

Chapter 8

Exploring the Taken-for-Granted Advantage of Outdoor Play in Norwegian Early Childhood Education



Liv Torunn Grindheim 

Abstract It is claimed that nature is given temporal and cultural dimensions in Norway, in a transgression of the distinction between nature and culture. The overall emphasis on nature in the Nordic countries may represent an unconscious taken-for-granted understanding of nature as the best place for children’s play, learning and cultural formation. Understandings of a strong Norwegian cultural connection to nature, and thereby outdoor life, as an important arena for children’s cultural formation may be challenged by changes in Early Childhood Education (ECE) institutions and the contemporary society. Such changes can force conflicts that help in depicting what is taken for granted. This chapter is therefore structured around the research question: *What conflicts can be found between ECE teachers’ values and motives for outdoor play versus contextual conditions and demands in personal, institutional and cultural perspectives and in the perception of nature?* By exploring conflicts between contextual conditions and demands and ECE teachers’ values and motives, the aim is to get a broader insight into perspectives and conditions for children’s cultural formation. The analysis draws on 15 interviews with ECE teachers, political documents and earlier research. The analysis reveals that nature as a valued arena for cultural formation, through play, may not be as apparent as expected in Norwegian ECE.

Keywords Early childhood education · Nature · Nordic · Cultural formation · The taken-for-granted

L. T. Grindheim (✉)

KINDknow Kindergarten Knowledge Centre for Systemic Research on Diversity and Sustainable Futures, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, Bergen, Norway
e-mail: ltg@hvl.no; Liv.Torunn.Grindheim@hvl.no

© The Author(s) 2021

L. T. Grindheim et al. (eds.), *Outdoor Learning and Play*,
International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development 34,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-72595-2_8

129

8.1 Introduction

The overall emphasis of the impact of nature in the Nordic countries may result in taken-for-granted understandings of nature as the best place for children's playing, socialisation and cultural formation. The historical heritage of Norwegians' connectedness to nature is outlined in Gullestad's (1992) pioneering anthropological works, in which she describes how nature was an important symbol in the formation of a national identity in Norway (p. 202). Her arguments align with Witoszek's (1991) work, which asserts that the connection to nature is a national identity for Norwegians (p. 12). Witoszek traces this national identity to the Norwegian emphasis on the pleasure of outdoor activities, the happiness of staying in the wilderness in the family cabin during weekends and holidays, the position of the Norwegian farmer who played an important role in building the democratic model in post-war Norway, the strong egalitarian impulses and Næss' (2005) Deep Ecology utopia. In Næss' utopian vision, humans, animals, plants, forests and oceans co-exist. There is no need for alcohol or other stimulant drugs because no one is bored. Witoszek (1991) claims that nature is given a temporal and cultural dimension in Norway that overcomes the distinction between nature and culture (p.13).

The Norwegian conceptualisation of nature as part of the national identity explains why it is considered culturally important for children to develop a strong attachment to nature. According to Gullestad (1992), there is an understanding among Norwegians that attachment to nature serves to bind the nation together (p. 202). Until the 1990s, most children in Norway did not attend ECE institutions. Before ECE institutions became well established in Norway, most Norwegian parents expected their children to play outdoors for several hours each day, in order to obtain benefits from wild-life experiences and to become more independent (Gullestad, 1992, p. 204). In addition, Nilsen (2008) outlines how state policy has traditionally regulated access to nature for families and individuals (p. 44). She points to the Law of Common Access (*loven om allemansretten*), which gives everybody the right to access the natural environment, whether this is privately or publicly owned. Nilsen (2008) also points to geographical opportunities for nature engagement in Norway, due to the short distances between towns and unbuilt spaces. Both the Law of Common Access and close proximity to nature – even if living in a town – facilitate the practical and everyday access to nature for most Norwegians.

The same politics, expectations and practices have also been a part of Norwegian ECE institutions. The politics are spelled out through the framework plan for the content and tasks for kindergartens (UDIR, 2017). '...[C]hildren shall be given outdoor experiences and discover the diversity of the natural world, and kindergartens shall help the children to feel connectedness with nature' (p.11). Birkeland and Sørensen (2021) report that children in Norwegian kindergartens are – on average – outside for 2 h a day in winter and more than 4 h in summer. The fenced playgrounds have features that are both cultivated and not cultivated; for instance, there are areas with stones, hills and trees as well as play equipment like swings, sandpits,

play houses and play boats. Most ECE institutions visit local natural spaces, such as the forest and coast, at least once a week and more often during the summer.

