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Teaching nature and nation in the Swedish mobile preschool

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Abstract

Ideas of nature, nation and childhood are intertwined in Nordic early childhood education. We explore in ethnographic data the ways nature is taught in Swedish mobile preschools. We show how everyday nationalism manifests in the teaching practices of 'good' pedagogy in nature. We argue that depending on who is teaching and learning, various constructions of nationhood emerge enabling the re-imagination of a single national imaginary to a plural one.

Keywords

Nature, everyday nationalism, early childhood, education, mobile preschools

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Introduction

Children have been constructed as closer to nature than adults ever since the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau discussed the relation between nature and children in his book 'Emile' (Taylor, 2011). Ideas of nature and childhood are closely intertwined in national narratives and ideals. In the Nordic region, having a special relationship with nature is connected to the construction of Nordic romantic nationalism, different stages of nation-building, and the emergence of Nordic national identities (Österlund-Pötzsch, 2013). For instance, Ideland (2019: 120) observes that 'the categories "Swedish" and "knowing about nature" and "nature lovers" stick together and create a foundation stone in the imagined national community', and nature 'becomes a place where a person – a non-Swede – can learn to acquire "Swedishness"' (2019: 119). Deep connections with nature and valuing the outdoors are considered important aspects of 'good' Nordic childhoods as well (Gullestad, 1997; Halldén, 2009; Sjögren, 2023). Since in modern society children are believed to become estranged from nature, risking a 'nature deficit' (Louv, 2008), childhood institutions consider it a central task to reconnect children with nature. As ethnographic research of everyday preschool practices shows, in Nordic early childhood educational practices and traditions, nature is assumed to be something children should develop a positive relation to, and an important place for them to play and learn, to enact freedom and agency, to be physically active and to experience 'healthy' childhoods (Änggård, 2010; Harju et al., 2021). The knowledge of how to properly be in and relate to nature is therefore foundational. For instance, children (and parents) are expected to perform a playful openness to nature rather than being afraid or express disgust, for example when seeing a dead animal (Jørgensen et al., 2020), to learn to dress correctly and according to the season (Handulle and Vassenden, 2021; Rutanen et al., 2019). At the same time, there are expectations placed on educators about how to properly support children's being in and learning about nature, with educators' own nature experience and confidence in using outdoor spaces considered instrumental in this process (Beery and Fridberg, 2022).

Learning about, and developing relations with nature have been posited both as a tool for social integration of adults and children with immigrant backgrounds and a measure thereof (Jørgensen et al., 2020; Pitkänen et al., 2017). However, as Imre and Millei (2022: 10) observe, 'nature as a key to good life … "homogenizes" the including group and initiates integrative actions, which manifest in different pedagogical approaches based on nationality status of children'. Harju et al. (2021) for example, find that the idea of good education in nature, intending to foster freedom and agency, seemed more reserved for children with majority backgrounds, whereas 'other' children needed to be compensated for the lack of 'correct' kind of capital concerning nature.

In this article we use ethnographic data to explore the ways in which nature is taught in Swedish mobile preschools (preschools in buses) that often visit nature areas. Reviewing the literature, we find that not enough specific focus has been yet on how nature and nation are *taught* as part of nationhood. We discuss how everyday nationalism manifests in the entanglement of the national ideals of 'good' childhood in nature, and 'good' pedagogy in nature in everyday practices of Swedish mobile preschools. We argue in this paper that it

is through such everyday practices of being in and interacting with nature that nationhood is performed in early childhood education. While these practices could be considered as just ways educators and children act in nature, they can single out and form the basis and feeling of non-belonging in nature, and hence nation, for those who are deemed as not doing it 'the Swedish way'. At the same time, different notions of nature, being in and relating to nature are also important to acknowledge in creating inclusive communities.

Conceptual and methodological framework

While 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995) focuses on national narratives, identities, and symbols of nationhood, 'everyday nationalism' seeks to understand the 'assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people' and their social practice as they give meaning to, accomplish or subvert the nation through routine activities (Hobsbawm, 1992: 10 in Millei and Imre, 2021). As part of everyday life, everyday nationalism is difficult to research, therefore one way to bring it to the fore in analysis is to observe when the nation is breached (Fox, 2017). This happens when, for example, young migrant children cannot yet perform their new nation's practices and hence they are taught mores and rules, belonging and feelings towards their new national community. However, it is also important to add that everyday nationalism is enacted in particular ways by groups of people positioned differently in a nation state, hence in each nation there are multiple nationalisms and everyday nationalisms. For example, Antonsich (2022a: 1080) shows how some 'second generation migrants' in Italy call themselves 'new Italians' to challenge differential belonging indicated by hyphenated identities (like Afro-Italians) to re-imagine the nation in relation to their 'alterity' and belonging to it.

