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Portraits of Swedish natureculture identity – entanglements of (gender) equity and integration in early childhood education

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ABSTRACT

Photographs of children are used on a daily basis in Swedish preschool practice. Although the preschool curriculum prescribes gender equality and celebration of diversity, photographs of indoor activities have shown to display a homogenous view of children and an emphasis on masculine-coded productions and accomplishments. This article examines 325 photographs of outdoor activities from Swedish preschools with diverse ethnic compositions. Our results reveal a Swedish natureculture identity that is more explicitly performed in the multi-ethnic preschool classes. Since ideals of gender equality and closeness to nature connect to the image of Swedishness, this can be understood as compensatory pedagogy. Moreover, the natureculture identity appears to be neutral in relation to ethnicity and gender, which risks rendering diversity invisible. However, the displayed neutrality is also possible to understand as working towards equity where conventionally feminine values such as care, empathy and sensitivity are underscored as desirable for everyone.

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Introduction

This study explores gendered notions of the outdoor child in nature re-/presented in photographs from Swedish preschools, contributing to debates of integration and gender equality work in early childhood education.

Pedagogical documentation is a work tool developed in the Italian region of Reggio Emilia and since the 1980s widely spread in Western early childhood education. In Swedish preschool practice, photographs of children depicting their activities are commonly shared among children, preschool employees and guardians, both digitally and analogously on preschool walls. The purpose of pedagogical documentation is described as enhancing children's participation in learning and in preschool practice and bears

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potential to challenge dominant power structures such as gendered inequalities (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 1999). A recent study shows, however, that indoor preschool photographs display children occupied in activities, focused on masculine-coded production and accomplishment (Wahlgren and Andersson 2024). Despite preschool curriculum explicitly highlighting the goal to work towards gender equality and diversity (Skolverket 2018), Wahlgren and Andersson (2024) found that feminine-coded care was made invisible in preschool photographs and Günther-Hanssen (2020) could describe supposedly gender-neutral nature spaces to contribute to gendering activities in preschool.

Here we draw on social-constructivist thoughts and Judith Butler's concept of performativity as a lens to understand the photographs as socially constructed language, presenting children's desirable performances, and in this case helping to maintain gendered norms in culturally marked communication (Butler 2016). Socially constructed language, or discourses, can be conceptualized as products of shared meaning, ideologies and social identities (Fairclough 2010), activated in collective meaning making. Discourses activated in indoor photographs were related to international trends of schoolification in preschool (Wahlgren and Andersson 2024) and very little is known about how children are portrayed in outdoor photographs and what discourses are activated in relation to children and nature.

According to Swedish preschool curriculum, education shall not only work towards gender equality and diversity, but also 'give children the opportunity to acquire ecological knowledge and to develop a caring approach to their surrounding environment and nature and society' (Skolverket 2018, 10). This entanglement puts responsibility on preschool to provide children with nature experiences, commonly translated into excursions to nearby outdoor environments, while maintaining a focus on moving towards providing children of all genders and diverse backgrounds with equitable learning opportunities. Danielsson et al. (2016) describe how this central practice of taking children outdoors originates from a tradition of outdoor education and associations between outdoor education and authenticity in Sweden. Documentations thereby demonstrate actualizations of outdoor education in line with Swedish norms of closeness to nature that are considered particularly authentic in nature encounters. Teachers document the encounters with photographs, which are then made available for children to interact with.

In this study, we explore entanglements between gender, education and nature in documentation photographs with guidance from the following questions:

- How do the preschool photographs re-/present relationships between children and nature?
- How do gender, ethnicity and agency figure in the photographs?
- What conception of 'nature' as a space for children do the photographs convey?

Swedish preschool

In Sweden, preschool is considered the first step in the education system and children have access to high quality educational practice from when they are one year old (European Commission 2019). Approximately 95% of all children attend preschool during some period between being one and six years of age (Skolverket 2020). In comparison, only about 35% of children younger than three years, and 50% of children from three to six years are enrolled in childcare or early childhood education in the European Union

(European Commission 2019). Preschools are explicitly encouraged to equalize differences in children's situations and backgrounds, taking into account gender, class and ethnicity (Skolverket 2018). Research across national contexts (e.g. Heckman et al. 2010; Lazzari and Vandebroek 2013) confirms that high quality early childhood education, available for all children, leads to levelled conditions for children throughout their lives, regarding school, work and health.

