

Making Use of “Nature” in an Outdoor Preschool: Classroom, Home and Fairyland

Eva Änggård

*Department of Didactic Science and Early Childhood Education
Stockholm University*

Citation: Änggård, Eva (2010). “Making Use of ‘Nature’ in an Outdoor Preschool: Classroom, Home and Fairyland.” *Children, Youth and Environments* 20(1): 4-25. Retrieved [date] from <http://www.colorado.edu/journals/cye>.

Abstract

In Swedish preschools, visits to nature environments are traditionally seen as important, and during the past two decades, interest in outdoor education has increased. This article concerns different ways of talking about and making use of nature in everyday activities in a Swedish preschool with an outdoor focus. The researcher studied 32 children between 1½ and 6 years old and their teachers during a one-year period. The data collected include ethnographic material such as video observations, interviews and local documents. The analysis indicates that nature is used in three ways: as a classroom where children learn about nature, as a home—a peaceful place for eating, sleeping and playing, and as an enchanted world, a fairyland.

Keywords: [nature](#), [preschool](#), [outdoor education](#), [ethnography](#), [Sweden](#)

Introduction

Nature: An Important Element in the Swedish Preschool

This article concerns different ways of talking about and making use of "nature" in a Swedish preschool with an outdoor focus. This preschool has been studied in the context of a project about nature as a symbol of ideal childhood.¹ In Scandinavia, there is a strong notion that children and nature belong together (Gullestad 1997), and this connection is the focus of our interest in the project. The studied preschool is special because it has an outdoor profile, but the results nevertheless say something about ordinary preschools, as spending time outdoors and in natural environments are preferred activities in Swedish preschools. In an inquiry sent to 100 preschools in Stockholm, staff report that the average time spent outdoors was 5.8 hours on a summer day, 3.6 hours on a spring or autumn day, and 2.0 hours on a winter day if the weather was nice. When the weather was bad, the corresponding figures were 2.6 hours, 2 hours and 1.5 hours. In preschools with outdoor profiles, even more hours were spent outdoors (Söderström et al. 2004).

The curriculum for the Swedish preschool states that "great emphasis" should be put on "issues concerning the environment" and that the preschool "should contribute to ensuring children acquire a caring attitude to nature and the environment, and understand that they are a part of nature's recycling process" (Swedish National Agency for Education 2006, 7). The interest in outdoor education for all age levels is increasing in Sweden. In teacher education programs, courses in outdoor education are being offered. At Linköping University, the National Center for Outdoor Education is involved in research as well as education.

Since the first kindergartens were started in Sweden around 1900, nature has been seen as an important part of the program. Jean Jacques Rousseau's and Friedrich Fröbel's ideas about nature have had a strong impact on the Swedish preschool (Swedish Government 1997, 157). The conception of the child and the ideas about education that Rousseau promotes in his book *Emile ou de l'éducation* (Rousseau 1762) still have an influence (Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi 1994). Rousseau thought children should be brought up in nature to avoid the damaging influences of society. Children were supposed to learn through their own experiences rather than through instruction. Nature was an important resource and a source of knowledge, and children should learn through physical interaction with the material world, beginning with the closest environment and gradually progressing to wider circles. Children ought to spend considerable time outdoors, preferably barefoot and lightly dressed. In a similar way, Fröbel's ideas have had a great influence on the Swedish preschool. In the philosophy that he formulated in his book *Die Menchenerziehung* in 1826, nature has a central position. Children were supposed to learn to love nature early. Their knowledge about nature should be based on experiences and observations. The teacher's task was primarily to awaken in them a feeling for nature. The important thing was not that children learned the names of natural

¹ The project is called "The Significance of Nature in Modern Childhood" and the project leader is Gunilla Halldén at Department of Child Studies, Linköping University. The project was funded by the Swedish Research Council.

objects, but that they got to know them by using their senses. Fröbel's decision to call the institution *kindergarten* mirrors his pedagogical view; he saw the child as a plant and the teacher as a gardener who was to make the plant flourish.

Nature as a Cultural Symbol

Gullestad (1992) argues that nature is an important cultural symbol in Scandinavia and that the national identities of the Nordic countries are related to nature. Gullestad shows that the concept of nature is complex and that this complexity is related to its symbolic character. Symbols are not restricted to a single context; they absorb meanings from different situations. Symbols contain their own oppositions, often only one of which is expressed, while the other is implicit. Gullestad suggests that nature is a part of two oppositions of particular importance. First, there is the opposition between home and nature, where home is related to order and security while nature is connected to wildness and danger. Nature provides resistance; in nature the human is trained to cope and survive. Second, there is an opposition between nature and the city. In this opposition, nature represents cosmos, order and wholeness, while the city represents chaos and fragmentation. Nature helps to create a feeling of wholeness in a person, and many people have spiritual experiences in natural environments. In the nature-city opposition, nature, like the home, represents harmony. Gullestad does not consider the complexity of the concept of nature problematic; she thinks instead that good symbols can always be understood in different ways. Complexity allows many people to identify with a symbol without having to agree on its meaning (Gullestad 1992).