Some of the children and educators in the mobile preschools in this study have migrant backgrounds, thus they can be considered as residing and contributing to a national community, yet might be identified as internal others (recognised and/or racialised as 'others') (Antonsich, 2022a). Paying attention to and contrasting the ethnographic data of how those children and their educators enact the(ir) nation(s) in nature can help us outline everyday nationalism in Swedish preschools. Thus, it is hoped that we can outline multiple forms of everyday nationalism as it is entwined in nature engagements of the Swedish mobile preschools. Ekman Ladru et al. (2021) have shown how the everyday mobility of the mobile preschool is connected to notions of places as more or less beneficial for children's proper future and Swedish citizenship, and how constructions of mobility play a part in everyday nationalism and everyday civilising processes in preschools. In this article, we take a deeper look into how young children's being in and relating to nature is viewed and acted upon by educators in everyday mobile preschool life.

Researching children's everyday life in institutions where children with migrant backgrounds are present offers generous opportunities to study the operation of everyday nationalism (Imre and Millei, 2022). Ethnographic data from three mobile preschool groups of children and educators with different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds enable us to analyse what and how young children and educators from different backgrounds need to learn to practise - be/have in and relate to - nature 'properly' and their

ways of reproducing the nation. In two of the buses (here the 'Blue' and the 'Yellow' buses), the majority of the children have Swedish backgrounds while in the third bus (the 'Purple' bus) some of the children have parents who have migrated to Sweden. Also, some of the educators in the third bus have migrated to Sweden. In all three buses, the children are expected to learn the rules and ways of the mobile preschool and how to behave 'properly' in nature.

Approaching nature of nation

A way to research everyday nationalism in child institutions is by following Millei's (2019) framework, the 'pedagogy of nation'. Millei identifies three areas for exploration: (1) didactic means; (2) emotions and affect; and (3) the interiority of space. **Didactic means** could include educators' teaching (*human didactic*) or materialities (*non-human didactic*) that teach children by relaying meaning and/or affording or preventing actions, functioning as continuous directive, or corrective, within the social space. For example, national symbols teach the nation and, as we will show later, children's outdoor clothes not only teach a certain way of being and acting in nature, but also produce nationed childhoods and subjectivities. Didactic means could also be *mimetic*, where children perform the practices they see or emotions they witness. For example, a certain relation to nature is learned if the educator displays disgust with a rotten apple and children witness and then enact that (Jørgensen et al., 2020). *Human didactic means* include passing on knowledge, modelling behaviour, or holding or directing children's bodies. *Non-human didactics* include objects and the physical environment, such as a nature path directing children in the forest.

The second aspect of 'pedagogy of nation' is **emotion and affect.** Wetherell (2015: 160) explains that 'affective practice is a moment of recruitment, articulation or enlistment when many complicated flows across bodies, subjectivities, relations, histories and contexts entangle and intertwine together to form just this affective moment, episode or atmosphere with its particular possible classifications'. Affective practices vitalis e a subject or groups, and if distributed, such as in collective wonder in nature, can set a collective mood. For example, an educator can enlist her love for nature or create an affective atmosphere to incite a child's attunement to nature (see also affective atmospheres as part of everyday nationalism, e.g. Closs Stephens, 2016).

The third aspect of the pedagogy of nation is the **interiority of space**. Spaces can relay pedagogic forces as they craft the body and promote different forms of embodiment. Spatialities connect and bring with them temporalities that orient individuals with moral orders of a given place (slow is good in nature) and coordinate activities across particular locales (e.g. slow in nature and slow in park). Space also 'locates' identities, as space is made up of discourses and practices (Massey, 2005). For example, in school spaces children embody the 'school child' as it is constructed in institutional discourses. The 'interiority' of space (which is different from 'interior'), refers to this created sense of space. In the pedagogy of nation, this plays a crucial role in habituating bodies and actions, and could also be considered as a non-human didactic means or even affect. Separating 'interiority of space' is only

analytical. For example, the rhythm of life (slow, fast, changing) or the allowed level of noise in related educational spaces carry didactic means.