An overarching Swedish discourse – gender equality

Sweden ranks as one of the most gender equal countries in the world (World Economic Forum 2022). The idea of gender equality permeates several governmental documents, including the preschool curriculum (Skolverket 2018). To achieve a gender equal education, the curriculum emphasizes providing possibilities for all children to participate in all activities, regardless of gender. The curriculum specifically underlines that everyone who works in preschool must 'actively combat stereotypical gender patterns' (Skolverket 2018, 7). The emphasis on preschool's task to equalize gender gaps (Skolverket 2018, 5, 7, 13, 14, 16, 17, 21) distinguishes the Swedish preschool curriculum from most early childhood curricula in the world.

Despite ambitious curricular policies, a government official report (Regeringskansliet 2006) showed that many preschools fail at their gender equality work and reinforce traditional gender patterns by providing gendered spaces for play. Furthermore, research shows that preschool teachers hold different expectations for girls and boys, and consequently treat them differently (Andersson 2012; Hellman 2010).

To achieve gender equality, some scholars suggest providing gender-neutral environments for play. Lyttleton-Smith (2019) demonstrates how de-zoning activities and deregulating gendering use of space can support children's access to 'a diversity of subjective experiences, including those which challenge the normativity of gender stereotypes' (Lyttleton-Smith 2019, 668). Lyttleton-Smith claims that children have shown to be protective of stereotypical gender roles in gendered play spaces, such as home corners.

Änggård (2011) suggests nature to be a gender-neutral space and argues that gender equality may increase in the process of letting children play outdoors. Spending time outdoors has been part of Swedish early childhood education since the middle of the nineteenth century (Ärlemalm-Hagser 2013). This history influences the contemporary Swedish curriculum in prescribing that preschools should 'lay a foundation for a growing interest and a responsibility among children for active participation in civic life and for sustainable development' (Skolverket 2018, 5).

Yet, the idea of nature as gender-neutral contradicts the classic (Western) nature-culture divide, in which nature is associated with empathy, relationships and femininity, and culture with logic, reasoning and masculinity (Connolly 2008). Historically, both women and children have been conceived as more closely connected to emotions and nature and as distant to or even the opposite of culture (Wall 2010).

Several scholars have investigated gendering in outdoor activities. Maina-Okori, Koushik, and Wilson (2018) show how women are overrepresented in environmental engagement, caring about and protecting nature, while Warren (2018) claims that individualism and a conquering mentality signify masculinity in outdoor environments. Moreover, while Änggård (2011) describes children's 'toys' in nature as non-gendered and

inspiring gender-neutral play, Anna Günther-Hanssen (2020) found gendered play in Swedish nature. Boys approached a rock with an unquestioned will to conquer it, while girls stood next to it and did not approach or even climb it until they had a chance to do so undisturbed by others.

Understanding no environments to be unaffected by gender norms (Änggård 2011; Lyttleton-Smith 2019) physical environments like nature are influenced by understandings of gender and can be interpreted through a cultural lens. Consequently, rather than culture and nature to be an exclusive binary, there are only naturecultures (Fawcett 2013; Haraway 2016; Latour 1993). The concept of naturecultures is useful for exploring and explaining entanglements between humans, non-human matter and discourses (Haraway 2016), entanglements which are at the centre of this work.

An overarching Swedish discourse – closeness to nature

Nature treats everyone equally, regardless of gender, age or ethnicity. Naturen behandlar alla lika oavsett kön, ålder och etnicitet. (Svenskt friluftsliv [Swedish Outdoor Life] 2021, 77)

In Sweden, nature is described as a collective societal asset, and by law available to everyone. *Allemansrätten* (The Right to Public Access) is a Swedish regulation (formally constituted in the 1940s) that allows everyone to freely explore nature, swimming, camping or picking berries and mushrooms (Naturvårdsverket 2021). Similar regulations exist in other Scandinavian countries but are unique in a global perspective.

Allemansrätten builds on old Swedish conventions involving rights, but also duties. While it allows everyone to freely explore nature, it also directs everyone to for instance keep their dogs leashed to protect wild animals and to collect rubbish to protect cultural landscapes from damage or littering (Naturvårdsverket 2021). *Allemansrätten* constitutes the base for Swedish children's possibilities to physically engage with nature while at the same time attached responsibilities are often taught and practised in preschool education.

