

## **Between the Wild, Unknown and the Safe: Play and the Affordances of Nature within an Early Childhood Education and Care Institution in Norway**

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### **Abstract**

This article deals with the opportunities for children to experience nature within an Early Childhood Education and Care Institution in Norway, drawing on a case study of a day care institution that, among other things, focuses on nature and outdoor life. The results of the study show that the children and staff of the ECEC institution are creating outdoor practices that focus on physical activity, play and friendship among the children. Through play, the children explore and learn the affordances of nature. The staff plays an important role in facilitating the nature play of children, drawing on a view that nature is a sanctuary and an alternative to the hustle and the bustle to regular day care life. Simultaneously, the staff plays an important role in balancing the different concerns of the institution, like the question of security and safety while outdoor in nature, the available resources and personal situation and the cultural and pedagogical ideals of children's free and self-initiated play in nature. The article argues that attention has to be directed towards the opportunity of the staff to create and negotiate the institutional space that ensures the opportunities for children to experience nature on their own terms through play.

Key words: children, nature, play, ECEC institution, affordance

Children's use of nature and the time spent in natural environments in the Western world are changing (Fjørtoft & Reiten, 2003; Muñoz, 2009; Tordsson & Vale, 2013; Waller et al., 2010). Everyday life constraints and an increasing adult organization of children's lives are contributing to a reduction in the amount of time spent outdoors, in particular when it comes to unsupervised, self-initiated play in natural environments. This concern has attracted much attention among academics, professionals and laypeople, and a fear has been raised that a lack of experience with nature is contributing to a number of different problems concerning the future relationship between humans and nature. Efforts to reengage children with natural settings to increase their experiences in and of nature have developed as a response to these changes, and childhood institutions and educators have been called upon to take action (Rosenow & Bailie, 2014).

This article focuses on children's experiences of and with nature in an early childhood education and care institution (ECEC institution) in Norway. Early childhood education and care institutions in Norway are a governmental responsibility, and are framed by the national, "Framework plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergarten" (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2011). Among the purposes, values and tasks listed in the plan are the importance of outdoor play and the experiencing of nature. ECEC institutions shall help to ensure that children experience the joy of being in the natural world, develop a love of nature and as

well as gain a fundamental understanding of nature, conservation and interaction in the natural world. (Ibid, 2011)

Playing outside is an intrinsic value to the ECEC institution tradition in Norway (Korsvold, 2005), and today, hiking in a local natural environment is an integrated part of everyday life in many ECEC institutions. In general, there is a rising interest for nature pedagogies within Norwegian ECEC institutions. As the number of forest schools and outdoor nurseries expands (Lysklett, 2013) and increases, attention is directed towards the importance of outdoor, environmental pedagogies within the ECEC institutions. This development is welcomed by both professionals and laypeople, as for different reasons the opportunities for children's play in nature near home in everyday life seems to be diminishing and disappearing. However, the consequences of this institutionalization of children's play in nature are to a large degree unexplored, thereby still remaining to be fully understood (Tordsson & Vale, 2013). Much research has highlighted the positive values of play in natural environments to children, in addition to the many aspects of benefits embedded in this play (Gill 2014). In particular, research highlights that outdoor life has a positive effect on the motor development, coordination, balance and muscularity of children (Fjørtoft, 2000, 2004; Grahn et al., 1997; Vigsø & Nielsen, 2006), as well as increased mental health, concentration, imagination and creativity (Mårtensson, 2004; Vigsø & Nielsen, 2006). Even so, there is a lack of studies looking into the different ways children experience nature from the various perspectives of social background, gender, ethnicity, physical ability and so on, though with a few exceptions of studies looking into the importance of gender (Årlemalm-Hagsér, 2008; Änggård, 2011).