Ethnography of the mobile preschool

The empirical data derives from a larger research project carried out from 2016 to 2018 that focus ed on mobility, informal learning and citizenship in mobile preschools in Sweden. Mobile preschools are preschools in buses that take children to various locations on a daily basis. Every mobile preschool is linked to a stationary preschool and works as a division of their own with approximately 20 children and three educators, one or two of whom also work as bus drivers. The chosen destinations to which mobile preschools travel include museums, libraries, playgrounds, but more often are nature spaces, such as outdoor recreation areas, a forest or a beach. To participate in a mobile preschool entails competencies, such as knowing how to act in diverse spaces, walking in line, eating meals in the bus and safely riding on the bus (see for example Gustafson and Ekman Ladru, 2020). Mobile preschools are regarded as providing opportunities for experiential learning in a variety of environments, most notably nature spaces, mirroring the national idea of 'good' education in nature. Video-ethnographic research was conducted in three mobile preschools located in different large Swedish cities. Two researchers followed children and educators in each preschool bus during their daily activities in – and between – different places. The fieldwork lasted 2 weeks in the 'Blue bus', 14 months in the 'Yellow bus', and 9 months in the 'Purple bus' (in total 71 whole days). Besides formal consent from parents and the involved educators, the on-site researchers continuously informed the children and requested consent from them, as well as paying attention to the children's diverse ways of showing – verbally or through body language – whether and how they wanted to participate. The Swedish Regional Ethics Review Board approved the project. For reasons of confidentiality, the names and details of the places, children, and educators have been anonymis ed in the text. Authors who had not participated in data generation worked with the anonymised data.

Working with the observations

The authors are an international group of researchers from Sweden, Poland, Norway, Finland, Australia and Hungary. We adopted an approach of 'analysis through discussion' (Lahelma et al., 2014) in which our different national upbringing and knowledge of respective early childhood education served as a tool. Analysis through discussion also meant discussion with literature, where nation and/or childhood have been theorised. In the *first phase* of the analysis, the authors who conducted the fieldwork picked the excerpts from the data in accordance with their preliminary interpretation of the methodology suggested by Millei's (2019) 'pedagogy of nation'. The selected extracts represented data where nation and nature appeared at their intersections. In the *second phase*, the group discussed the selected data looking for the pedagogic elements connected to the 'pedagogy of nation' using a series of analytical questions (below). Everyday nationalism is difficult to identify (Imre and

Millei, 2022), but our discussion across the different national contexts helped us notice also those aspects that might have been taken-for-granted by the Swedish researchers (and fieldworkers). Along these identifications, *in the third phase*, the fieldworkers then identified additional data excerpts for further analysis. This way of working across the fieldnotes also helped us to see similarities that run across all national contexts. We considered whether these similarities might be related to the way early childhood education operates as an institution rather than being considered as related to particularities of 'Swedish' early childhood education pedagogy. Identifying aspects of the pedagogy of nation inadvertently renders the pedagogy described as 'national' and highlights its assumed shared characteristics (see Åkerblom and Harju, 2021). Here, we expanded this notion of 'national pedagogy' with a more attuned and embodied performance of nationhood beyond an explicit pedagogy that is common to a nation, such as enacting child-centred pedagogy or facilitating independence. In the *fourth phase* of data analysis, the two Swedish researchers contrasted the selected observations across the other preschool buses, to investigate whether there were differences concerning how nation and nature were taught and practised. We considered how in each preschool bus the nation had been taught or related to by educators who had created the opportunities for children's learning in and about nature.

The analysis followed the questions derived from the methodology of pedagogy of nation and its three areas of attention:

(1) **Nature as enacted curriculum (human and non-human didactic means)**: How have children's relations with nature been assumed and practised? How are children being socialised or taught to be in nature and know about nature?
(2) **Affects, emotions and nature**: How are emotional and affective relations with nature noticed, forged and practised?
(3) **Nature as a space for early childhood education**: How have environments been chosen and created by educators and what ways of being and acting in nature are allowed and nurtured?