Several studies (e.g. Chawla 2006; Gill 2014; Kahn and Kellert 2002) point out children's positive experiences of nature as fundamental for good health and environmental engagement in adult life. Scholars use different definitions of nature experiences, as for instance, 'being in nature', 'outdoor education' or 'environmental education' (Parkin 1998; Sandberg 2009; Wilson 1996). Gustafsson et al. (2012) define outdoor education as aiming to foster participants' learning through an interplay between experience and reflection, while Parkin (1998) claims that outdoor education is connected to perceived benefits for participants, but also expects participants to build relationships to nature. Environmental education is, in turn, defined as focusing on participants creating connectedness, respect and care for nature through healthy interactions and supporting practices that ensure the environment's well-being (Wilson 1996). According to Beery (2014) environmental degradation can be related to a disconnection between human beings and the rest of nature caused by poor accessibility to nature. Therefore, Beery (2014, 2018) argues that giving people access to nature, through regulations like *Allemansrätten*, as well as challenging the nature-culture dichotomy, can be constructive in shaping a relational outdoor education discourse.

The accessibility of nature has affected how being in, and feeling close to nature, became a part of building the Swedish nation and the Swedish people's identity in the

end of the nineteenth century (Ehn, Frykman, and Löfgren 1993). Therefore, how to be and behave in nature can also be conceived as a part of Swedish culture (cf. Fawcett 2013; Haraway 2016; Latour 1993). Importantly, Allemansrätten has furthermore been described as a fundamental part of feeling Swedish as well as to be an entry point to Swedish society for immigrants (Singleton 2021).

Due to cultural expectations, people born in Sweden are assumed to have experienced nature in family activities. Sandberg (2009) found that children from a middle-class residential area related early nature experiences to their private lives, while children from a multi-ethnic residential area, conversely, tended to relate nature experiences to school or public care activities. Harju et al. (2021) found how preschool children with multi-ethnic backgrounds were offered an outdoor education permeated by compensatory ideas, while the children with Swedish backgrounds were offered an education that aimed for freedom and agency (Harju et al. 2021). Altogether, preschool plays an important role in supplying immigrant children with Swedish nature experiences, but research indicates the importance of not only providing access to nature, but also of exploring and critically reflecting on how nature is approached, as pivotal for the Swedish educational system.

Experiences, entanglements and environments

This article focuses on gender equality (GE) and closeness to nature (CtN) as overarching discourses in Sweden in entanglement with ideas about Swedishness (Ehn, Frykman, and Löfgren 1993; Martinsson and Griffin 2016). Discursively analysing photographic documentations in preschool, we perceive discourses as maintained and/or challenged in corporeal and visual language. Photographs are thereby understood as linguistic acts, which through iteration offer certain subject positions that are possible for children to negotiate (Butler 1990; Foucault 2003).

We furthermore draw on the concept of naturecultures to account for the agentic entanglement between children, nature and discourse (Fawcett 2013; Haraway 2016; Latour 1993). According to Beery (2014) an integrated idea of nature and culture encourages nurturing and responsible human/environmental engagement. Butler (1990, 2016) explains how agency often is understood as belonging to a subject, constituted through reiterated norms that produce frames. Within these frames, both the subject and agency can be recognized and become mediated through the environment. Thereby, agency becomes an interdependent achievement through joint engagement in the encounter between the subject, the discourses and the environment, rather than an individual, independent characterization (Esser 2016). In identifying activated discourses in these entanglements, the photographed encounters from preschool excursions become repeatedly revisited and reflected experiences, which are assumed to frame children's current, but also possible future relationships with nature and engagements in environmental issues like climate change.

Methods

All photographs in this study were taken by teachers involved in ongoing documentation practice, that is, photographs of children in everyday activities were displayed on preschool walls for children to interact with. In line with the feminist post-structural approach

of this article, the photographs are regarded as communicating certain performances and ways of being in nature. They can be understood as stories of desirable ways of performing, which influence how children (are able to) act.

Data collection and selection

The data presented in this article is part of a larger dataset of about 1600 indoor- and outdoor photographs documenting pedagogical practices in four preschools situated in urban areas around Stockholm, Sweden. Preschools were selected from areas with diverse socioeconomic status and ethnic compositions. Three of the preschools enrolled mainly children with guardians born in Sweden, and one preschool predominantly enrolled children with different ethnic backgrounds. For this article, all outdoor photographs ($n = 325$), displayed on the preschool walls, were analyzed to answer the study's research questions. Moreover, field notes from 45 site visits made at the preschools informed the analysis.

This study underwent ethical vetting and was approved by the Swedish ethical review board (Etikprövningsnämnden 2018/142). There were no indications that this research could do harm to individual children. With respect to the participating children's integrity, results and photographs have been edited and handled confidentially.

