knowledge and skills. Thus, education includes perspectives on teachers and learners that connect with perspectives on outdoor education (Loynes, 2018).

The concept *didactic* entails "relations between teaching, learning, and socialisation" (Quennerstedt & Larsson, 2015, p. 565) in Scandinavia and continental Europe. The concept covers a socio-cultural approach to learning concerned with teaching and learning theories,

situated practices and “the context-embedded character of learning concerning participation and membership in a social group” (Quennerstedt & Larsson, 2015, p. 567). A central idea in didactics is that education involves variable content and formats chosen by teachers, institutions, policymakers, and other areas of society. In the English language, the word *didactics* can be associated with systematic instructions or specific teaching methods differing from the continental European perspective.

## **Theoretical framework**

### ***Growth along corresponding lines***

Social anthropologist Tim Ingold’s (2000) ontological premise is that humans, including children, dwell in the world by shaping and being shaped by the social and physical environment. Ingold (2007) develops the concept of *lines* to illustrate how humans and environmental features grow together through movement. Humans, he argues, live their lives along non-linear lines. These lines are woven together like threads in a growing meshwork consisting of, in this case, children, teachers, natural- and socio-cultural surroundings. The lines influence each other in a process Ingold conceptualises as *correspondence* (Ingold, 2013, 2018). He defines *correspondence* as “the process by which beings or things quite literally co-respond or answer to one another over time” (Ingold, 2018, p. 26). Myrstad et al. (2021) use children walking in deep snow to illustrate *correspondence*. They argue that where and how children move in deep snow results from how children attune their bodies and muscles to the conditions and find a rhythm for movement. Simultaneously, the snow responds to the children’s movement by being shaped into paths. Through correspondence, children create knowledge and meaning (Ingold, 2018).

Krüger (2018) takes a different approach to growth. For him, growth results from the Foucauldian discourses creating a dramaturgy that constitutes and shapes physical, social, and

cultural environments. Krüger's perspective is related to Goffman's ideas that humans act according to social expectations to receive recognition. Outdoor researchers employ Goffman's ideas to analyse adventurers' self-presentations in social media (Beames et al., 2019). Inspired by Krüger, we suggest that the *dramaturgy* in children's play includes different *energies* that drive, paralyse, or compose movements, experiences, and pedagogical situations. The dramaturgy is created, maintained, or blocked by teachers, groups of children, cultural values, norms, and practices. Variations in seasons and weather influence the play's dramaturgy by influencing children's meaning-making, how they move (Myrstad et al., 2021; Sanderud et al., 2020) and different play moods (Jørgensen, 2016).

### ***Outdoor play as self-formation***

In this paper, 'play' refers to activities that are "non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for [their] own sake, rather than as a means to an end" (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child [CRC], 2013, p. 5). According to Steinsholt's (2010) reading of Gadamer, play is a subject that continually unfolds and shifts direction. It requires the players to be absorbed in the play and allow play to shift directions with no other reward than to play. Thus, there is something unpredictable in play. We emphasise outdoor play that Edwards et al. (2020) characterises as a "traditional" form of play.

Throughout the paper, we use *self-governed play* to describe children's autonomous play by following their initiative. We recognise that teachers, peers, curricula, legislation, and playgrounds influence how children play. Consequently, Wood (2014) questions whether children's play can be *free*. Play is essential for children's learning. However, a prerequisite is that play is well facilitated (Broadhead et al., 2010), such as by considering children's skills and interests. Play is also a type of *self-formation* and hermeneutic process. Children continually create experiences that contrast, confirm, or transform past understandings as they

play. These back-and-forth processes challenge and change their assumed *truths* (Steinsholt, 2010). Diverse situations occur in which children may wonder about things and their lives by seeking answers to questions such as *who am I?* and *what can I do?* That is at the core of *self-formation* (Løvlie, 2002). A related perspective on self-formation is applied to children's outdoor play by Gurholt and Sanderud (2016). They understand children's play as a self-driven, playful exploration of the border between what children know and what they do not understand. It represents self-formative processes that shape children's understandings.