In the empirical sections that follow, we will discuss how everyday nationalism is taught in three different mobile preschool groups in relation to education in nature. First, we discuss the taken for granted (or assumedly 'proper') ways to perform early childhood education practices in and about nature. We hope that through the analysis it becomes clearer how these performances can be seen as forms of everyday nationalism that re-produce the nation in everyday life. Second, we discuss some examples of situations where practices do not match the taken for granted ideas of how nature is supposed to be taught in Swedish early childhood education. In these situations, we show how the (Swedish) nation is breached mobilising certain reactions which for us indicates that something out of ordinary is taking place and in contrast might tell about how everyday nationalism is practised as taken for granted. Third, we show how the (Swedish) nation is performed by a migrant educator, bringing to the fore the possibility of a 'plural nation' (Antonsich, 2022b) in nature.

Performing nation and nature in the mobile preschool

In this first part, we discuss how Swedish early childhood education practices are generally performed in nature in ways that are taken for granted. Using the case of the mobile preschool is beneficial since these buses visit nature spaces on a daily basis and underline nature as an important learning environment. Being and learning in nature is emphasised as central to Swedish early childhood education, and mobile preschools are keen on highlighting this as an important benefit of mobile preschool pedagogy (Harju et al., 2021).

Everyday practices of the mobile preschool

The rhythms and routines of Swedish early childhood education and care settings usually follow the same time-spatial order everyday, starting with in- or outdoor play, followed by circle time with a snack, and morning activities. Next comes lunchtime and napping/resting followed by afternoon activities, a snack, and in- or outdoor play until parents arrive to pick children up. Mobile preschool routines follow a similar rhythm, with the difference that the routines are conducted in – and between – different places (see Ekman Ladru and Gustafson, 2020). Mobile preschools usually visit recreational areas, parks, woods or beaches, and educational activities are almost always performed outdoors 'in nature'. Children are expected to know how to play in such nature areas, without playground equipment or fences. Children's 'free' play in nature includes climbing trees, jumping on and between large stones, balancing on fallen trees as well as using a range of loose nature elements like sand, stones, branches and the like. Educators take every opportunity to teach in and about nature and to work with natural material as educational material. Children are encouraged 'to pick up, explore and play with all kinds of living and non-living natural material, as long as they do not hurt living things or themselves' (Harju et al., 2021: 247). They are also expected to be dressed appropriately for the season and weather, and the educators teach parents about 'all-weather-clothing'. Especially during winter, children are expected to wear snow suits and to dress in several layers. Often inner layers of wool or fleece are considered necessary in the cold season, and this is to be followed by a robust outer layer that keeps wind and moisture out.

In the following sections, we will provide examples of situations when children were explicitly taught the nation.

Dressing properly for the outdoors

The mobile preschool groups in the study differ in terms of how the children are dressed. In the Yellow and Blue buses, the children's outdoor clothing includes layers to keep children warm, such as wind and waterproof shells. Only sometimes do educators make a comment on the clothing, for example if a child's rain boots have become too small. 'Look, your feet have grown, tell your mum and dad you need new boots!' In the Purple bus, the clothing of the children is frequently addressed by the educators. They often mention that a child is incorrectly dressed, implying that the clothes and shoes are not

sufficiently warm or waterproof. They then tell the child to inform his or her parents about this or talk to the parents directly. The educators also make comments to the researchers about how 'migrant' parents do not know how to dress the children correctly. Knowing and practising proper clothing for various seasons is a *human didactic means* through which the nation is taught in nature. The child dressed for weather locates the child in nature whereby the *interiority of space* constructs the 'Swedish child' dressed 'properly'. Providing the 'correct' clothes to engage with nature (robust, comfortable all-weather clothing that keeps the child warm, the moist out and that allows the child to move about freely) and a proper change of clothes for their children in preschools is considered as a sign of 'good' parenting in Nordic countries and constructs the 'Nordic child' (see Rutanen et al., 2019), which migrant parents learn in contact with education institutions. Handulle and Vassenden (2021) found that the expectation to dress correctly created anxiety and stress amongst 'second-generation' Norwegian-Somali parents, who were afraid of not being considered to perform 'good' Norwegian parenthood. Clothes supplement the child's bodily appearance, hence how others see, understand and accept the child, and in this way outdoor clothing helps to bring the personhood or identity to the fore (Paju, 2018). Being dressed in proper clothing and properly, as expected from a preschool child and their parents, thus communicates a Nordic identity and can be seen as a *non-human didactic means* through which the nation is taught.