Data analysis

In critical image analyzes, attention is paid to the content of the photographs, as well as who is able to access them (Rose 2016). Thereby, the first step in the analysis was to note how the photographs were organized and where they were displayed. Positioning indicated how they were used, and which values they communicated. The next step was to thematically categorize the content of the photographs. We noted how children and teachers were made visible in and in relation to nature, but also explored what was *not* depicted in the photographs as visual culture and considered what is made and not made visible to be equally important (Figure 1).

Figure 1 constitutes an example of a photograph on which analysis was done. Six children are made visible, but it is not possible to identify them. Very little or nothing of their faces is made visible. All children wear the same reflexive vests. They appear small in relation to the fallen tree representing nature, which makes nature appear important and central. In this case, a teacher is present in the photograph. However, the teacher is vaguely visible, and thereby positioned as less important. Children are portrayed as curious in contact with nature. No children are depicted as scared, frozen or reluctant towards nature.

After the thematic content analysis similar to the example above was conducted, theoretically driven questions about which subject positions are celebrated (Carlone, Scott, and Lowder 2014) and which performances are negotiable (Butler 1990) were posed to the material. Frequently repeated performances and activities were identified as desirable and interpreted as signs of activated discourses in the photographs. For example, nature itself in the form of for instance rocks and trees took large space in the photographs and was thereby constructed as important to the children's activities. These underlying discourses, in the results referred to as sub-discourses, were later set



Figure 1. Six children are depicted close to the root system of a large fallen tree.

in relation to the overarching CtN- and GE-discourse, to answer questions about how child-nature relationships were gendered in the photographs.

Identified discourses of children, gender and nature were categorized according to their connotations to ideas of nature as a gender-neutral space (Änggård 2011), and to conventional binaries of femininity and masculinity in relation to nature and culture (Connolly 2008). Representations of children and nature were finally thought of from a perspective of interdependent agency (Esser 2016) and naturecultures (Haraway 2016; Latour 1993).

Results

The results are presented describing how the two overarching discourses of *closeness to nature* (CtN) and *gender equality* (GE) operate in the construction of certain representations of children and nature. In this process, we could identify patterns underlying these overarching discourses, which we call sub-discourses contributing to the construction of natureculture representations. The CtN discourse was made visible in three sub-discourses, namely centring on *pedagogy*, *health* and *environment*, while the GE discourse was made visible through one sub-discourse, *gender neutrality*. The photographs shown in this section are representative of the type and scope of images, displays and discourses identified in the entire data set for this article. Below are two examples of how outdoor photographs were shared in a multi-ethnic preschool class and in a preschool class with children with mainly Swedish-born guardians.

Neutral children in a neutral space

The GE discourse above all operates through notions of gender neutrality in the photographs. These ideas are indicated by at least two features. First, children are portrayed

from a distance and dressed in bulky clothes, which makes them hard to identify. Second, children are represented in teacher-led activities, which all children are supposed to participate in. Photographs that show children playing the same game in uniform vests display no differences in gender participation or performance.

Due to rather common expressions of normative gender stereotypes in this setting, pink clothing connotes girlhood whereas black and blue clothes are associated with boyhood. If analyzes were to build on such expectations, the photographs would still construct both girls and boys as interacting with the rough terrain. In [Figure 2a](#), second row, a photograph displays children with pink, blue and red clothes, who are freely moving around, possibly about to move out of the picture. No teacher who guides or limits them in their interactions with nature is visible.

However, it is possible to identify both conventional feminine and masculine characteristics in the photographs. Beneath the photograph of children freely moving around (2a), three children are displayed standing on a rock. The child to the right in the photograph seems to take on the challenge to climb an even bigger rock, while the other two children appear to be looking down at the ground, visually assessing heights and distances. In this documentation, we discern masculine-coded characteristics such as logic, special understandings, independence and braveness. But it is also possible to identify the child in the middle as caring for the climbing child, helping them avoid falling into the gap between the two rocks. Care is conventionally identified as a feminine-coded characteristic.

In the next row (2a, 4), five children are depicted moving towards the camera in rough terrain, where they have to climb or jump down from low height. The first child slides



Figure 2. Representative displays of outdoor photographs at: (a) a multi-ethnic preschool class (left), (b) a preschool class with children with guardians mainly born in Sweden (right).

down the slope, balancing with their right hand, stretching out one leg to reach the ground. The child is looking down, seemingly to find where to put their foot. Behind, three other children standing closely together, watching and observing. The children are displayed as more cautious and supportive of each other, standing tightly together, waiting for their turn to get down the slope. They are depicted as aware of and moving towards the teacher (camera). The caring and supporting characteristics can be interpreted as feminine-coded, as well as the dependency on an assumed teacher nearby.