In addition to these kinds of typical outdoor play experiences in ECE institutions, Moen, Blekesaune, and Bakke (2008) point to the increasing number of nature daycare centres (*naturbarnehager*) in Norway. In these *naturbarnehager*, children spend time in the local nature – outside the fenced playground of the institution – during the core period of the day when all the children in the group are present (10 am to 2 pm), every day, throughout the year. Moen et al. (2008) assert that these ECE institutions are popular among parents. Lysklett and Emilsen (2007) outline that these ECE institutions also are popular among teachers, especially male kindergarten teachers. The popularity can be explained by Nilsen's (2011) research that describes the strong expectations of teachers that Norwegian children should master the wilderness and the climate. Valuable outcomes from outdoor activities are also underlined by Sandseter's (2009) research, which demonstrates that the ability to encounter risks and challenges is ultimately beneficial for development. Sandseter (2009) describes how children intentionally pursue risk in their outdoor play through seeking great heights and high speed and by performing play in hazardous, dangerous and daring manners. Additionally, the children actively evaluate the positive and negative outcomes of these play situations. Therefore, outdoor play is emerging as an important area for developing the ability to encounter risk.

The customary Norwegian connectedness to nature may indicate an unconscious taken-for-granted understanding of nature as the best place for children's cultural formation. In spite of this conviction and in line with taken-for-granted understandings, it seems to be hard for ECE teachers to explain why they see the outdoor environment as important. The taken-for-granted can be recognised by investigating tensions or conflicts (Grindheim, 2020). This chapter is therefore structured around the question: *What conflicts can be found between ECE teachers' values and motives for outdoor play versus contextual conditions and demands in personal, institutional and cultural perspectives and in the perceptions of nature?* By analysing teachers' vocalisations about outdoor play, I investigate conflicts between the teachers' values and motives about outdoor play versus conditions and demands from the institutional and cultural perspectives and from the perception of nature. Thereby, I aim to investigate the assumed approach to play in nature in Norwegian ECE.

There is seldom a singular discourse of what is considered to be the most important or the best approach for the next generation. The Norwegian (and the Nordic countries') history of strong connections to nature, and thereby valuing outdoor life as something important to pass on to the next generation, may be challenged by changes in ECE institutions or in the contemporary society. By obtaining a broader insight into several perspectives on children's outdoor play and learning, we may be able to both challenge our view of cultural formation and explore what are regarded as important content and methods in ECE institutions. The analysis from 15 qualitative interviews among ECE teachers, earlier research about outdoor play or conditions for outdoor play, and political documents, reveals that nature as a valued arena for cultural formation through play is not as obvious as may be expected. The results

from the analysis indicate that humans, culture and nature seem to be hard to separate in children's cultural formation during play in nature.

8.2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that underpins my analysis to trace conflicts between ECE teachers' values and motives for outdoor play, versus conditions and demands in their context, takes departure from Ødegaard and Krüger's (2012) outline of cultural formations. They present cultural formation as an always-present and continuous process, in which active agents are at the core of learning and cultural formation. Humans' learning and cultural formation are contextualised, situated, mediated and embedded in their given cultural context (p.12). Ødegaard and Krüger (2012) present cultural formation as a descriptive concept that depicts an act of humans in relation to the conditions in their given culture. Both the process (act) and the result of being a part of the activity are embedded in cultural formation (p. 22). Understanding both the process and the result as cultural formation leads to the realisation that humans are both being formed and able to form their culture, the people they are involved with and their contexts.

Understanding humans as both shaped by and actively shaping the conditions and demands of the culture and the practices they participate in is in line with how Hedegaard (2009) outlines children's development as interwoven into institutional practices that are embedded in societal and cultural conditions and demands. Even though Hedegaard's theory emphasises children's learning and development, I take departure from her thinking while emphasising the teachers' values and motives, aiming to depict knowledge from the personal, institutional, cultural and natural perspectives. The taken-for-granted advantage of outdoor play in Norway is challenged by tracing the conflicts that occur between teachers' values and motives versus the conditions and demands in personal, institutional and cultural perspectives and regarding the perceptions of nature.

8.3 Method

The material that forms the starting point for my analysis is from a study undertaken in collaboration with an ECE institution in Norway from April 2015 to August 2017. Most often, empirical material that informs analysis in research emphasising everyday activity is, in the first stage, collected from the researcher's physical position in the field (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 29). This is not the case in this project. The primary position of what data were collected comes from the teachers' understanding of what activities they found interesting. However, my concerns and aims for the project, and the way I cooperated with the teachers, also contributed to the choices that were made. The institution is located in an urban area on the west coast

of Norway. During the period of this research, 63 children between one and 6 years of age were attending the institution. They were divided into four age-specific groups. The staff comprised nine assistants and seven teachers, including the manager and an extra teacher who took care of children with special needs.