There is a need for research on how nature is experienced by children within the ECEC institutions, especially in relation to how an adult adjustment and presence influence upon - and create conditions for the nature experiences of children (Gill, 2014; Kernan, 2010). According to Stephenson (2002), research has to look into the conditions and constraints within the organization that contribute to the experiences of outdoor play and nature for children. The aim of this article is to explore the conditions for children's play in nature within the setting of the ECEC institutions. It asks how children and the ECEC institutions' staff practices outdoor life and interacts with each other and with nature, as groups of children and staff go hiking into the nearby forest, paying particular attention to the condition for children to influence and shape their experience of nature within the context of ECEC institutions. Going hiking in this context refers to a variety of practices where children and staff together leave the home base of the ECEC-institution to spend time in nearby nature areas. Sometimes a few of the children, together with one of the staff members, can go for short, spontaneous walks just outside the fenced area. However, the hikes are often a part of the everyday schedule where trips in nature areas are planned ahead and organised by the staff, and the groups walk into nature areas in order to spend the day outside. The children often carry their own backpacks with food and drinks, as well as their personal belongings and some warm clothes. The empirical findings are based on interviews and participant observations from a case study of an ECEC institution in Norway. The methodological design will be presented more in depth, following an initial presentation of the theoretical underpinnings. The results of the fieldwork will then be accounted for and discussed in the last section of this article.

### **Analytical and Theoretical Approach**

The choice of the theoretical-analytical approach stems from the empirical data and the data collection. The central importance of play in the hikes was identified from both the staff and the children early in the observations. Within the play theme, both the interaction with the natural environment and the social processes surrounding the play showed themselves to be interesting aspects of the hikes. We therefore chose the theoretical concept and related theory of affordance as a lens for our analysis, mainly based on Gibson (1986), but supplemented with some later additions on the theory of affordance by Michael and Still (1992) and Costall (1995).

The term "affordance" Gibson derives from "to afford" and the concept refers to both the environment and the animal in a certain complementarity (1986, p. 127). The affordance of the environments, according to Gibson, is what it provides or offers for the animal. Gibson coins the term to point out the relational aspects of the environment and the animal/human: Nature affords something in relation to the capacities of the specific animal/human and what it recognises. However, the term can also be used for how the environment and the animal/human together can construct and constrict the possibilities that the environment can have for a given animal/human. The environment affords different possibilities to a dog than a sparrow, even if they live within the same environment. We focus on children as social agents and actors in relation to the natural environment,

as they develop and learn to respond to the affordances of nature. Humans have to learn the affordance of things: “To perceive the world is to cooperate oneself. [...] The awareness of the world and of one’s complementary relations to the world is not separable” (Gibson, 1986, p. 141).

Michael and Still (1992) make an extension to the affordances term, which is especially important in our empirical setting: A possible resistance to control by power-knowledge – the power-knowledge of the self-evident. Gibson’s ecological theory of perception leads to a model of resources for resistance, and Michael and Still elaborate:

There is a resource for resistance that stems from the constitutive interlocking of physical environment and organism, and the transgressive act is grounded in the affordances that are intrinsic to the relation of organism and environment. [...] There is a latitude, a collection of affordances, that inheres in the ecology of the situation and that outstrips the more or less meagre possibilities demarcated by power-knowledge. (Michael & Still 1992, p. 881)

Play plays a part in an exploration of the latent affordances of the environment, and the range of the organism-environment relationship extends beyond power-knowledge.

Drawing on Gibson’s ecological theory, Costall (1995) develops and argues for an understanding of the social aspects of affordance. We are surrounded by artefacts: things and surfaces, but also animals and plants, which have been shaped by human intervention for generations. People experience objects in relation to the community, and within this community they have meaning. Learning the functions of a natural object can be done in different ways, both deliberately and through other people, without explicit instruction. A path tells us that this part of the ground affords a good walk without bushes to climb over, bogs to sink into and so on. Other people are important in learning the affordance of things, and things may afford something to some and not hinge to others. Human activity itself is socially and culturally transformed. Humans have the possibilities to change the environment, and even more important for our study humans have the possibility of creating a belief. We can change the affordance the environment gives us in play on a whim.

In this study, the ECEC institution is the setting for learning the affordance of nature. As an institution, it represents an everyday domain for children that has increased dramatically over the past 20 years in Scandinavia, and which is often associated with an increasing societal control and interest in the lives of children aged 1–6 (Kampmann, 2004). Hallén et al. (2011) describe ECEC institutions as an “intermediate domain,” i.e. as a place in the intersection between the private and the public. As an intermediate domain, the ECEC institutions are characterized by the public, pedagogical and professional actions on the one hand, and the concrete and individual actions of the agents, negotiations and participation in the socialization processes on the other. At every ECEC institution, there is an ongoing negotiation between the public and the private domain, which together create the symbolic spaces of the ECEC institutions (p. 172). These negotiations also take place when hiking into the woods, as the various participants contribute, create and recreate the outdoor life of the ECEC institutions. In this way, one can study how different agents participate in the process of constructing the outdoor life of the ECEC institutions, and to be more specific, how children, through their doings, actions and negotiations within the ECEC institution setting, are responding to the affordances of nature and how the staff interacts and relates to the children.