The Framework Plan for Kindergartens, which regulates kindergarten pedagogical content in Norway, emphasises exploration (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). Inspired by Ødegaard (2020), we understand exploration as play or curiosity-related action that results in transformative dialogues between children and the environment. Such conversations are open-ended and may take children into unforeseen and unknown situations to discover new clues to meaning.

The forms of embodied wisdom that explorative and experiential types of play create may be challenging to observe and quantify. These play processes contrast with what Biesta (2010) refers to as the currently dominant educational rhetoric, which calls for *more learning* in measurable content knowledge.

### ***Natural environments***

We understand *natural environments* and socio-cultural contexts as being intertwined. Accepting Ingold's (2000) understanding, children create meanings in relationships with the environment and the socio-cultural context. Teachers, children, political frameworks, playgrounds, and contemporary socio-cultural understandings of *nature* and *outdoor education* are examples of relationships that frame conceptualisations of natural environments and their educational potential. *Natural environments* do not have prescribed inherent



meanings or pedagogical functions that the children can extract. Instead, children and adults create meanings and pedagogical ideas related to earlier experiences, the current situation, and cultural ideas.

## **Methodology**

This ethnographic study explored outdoor didactics in a Norwegian nature kindergarten. The kindergarten is in a semi-urban area in western Norway. We selected the kindergarten because it emphasises self-governed outdoor play and outdoor education as educationally important. Consequently, it has an outdoor playground with a natural environment. Children can build dens and play with snow, mud, plants, and stones throughout the year. Within walking distance, the kindergarten has access to diverse natural environments typical of towns and settlements along the western coast, such as a fjord with beaches, rocky fields, small streams, and nearby forests. The children rarely use digital equipment, and the teachers have few worries about children getting injured. Thus, the kindergarten represents an alternative to risk-averse approaches and the development of converged digital-traditional play forms (Ball et al., 2019; Edwards et al., 2020).

The children alternate between spending time indoors and outdoors. They spend two weeks in the “indoor section” followed by two weeks in outdoor areas both at and away from the kindergarten. Their only shelter is an uninsulated one-room wood hut during the outdoor weeks, and they spend considerable time outdoors. They also have access to an indoor dressing room. During both the outdoor and indoor sessions, the children play outside every day throughout the year. The fieldwork took place during the children’s outdoor sessions in the winter and summer of 2018.

Teacher’s and children’s participation in the study was voluntary. The teachers and all the parents in the kindergarten department received written information about the study’s

purpose and methods. Additionally, the parents received information about the study in simple language to read to their children. All 19 children, aged four to six, participated with their parents' written consent. All the teachers gave their written consent. The study's ethics were approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data<sup>1</sup>.

The first author conducted the fieldwork. Drawing on sensory ethnography (Pink, 2009), he employed participant observation, including informal conversations (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), and he played with the children (Sanderud, 2020). In sensory ethnography, the researcher focuses on sensory and embodied aspects (Pink, 2009). This provides possibilities for the researcher to gain insight into children's sensory relations with their play-world.

Observations and field experiences were recorded by videos, photographs, and by writing fieldnotes. This combination allowed the first author to play with the children while paying attention to his embodied experiences. The video recordings provided a detailed capture of how children and materials influenced each other.

The research project, including the proposal, fieldwork, and analysis, was thoroughly validated during discussions including all authors. Reflexivity was maintained by discussing ways our prejudices may have coloured the interpretations (cf. Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Additionally, the first author reflected on his position in children's play by asking himself questions such as "how do the children play and how do I play?" (cf. Olivie, 2020).

The data was manually coded using Nvivo 12 to obtain an overview of the material, guided by the research question. One example from the fieldwork, titled *At the Seashore*, functions as a "key event" (Fetterman, 2010, p. 99). We selected the example because it

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<sup>1</sup> Project no. 57398

illustrates how teachers facilitate play and growth typical of the observations made. It provides insight into the complexity of the relations between the children, the adults, and the natural environment in situations where children apparently *played independently*. However, closer investigation reveals that the children's play was framed by a carefully conducted didactic. The theoretical framework was used as a lens to submit the *At the Seashore* situation to in-depth analysis through a hermeneutic back-and-forth process between the data, the research question, and close readings of the study's theoretical framework (cf. Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2018). All authors validated the analysis through critical examination. Various situations where the children's play was facilitated regarding the place, seasons, and individual children have been analysed elsewhere (Sanderud, 2020; Sanderud et al., 2020).