Where is nature?

The children in the Purple bus and their families live in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods. According to the educators, these families mostly stay in their residential areas and they never go out to nature areas. It is assumed, therefore, that the children lack skills of being and acting in nature, thus they are believed to have certain civilisational needs (Jørgensen and Martiny-Bruun, 2020). Such a perception of children as 'needing to get out into the forest', Ideland (2019: 118) argues, leads to educational projects aimed at moving them there 'for the sake of their development'. Likewise, when children from the Purple bus go outside, either in residential or nature areas, educators mobilise child developmental knowledge, and teach them first the basic skills, on which, in a stage-like manner, more complicated skills can be layered. As an example, the Purple bus travels every Monday to the same recreational area in order to create stable routines for the children and as a good way of starting the week. The managers and educators regard this place as especially important for these children as it is considered as a secure environment, less 'wild' and more structured, in order to ease children's learning how to be in nature.

This recreational area is a large public space where it is easy to park the bus and oversee the children, and that includes extensive green areas, walking paths of different length (2–10 km), rest areas with heated buildings, public toilets and an outdoor gym. Even though children enter the so called 'nature', this infrastructure is considered as important to keep children safe, ease their entry into nature and civilise them so they know how to be in nature. It can help children to keep warm (as they might lack proper clothing), to feel safe (as nature might be new to them), and comfortable and cared for (toileting and eating in ways they are used to in the

preschool building). In this way, the recreational area with all its facilities as well as the hands and line children hold while they are walking, scaffold children's presence in nature. This infrastructure can therefore be considered as *non-human didactic means* to teach children how to be in nature, and by extension, how to become 'real' Swedish children who have nature in their nature. Educators' teaching for children with white Swedish backgrounds focuses on the being in and teaching about nature, whereas those with other backgrounds are instructed by the educators about the basic skills of being in nature on which later other knowledge can be built. Being acquainted with nature in a slow and scaffolded manner is the curriculum for children who are learning the new nation.

In the next section, we discuss how the walking paths are an important part of the infrastructured nature for the Purple bus. While paths are used mainly for transport by the Yellow and Blue buses, and the actual play and educational activities instead are conducted in the forested/bushed/greened spaces between the paths, the Purple bus uses the paths to teach children how to be in nature.

Walking in nature - sticking to the paths

Move to the side and keep on walking, children! And look how beautiful nature is!

One day, in the afternoon in this recreational area, the children in the Purple bus are getting dressed and a child says that she does not want to go outside since it is cold. The educator answers that although the weather is cold, they will go for a walk and they will take the 2 km path marked by a white-yellow sign. Since proper dressing enables children to be outside all the time, the educator easily disregards though acknowledges the child's resistance. She instructs the group of children to look for the signs of the path. The group starts to walk in line on the path, one educator in the front, one in the back and children holding hands in pairs in between. The walk is disciplined and children receive instructions to hold hands, stay on the path and follow the lead. When encountering other people on the walking path, one of the educators repeatedly shouts out 'Move to the side! To the side!' The path as a *non-human didactic means* and raised voices and accompanied emotions as *emotional means* direct children's bodies, teaching them the 'proper' way to be in nature considering other people. While this has to do with safety discourses to some extent, it also teaches these children's embodied presence in spaces of nature (*interiority of space*). In addition, every now and then the educator exclaims how beautiful the nature around them is, seemingly trying to create an affective atmosphere (Closs Stephens, 2016), teaching the children how to properly feel for and relate to nature.

The developmental reasoning prevalent in this mode of thinking illustrates how children in the Purple bus, while considered as being less civilised thus more 'primitive' (especially if we consider racialised children (Burman, 2008), are paradoxically considered as removed from nature hence needing to be taught how to be closer. The developmental trajectory thus is informed by race which seemingly underpins the pedagogy of nation in this mobile preschool.

In the Blue and Yellow buses, playing freely and learning in (and about) nature are important activities. In the Purple bus, however, educators and children go for long walks (about 40 min) instead. Here, the focus is on the need to learn to walk properly and for longer distances in nature. While walking, educators in the Purple bus often commented on the need for physical activity for these children, since their parents, the educators say, 'do not make their children move, children do not need to walk, they just keep them in strollers!' Walking in nature is believed to be beneficial for these children in terms of physical health, which is a commonly shared perception. To train endurance, as well as to learn to appreciate the beauty of the natural scenery are regarded as important in the Purple bus. We consider this as teaching children the Swedish nation.