(Natural) Places as Socially Constructed

Olwig and Gulløv (2003) have stressed that although places are of great importance to social life, the notion that the character of places is socially constructed has not been problematized sufficiently in sociology and social anthropology. Rasmussen (2004) discusses the place concept in an article about "children's places." He draws on Relph (1976), who thinks that place refers to a specific, recognizable part of space. A place is given meaning through human experiences of that given physical locality. Rasmussen also refers to Tuan (1977), who in a similar way considers that a place is constituted through experiences as humans get to know it better and connect it with social meaning.

One point of departure in my understanding of natural places is that they are also given meaning through human experiences, including social experiences. The meaning they are given has to do with the different ideas people have about nature. In turn, the meanings we associate with the concept of nature influence how we talk about and relate to it. The aim of the present article is to show how nature is used for pedagogical purposes in the setting under study. How do the teachers make use of and present different nature places to children in the everyday life of a preschool?

The Study

The study discussed here was carried out from August 2006 to June 2007. The investigation had an ethnographic approach; I acted as a participant observer on

average one day a week. The data consist of field notes, video observations (38 hours), informal conversations with children, interviews with staff members (10 hours) and parents (12 hours), photographs and local documents. This article mainly draws from my field notes, video observations in nature environments and interviews with staff.

In ethnographic research, the analysis process starts from the first day of the investigation and impacts the choices made for data gathering (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). In August 2006 when I made my first visits, new children were introduced to the preschool. This awoke my interest in how the forest near the preschool would be presented to the beginners. I decided to observe the new children's first days in the forest and how the nature environment was introduced to the children by the staff. My first analysis was based on field notes that were typed out immediately after the field work and video observations and interviews that were transcribed in rough outlines. I posed different questions to the material: How is nature used in play and pedagogical activities? How is it presented to the children by the staff? Which aspects of nature are put forward? I read the transcriptions several times and noted and developed categories. During the year, I continued to put the same kind of questions to the material and transcribed some episodes from the video observations in detail. My interpretations were cross-checked in workshops and seminars where I shared the material with members of the project group and other research colleagues.

Data from the observations and the interviews were consistent; the staff expressed the same view of nature in the interviews as they did in action in nature environments. This article mainly draws from video transcriptions² to underpin my findings, as these concrete episodes are more illustrative and interesting than utterances.

Outdoor Preschools

The studied preschool is a so-called "I Ur och Skur" (approximately translated as "all-weather") preschool. These preschools are conducted in cooperation with Friluftsförbundet, which is an important national organization for outdoor life in Sweden. This type of "forest" or "outdoor" preschool has existed since the mid-1980s, and today there are around 170 of them in Sweden, according to the registry of Friluftsförbundet. I Ur och Skur preschools carry out outdoor education, and a large part of the day is spent outdoors. Their aim is to give children knowledge about nature, to make them aware of the environment and help them acquire a feeling for nature.

Nature awareness education is mediated through play and pedagogy characterized by exploration. In this kind of preschool, the traditional preschool program is integrated with the approach of Friluftsförbundet, which has organized outdoor activities for children of different ages since 1950. At that time, schools in which

² In the transcripts, brackets are used to mark non-verbal actions carried out simultaneously with talk. Italics mark emphatic words. Three dots indicate that part of a turn in an interview has been left out. All names are fictional.

children could learn to ski and ice skate were started, as well as forest schools. In the forest schools, children learn about flora and fauna, environmental protection and camp life. One central idea is that children should learn by having fun, by playing, singing and fantasizing about the animals and plants of the forest. A special part of the pedagogy involves imaginary characters, which are used to arouse excitement and encourage the children to use their imagination. The most important of these characters is the troll Mulle, a forest creature who is made from the material of the forest (Rantatalo 2000).

During the first decades of the outdoor schools' existence, many different kinds of materials were used to teach children about flora and fauna; for example, pictures of animals were brought to the forest. An important development in the forest schools' pedagogy took place in the 1970s when magnifying glasses were introduced. The children's own experiences became central. They are encouraged to explore and to collect, sort and compare. Sensory impressions are considered important to the children's understanding and conceptualizations, and their desire to discover and explore is considered even more important than it had been before (Rantatalo 2000).

The Preschool

In the preschool under study, here called The Rainbow, there are two groups, one with 18 places for children between 3 and 6 years old and the other with 14 places for children between 1 and 3 years old. The staff consists of three leaders³ for each group plus two extra leaders for children with special needs, a manager (who also has the responsibility for an outdoor primary school), and a cook who prepares breakfast, a hot meal for lunch and snacks. The preschool is located in an ordinary residential building. The premises are adapted to preschool activities, and the site are as big and well-equipped as in a "regular" preschool. The yard is shared with people who live in the surrounding houses, which means that the staff has limited opportunities to influence its design. The preschool is located about 50 meters from the edge of a wood.

The preschool is imbued with nature in different ways. First and foremost, a large part of the day is spent outdoors in natural environments. Nature is also incorporated in other ways; conversations, fairy tales, songs, rhymes and games mostly have themes from nature. The preschool and the two groups have names connected to nature. Furthermore, the artifacts used during gatherings—books, pictures, objects—preferably depict nature elements.