Five teachers at this ECE institution made videotapes to illustrate children's activities that they found to be of special interest and value. I visited their institution to pick up the videos and interviewed the teachers who had recorded the activities, meeting one teacher at a time as well as the children in the video(s). I visited the institution 11 times for 2 to 4 h to do the interviews. Altogether, I obtained 13 videos of activities that range in length from 1:11 min to 10 min, and all are followed by comments from the teachers who made the recordings. Seven videos also include comments from the children involved. The videos contain activities that took place over the period of 1 year and involve different teachers, children, activities and places, but they are all from the same institution.

My project was part of the research group *Conditions for Children's Explorations*. Since two of my colleagues in this research group were investigating outdoor activities (Birkeland & Sørensen, 2021), I told the teachers that I preferred that they chose indoor activities when making videos of activities of special value and interest. The main emphasis was on what they saw as especially valuable and interesting activities, which may explain why six of the thirteen videos recorded outdoor activities, in spite of my suggestion that they should audio-visually record indoor activities. It may also indicate that the cultural dimension of outdoor activities as valuable activities in the Norwegian context could trump my wish for them to pick indoor activities.

Following my first analysis, which evoked more questions about the teachers' values and motives for the activities they found of specific value and interest, their opinions about play and the conditions and demands they meet in their daily practices, I did a group interview (lasting about 90 min) with four of the five teachers who had made the videotapes. In addition, I participated in two staff meetings (each lasting 1 h): the first to introduce and discuss my aims and research interest and the second to present and discuss my findings.

That the videos included outdoor activities despite my wish for indoor activities, and that no one in the group interview mentioned the subject of outdoor activities or referred to differences in outdoor and indoor activities, awoke my interest in how outdoor play is explained and outlined by Norwegian ECE teachers. This interest became even stronger when I noticed that, not only did the teachers hardly mention their views about outdoor education, but neither did I follow up this theme by questions in the interview. All these experiences may point to using the outdoors in ECE as something 'taken-for-granted'. I therefore contacted several ECE institutions, using the initial questions from the group interview and including a question about outdoor play. From this request, I received nine texts in response. Some of these texts were an individual response and some of them were notes from a group discussion among the staff in an ECE institution. The material for my analysis is based upon the content about outdoor activities in these nine texts, and comments made by the teachers about six audio-visual recordings of outdoor activities. Altogether, this creates a data collection of 15 qualitative interview transcripts. In addition, I include

political documents, the Norwegian Framework Plan for the contents and tasks of kindergartens, and earlier research, to inform my analysis.

The analysis builds on a conflict analysis (Grindheim, 2020), in which I trace conflicts between values and motives versus conditions and demands from personal, institutional and cultural perspectives and regarding the perceptions of nature. The data from the interviews with teachers are thereby considered to reflect their values and motives; and the teachers' articulations point to conditions that are seen in personal, institutional and cultural perspectives and regarding the perceptions of nature. The interviews form the basis for my analysis, but the teachers' utterances are understood in relation to relevant policy documents and earlier research. Although some of the conflicts can be related to more than one perspective – they are interwoven and interrelated – I keep them separated, aiming to make my analysis more transparent. The teachers' verbalisations are written in quotation marks. I am fully aware that this small-scale qualitative material does not represent all Norwegian ECE teachers. In spite of these limitations, I suggest that my analysis points to something relevant to take into consideration when discussing the content and methods of early childhood education.

8.4 Analysis and Findings: Conflicts in the Four Perspectives

To obtain more insight into conflicts that can be traced between ECE teachers' values and motives for outdoor play versus contextual conditions and demands for outdoor play, I trace conflicts in the data from personal, institutional and cultural perspectives, and regarding the perceptions of nature.

8.4.1 Conflict from the Personal Perspective

From the interviews, a conflict seems to occur between teachers' values and motives for emphasising outdoor free play (less controlled) versus their arguments for the need for teachers to be present and involved.

8.4.1.1 Less Controlled Play Versus the Need for Teachers to Be Present and Involved

On the one hand, all the teachers stated that 'outdoors there were fewer activities controlled by the teachers'. I interpret this as a reflection of their understanding of 'free' play as valuable and that less control is a motive for outdoor activities. This is in line with research that states that 'free' play and outdoor activities are often presented as being closely connected in Norway (Nilsen, 2012). Also, all the teachers stated the benefit that 'children were using their whole body for learning outdoors'.

I understand these comments to indicate that they value embodied learning. The value of learning as embodied – as more than cognitive and mental – is also emphasised in research (Stolz, 2015). Additionally, the teachers' responses demonstrated that they value 'outdoor activities as physical training (gross motor skills)'. I interpret this as valuing physical health and that this can more easily be obtained in nature or outdoors in free play, which confirms Gullestad's (1992) research. The teachers also pointed out that there were 'fewer conflicts outdoors – especially in the wilderness', which I interpret as valuing harmony. The connection between nature, free play/freedom and harmony can be traced in the heritage from the Norwegian philosopher, Arne Næss (2005), and his conceptualisation of nature as an ecological utopia (or Deep Ecology) where humans, animals, plants, woods and sea are connected in peace and harmony (Witoszek, 1991). The teachers also mentioned that outdoor activities and free play 'support good self-esteem', which I interpret as valuing well-being. The connection between outdoor free play and well-being can also be traced in Sandseter's (2009) research that demonstrates that children who challenge themselves in outdoor activities are better able to manage risk-taking.