In the next section, we continue to discuss the walking-in-infrastructured-nature practices of the Purple bus, and how this involves not interacting with any natural elements.

Just walking - not touching!

One morning, the Purple bus group sets off to walk in the residential area holding hands. Some children get interested in the fallen chestnuts, ready to pick some, but the educator stops them. The chestnuts are not part of the enacted curriculum, it seems. The task is only walking, as the educator explains. A girl picks up a chestnut and hides it in her pocket. The chestnut's shiny surface and round smooth shape attract the child's hand. Even though nature here seems to be the backdrop of the activity of walking, the chestnut teases the child and engages her attention, it invites the child to 'be in/with nature' (Rautio, 2013), but the educator forbids this possibility. Doing so, the educator contravenes the perception of the proper Nordic educator who promotes access to nature experiences and allows nature play (Beery and Fridberg, 2022: 31). Walking on, the girl performs the expected curriculum and asks and talks 'about' the surroundings, without touching anything. But then again, an apple is lying on the ground, with its colour and shape, maybe even smell attracting the child. Forbidding the engagement with the apple now comes with an emotional charge, the educator's demand to throw the apple away with a disgusted 'Urgh', teaching the child how to relate to an apple on the ground. Rautio (2013: 402) describes how children's 'autotelic practices' are often overruled by adults' 'insistence on … controlling of learning outcomes'. The chestnuts and apples are lending themselves to be investigated and engaged with – often just for the sake of looking or touching. However, the task is learning to walk on the path, safely and remaining unaffected by the invitations of apples or chestnuts. Hence a particular politics is unfolding when something is preferred while something else is left out. Valuing children's agency and free play in nature is set aside, as well as pedagogical principles of the Swedish preschool, i.e. following children's interests.

Thus, the children in the Purple bus learn how to dress, walk and keep safe, in – rather than with or about – nature. Assuming that nature is Swedish children's first nature is a way everyday nationalism works. This assumption separates those who are viewed as having this nature and those who do not, which in turn initiates different pedagogies of nation, as we will explain later (Harju et al., 2021). The children in the Yellow and Blue

buses, who are considered ethnically Swedish and live in areas labelled as middle class, are expected to be able to perform fluency regarding nature, including proper clothing, acting safely and just being in nature. These children are expected to know the basic rules and mores of being in and relating to nature, even if the socialisation process of becoming a 'mobile preschool child' is a lot about really embodying these rules and, not the least, fostering endurance. It is assumed that parents of these children often take them to nature as it is considered as a part of 'good' Nordic parenting (see e.g. Herrero-Arias et al., 2020). Starting from this understanding or even expectation about these children's 'nature competencies', during the walks and activities in nature spaces, educators take every opportunity to engage in nature education with children, to engage with and learn about animals, plants and so on.

In the next section, we see how sometimes the children in the Purple bus are allowed to do more than just walking on the paths.

Having fun in nature… but nature is dangerous

Teaching and learning the 'proper' way of being in and interacting with nature involves negotiating risk and having fun in nature (Änggård, 2010). On one of the walks the children from the Purple bus encounter a steep, slippery hill, leading to a blueberry patch. They enjoy falling down and jumping up again, sliding down a big stone and gobbling blueberries up. The educators seem divided on whether to allow children to pick up sticks and other objects from the ground and to grab tree branches – thus performing the early childhood educator's role by 'promoting access to nature experience, [and] allowing nature play' (Beery and Fridberg, 2022: 31), or not. While one ignores the children's engagement with the natural objects, the others are more reluctant. 'You may hurt yourself when you have a stick in your pocket', one of them says to one child, and scolds another who swings a branch: 'Don't do that'. The ability to engage freely in potentially dangerous play and exploration without adults' unnecessary supervision and intervention is considered a defining feature of good Nordic childhood (Wagner, 2006). This, however, seems challenging for the educators who struggle to find the right balance between keeping children safe and allowing them to explore nature.