Three or four days a week the groups head for the forest. One day a week is spent in the yard so that some staff members can have meetings while the others take care of the children. The weather does have an impact. If it is very cold or if there is snow and ice on the ground, the small children stay in the yard.

³ In I Ur och Skur-preschools, the teachers are titled leaders in accordance with the tradition of Friluftsförbundet.

Each of the two groups has its own "base place" near the preschool. In these base places, the "log ring" is an important place (Figure 1). It consists of four thick logs placed in a square. The log rings are used for gatherings and snacks. The 3- to 6-year-old group's base place is located in a grove close to the preschool. The 1- to 3-year-old group's place is situated a few hundred meters away. For the small children, the walk to the base place is considered important, and there are special "stop places" along the way where children and staff wait for each other and look at something that nature provides or that the leaders have prepared. The base places are carefully chosen to provide environments that are considered appropriately challenging in relation to the children's ages. The 3- to 6-year-olds' place contains a small hill, trees, a ditch that is sometimes filled with water, and it includes areas where children can play out of sight of adults and other children. The 1- to 3-year-olds' place is an open plateau with minor differences in ground level, and it is surrounded by trees and bushes. There are stones and two big pits sometimes filled with water. Both places have flat areas where organized games led by the staff are played. The groups generally leave the preschool shortly after nine o'clock. During the winter half of the year, they stay in the forest until noon. Lunch is served at one o'clock and a snack consisting of sandwiches and a warm drink is served in the forest around ten o'clock. During the summer half of the year, the groups often stay in the forest to have lunch and sleep or rest. Sometimes warm food is fetched from the preschool by one of the leaders, and sometimes prepared food is warmed on a camping stove or over an open fire.

Figure 1. The 3- to 6-year-olds' log ring⁴



⁴ All photographs were taken by the author.

All the children at The Rainbow also are divided into smaller groups called forest school groups which are a traditional part of Friluftsfremjandet's program (see description above). The forest school groups start when the preschool semester has been underway a few weeks in the autumn and spring and are terminated some weeks before Christmas and the summer holiday. The forest school groups consist of approximately five children of the same age, who once a week walk to the forest with their own leader, who is one of the staff. They leave the preschool slightly after nine o'clock and stay out between one-and-a-half and three hours, depending on the children's ages. They walk to a special group place selected by the leader and they always follow the same paths to get there. During group time, the children are taught about nature in different ways, they play games and eat snacks that each child has brought in her or his rucksack.

Besides the forest school groups, the 3- to 6-year-olds' group from The Rainbow sometimes takes excursions to the sea or other places in the surrounding forest.

Different Ways of Using Nature

In my observations, I found that nature was used at the school in three main ways:

- as a classroom where children learn about nature in different ways.
- as a home—a peaceful place in which to eat, sleep, socialize and play.
- as an enchanted world—a fairyland populated by fairy figures and animals with human traits.

A Norwegian study in a nature-oriented child care center (Nilsen 2006) identified other ways of using nature, such as a place to be protected and cared for and nature as a place for outdoor life. However, as these were less common in my observations I have chosen to exclude them from the present paper and focus on the three predominant ways of using nature.

Nature as a Classroom

One day in June, the 3- to 6-year-old group visits a lake not far from the preschool. When we, after a short bus trip and a walk, reach the shore, we sit down in the shade under a tree to have a snack. One of the leaders walks together with two children out on a bridge to check the water temperature. Another leader shows the children items they are allowed to use, like strainers, pipettes and magnifying glasses. There are also reference books for plants and insects that live at the water's edge. The children are told they are allowed to go into the water, but only until the water reaches their knees, no farther. Children and adults spread out along the shore. Most of the children wade in the water and pick up plants, stones and other material from the lake. The children are dressed in T-shirts, shorts or rolled-up pants, and sunhats. One of the leaders sits on the bridge together with a couple of children, looking for an insect that one of the children has found in a reference book.

Figure 2. Excursion to a lake



In this episode, the children appear as small researchers who investigate, invent and discover various elements of nature. They are intensely busy exploring their findings. They are used to this kind of activity. They have visited the same place many times during different seasons, and both the environment and the tools are familiar to them. A "regular" preschool on the other side of the shore constitutes an interesting contrast. In this group, the children and the staff are sitting in the sun on blankets a few meters from the shore. They are all dressed in bathing suits. Spades and other plastic toys in bright colors are placed in the sand. A few children swim together with adults.

In the example above, the children at The Rainbow learn by exploring, something that can be related to the new ideas brought into Friluftsförskolan in the 1970s. This exploratory pedagogy is also common in the forest school groups. When I join the forest school group for the 5- to 6-year-olds one day in March, the children each have a magnifying glass hanging around their necks. To begin, we walk over an open area with dry grass, bedrocks and moss. On the way to the group's own place, we make several stops. The leader encourages the children to look at the moss with their magnifying glasses. She also rolls over two stones and together with the children she examines what is under them. They find ants and a snail. The leader also urges the children to observe what has happened since they walked this way a week earlier, and to look for signs of spring. Among other things, they look at and touch pussy willow buds. When we reach the forest, the leader and the children examine some trees—mountain ash, aspen and birch—by comparing their buds and leaves from last year, lying on the ground with pictures in a book.