On the other hand, when asked what conditions were necessary for obtaining the types of play that they value, the teachers responded that this kind of play 'asked for present, engaged, involved teachers that are aware of what values are to be emphasised'. They also stated that 'knowledge about play, respect for children, their needs, development and conditions', are necessary to obtain the teachers' favourable opinion of outdoor activities. When organising my material this way there seems to be a contradiction and a conflict between all the benefits of outdoor, free play and the need for the present, educated, conscious and well-trained teacher. Perhaps this is an indication that nature *per se* is not enough in the eyes of the teachers. It seems that both the intentional human teacher and the outdoors are considered essential to facilitate good education.

8.4.2 Conflicts from the Institutional Perspective

From the interviews, three conflicts seem to occur from the institutional perspective. One is the teachers' values and motives for education in nature versus valuing institutional activities. Another is the teachers' valuing of children as tribes separated from adults versus intergenerational perspectives. In addition, a third conflict occurs between teachers' taken-for-granted values and motivations for outdoor activities versus claims for more administrative tasks.

8.4.2.1 Education in Nature Versus Valuing Institutional Activities

On the one hand, the teachers stated that there were more opportunities for ‘multi-tasking outdoors, there were possibilities for several activities that happened parallel in time’. For example, when two girls were pretending to make cakes out of sand and water, one of them went to collect more water. On her way she engaged with other children pretending to be workers making a dike to keep the water from the fields, at the same time as she was involved in the sand and water play with the first girl. I interpret this – as the teachers value and are motivated to expand children’s ability to multitask – as being able to shift activities and being flexible. This is in line with Nilsen’s (2012) research in which she traces how readiness to shift and flexibility come to the forefront when teachers condition and value outdoor activities (p. 218).

The teachers also pointed out that ‘there is more space for play involving a variety of roles; for example, family play where there is room for movement like taking a taxi or a bus or driving the car to work because of the physical distances that it is possible to create between the “house” and “work”’. In addition, the teachers point to the outdoors as ‘a place that allows for experiences like watching the rubbish truck and the workers emptying the rubbish bins or the construction of a new building’. I interpret these two last utterances as demonstrating that the teachers value and are motivated to expand children’s role-playing. Valuing role-play for children’s development has a long history in ECE and can be traced from the heritage of Vygotsky (2016), who emphasises (role) play as the leading line in children’s development.

On the other hand, the content of the children’s outdoor play, their activities and roles that I refer to above, are institutional activities. The children made cakes, recycled the water, played families, used private and collective transport and went to work when playing in nature. In addition, due to the closeness between nature and urban areas, the children were able to watch different workers performing societal duties like emptying rubbish bins and constructing new buildings on their way to investigate the local nature. All these activities can be connected to institutions like homes or workplaces. Therefore, a contradiction and a conflict seem to occur between education outdoors or in the wilderness, while at the same time valuing institutional content. Perhaps this indicates the cultural heritage that emphasises humans’ duty to cultivate and harvest nature. Such a cultivation has to happen in nature. Again, it seems to be hard to separate humans and nature when educating children.

8.4.2.2 Valuing Children as Tribes Separated from Adults Versus Intergenerational Perspectives

On the one hand, the teachers stated that ‘the outdoors made room for play that children can manage without teachers being a part of the game. Play that requires space – games like hide-and-seek that are more fun the more children that are

involved'. I interpret this as that the teachers valued and were motivated to establish community, belonging and friendship among children, which is also in line with the Norwegian Framework Plan for the content and tasks of kindergartens: 'Kindergartens shall make good provision for play, friendship and the children's own culture' (UDIR, 2017, p. 20). Research presented by Kjørholt and Tingstad (2007) indicates that when constituting childhood as a period in the lifespan of humans, children were constituted as something other than adults. Children became tribes – separated from adults embedded in their own culture (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Like western societies colonising indigenous tribes and thereby destroying their culture, adults'/teachers' interventions in children's lives may harm their peer-communities.

On the other hand, as mentioned above, the teachers pointed to institutional conditions and demands like 'the need for qualified teachers'. Therefore, a contradiction and a conflict occur between understanding children as a community of peers that had to be protected from adults versus an intergenerational perspective emphasising that there are also empowering and important relations between the generations (Grindheim, 2017; Lee, 2001; Mannion, 2010).