The CtN discourse is activated in the photographs through different and intertwined sub-discourses. A pedagogical sub-discourse is activated by depicting children in teaching and learning situations, a health sub-discourse is activated by displaying physical challenges, and an environmental sub-discourse underlies showing relations between nature and children. Drawing on the CtN discourse, nature often constitutes dominant portions of the photographs, children being part of a larger scenery, which creates ideas about nature as an active respondent, and important for how children conduct their tasks in. Sometimes nature constitutes a scenery for creativity and imagination; in other photographs it is pictured as a classroom that offers endless possibilities for exploration and discovery. Moreover, nature is depicted as providing the children with materials for indoor education (2b). According to the photographs, all preschools have access to forests that provide challenging physical activities, play with rocks, dead wood, and in sufficiently rough terrain. No photographs show children that seem reluctant to approach nature's challenges. Ideas of nature as a non-discriminating, gender-neutral and welcoming space are made visible.

Nature as children's regular space

The examples (Figure 2) show how photographs communicate outdoor activities as having an integral role in everyday preschool education. Figure 2a shows a typical piccollage from a visit to the forest, displaying a group of children with different ethnic backgrounds. The date and name of the group (Knytte 14) are written in large letters while the photographs are relatively small. Ideas of regular nature contacts as desirable are reinforced by displaying all children wearing water-resistant outdoor clothes and yellow vests, which communicates a relationship between nature and children, regardless of season or weather. The health sub-discourse is activated by showing children actively moving around in nature on a regular basis, indicated by the dates in the piccollages. Figure 2b, a typical section of a project wall from a preschool with a majority of children with Swedish backgrounds, is also communicating nature contacts as a regular part of education by showing children outdoors with a thin layer of snow on the ground, dressed in bulky outdoor clothes, appropriate to the season.

However, the regularity in nature contacts is communicated differently in 2b, and more clearly activates the pedagogical sub-discourse. The heading says, 'We play the fairy tale of Ninni, the forest troll.' Below, there are photographs of children and teachers in the forest. Another heading says, 'We create our own fairy tales.' It is placed above four indoor photographs, depicting children, one in each photograph, sitting at a table with nature material collected outdoors, in front of them. Outdoor and indoor photographs, displayed together, mediate a storyline about cohesive education where outdoor activities continue indoors.

Nature as children's extended classroom

The pedagogical sub-discourse was activated by ideas about nature as a living classroom, where children were taught but also learned by exploring independently. The pedagogical sub-discourse made visible understandings of learning in nature as an act of combining theory and practice. The photographs communicated children as active in interaction with nature but also as collaborative participants in their own education.

Figure 2b exemplifies how the pedagogical sub-discourse is activated by displaying teachers in lecturing modes, and children as attentive to teaching, rather than physically involved in education. Ideas of children as pupils are also made visible in the piccollages (2a), which all contain one photograph of the children gathered in 'circle time,' a teacher-initiated activity.

However, Figure 2a shows how the pedagogical sub-discourse is activated by showing children's own explorations. Children are displayed moving around freely in rough terrain, which expresses ideas of children's learning through physical practice and experience. The children in Figure 2a are presented as examining heights, distances and materials with their bodies. One photograph captures a child tasting a polypody (*Polypodium vulgare*) and grimacing (the only face possible to identify in the piccollage). Next to that photograph, a polypody is shown in its natural habitat. These photographs display nature as a living classroom, where children can experience the taste of a polypody but also see and learn about species in their environment. The CtN discourse is activated by notions of education as a practice that involves using the body and senses like taste and smell, all of which contribute to the establishment of a relationship between the child and nature.

Nature as children's space for relationships

The photographs bring out that nature by default inspires the children to connect to it. Most outdoor photographs picture forest environments, with rocks, outcrops, moss and groundcover plants. It is possible to identify trunks of sparse pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) and spruce (*Picea abies*) trees. These are elements of typical urban forest environments in large parts of Sweden.

The CtN discourse makes ideas of nature's agency visible by letting nature dominate photographs and by displaying ideas of nature as having a major impact on how children are able to play and learn. Returning to the photograph of three children (Figure 2a) standing on a big but quite low rock, the child to the right leans towards a bigger rock as if they are about to climb it. The child has their back turned towards the camera. The child in the middle turns towards the child on the right and bends down as if they are looking at the gap between the rocks. The photograph makes visible ideas of children as free to explore nature, without guidance from adults. The health sub-discourse is activated by depicting the children using their bodies to climb and jump, with opportunities to feel the rock and moss. Ideas of children's development of motor and coordinative skills in contact with the environment become represented, as well as notions of nature as a natural, physical playground.