The group has also done an experiment: The last time they met before Christmas, they nailed things on a board: a leaf, a plastic bag, a piece of fabric and an orange peel. They dug the board down into the soil and left it there over the winter. When they returned for the spring semester, the leader and the children investigated what had happened to the different materials. Starting from the experiment, the natural cycles were discussed.

This pedagogy, in which children are given opportunities to actively explore and experiment, is based on the theories of John Dewey and Jean Piaget. They both underline, though from different theoretical perspectives, that children learn best when they are allowed to actively explore their environment (Dewey 1990; Piaget 1989).

Some of the exploratory activities are organized as themes. For example, one of the forest schools for 4- to 5-year-olds is working with a special butterfly species for the entire spring semester, a theme chosen by the children. The leader introduces the theme by conducting interviews with each child to find out what they know about butterflies. She also lets every child draw a butterfly. The children work with the theme in different ways. Butterflies are studied in nature and in books, games in which the children pretend to be butterflies are played and pictures of butterflies are created and discussed. The project ends in the same way as it started—the children are interviewed and invited to draw a butterfly again. The organization of the project is similar to the pedagogical approach used in the Italian town of Reggio Emilia, where projects start from children's pre-understanding of a subject and are developed in interplay between the teachers and the children. One project often lasts for a long period (Rinaldi 2004)

Alternating with this exploratory and experimental pedagogy is a more traditional pedagogical approach in which the leader mediates facts. When the 5- to 6-year-olds go to the forest in the episode above, the leader teaches them about the different animals and plants they are observing. She tells the children, for example, about how the snails protect themselves against cold in the winter and that there are different kinds of birches. The gathering in the forest later on is reminiscent of a classroom situation. The leader uses a wall chart that illustrates different signs of spring, and together with the children she recalls the signs they have seen today. In these activities, she poses questions to the children. Here, a well-known pattern in pedagogical situations can be seen: the leader poses a question, lets a child answer, and then gives feedback (Mercer 1995). This is in accordance with observations in the Norwegian study mentioned above; Nilsen (2006) found that this classroom pattern was common when the staff talked about animals with the children.

In the work with the youngest children, knowledge of species is not given great weight, although such elements do appear. The focus is instead on encouraging the children to experience nature with their senses, like in the following episode.

A leader and her forest school group are heading out into the forest. This day four children, 2-2½ years old, are participating. It is raining slightly. When they have walked a few meters on the path, the leader stops. She squats down, gathering the children around her.

Leader: Can you see that there is something on this leaf?

Child: It has rained.

Leader: They are wet—raindrops—you can hear them if you listen. Can you hear that it's raining on the leaves!

Niclas: (takes off his cap to hear better) Raindrops on my head! (He laughs.)

The leader starts to read a rhyme about rain together with the children. They carry on walking along the path and stop after a few meters at a small juniper shrub.

Leader: How does this feel? Is it soft? Prickly? It prickles a little, do you feel it Niclas?

Niclas: (touches) Yes.

Next stop is at a rock with moss on it.

The leader tells the children to touch it and that Jenny, who is wearing mittens, can feel it with her cheek.

Leader: Feels like it's wet.

Niclas: It is wet!

Leader: Did you feel it Jenny? Or you can feel it with the tip of your nose—you can smell it at the same time.

When the leader talks with the children about nature elements, she encourages them to use all their senses. She invites them not only to look but also to feel, listen to and smell things. The sensory impressions are central, and using her voice and facial expressions the leader in this episode helps create a feeling of fascination and wonder. This way of presenting nature is in accordance with the aims of the forest schools.

This way of teaching is also close to what both Rousseau (1762) and Fröbel (1826) suggested. The teacher's task is not to teach children about the names of different species, but to encourage them to experience nature with their senses and thus get a feeling for it. This opinion also is expressed by the manager of the preschool at an information meeting for parents who are applying for a place in the preschool for their children. She says that the important thing is not to teach the children facts about nature, as that comes automatically when the children play, experience and have fun.

To conclude, at this preschool, nature is used as an environment for learning, a classroom outdoors, where different pedagogical methods are used to encourage children to learn about and experience nature. Great importance is given to sensory exploration, to experiencing nature with all the senses. The children are made observant of the details in nature.

Nature as a Home

It is a day in June and the children in the 1- to 3-year-olds' group are going to have a rest after eating lunch at their base place. Before lunch they have had time for play. An open tent is raised and blankets are spread on the ground. The children take off their caps and boots. Some of them want to keep trousers and socks on, others just want to wear underpants or briefs and T-shirts. The leader who is responsible for the rest time places the eight children close to each other and puts a blanket over each of them. Some of them have pacifiers. The leader lies down by their heads and reads a fairy story to them. The wind flutters in the canvas and a blackbird warbles nearby. Some of the children are lying on their backs and touch the canvas with their feet. One girl is lying on her face and plays with some needles while she listens to the story. Some of the children fall asleep while others are allowed to go on playing after having rested for a while.