The analyses employ what Fangen (2010) describes as three levels of interpretation. The first level relates to detailed observations, meaning that we have condensed observations into detailed descriptions. The second level relates to what others call a *thick description*, which means that we have investigated relevant contexts and interpreted the situation in light of the theoretical-contextual framework. At the third level, we have critically interpreted the structures, including the didactic practices, that influence the children's actions and/or motives.

### **Analyses: facilitating outdoor play and growth**

In this section, we analyse the situation *At the Seashore* in light of this study's theoretical framework. The section is structured around central elements in the teachers' creation of conditions for children's play. A general impression is that the teachers had a crucial role in facilitating the children's play, although the teachers' involvement varied.

## ***At the Seashore***

It is a hot summer day. The teachers decide to hike with the children to the fjord. The seashore is approximately 60 metres wide. The ground is covered with grass, and next to it is a dense forest of young deciduous trees. The water is turquoise, cold, and shallow near the shore. I sense a cool, refreshing, breeze in contrast to the hot and still air back at the kindergarten. The two accompanying teachers are standing at different places along the seashore talking calmly with the children. The children are spread out along the seashore, wading or playing in the forest. Wading children stare into the water while using their hands to pick up stones, seaweed and shells and bring them to the surface. Some of them use the landing nets and magnifying glasses provided by the teachers.

Suddenly, a group of children gather around one teacher. She is standing in the water holding a stone that she has taken from the seabed. Small bubbles rise from the seabed to the surface. "It's from a sea serpent!" a child says. One boy puts his magnifying glass underwater to investigate.

A bit later, one girl starts to scream that her shoes are submerged. She seems terrified and tells me that she put them on dry land, but now they are underwater.

Two boys, whom we call Dag and Fredrik, invite me into the dense forest. Here, we are out of sight of the teachers. Dag tells Fredrik and me about an edible root and shows us where to find it and how to dig it up, clean it, and eat it. It seems like this is the first time Fredrik has tasted it. Fredrik holds a root with soil on it close to his mouth. Fredrik tells us that he likes the taste of it. They agree to notify the other children that they have found *candy*.

## ***Creating a culture of independent outdoor play***

The situation *At the Seashore* represents one of many hikes and events children and teachers undertook. The teachers regularly went on hikes with the children to various places. For example, they went to a frozen waterfall and to a snowy field to play and ski. Hiking to various places throughout the year is a common pedagogical practice in Norwegian kindergartens (Sandseter & Lysklett, 2017). The hikes often included eating lunch, drinking hot chocolate around a fire, whittling sticks, exploring, and playing with local materials. The

teachers carried the required equipment in backpacks. Hiking and eating outdoors are also a way of introducing children to local nature, stories, the Free Public Access Rights (in Norwegian: *Allemannsrett*), and sharing local cultures of hiking and living in the western fjord-mountain landscape. This culture includes routines and norms for how to behave appropriately and safely. For example, respecting *nature* and all forms of life, collecting waste when hiking, and the principle of not leaving any traces. When including cultures of environmentally friendly behaviour, the teachers' praxis contributes to developing respect and awareness for natural environments, a central aspect of outdoor education (Leather, 2018).

The teachers used different methods to organise the children's play and growth throughout the fieldwork. These methods ranged from telling stories about local animals to inviting children to taste snowflakes. In other cases, the children organised play on their own. Accordingly, the teachers' approaches represent a balanced amalgam of selecting places and inspiring children. As a result, the teachers and children arrived at a shared sense of what was acceptable to do.