8.4.2.3 Motivations for Outdoor Activities Versus Claims for more Administrative Tasks

On the one hand, all the teachers mentioned how they value outdoor activities. Reasons for their valuing and motivating for children's outdoor activities are read from their descriptions of the benefit from outdoor play that formed conditions for children to 'using their [children's] whole body', 'supporting self-esteem', 'supporting creativity', 'challenging gender dichotomies', and 'laying the foundation for sustainable development'.

On the other hand, Norwegian ECE institutional managers have experienced changes in the last few years in their contextual conditions and demands for what duties to perform, by receiving more administrative responsibility because of changes in the way that Norwegian local municipalities are organised. Therefore, the managers need to delegate more administrative tasks to the teachers (Børhaug, 2011; Seland, 2009). Research has depicted that extra administrative tasks are limiting the time that teachers are directly involved with the children (Granrusten & Moen, 2009; Helgøy, Homme, & Ludvigsen, 2010; Larsen & Slåtten, 2014). These administrative tasks, in addition to more meetings among the teachers, are often done in the period of the day when children are playing outside. Therefore, the less qualified members of staff often spend more time looking after the children during outdoor play.

This dilemma of how to prioritise tasks can be traced from the teachers' utterances that pointed to 'room and space, material, time and economy' and 'qualified teachers' when asked for conditions for realising the outdoor play they valued. Their priority of when to interact with the children may, on the one hand, indicate that the time spent outside will be of educational value even if less qualified staff

members are looking after the children because of the advantage of nature as an agent for cultural formation. On the other hand, it may indicate that the overall emphasis on nature is not as overall as expected since it may be seen as an arena of lesser educational value. Thereby, the involvement in the outdoor context is not prioritised among teachers. Anyway, a conflict occurs between what context (outdoor or indoor) that is emphasised for educational purposes versus the taken-for-granted motivations and value of outdoor activity.

8.4.3 Conflict from the Cultural Perspective

From the interviews, a conflict seems to occur between parents' and politicians' expectations of ECE to solve a range of contemporary challenges that serve as conditions and demands versus taken-for-granted Norwegian values and motives for more unstructured outdoor activities.

8.4.3.1 Unstructured Outdoor Activities Versus Measurable Educational Outcomes

In the interviews all the teachers, on the one hand, mentioned that 'outdoor activities are less regulated by the staff'. On the other hand, the teachers' valuing of fewer regulations and motivations for children's initiative forms a conflict with changes in Norwegian ECE. During recent years, Norwegian ECE institutions have experienced both a growing and changing public and political interest (Grindheim, 2018). The growing interest can be explained by the rapid expansion of ECE institutions in Norway. From being a desired option for a few (18% in 1980), there are now ECE institutions available for most Norwegian children (91% in 2017). Therefore, most of the citizens, including parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, are personally engaged in how ECE institutions are contributing to their children's education. In some urban geographical areas, the owners of ECE institutions compete to attract parents. Therefore, families are viewed as customers within the framework of competitive local institutions regulated as a market for meeting the individuals' needs for future education. Political interest in ECE institutions is also changing. Not only are ECE institutions viewed as a political tool for gender equality by paving the way for women's role in the labour market (Korsvold, 2005, p. 21), but they are also seen as an arena for resolving a variety of contemporary problems. Through early interventions, ECE institutions are supposed to neutralise class differences (Stortingsmelding nr. 41:2008–2009, 2009:10), provide school readiness for bilingual children (Stortingsmelding nr. 17:1996–98; Stortingsmelding nr. 49:2003–2004; NOU 2011:14; Drange & Telle, 2011) and prevent behavioural problems and school dropouts (Webster-Stratton, 1999). From an economic perspective, education paves the way for early intervention, so that the outcomes can be achieved in the least 'costly' way possible. This can be seen in the constant pressure to start teaching

academic skills at a progressively younger age (Bodrova, 2008). Education is emerging as an economic investment. Politicians and parents are thereby strong agents, representing both economic and political resources, when it comes to defining the content and methods of ECE (Grindheim, 2018). Economic and political resources are important conditions and demands for ECE institutions.

These conditions and demands in the societal/cultural perspective influence what are seen as important content and methods in ECE and ask for measurable educational outcomes controlled by teachers. At beforehand defined measurable outcomes form a contrast and conflict to what the teachers pointed to when describing outdoor activities as ‘less regulated by the staff’. Outdoor activities in nature are seldom structured, teacher led, learning activities with explicit academic aims. Therefore, a contradiction and a conflict emerge between demands for ECE to solve a range of contemporary challenges in the presumed less costly way to meet their customers’ wishes versus the taken-for-granted values and motives for outdoor and more child-initiated activities. The teachers’ reference to ‘economy’, as a condition for the play they value, also underlines the emphasis on costs and this emerging conflict.