Figure 3. Rest time for the small children



During the summer half of the year, the groups spend as much time as possible in the forest. They eat, sleep, go to the toilet, play and socialize in the forest. Every function has its own place. Just as in a home, there is a "dining room," a "bedroom" and a "bathroom" in each of the base places. In this regard, it is possible to say that the base place is made use of as a home.

The focus on care and physical needs—eating, sleeping, wearing appropriate clothes, and relieving oneself—also creates a home feeling. It is also possible to say that the base places are used as preschool settings with the same kind of rooms and functions found indoors in a Swedish preschool.⁵ In part, the same routines as in indoor preschools are used. The gathering at the log ring is an example. Here the groups are gathered for a time of daily interaction. The episode above in which the children were having a rest was preceded by a gathering at the log ring with teacher-led conversations and song time. After that it was time to go to the "dining room"—a flat piece of rock with a thin layer of grass—to have lunch. This dining area was chosen because it is easier for the children to sit on the ground when they are eating than to sit on a log where it is difficult to balance their cups and plates.

A leader who has been in the preschool's staffroom for a break returns with a stroller loaded with food. Today meat, mashed potatoes and vegetables are being served. As they arrive with their water bottles and sitting cushions, the children are helped to sit down at their places. They sit in a circle in the same order as at the log ring. One of the girls has taken off her boots and picks at her toes. She is corrected by Malin, one of the leaders, who says: 'Lisa, at the table we don't need to sit and pick at our toes.' Malin also tells Lisa, Ulrika and Ellen to put away some of the pegs they are playing with and that they can 'play with them later on, after the rest time'. Karin, another leader, spreads a tablecloth that functions as a serving table on the ground. She puts food on the plates and as they are filled a boy helps her to give the plates to his peers. A girl is told to go around and offer the children pieces of carrot, cucumber and tomato. When the meal is almost over, Ellen and Ulrika turn around at their places and continue playing with the pegs they were playing with earlier. Lisa leaves her place and sits down opposite the other two girls. Malin says to her: 'Lisa, come and take your seat again, we are still eating, we are going to have fruit as well and clear the table.' A child collects the plates. Karin asks one child after another which fruit they want: 'apple, kiwi or banana.' Ulrika and Ellen have found pieces of birch bark that they pretend are foldable cell phones. Malin says: 'Ulrika and Ellen, put those away, we are still sitting at the table.' The girls put the pieces of birch bark behind their backs.

The lunch in the episode above is reminiscent in several ways of an indoor lunch at preschool or at home. Though lunch takes place in the forest, a warm and complete meal with meat, potatoes, vegetables and fruit is served. A tablecloth is used as a serving table. The children are engaged in serving food to their peers, which is similar to the common practice in Swedish preschools of letting the children set the table. Verbal expressions such as "at the table" and "clear the table" create a feeling of sitting at a dinner table. The children are seated in a certain order, the

⁵ In comparison with English preschools, the premises of Swedish preschools are organized in a homelike manner (Nordin-Hultman 2004). Care and education are combined. Many children spend a great part of their days in preschool. A warm meal is served in the middle of the day and after that the children generally have a rest.

same from one day to another, something that is common in preschools and in many homes. Furthermore, the staff require that the children use their indoor table manners—they are not allowed to pick at their feet or to play during the meal.

"Going to the toilet" is also an important part of the daily program. All children, except the oldest, are gathered by one of the leaders "to go and wee-wee," often directly after meals, before the next event in the schedule begins. The groups have special places that they always use to urinate. The girls are taught to hold on to a tree so they can squat down, lean slightly backwards and urinate without wetting their trousers. If the children in the 3- to 6-year-olds' group need to "do number two" one of the leaders follows them back to the preschool. The 1- to 3-year-olds who wear diapers have their diapers changed in the forest, while the others use a potty that is brought to the forest.

The staff at The Rainbow consider routines to be important. They strive to follow the same routines every day, as far as possible. They walk in a line to the forest. The stay in the forest starts with a gathering and a snack in the log ring, followed by organized games, free play, lunch and rest. The children urinate at certain times, often after the meals. Another important part of the routines is that the children are trained to dress themselves. They also are expected to learn to recognize when they are too warm or too cold, to undress if they are too warm and put on extra clothes if they are cold. Every child is also expected to learn to take responsibility for his/her personal rucksacks with extra clothes, sitting cushion and water bottles. The leaders believe that routines provide children with a feeling of security, as they always know what is going to happen next. This applies particularly to the youngest children. The older children, however, sometimes take excursions to other places, which leads to changes in the routines.

The leaders often described nature as homey and peaceful. One mild day in November, one of the leaders told me that they had had a nice and "cozy" day in the forest the day before. They had lunch there and sat around the fire and listened to a book. When the dusk fell around 3 p.m., they lit lanterns and hung them in trees so that the children could go on playing.

Connected to the description of nature as homey is the notion that being outdoors counteracts stress. The Rainbow's manager feels that the children's play is more harmonious when they do not have to compete about toys and that the noise level is lower than indoors. She also thinks that nature itself has a calming effect. She describes the feeling of coming to the forest: "So you get out and you sit down out there—the stress simply drains off you and that has to do with nature ... you sit there under the oak and you think it's cozy and nice, the birds warble, maybe a hare runs by." One of the leaders expresses herself in a similar way; she says that nature is "peaceful for the mind" and "provides contemplation."