The children played with little influence from the adults during a large portion of the fieldwork. During this time, the teachers expected the children to respect each other and play in acceptable ways. These expectations became apparent, for example, during the winter fieldwork when some of the children threw snow at each other, resulting in a corrective verbal response from a teacher. The teachers showed trust in the children as competent beings and intervened when they did not fulfil their expectations.

### ***Selecting natural environments***

The reason behind the teachers' decision to hike to the seashore is unknown. Hiking to nearby natural environments is an everyday practice in many Nordic kindergartens and families (Sandseter & Lysklett, 2017). Thus, hiking to the seashore represents a taken-for-granted way

of acting by the teachers and the researcher. It is also an example of a local and place-based approach that Loynes (2018) points out is an important method for making experiences relevant for everyday life.

If we adapt Ingold's ideas to young children, the children shape their understanding of themselves and the environment through corresponding movements in a growing meshwork. Because environments and weather always influence humans' perceptions (Ingold, 2013), embodied relationships relate to particular places and seasons. For example, the ways the children played *At the Seashore* were possible because of the warm weather, contributing to a dramaturgy that made wading in cold water acceptable. The season made the leaves in the small forest dense and green, providing shelter for Dag, Fredrik, and the researcher in the situation above. Additionally, the root had its taste at this time of year. Thus, the teachers provided children with possibilities, as noted by others, to engage their senses and emotions in a specific time and place (Humberstone, 2011).

Leather (2018) points to opportunities for aesthetic experiences in embodied encounters with water. The trip provided the children with opportunities to have experiences considered educationally important and culturally relevant. More specifically, the children's opportunities to play with and experience different materials - such as fjord water, stones, seaweed, landing nets, magnifying glasses, the weather, forest, and plants - are framed by the teachers' choice of environment. The teachers may use the experiences to initiate dialogues to raise awareness and respect for the natural world (cf. Leather, 2018).

Children shape themselves and are shaped in a dynamic and ever-changing meshwork where ideas, problems, options, and solutions grow relationally (Ingold, 2007). From this perspective, our analyses reveal that materials, such as trees and water, do not possess inherent knowledge for the children to extract. Instead, children create knowledge and meaning in relationships while participating in dialogues and playing with various

environmental features. Thus, *how* children interact with environmental features is essential for their growth.

When selecting specific environments or introducing materials for play, teachers organise children's possibilities for correspondence. Their selection results from a delicate balance between the educational aim, the weather conditions, and the children's capabilities and interests.

### ***Environmental features may influence play***

The lines at the seashore, such as the ebb and flow of the tide, influenced the play's dramaturgy and children's opportunities for growth. For example, one girl was surprised and upset when she discovered her wet shoes. One boy told the researcher that he had cold feet after wading in the chilly water. Both examples illustrate how the place gave life to and influenced the children's experiences. The girl's attention was drawn to the sea-level changes due to the tide when her shoes submerged. Additionally, the tide influenced her emotions by making her upset. The seashore is an example of the teachers letting the place influence the dramaturgy. Additionally, it exemplifies how environments with different materials may stimulate imagination, fantasy, and the senses (Jørgensen, 2016).

Drawing on Ingold's (2013) concept of *correspondence*, we interpret children's play as a back-and-forth process influenced by environmental features. One example is when Dag and Fredrik tasted the root. At first, the root's presence made it possible for Fredrik to find it, invite us to taste it and dig it up, leaving a small hole in the ground. The root responded with a taste that triggered associations with "candy." Thus, the local place contributed to the play by affording the root and providing a taste. In other words, the children changed the environment by removing the root and were moved by the root's taste. Inspired by Ingold (2013) and

Myrstad et al. (2021), we suggest that the children shape their understandings of their relation to the nearby forest and root through playful correspondence.

The environmental features on the seashore influenced and restrained play by offering opportunities for wading and investigating bubbles while not being well suited for other activities, such as bicycling. The hike provided children with opportunities to experience how they relate to new and known environmental features using their bodies (cf. Leather, 2018; Sanderud et al., 2020).