8.4.4 Conflicts from the Perception of Nature

From the interviews, two conflicts appear from the participants’ perception of nature. The first is a conflict between teachers’ values and motives understanding nature as ‘good’ and serving equity, versus nature as dangerous. The second is a conflict between the teachers’ values and motives understanding nature as valuable in itself (eco-centric perspective), versus nature as a tool for meeting human needs and something to be cultivated by humans (anthropocentric approach).

8.4.4.1 Nature as Good Versus Nature as Dangerous

On the one hand, the teachers asserted that ‘outdoor activities can challenge gender dichotomies’. I interpret this utterance as that the teachers value and are motivated to create more equity among genders. The statement is followed by the explanation, ‘in outdoor play in nature, there are fewer gendered tools for play’. The outdoors as an arena for more equity among genders is often supported by research (i. e. Erden & Alpaslan, 2017).

On the other hand, the teachers, when asked for conditions for obtaining less gender-biased play, responded that this play called for conditions ‘like smaller groups of children, since play in the wilderness, for example climbing trees, calls for teachers paying close attention’. Therefore, a contradiction and a conflict seem to occur between an understanding of nature as a creature of the good (equity among genders), versus nature as dangerous. Werler (2015) states that nature does not have any intention or plan for humans – neither good, nor bad. He states that the

dichotomy between nature and culture is a construction, made by language and by the duty to cultivate and harvest nature.

8.4.4.2 Nature as Valuable in Itself Versus Nature as a Tool for Meeting Human Needs

On the one hand, the teachers state that ‘play in nature is more creative and more explorative’. I interpret this as teachers valuing natural materials that children use as mediating tools in play, for example rocks and sticks, because it is not pre-defined how to use them or what they should be used for, like more commercial toys, that are more frequently encountered indoors. There may also be more to explore outdoors; the teachers pointed to ‘insects, plants, water, sand, trees to climb’. I interpret this as reflecting the teachers’ perception of nature as a tool for the conscious human being, that is close to an anthropocentric approach.

On the other hand, the conditions for obtaining this valuable creative, explorative play is based upon access to natural spaces that are still not cultivated by humans. In addition, the teachers pointed out that ‘outdoor play lays the foundation for sustainable development’. I interpret this as that the teachers value and are motivated to continue the heritage of an educational understanding of sustainable development emphasising children’s closeness to nature by playing in nature (Sanderud & Gurholt, 2014). By learning to love nature, humans will also care for and protect nature (Chawla, 2006), and recognise the connectedness and the dependence between nature and humans, and that we all are nature (Dickinson, 2016). Thereby nature is presented as valuable in itself, closer to an eco-centric perspective. Connectedness to nature has been a global discourse in sustainability education (Boldermo & Ødegaard, 2019). The national discourse in Norway, valuing outdoor activities, has been closely connected to the global discourse on environmental protection (Heggen, 2016). The main approach in the national and global discourses is that connection to nature is leading the line to constructing environmentally protective subjects (Nilsen, 2012, p. 215). Therefore, a contradiction and a conflict seem to occur between the anthropocentric and the eco-centric perspectives.

8.5 Summing Up and Exploring the Emerging Conflicts

From the *personal perspective*, there seems to be a conflict between all the benefits of outdoor play and the need for the present, educated, conscious and well-trained teacher. From the *institutional perspective*, three conflicts occur. First, there is a conflict between education in nature versus the valuing of institutional activities. Second, there is a conflict between the teachers’ valuing children as tribes separated

from adults versus intergenerational perspectives. Third, there is a conflict between teachers' taken-for-granted values and motivations for outdoor activities versus claims for more administrative tasks. From the *cultural perspective*, a conflict occurs between expectations of parents and politicians versus taken-for-granted cultural valuing of more unstructured outdoor activities. In the *perceptions of nature*, two conflicts occur. The first is a conflict between nature as innocent – serving the good – versus nature as dangerous. The second is a conflict between nature as valuable in itself versus nature as a tool for meeting human needs. Outdoor activity seems to be valued from all perspectives, but conflicts are emerging, when meeting conditions and demands.

When exploring these conflicts, most of them indicate that nature, culture and humans are hard to separate. Drawing on interviews, research, political documents and changing cultural conditions and demands for ECE it seems, on the one hand, that the historical emphasis on outdoor activities is narrowed. On the other hand, if nature *per se* makes children free, offers harmony, more space for a variety of activity in the institutions, societal equity between genders, peer-communities and an eco-centric understanding, there may be a possibility of making spare time for teachers to do administrative tasks. This forms a contrast to utterances that emphasise the present, educated teacher, knowledge, economy, experiences for institutional role-play and nature as a tool for creativity. In addition, outdoor activities also emerge as being trapped between the Norwegian 'love of nature' and the expectations of educational outcomes. The interviews also reveal that outdoor activities are constituted by the kinds of practices that are embedded in ECE, the Norwegian culture, and nature, which is accessible and frequently in use.