To conclude, the base places used by the groups several days a week are used as homes or preschool premises with "rooms" for different functions like eating, sleeping and going to the toilet. If the way of using nature described in the previous section meant that nature is a place in which to *learn*, then this way means that

nature is a place in which to *be*. The base places are described as peaceful and homey places, free from stress. When nature is used as a home or a preschool, it appears as secure and well organized. At the same time, it is important to manage and master the difficulties connected to staying outdoors. This is achieved by wearing the right kinds of clothes so that you do not get cold or wet, by managing to relieve oneself outdoors, by managing to walk in uneven topography and by coping with hardships. This mastery creates security and eliminates stress. An important part of collective mastery is the organization of time and space. The routines and the spatial structure replace the security and frames provided by the preschool premises.

Nature as a Fairyland

Along the path leading to the 1- to 3-year-olds' base place, there is a "stop place"—a tree where the group always makes a stop. In the tree, there is a nesting box with a red parrot made from fabric that the leaders have placed there. One day in December when I follow the children and their leader to the forest, the children run in advance until they reach the tree.

Mikael: I want to see the parrot.

The leader gropes in the nesting box, finds the parrot and puts it on her finger.

Mikael: It was there!

The children are invited to caress the parrot one after another. The leader tells them to ask if the parrot has something to say. She pretends that it whispers something in her ear and says that the parrot wants them to sing. They sing a song about a parrot. The leader says "bye, bye" to the parrot. The children say "bye, bye" and the leader returns the parrot to the nesting box.

Figure 4. The parrot in its nesting box



In the episode above, facts are mixed with fantasy. An artifact—a bird manufactured by the staff—is placed in a "nesting box" set in the tree by the staff (Figure 4). It looks like a real nesting box but it is not. It has no hole on the front, instead the leader lifts the roof to open it. Furthermore, the fabric bird represents a bird, but not one that occurs in the Swedish fauna; rather, it is an exotic bird that the children probably know about mainly through TV and other media. The children are excited when they reach the tree. They know that the parrot is there and they think it is fascinating and fun to look at it and "talk" to it.

This is one of many examples of a pedagogy in which the leaders make up stories and dramatize and in which nature, in particular the animal world, is charged with magic. When the 3- to 6-year-olds sit in the log ring, the leaders often tell stories about animals. They make up their own stories, and they use gestures and intonation to create excitement. The animals are often given human traits, as in the example of the parrot. This anthropomorphic and animistic approach occurred often in my observations, both among children and adults. Animals are called "small friends" whom one sings to and visits. In the following episode, which takes place in the 3- to 6-year-olds' log ring, snails are given human traits.

*Several snails are placed on a stone in the middle of the log ring.
Hanna: (to the leader) Sanna, one of the snails is escaping!
Sanna: (with a mysterious voice) No they are saying something!
Sanna bends down and pretends to talk with the snails. She tells the children that snails can get close to each other and if they like each other they can talk and then there is a lot of foam. A little while later Sanna steps on one of the snails by accident. It crunches loudly. Sanna quickly decides that they have to arrange a funeral. She asks the children how a funeral is organized. She makes a coffin out of leaves and picks a flower that she puts on the top. She invites the children to recite a rhyme about a snail and then she asks the children who are responsible for delivering the snack this day to serve the "funeral coffee."*

In the example above, Sanna ascribes human traits to the snails when she says that they talk to and like each other. When she happens to step on a snail, it turns out to be more dramatic and frightening because of that. Sanna improvises and quickly finds a solution, using the cultural rituals that are available to handle death. She invites the children to help her discuss how a funeral is arranged and stages a ceremony. In this way, the snail is anthropomorphized even more.

Not only animals are used when the leaders tell stories and dramatize. In Friluftsförbundet's program there are also fairy characters, among them the troll Mulle. These characters are an important part of the pedagogy. On special occasions, Mulle or another character, played by an adult in costume, comes to visit the children. At The Rainbow, there is another character who sometimes comes, the Red Feather. The story of the Red Feather has been used in the preschool for about ten years. The inspiration came from a visit to The Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm, but the leaders have made up their own story. In this story, the Red Feather, a wise, old Indian woman, rescues a boy. She warns him about a buffalo

flock that comes running against him by shouting "lilili" with a high guttural sound. This sound is used by the leaders to gather the children. When the call sounds, the children leave whatever they are doing and hurry to the leader making the sound. The leaders want to keep the story alive to motivate the children to come when they call. Sometimes the story about the rescue of the little boy is retold, and it also happens that the Red Feather comes to visit the children. In the following episode, puffs of smoke are produced to make the Red Feather come.

One of the leaders makes a fire. One of the children tells me that they are going to make puffs of smoke "so that the Red Feather can come."

Leader: Does everybody know what we are going to say to the Red Feather? (she makes puffs of smoke using a sitting cushion).

The children suggest different things to say to the Red Feather.

Leader: (shouts) Come to us now Red Feather!

She tells the children to watch out for the Red Feather.