The various experiences derive from corresponding movements that are not isolated events but embedded in an environmental entity (cf. Humberstone, 2011), including the stones, water, smell, trees, and each other. Interpreting these in dialogue with the *meshwork* (Ingold, 2007), we argue that children are part of a meshwork in which different lines correspond and constitute a complex meshwork of relations. When the teachers facilitate the children's opportunities for growth by letting them play with surrounding relationships, the children weave themselves into a meshwork that includes themselves, the teachers, the root, the chill breeze, and the smell of salty water.

### ***Inspiring wonder and exploration***

The teachers also arranged situations that roused the children's wonder and kindled their curiosity, such as when one of them picked up a stone from the seabed and expressed her surprise. In other situations, the children received questions such as *What happens if you do this?* and *What can you do with this?* The teacher showed them varied *wonders* which had immediate appeal to the children. The effect was observable: the wonders initiated a chain of responses that modified lines and the meshwork that the children created. The responses relate to Jørgensen's (2016) point that wonders may inspire children's explorations of different



materials. Variations in the teachers' involvement provided the children with varied environmental experiences (cf. Mawson, 2014).

Introducing children to specific environments is another way of facilitating wonder and curiosity. For example, the boys' wading experiences in the fjord may provoke an emotional *stimulation* of uncertainty and excitement that something interesting might happen, such as the bubbles. Drawing on Gurholt and Sanderud (2016), their actions triggered responses to questions such as: *What is the water concealing? What is seaweed? What happens to the things that the children pick up when they reach the surface?* The colour, texture, and reflections of the stones that the children picked up changed when they breached the surface. With everything the children do, there is an opportunity to explore something interesting, exciting, or unforeseen. In other words, they may encounter lines that they do not know what it is like to correspond with. The observation is connected with Leather (2018, p. 128), arguing that "water has an inimitable facility to bring one's self into the present". Our idea is that children learn to deal with the world by anticipating and responding to uncertainty.

Applying Ingold's (2000) understanding that environmental qualities are fundamental to movement and growth, the dwelling *At the Seashore* illustrates how places provide different and sometimes unforeseen opportunities for wonder and exploration that complement those available at the kindergarten playground.

Our reading of Johansson (2019) suggests that playing children may learn different meanings for the ideas of things, such as stones and water, through experiences in diverse contexts. Abstract concepts, such as temperature and season, can also be explored. All of this happens as children play with materials. Simultaneously, they are finding that neither the textures of the material nor their ideas about them are fixed, but rather continually evolving as the children imbue them with meanings. When wading, children sense the ground they step *on*

and the chill and powers of water they are wading *in* while developing awareness about themselves and the environment (Sanderud & Gurholt, 2016; Leather, 2018).

The teachers not only selected and introduced the children to environments; they also adjusted or modified the environment by providing the children with access to landing nets, magnifying glasses, and bubbles rising from the seabed. These things made it possible for them to explore and correspond in ways they could not have done otherwise.

### ***Openness to the educational process***

The oldest children participated in a *children's council* once a week. Their mandate was to propose and vote on what to do and where to go that day. The children's council illustrates how the teachers empowered the children and organised them to have ownership in the day's content and outcome. Suggesting and voting on alternatives made the children and teachers cooperate and become co-responsible for the day's content and outcome. At the same time, the children participated in a community and had to respect the majority's selection. Both are central democratic values. Researchers have noted the potential outdoor settings have for learning democratic values and children's participation (Aasen et al., 2009).

The teachers' open-ended, sensitive, and flexible didactics gave the children the time and space to act on their initiatives with care and support from the teachers. There is always a risk that something unpredictable might happen in children's correspondences with the environment because stones on the seabed may be slippery and because roots may taste awful and even be poisonous. The example illustrates the widely recognised complexity and unpredictability of facilitating outdoor educational situations (Loynes, 2018). The open and flexible didactic approach can also expose teachers to uncertainty because, as in any educational case, they encounter countless questions that need answers: *What do children*

*experience? How can I inspire them? What risks are they exposed to?* Every other question arises from the fundamental question of what is in the child's best interest (van Manen, 2008).