Ambiguities occur, according to what conditions are best for cultural formation. An understanding of nature as both a place that does not have an intention and as one that represents 'good formation', appears. The teachers' articulations reflect their valuing of and motives for outdoor activities when they are explicitly asked for their opinions. It may be a task for researchers to raise such questions to obtain knowledge of the taken-for-granted. Thereby, both teachers and researchers will have a voice in the choir of agents that direct the content and values in ECE, to serve conditions for children's exploration. The taken-for-granted can be neither improved nor cultivated if not conceptualised. When humans and nature emerge as two sides of one coin, they can easily be trapped as the one or the other, and the outdoor environment can offer neither cultural nor natural formation without the presence of interacting humans. In this way, a more complete model can emerge, which includes nature, culture and humans where both children and teachers are in intergenerational relations, in the ongoing formation of ECE. Active and conscious researchers and teachers, in collaboration with children and parents, as well as a variety of contexts for children's exploration, are important for children's exploration, play and learning.

References

- Birkeland, Å., & Sørensen, H. V. (2021). Time regulation as institutional condition for children's outdoor play and cultural formation in kindergarten. In L. T. Grindheim, H. V. Sørensen, & A. Rekers (Eds.), *Outdoor learning and play: Pedagogical practice and children's cultural formation*. Springer.
- Bodrova, E. (2008). Make-believe play versus academic skills: A Vygotskian approach to today's dilemma of early childhood education. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 16(3), 357–369.
- Boldermo, S., & Ødegaard, E. E. (2019). What about the migrant children? The state-of-the-art in research claiming social sustainability. *Sustainability*, 11(2), 1–13.
- Børhaug, K. (2011). Barnehageorganisasjonen—autonomi eller standardisering? *Tidsskriftet FoU i praksis*, 5(2), 49–66.
- Chawla, L. (2006). Learning to love the natural world enough to protect it. *Barn*, 24(2), 57–78.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2008). Introduction. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (pp. 1–44). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dickinson, E. (2016). Ecocultural conversations: Bridging the human-nature divide through connective communication practices. *Southern Communication Journal*, 81(1), 32–48.
- Drange, N., & Telle, K. (2011). Gratis kjernetid i barnehage. Effekt på skolekarakterene til barn fra innvandrerfamilier. In N. P. Sandbu (Ed.), *Utdanning 2011 – veien til arbeidslivet, Statistiske analyser 124*. Oslo, Norway: Statistisk sentralbyrå.
- Erden, F. T., & Alpaslan, Z. G. (2017). Gender issues in outdoor play. In T. Waller, E. Ärlemalm-Hagsér, E. B. H. Sandseter, L. Lee-Hammond, K. Lekies, & S. Wyver (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of outdoor play and learning* (Vol. 348, pp. 349–363). London: Sage.
- Granrusten, P. T., & Moen, K. H. (2009). Mindre tid til barna?: om pedagogiske lederes tidsbruk etter kommunal omorganisering. In I. S. Mørreaunet, V. Glaser, O. F. Lillemyr, & K. H. Moen (Eds.), *Inspirasjon og kvalitet i praksis – med hjerte for barnehagefeltet* (pp. 123–138). Oslo, Norway: Pedagogisk forum.
- Grindheim, L. T. (2017). Children as playing citizens. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 25(4), 624–636.
- Grindheim, L. T. (2018). Beyond uniform reproduction: Exploring children's imaginative play through the lenses of their teacher. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 21(1), 58–69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949118783384>
- Grindheim, L. T. (2020). Conflict analyses: A methodology for exploring children's cultural formation in early childhood education. In M. Hedegaard & E. E. Ødegaard (Eds.), *Children's exploration and cultural formation* (pp. 65–82). London: Springer.
- Gullestad, M. (1992). The art of social relations. In *Essays on culture, social action and everyday life in modern Norway*. Oslo, Norway: Scandinavian University Press.
- Hedegaard, M. (2009). Children's development from a cultural–historical approach: Children's activity in everyday local settings as foundation for their development. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 16(1), 64–82.
- Heggen, M. P. (2016). Education for sustainable development in Norway. In J. Siraj-Blatchford, E. Park, & M. Cathy (Eds.), *International research on education for sustainable development in early childhood* (pp. 91–102). Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- Helgøy, I., Homme, A., & Ludvigsen, K. (2010). Mot nye arbeidsdelingsmønstre og autoritetsrelasjoner i barnehagen. *Tidsskrift for velferdsforskning*, 13(1), 43–57.
- James, A., Jenks, C., & Prout, A. (1998). *Theorizing childhood*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Kjørholt, A. T., & Tingstad, V. (2007). Flexible places for flexible children: Discourses on new kindergarten architecture. In H. Zeiher, A. T. Kjørholt, D. Dymna, & H. Strandell (Eds.), *Flexible childhood? Exploring children's welfare in time and space* (pp. 169–189). Odense, Denmark: University Press of Southern Denmark.
- Korsvold, T. (2005). *For alle barn. Barnehagens framvekst i velferdsstaten*. Oslo, Norway: Abstrakt Forlag.