Some of the children walk around calling for the Red Feather.

Child: I saw something red there!

Child: Here is another clue. (picks up a candy wrapper)

Child: Another clue. (points at a cigarette butt)

Child: I can smell the Red Feather.

Some pegs are placed on the ground in the shape of an arrow. The children think it is another clue.

The leader has extinguished the fire and joins the children.

Leader: (points at a footprint on the soil) Here you can see a footprint from the Red Feather, she has probably walked here.

An important aspect of the enchantment of the forest is the fantasy play. During a great part of the day, the children are allowed to play freely in the forest. When new children join the groups in the autumn, the leaders participate in the free play to mediate play possibilities in the forest.

In the group for the small children, Malin, one of the leaders, takes two of the new children, Oskar, 1½ years old and Mikael, who is 3, to a pine whose trunk runs parallel with the ground a bit before it strives upwards.

She says that it is a motorcycle and sits down with the children on it, pretending to drive away. The next day Mikael wants to go for a ride again. Malin follows him to the pine.

Malin: Shall we sit down like we did yesterday?

They sit down and Mikael growls.

Malin: Where are we going?

Mikael: To ICA [a food store]. Now we close the doors.

Malin: Are there doors?

Mikael: On the bus ... hello McDonald's!

Malin: How nice, what do you want? Hamburger and French fries, that's what I want, and a Coke.

In this episode, in the interaction between Malin and Mikael, nature is presented as a place for play just as in the indoor environment at the preschool or the preschool

garden. Malin demonstrates how the pine can represent a motorcycle and Mikael elaborates on the play when he pretends that it is a bus. In the play, "civilized" life is integrated into the natural environment—they pretend to take the bus to a food store and McDonald's.

To conclude, nature is presented as a fairy world where animals have human traits and where magical things can happen. The approach is connected to traditional preschool pedagogy which includes fairy stories, songs and fantasy play as important parts. It is connected as well to Friluftfrämjandet's tradition of populating nature with imaginary characters. The stories, songs and imaginary characters help the children create a relationship to nature. They make the forest more exciting and interesting to the children and provide them with symbols they can use in their play.

Concluding Discussion

As shown above, several different ways of using nature can be discerned in the preschool I have studied. Besides the predominant ways of relating to nature I describe above, there are others as well; for example, nature is presented as a place that should be protected and cared for, and as a site for wildlife.⁶ Nature is thus presented in many, partly contradictory, ways. One could say that the school leaders have a multidimensional conception of nature. This complexity is in line with the fact that the concept of nature is an important symbol in Scandinavia. The concept absorbs meaning from different contexts and in that way covers a wide range of meanings. It is included in several binary oppositions, where both sides are present, often so that one of them predominates while the other one is implicit (Gullestad 1992).

When nature is used as a classroom, the notion of nature as scientific has been foregrounded. Through the centuries, since the days of Aristotle (382-322 BC), many philosophers, psychologists and pedagogues have stressed that knowledge is gained empirically, through sensory exploration. Jean Jacques Rousseau and Friedrich Fröbel, mentioned above, have both had a great impact on the Swedish preschool. Another protagonist is John Dewey, who considered that one of the problems with schools was that school education did not start from natural contexts but was fragmentary and artificial, with the result being that children did not learn how to understand whole processes (1990). An important advantage of outdoor education, according to Lars Owe Dahlgren (2007), is that the outdoor space, as opposed to the classroom, is an authentic environment. The outdoor environment provides experience-based learning (Szczepanski 2007). The experiences inspire the children to ask questions, questions that are not forced upon them from above and that create good conditions for learning. The teacher can take responsibility for the questions and together with the children try to answer them. In that way, the children can gain knowledge about processes that create good conditions for a deeper form of learning (Dahlgren 2007). According to this line of reasoning about nature as a context for learning processes, there is an opposition between "natural"

⁶ In her study of a Norwegian nature-oriented childcare center, Nilsen (2006) found these two areas, together with the fauna, to be central.

and "artificial" (Gullestad 1992), where nature is seen as a genuine and authentic context, while the classroom is seen as artificial and unnatural.

When used as a home, nature is involved in two different oppositions: between nature and city, and between nature and home. When nature is used as a home (or a preschool), where one eats, sleeps, goes to the toilet, plays and socializes, it appears as an orderly place. Nature represents the opposite of the city, which is (implicitly) understood as dangerous, chaotic and stressful. The opposition to the city is underlined by the fact that the children mainly play with natural materials. Grahn and colleagues have investigated the importance of nature to people of different ages in Sweden (Grahn 1991; 1992; Grahn et al. 1997). Grahn (1992) states that staying in natural environments counteracts stress and provides possibilities for recreation in an everyday life filled with artifacts and stress. He refers to the Kaplans' research about nature as a resource for recovery. In natural environments, as opposed to urban environments, people do not have to make efforts to block unnecessary information such as advertisements, noise and unknown persons (Kaplan and Kaplan 1989). Nature provides opportunities for spontaneous attention at the same time that thoughts can wander freely. Frustration is less common in natural environments than it is elsewhere (Kaplan 1990).