### ***Perceiving children as trustworthy***

There were no fences or markings on the land or in the sea, except one side of the beach. Thus, no physical barriers prevented the children from roaming into areas where they might, for example, get lost, fall from a small cliff, or wade into deep water. However, the teachers seemed to be keeping an eye on the children. They trusted the children to have the competence to manage different forms of risks. For example, the children were not wearing lifejackets even though the water was deep a few metres away from where they played. The teachers also trusted the children to follow unspoken rules that they had learned during the previous hikes. Tovey (2010) mentions trust in children's competencies as a vital part of teachers conditioning of (risky) outdoor play. For Biesta (2020b), freedom to act according to one's interest and the possibility of affecting their surroundings is central to becoming autonomous subjects in society. The teachers in our example trusted the children by providing them with the freedom to decide what to do.

The teachers paid close attention to children engaging in activities that the teachers perceived as dangerous, or if someone was unfriendly or seen mistreating the natural environment. For example, when they were whittling sticks, checking local nesting boxes, and telling stories about snow and local birdlife, the teachers firmly controlled both the situation and every child. Having balanced involvement in the children's play in the natural places they visited is an expression of the teachers' professional understanding of when and how to intervene in children's play. Perceiving the uniqueness in daily situations and adapting efforts to respond to what happens is central to teacher's professional expertise (van Manen, 2008). Inspired by Biesta (2020b), the teachers scaled the children's freedom to different situations.

The children received trust and freedom to generate a proper *dramaturgy* that included respecting each other, the setting, and other living beings. However, the dramaturgy among the children was not joyful at all times. Some children were frustrated and angry about unpleasant events occurring; for example, some children said they were too hot because of wearing too many clothes, and some fell and cried.

In general, the children followed the instructions and rules they have embodied through regular hikes. One consequence of the open facilitation is that the children had, and were expected, to master different situations and take the initiative to approach the teachers if they needed assistance. In this way, the children were framed to make it possible for them to perceive, understand, and act according to earlier experience, skills, and the current social context. The children had the freedom to play within the expectations from the teachers, the institution, and the embodied rules.

The belief that independent action is essential to children's growth was made explicit by the pedagogical leader, who said that children grow when trusted and held accountable for their actions.

Another consequence of how the play was organised is that the children found and used local resources to deal with the issues that occurred or actively asked for assistance. Using local resources and coping with emerging issues is possible when teachers recognise that children have the competencies to play independently and when teachers trust children's relational self-formation with other children and environmental features.

When the teachers located themselves in accessible positions along the shore, the teachers kept an eye on the children and the area. This organisation of social control provided the children with opportunities to explore and deal with situations and environmental features on their own. However, surveillance regarding safety and risk may negatively influence children's play (Løndal & Greve, 2015).

## **Didactic sensitivity**

In this section, we discuss the concept of *didactic sensitivity*. This concept relates to the teachers' responsive, thoughtful, and careful approach towards children and places. It is a form of intuitive praxis that includes values and thoughtful habits that evolve through practice. Teachers' intuitions refer to the ability to make decisions fluently and adaptable in complex situations without necessarily being able to explain what one is doing (Claxton, 2000). In this case, the teacher's outdoor praxis represents a form of tacit knowledge that, as van Manen (2008) points out, is difficult to articulate.

*Didactic sensitivity* encompasses teacher sensitivity to the unique and daily unfolding relationships between children and the natural environment that inspire and nurture children's play, exploration, and growth. Inspired by van Manen (2008), it includes teachers acting according to their professional judgment to create place-based experiences they regard to be in the best interest of the children's growth. "Special normative, ethical, or affective considerations" (van Manen, 2008, p. 6) are guiding the practice of teaching and differ from the principles of effectiveness, as the rhetoric of learnification embeds. As a result, teachers do not have to organise children's play according to universal *learning programmes*. Instead, they may employ didactics sensitive and flexible to children's needs and educational possibilities in local child-environment relationships.