- Larsen, A. K., & Slåtten, M. V. (2014). Mot en ny pedagogisk lederrolle og lederidentitet? *Tidsskrift for Nordisk Barnehageforskning*, 7(5), 1–9.
- Lee, N. (2001). *Childhood and society. Growing up in an age of uncertainty*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Lysklett, O. B., & Emilsen, K. (2007). *De er mange, de er motiverte, de er menn i natur-og friluftsbarnhage. Sluttrapport fra prosjektet "Menn i natur-og friluftsbarnhager"*. Trondheim, Norway: Dronning Mauds Minne Høgskole for Førskolelærerutdanning.
- Mannion, G. (2010). After participation: The socio-spatial performance of intergenerational becoming. In B. Percy-Smith & N. Thomas (Eds.), *A handbook of children's participation* (pp. 330–342). Oxford, UK: Routledge.
- Moen, K. H., Blekesaune, A., & Bakke, H. K. (2008). Hvem bruker natur- og friluftsbarnhager? *Barn*, 26(3), 37–56.
- Næss, A. (2005). Deep ecology of wisdom. Edited by H. Glasser & A. Drensgson In Cooperation with the author and with assistance from bill Devall and George sessions. In H. Glasser & A. Drensgson (Eds.), *The selected works of Arne Naess*, X. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- Nilsen, R. D. (2008). Children in nature: Cultural ideas and social practices in Norway. In A. James & A. James (Eds.), *European childhoods. Cultures, politics and childhood in Europe* (pp. 38–60). Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nilsen, R. D. (2011). Født med ski på beina? På ski i et fargerikt fellesskap. In I. T. Korsvold (Ed.), *Barndom Barnehage Inkludering* (pp. 151–172). Bergen, Norway: Fagbokforlaget.
- Nilsen, R. D. (2012). Flexible spaces – Flexible subjects in 'nature': Transcending the 'fenced' childhood in daycare centres ? In A. T. Kjørholt & J. Qvortrup (Eds.), *The modern child and the flexible labour market. Early childhood and care* (pp. 203–221). In A. James & A. James Studies (series Eds.) Childhood and youth. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- NOU Norges offentlige utredninger. (2011:14). *Bedre integrering. Mål, strategier og tiltak*. Oslo, Norway: Barne-, likestillings- og inkluderingsdepartementet.
- Ødegaard, E. E., & Krüger, T. (2012). Studier av barnehagen som dannelsesarena. In E. E. Ødegaard (Ed.), *Barnehagen som dannelsesarena* (pp. 19–47). Bergen, Norway: Fagbokforlaget.
- Sanderud, J. R., & Gurholt, K. P. (2014). Barns nysgjerrige lek i natur–Utforskende dannelselse. *Nordic Studies in Education*, 34(01), 3–20.
- Sandseter, E. B. H. (2009). Risky play and risk management in Norwegian preschools – A qualitative observational study. *Safety Science Monitor*, 13(1), 2–12.
- Seland, M. (2009). *Det moderne barn og den fleksible barnehagen*. Ph.D. thesis (258). Trondheim: NTNU, NOSEB.
- Stolz, S. A. (2015). Embodied learning. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 47(5), 474–487.
- Stortingsmelding (White Paper) nr. 17. (1996–97). *Om innvandring og det flerkulturelle Norge*. Oslo, Norway: Kunnskapsdepartementet.
- Stortingsmelding (White Paper) nr. 41. (2008–2009). *Kvalitet i barnehagen*. Oslo, Norway: Kunnskapsdepartementet.
- Stortingsmelding (White Paper) nr. 49. (2003–2004). *Mangfold gjennom inkludering og deltakelse*. Oslo, Norway: Kunnskapsdepartementet.
- UDIR Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. (2017). *Framework plan for the content and tasks of kindergartens*. Oslo, Norway: Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (2016). Play and its role in the mental development of the child. *International Research in Early Childhood Education*, 7(2), 1–24.
- Webster-Stratton, C. (1999). *How to promote children's social and emotional competence*. London: Paul Chapman/Sage.
- Werler, T. (2015). Læring i og av naturen? Epigenetiske aspekter ved et didaktisk problem. In B. O. Hallås & G. Karlsen (Eds.), *Natur og danning. Profesjonsutøvelse, barnehage og skole* (pp. 37–57). Bergen, Norway: Fagbokforlaget.
- Witoszek, N. (1991). Der Kultur møter Natur: tilfelle Norge. *Samtiden*, 4, 11–19.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