In the opposition between nature and home, nature is understood as wild and unbroken, in contrast to the well-organized, safe and cozy quality of the home. The wild and unpredictable side of nature is made homelike and safe by mastering the difficulties associated with being outdoors. This is reflected in the name of the organization—"I Ur och Skur" means approximately "in all kinds of weather." Routines are created to replace the safety provided by the walls of the preschool, and the children are trained to adapt to the wild character of nature. They are taught to dress themselves from an early age and to observe their own bodies to handle cold and warmth. They are also encouraged to develop their motor skills, move well through hilly terrain and become strong and brave. Nilsen (2008) describes similar findings from her study of a Norwegian child care center. She shows how the pedagogy in the studied center constructs a robust child who can cope with hardships and take responsibility for his/her own well-being. Thus, in the use of nature as a home, we find a duality. On the one hand, nature is constructed as safe, cozy and welcoming; on the other, as something that one must master. This contradiction is similarly found in people who practice outdoor activities. Nature is understood as cosmos, a place for contemplation—but it is also comprehended as chaos, which has to be mastered.

The third presentation of nature as an enchanted world can also be tied to the opposition between home and nature. The wild and chaotic side of nature is used to construct nature as an exciting and unpredictable place where anything can happen, a place with space for the imagination and excitement. Nature as an enchanted world is tied to the traditional culture for children. Fairy tales often take place in forests, and the animals and elements of the forest are given symbolic meanings (see, e.g., Bettelheim 1976). Throughout European history, the forest has been animated and populated with different kinds of creatures (Ekman 2007).

These different ways of talking about and using nature are partly contradictory. For example, the scientific use of nature as a classroom and the practice of animating nature and giving animals human traits can be understood as incompatible. In practice, however, this contradiction seems unproblematic. The multidimensional character of the concept of nature is essential in enabling different ways of talking about and using nature to exist side by side. All three approaches address the aims and intentions of the curriculum for the Swedish preschool. For example, as mentioned in the introduction, one of the aims stated in the school's curriculum is that children are to gain knowledge about nature's recycling process and about plants and animals. Furthermore, the curriculum states that care, nurturing and learning should be seen as a coherent whole and that preschools shall provide a "well-balanced daily rhythm" in which care is balanced with other activities (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2006, 7). This is achieved at The Rainbow through the homelike use of nature, where priority is given to care routines. The curriculum also states that the preschool shall develop children's cultural creativity as well as pass on a cultural heritage from one generation to the next. This is achieved at The Rainbow when nature is presented as an enchanted world.

A further factor that allows nature to be constructed in contradictory ways is that the different uses of nature are partly separated in time and space. Through the lived life in the studied preschool, different places are given different meanings. These meanings can vary during the day. The base places, for example, are used as playrooms during some parts of the day and as places for care and rest during others. Through organization in time and space, an immanent pedagogy is created (Ennew 1994; Markström 2005). The use of nature as a classroom is mostly connected to the places used for the forest school groups and the excursions. The homelike ways of using nature are linked to the base places and the routines for gatherings, meals, rests and general corporal care. The enchanted presentation of nature is also mostly connected to the base place, to the children's play and the staff's stories and dramatizations. Fantasy elements occur in the forest schools as well, for example when Mulle comes to visit the children.

One interesting point is that the 3- to 6-year-olds' base place is a grove of trees that is visible from the preschool's windows. It would hardly be called a forest by an outsider, but the leaders talk about it as "the forest"—as opposed to just the preschool yard. The present presentation of the forest is interesting to compare to that observed in Nilsen's (2008) study. At The Rainbow, the forest is talked of as a safe and secure place that the group returns to on a daily basis, living their life there as residents. The place has been claimed by building the log ring on it. In the Norwegian day care center, the forest is seen as something far away from human settlement, with a character of being wild and untouched. The children and their teachers appear as nomads. They leave the day care center every day on skis or on foot, and they visit several different places in the forest.

Something that permeates all three ways of presenting and using nature in the Swedish preschool described here is a wish to create a *feeling* for nature in children. Such a feeling is thought to emerge in the nature classroom when the

children use their senses to explore elements of nature and learn about flora and fauna. When the children learn the names of plants and animals, these things become visible to them, and a world that earlier was invisible and undifferentiated becomes accessible. When children learn about what grows and lives in the forest, and when they learn to understand nature's recycling process, the conditions needed for them to acquire a feeling for their environment are established. Further, there is a notion that the children will experience a feeling of wholeness and harmony through sensory experiences in natural environments—like feeling the wind and the warmth of the sun on their skin and listening to the wind in the trees and the warble of the birds. These experiences are connected to the homelike use of nature as a peaceful place to be. Finally, a special feeling for nature is achieved through enchantment. Through the leaders' stories and the children's play, nature is presented as a fascinating place with many opportunities for fun and adventure.

Eva Änggård, Ph.D., is senior lecturer at Stockholm University, Department of Didactic Science and Early Childhood Education (DoPA). Her field of research includes meaning-making processes in early childhood settings. In her dissertation study, children's art activities were analyzed as a part of their peer cultures. In the current nature and outdoor project other articles deal with children's play activities in natural environments.

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