The CtN discourse is also activated by posting photographs of nature landscapes on the walls; trees with autumn leaves, icicles or sparkling snow. Notions of nature as

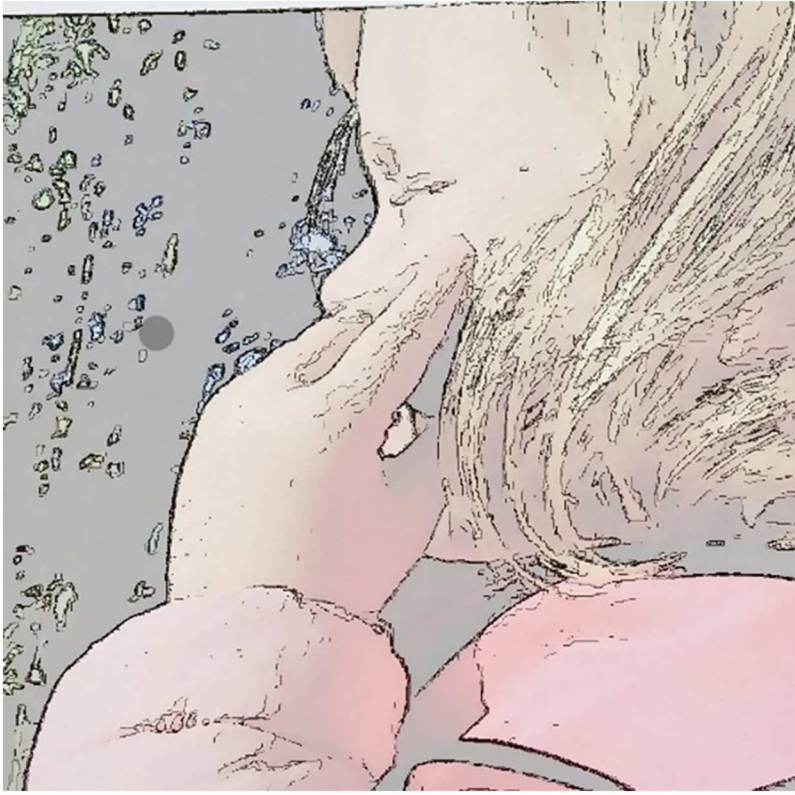


Figure 3. A child is putting a horse chestnut to their cheek.

beautiful, magnificent and sometimes mysterious are represented in unexpected outgrowths on trees or deep holes behind rocks. These notions are used in the preschool projects, where nature is depicted with imaginary inhabitants such as trolls and dinosaurs.

Figure 3 shows how ideas of connections between children and nature are made visible by activating the environmental sub-discourse. A relationship is portrayed between a child and a horse chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*), which the child puts to their cheek. The child has closed their eyes. Even if nature (represented by the horse chestnut) is held by the child and put to their cheek, notions of agency as an engagement, which arises when the chestnut touches the cheek of the child, are activating the environmental sub-discourse. Ideas of nature as designed for engagement by the characteristics of the horse chestnut, which fell to the ground and willingly challenged the child to open the prickly shield to get hold of the smooth seed, are presented, as are notions of the child as curious and eager to explore nature using different senses. The material contains several examples of how photographs portray children's relationships with nature in the shape of objects and critters such as cones, sticks and insects.

The interpretation of the photographs reveals a plethora of intertwined sub-discourses about children and nature. The results suggest that all presented outdoor activities include features that promote the development of environmental engagement, and therefore can be defined as environmental education. The photographs exhibit a coherence between discourses, humans and the promoted role of nature, which communicates

an interdependent agency, summarized as a re/presentation of the desirable outdoor child. In the following discussion, this conglomeration will be referred to as a Swedish *natureculture identity*.

Nature – providing neutral spaces for gender-equitable practice?

Our analysis shows that the conventionally feminine-coded nature tends to be conceived as gender-neutral in Swedish outdoor preschool photographs. Commonly, spaces that are conceived as gender-neutral have shown to carry masculine codes, since masculinity is normative. Moreover, Wahlgren and Andersson (2024) found that indoor preschool photographs celebrated masculine-coded writings from the curriculum and made caring and feminine coded tasks invisible. In these outdoor photographs, relationships with nature, which relate to femininity (Warren 2018), are made visible as highly valued and desirable for everyone.