Van Manen (2008) suggests that experienced teachers intuitively know what goes on among the children, understand their experiences, sense the pedagogical significance of different situations, and how to enhance educational situations. The *didactic sensitivity* of the teachers' outdoor educational praxis differs from an academic discourse that emphasises learning and owner control over children's autonomy, teachers' professional judgment, and the open-ended problem-solving that is important in a multi-faceted world.

Teachers' professional judgment and initiatives for using local resources to facilitate children's growth are at the core of *didactic sensitivity*. The approach demands reflexive, independent, and competent teachers who continually develop and revise their understanding of what may inspire different children. Our perspective requires teachers to be sensitive to the "rhythm of the playing children, pay attention to it, and improvise together with the children" (Løndal & Greve, 2015, p. 477). Teachers need to use their professional judgment and practical know-how to create conditions for growth in situ, which corresponds with van Manen's (2008) idea of experienced teachers performing intuitively and on an improvisational basis by which they *instantly* know what to do. It also reflects Biesta's (2016) premise that learning is *uncontrollable*. However, it requires trust in teachers' pedagogical competence from owners, policymakers, and parents.

Using implicit clues to be sensitive to children's interests, understandings, and feelings (van Manen, 2008) makes teachers see variations and possibilities in children. Thus, it may be possible to inspire children to explore their surroundings independently or with support.

Children's self-governed play and exploration are at the centre of *didactic sensitivity*. Self-organised outdoor play appears as an essential part of children's lives when there are grand expectations of academic learning. By employing *didactic sensitivity*, teachers can respond to children's interests and co-create meaningful situations, which Hussain (2018) perceives as central to meaningful learning.

At the same time, van Manen (2008) argues that teachers must be sensitive to when to enter different situations and to what extent. Løndal and Greve (2015) find that many teachers balance observing, initiating, and participating in children's play. In our study, the teachers did also incorporate sensitive attention to the natural environment and individual children when conditioning children's outdoor play. Besides, the approach provides children with

various possibilities to engage in relationships and treat environmental features as respected ‘playmates’ (Steinsholt, 2010).

The approach requires knowledge of local weather, different environments, and the children’s needs in order to plan and facilitate play and exploration that pivot on children’s interests, environmental properties, and educational ambitions. Thus, it is difficult to predict and *secure* the outcome of playful meaning-making.

The approach’s openness makes it difficult to predict how the children will play and what they will learn. The approach challenges the narrow conceptions of education and knowledge found in neoliberal educational climates. By implementing *didactic sensitivity* to children and environments rather than universal *programmes*, teachers who act professionally may satisfy Moss and Urban’s (2020) call for greater uncertainty and exploration in early childhood pedagogy. At the same time, they may be “fostering the well-rounded and independent free thinkers that can respond to future challenges” (Pimlott-Wilson & Coates, 2019, p. 276).

### **Concluding comments**

Our ethnographic investigation demonstrated an outdoor education culture that emphasises *didactic sensitivity* towards children and local places. By elucidating a didactic that is often tacit, we provide the means to discuss how to facilitate children’s growth through self-guided, improvisational, and vigorous play that children may find meaningful. We argue that teachers’ professional responsiveness towards children and places serve to condition children’s self-formation and self-governed play in natural environments. Thus, the approach contributes to a better understanding and recognition of teachers’ professional know-how. Thus, *didactic sensitivity* is in line with the open and sensitive didactic practice at the heart of outdoor practice in Nordic early childhood education.

By developing didactic thinking and practices sensitive to local contexts and possibilities rather than using predesigned learning programmes, teachers are better equipped to address the cultural diversity, multiplicity, and complexity in kindergartens. As children's play and meaning evolve in local relationships, facilitating this requires teachers' didactic competence, local knowledge, and opportunities for daily environmental interaction. The approach thus cannot be standardised. Instead, it demands a high level of professional wisdom, know-how and context sensitivity in the teacher.

The openness of the approach connects to an open-ended and locally based form of education that challenges the control, predictability, and universality found in predefined learning programmes. Thus, we argue for a broad perspective on education open to children's initiatives and learning to handle themselves within a complex meshwork of socio-material relationships.



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