The educators seem to see nature as dangerous – with snakes as the one they saw this morning, as an educator remarks, and forests in which one can easily get really lost, as happened to another one who confesses that 'That's why I don't go into the forest but just go on walking paths with you'. The educators remain wary of sticks in children's pockets and swinging on branches, and prefer to stay on walking paths rather than going deeper in the forest. The children seem to be embodying their new nation through interacting with nature independently and bravely, enjoying the steep and slippery walk down the hill, tasting berries and playing in the forest. The boundaries between the wild and infrastructured nature blur as the children start playing at the edge of the forest, thus producing another space in which the pedagogy of nation enfolds. The fruit, sticks, branches and stones become aspects of the curriculum – the *non-human didactic means* of pedagogy of nation – teaching how to be in nature and how to organise their play without adult instructions.

In the next section, we discuss how not only young children new to the country need to be taught but also adult educators are supposed to learn the nation. We argue that it is important to shift from an understanding of the nation as single to plural.

Teaching in and about nature – the signs of spring

On one Monday, the Purple bus is at their usual recreational area and the group is on their morning walk. After having walked for a little while, the educator says that there are no signs of spring anywhere yet to be found. A little later she shows the children a field of flowers and all the children are allowed to go up to two m from the path to get closer to the flowers. 'Now summer is near', the educator says, and starts photographing the flowers for their blog that the parents and colleagues at the preschool have access to. She then gathers the children and continues the walk on the path, without talking more about this. The researcher, who has silently observed a lot of 'signs of spring' in the form of different kinds of spring flowers and grasses, takes the opportunity to talk to one of the children next to her and names the flower they photographed: 'It is the blue anemone'. The child notices that the flowers do not all have the same blue colour and asks the researcher about that. The researcher starts to educate the child about different types of anemones, their colours and names like white anemone and that there are even yellow anemones. The child asks a lot of questions and the researcher shares what she knows about the flowers.

During the ethnographic field work in the Purple bus, the explicit teaching of how to be in nature provoked some ambivalent feelings in the researchers. Having been raised in Sweden, and from earlier observations in other buses, they had an implicit expectation about how to be in nature and how children could be taught this. That included educators following children's interest in nature, allowing and inviting them to respectfully but freely roam in and with nature, and while showing that nature is a safe space additionally passing on knowledge when naming and discussing certain plants and flowers (Beery and Fridberg, 2022). Perhaps to resolve their ambivalence, the researcher shifted how she performed her role as a participatory observer. Slowly, she took on some of the educator's role to fill the void of nature in the pedagogy and curriculum children received by talking to children about plants, animals and natural processes.

It was not until doing the collective analysis from the pedagogy of nation perspective that we noticed how the researcher suddenly and unintentionally slips into teaching the nation through nature, offering the educational knowledge that the educator missed: teaching the different colours of the anemone flower that every Swedish child needs to know and, thus, enacting nature in a Linnéan manner (Sjögren, 2023). This shift in the researchers' role helps us to make explicit the taken for granted operation of the nation. It also helps us to show that the way the educator performed teaching about spring to children did not meet ´Swedish expectations'. The educator's practice of nature, while seemingly following the importance of 'child in nature' in Swedish pedagogy, fell short (or rather constructed another way) of performing everyday nationalism with nature.

Later that morning when the Purple bus has a short circle time while waiting for lunch, the educator asks a question about what they have been doing in the forest today. She provides the answer herself, that they have been looking for the spring and for flowers.

She then continues to talk about how the snow and the ice are now melting and that it soon will be time for the Easter holidays. While these explanations are quite right in diagnosing that the winter is indeed over, they lack in detail about the differentiations and categorisation that make up the spring flowers and their significance for Swedish spring. When nature is enacted the 'Swedish' way, spring is not only about flowers per se, it is about particular flowers, which carry national meanings. Here the educator releases the arrival of spring by the flowers, but she does not know the sequence and characteristics of different flowers and the importance of their colours. This performance demonstrates the desire to belong to the nation, and highlights the need to understand the nation and everyday nationalism as *plural* rather than singular (Antonsich, 2022a). The educator's way of approaching nature is through admiration – the beauty of nature. This emotional pedagogy is how she teaches the Swedish nation to children.