Further, the narrative of nature as a gender-neutral space and children as gender-neutral subjects can be understood as ideas of democracy and justice. Chapman (2021) describes gender neutrality as a strategy to achieve gender equality in early childhood education. Local nature is also commonly used in Swedish integration projects as cultural borders are expected to be easier to bridge in these environments (Singleton 2021). Therefore, notions of nature and children as not only gender-neutral but also ethnically neutral reinforce the image of an education with aims of sustainable development, economic, social and environmental, which correlates with the preschool curriculum (Skolverket 2018).

The photographs highlight ideas of nature as accessible for everyone, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age or physical ability, which aligns with the quote from Svenskt friluftsliv (2021), as well as with Allemansrätten and the curriculum. The portrayal of children in bulky clothes, at a distance, gives the impression that all children participate. The photographs portray a well-dressed, gender neutral, collaborating child without ethnicity or challenged physical abilities. The depiction of children as neutral coheres with the ideas of nature as a neutral space and aims of achieving gender equality through neutrality (Änggård 2011). Moreover, displaying feminine characteristics like care and sensitivity as desirable could be read as challenging existing masculine-coded norms. However, portraying children as a homogenous group might ignore children's competence to negotiate their own identities in situations where diversity becomes apparent as well as hides sociocultural and socioeconomic diversity. For example, the absence of visibly physically challenged children makes the photographs less including, and the homogeneity could be interpreted as ableist avoidance rather than inclusive equity work.

The environmental sub-discourse is activated in almost all photographs, displaying children when connecting to and interacting with nature (Årlemalm-Hagser 2013; Kahn and Kellert 2002; Szczepanski 2013), seemingly developing respect and care for nature, as well as gaining knowledge about different species (Chawla 2006). This also includes picking up and sorting waste and displaying the acquisition of an understanding of sustainability (Wight et al. 2016; Wilson 1996). Drawing on the environmental sub-discourse, notions of nature with agency that is intertwined with children's agency and creates something bigger for the future are presented. Moreover, the environmental sub-discourse values the development of expanded knowledge of ecology and globalization,

democratic participation and social justice (Szczepanski 2013), which is intertwined with values in the neutrality discourse. Ideas about nature as more important than children's individual identities are communicated by photographs showing large portions of nature, while children are placed in and documented from the distance. This reminds of aims of preschool teachers to make children feel like they belong to something bigger, as Årlemalm-Hagser (2013) found. This creates room for ideas of agency as interdependent engagement (cf. Esser 2016). In contrast to indoor photographs, which tend to strive to make every child visible in every single activity (as described by Wahlgren and Andersson 2024), outdoor photographs involve every child by making individual identities invisible.

The strong activation of the CtN discourse embedded in Swedish society contributes to nature holding a given and central position as part of children's learning and development. The Swedish natureculture identity is repeatedly represented in the photographs of all studied preschools, thereby promoting itself as a desirable performance for the children to negotiate their identities with.

Gender and the Swedish natureculture identity

Given the positive influence of gender-neutral spaces (Lyttleton-Smith 2019; Ånggård 2011), ideas of nature as a gender-neutral space could be helpful in preschool's work with gender equality. However, displaying children as gender-neutral and participating in supposedly gender-neutral activities, communicates sameness and risks to make gender differences or inequalities invisible. According to Chapman (2021), gender neutrality can also function as a strategy to avoid reproducing explicit gendered stereotypes, which makes exclusionary processes invisible and impossible to counteract or discuss.

However, some photographs express gendered binaries as aligned with Warren's (2018) claims that an individualistic and conquering mentality connects to ideas of masculinity, while other-oriented and supportive characteristics are associated with femininity in outdoor environments. Examples of gendered performances are shown in the photographs of three children (Figure 2a) conquering a big rock, while, in another photograph, children are supporting each other to climb down from an elevated area, on their way towards the teacher (camera). These photographs communicate gendered expectations of children's performances in nature.

Most photographs, though, tell stories about gender-neutral children, and an indifferent notion of just letting the children spend time in a gender-neutral space seems to operate. In the photograph displaying children moving freely towards nature (Figure 2a), they, seemingly regardless of gender, take on rough ground in nature without restrictions or guidance from adults. But, as Günther-Hanssen (2020) foregrounds, the natural environment itself is not enough to guarantee gender equality among children. All preschool employees are obliged to combat stereotypical gender patterns (Skolverket 2018), which means that the outdoor environment cannot, in itself, be used as an answer to that task.

The photographs repeatedly communicate the desirable Swedish natureculture identity. On the one hand, gender neutrality in the photographs indicates gender avoidance, by making gender diversity invisible; on the other hand, feminine-coded values like care and closeness to nature are upgraded into desirable values for all. This distinguishes the outdoor from the indoor photographs (Wahlgren and Andersson 2024).

Ethnicity and the Swedish natureculture identity

Beyond gender, the Swedish natureculture identity also seemed to render ethnicity invisible by displaying children homogenously in the photographs. The piccollages in the multi-ethnic preschool classes underline the Swedish natureculture identity, while the preschools with children with Swedish backgrounds focused on connecting educational outdoor and indoor situations. The outdoor piccollages in the multi-ethnic preschool were highlighted, implying their inherent value, displayed on separate walls, disconnected from project photographs.

Altogether, this suggests that outdoor photographs are part of a compensatory education, where children from multi-ethnic areas are expected to have less experience with nature (cf. Harju et al. 2021). For example, the announcement of the date and name of the group with large letters in all of the piccollages inform the guardians about the desirable regular nature contacts, regardless of season or weather. Guardians also come to understand that they should be aware of what clothes are suitable for the weather, aligned with the Swedish saying: *There is no bad weather, only bad clothing* (Det finns inga dåliga väder, bara dåliga kläder).

While children from multi-ethnic residential areas in Harju et al. (2021) were held back in their contacts with nature, photographs in this study pictured children from the multi-ethnic preschool classes as freer to move around than children from the preschools in ethnically homogeneous neighbourhoods. Several photographs from the multi-ethnic preschool are interpreted as play. Thereby, this study sheds light on variations in how preschools choose to compensate children with different ethnic backgrounds in outdoor education. The outdoor photographs of children in multi-ethnic preschool classes also contrast a fresh report from the third largest city in Sweden (Malmö City 2021), that describes how children in multi-ethnic residential areas often are fostered into narrow gender roles, which positions girls as less physically active. The report states that these roles tend to be accepted and maintained by preschool employees to please guardians (Malmö City 2021). Countering this finding, the present study shows that teachers in the multi-ethnic classes aim to depict children as equally independent and free to explore nature on their own, regardless of gender.

Although, the schoolification trend in preschool (Brogaard Clausen 2015; Liljestrand 2021) is more distinctly recognizable in indoor photographs (Wahlgren and Andersson 2024), the groups of children with Swedish backgrounds are more often displayed in lecturing situations outdoor in combination with coherent practical tasks indoors. Additionally, features of play occur more prominent in the outdoor photographs of the multi-ethnic preschool. These results suggest that efforts to introduce children to Swedishness are made by repeating certain performances in the photographs of the multi-ethnic preschool classes, while other, more docile performances, dominate photographs in preschools serving mainly children with Swedish-born guardians.

Conclusions

In this study we showcase outdoor education in Swedish preschools to be portrayed as environmental education which aims at engaging children in explorations of nature and involving children in sustainable futures. Interactions with nature are portrayed as

indifferent and gender-neutral, which rather than promoting diversity and strengthening cultural identities, bears the risk of displaying children as gender- and ethnically neutral and thereby hiding inequalities based on gender and ethnicity. Neutrality at the same time can invite children to develop relationships of care and sensitivity, characteristics connected to feminine values, communicating ideas of connectedness. The outdoor photographs challenge masculine norms, counteract persistent stereotypical gender roles and challenge cultural borders. The Swedish way of being in nature, however, remains unchallenged reproducing the celebration of hegemonic natureculture identities.

In line with and expanding on previous work, our study displays the need to further explore and challenge uses of supposedly neutral educational spaces to nuance educators understanding of how they both hold the risk to reproduce and the potential to transgress exclusionary education. Environments do not solely do the equity work, ideas of documentation practice must be scrutinized, and strategies for equitable documentation in preschools developed.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Katerina Pia Günter holds a PhD in gender studies with focus on identity and norms in cultural worlds of higher education biology. With a disciplinary background in biology, they have extended their perspectives to other natural sciences disciplines and are interested in natures of science (trans)disciplinarity, as well as participants' identity work in relation to matters of equity and social justice. Katerina spent a postdoctoral year at San Francisco state university, and recently started as a postdoctoral researcher at Umeå University, Sweden. They engage in further developing critical and feminine perspectives towards changing higher STEM education.

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