Discussion

Everyday nationalism with nature in the mobile preschool is enacted as children are being taught to be and learning to be in nature and about nature. In the Yellow and Blue buses, nationalising practices are almost invisible since how children spend time in nature and learn in nature is taken for granted. The usual Swedish way, that is assumed as natural or normal, thus remains unquestioned and mostly unrecognised. It is only in the Purple bus that the nationalising project actually becomes visible as it deviates from what is assumed needs to happen; it is breached. As we showed in the analysis, everyday nationalism and nature became visible when the educator expected children to walk in line, to not touch or pick up anything, when children's questions remained unanswered or taken as not suitable, and the researcher recognised this difference and stepped in to show what flowers actually bloom in spring and signal its arrival, and what actually takes place in nature when people with Swedish heritage recognise that the spring has arrived. The educator in the Purple bus did her best to teach how to be in nature, to keep children safe in nature by using the designated path and not allowing them to pick up things as they might be dangerous, teaching them about spring. However, this way of being in nature can be interpreted (as the Swedish researcher also did) as not the 'correct way' to perform nature like it happened on the other two buses. For us this is important for two reasons. First, this shows how performing nature as a second nature of staff and children and knowing the significant national plants operate as a form of everyday nationalism in Sweden. Second, it demonstrates that there are many ways in which to enact a nation with nature. The educator on the Purple bus did her best to teach nature and model being in nature. Even though it was not aligning with the Swedish researcher's (unconscious) expectations, it still is a way, yet a different one, to understand nationhood through nature. Thus, what the educator in the Purple bus performs is her own interpretation of the Swedish nation in nature, pointing to the prevalence and possibility of plural nationalism around nature in Sweden.

Some could identify the educators' performance of nation in nature in the Purple bus as poor pedagogy perhaps delivered by a not so well trained educator. While this interpretation might be plausible, we instead want to point to the fact that judging the way she

enacts the nature curriculum and pedagogy gives also reason for differentiating her as not Swedish, not belonging to the nation and perhaps therefore not being a good pedagogue (Änggård, 2010). In this way, her pedagogic performance of the nation could be grounds for exclusion. According to the observations, she is doing her best to enact the nature curriculum and pedagogy, still the children under her care are not being socialised into Swedish nature as other children are. They are not allowed to roam freely in nature within the given boundaries to exercise autonomy, independence and responsibility for their actions, they are not allowed to freely engage with materials they collect in nature. Thus, despite the hope that the Purple bus takes migrant children out of their suburbs, which is recommended as good practice since the children assumedly rarely have the opportunity to enjoy nature and other places, they do not have the chance to learn how to be in nature as ethnically Swedish children do. This might lead to their identification and differential belonging to the Swedish nation (see Antonsich, 2022b).

As the educator had perceived her own way of doing the Swedish nation through nature, children might also gather their own ways of being in and doing nature. These ideas and performances, if included, are the ones that make a nation a plural one in which everyone recognises her or himself as a member, as the educator also aspires. However, the educator keeps children in nature and at the same time separated from it as they are deemed not ready for it. Having this developmental view, that being in nature should be approached in stages first by walking on the path holding hands before children can walk alone and freely, recapitulates the idea that migrant cultures are less developed (more 'primitive') than the Swedish culture of being in nature. In this way, as another explanation, the educator's actions could be viewed as internalising the expectations towards migrant children and nature and reproducing the hierarchies that exist in Swedish society among the so called 'native' population and those who migrated there.

The question thus emerges: What nations are being learned and taught in the mobile preschool, and in the Purple bus? What inclusions and differential belonging do these notions of nation and nature create? As shown in the article, how nature is regarded as 'good' for the children in pedagogical practice differs depending on children's perceived family background and the notions attached to the socio-economic positioning of the residential area they live in (Ekman Ladru et al., 2021). Here, the idea of 'good' Swedish childhood in nature becomes visible producing differential pedagogies in everyday practice depending on by whom, according to the particular understanding of nature and nation, and with whom this understanding is performed. Finally, in the present 'age of migration' and the increasing ethno-, cultural, religious, and racial diversity of its people, the Swedish nation is reinvented to strengthen its boundaries. Diversity brings about change in how the nation is constructed and reproduced in everyday practices and nature provides one way to de-ethnicise and de-racialise the nation in its recreation. We aimed to point to a way that the recreation of the nation happens continuously in everyday preschool practices. Thus, practising the nation in many different ways and accepting all those as possible 'proper' ways of doing nation might be one way of creating a multicultural nation of Sweden.

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