## EMPIRICAL APPROACH AND DATA

This paper is part of a larger study of children’s nature experiences within different contexts and situations in Norway, funded by the Research Council of Norway. The study has an ethnographic approach, using data from participant observations and interviews with children and staff about their experiences and practices of hiking into nearby forest during preschool hours. The fieldwork was conducted over a period of six months from January–June 2013. Data consists of observation notes from 26 hiking trips into the nearby forest, from the time of the children’s arrival in the morning to when the group returned to the ECEC institution in the afternoon. The staff also participated in two focus group interviews. Among other things, the ECEC institution focuses on outdoor activities, but is not a specialized forest/outdoor preschool. The institution practices outdoor life as part of their everyday life, with the children spending at least two days every week outside in the nearby forest. The ECEC institution is a typical medium-sized preschool, located on the outskirts of a medium-sized city in Norway. The nearby forest is approximately 28,000 square meters, and the institution is

located on the fringe of the forest. The forest is open to everyone, and in some places the municipality has set up campsites, tables and benches. In the forest, the preschool has access to these different installations, although the ECEC staff has also arranged a natural playground for the preschool some 200 meters into the woods, where they often spend their outdoor days. The nature area itself has no fences and anybody can enter and leave the forest with no difficulty. Moreover, several of the staff members have an education in being outdoors in nature with preschool children.

Field notes from the participant observation were written immediately after the fieldwork, focusing on play, the organization of the outdoor days and the interaction between the staff and the children during the hikes. This was done in two stages: In the first stage the observation notes were coded using NVivo, identifying different themes concerning the relationships between the actions of the children and the staff, particularly regarding children's play, the affordances of the natural environment and the organizational framework. In the second stage, a closer reading of transcriptions focused on elaborating and broadening the interpretations, as well as highlighting the institutional-, cultural- and legal context of the outdoor hikes. The focus group interviews investigated the pedagogical concerns and reasons given by the staff, and were conducted at the beginning and the end of the fieldwork period. They were transcribed according to the themes relevant to the observations.

## RESULTS

The results of the analyses show that there is a close connection between the children's experiences of nature, the adjustment and the facilitation provided by the ECEC staff and the organizational conditions of the Early Childhood institution itself. Hence, the nature experiences of the children and the opportunities to shape and experience nature is conditioned by these different aspects of the institutional framework, interacting with each other and constituting the foundation upon which children experience nature within the institution. As will be elaborated in the following section, the children themselves are actively participating in negotiating and exerting an influence upon the institutional framework through which the nature experience is created.

### Transforming the affordance of nature through play

Play is important in how children make use of nature while hiking in the forest. In the forest, the children participate in a wide variety of self-initiated play activities: physical play, animal play, family play, fantasy play, hero play, etc. The children continuously move in and out of different play activities, in an ongoing creation of new play themes and play partners. In this play, the children are actively negotiating the affordance of nature and the natural elements, in relation to each other, to the play themes and partners involved in the play. There is a reciprocal relationship between nature and children in this ongoing play. The children are shaping the meaning of nature around them, as they utilize and respond to the negotiated affordances provided by the natural environment:

*Four boys (Axel, Emil, Filip and Oskar, all five years old) meet under the climbing frame. "Shall we play mother and father and child?", Axel asks. "I'm the dad." "Can we be two dads?", Emil asks back. "No, you can be the big brother, I'm the dad," Axel says. "Filip is the baby." They start playing under the climbing fence. "I will make a fire," Axel says, picking up a few sticks that he balances toward each other. The other three continue the negotiation of roles, and in the end they figure out that they can all be three big brothers. "This is our house, and now we shall make a fire," Emil says. Filip comes back after a walk with a snail in his hand. "This can be his house," Oskar says, pointing at the fire the other two are making. All four continue picking moss, leaves and small pieces of bark while talking to each other: "This can be a couch," "This is the tv, and this is a duvet." Axel, now handling the snail, puts it on the sofa and they all close the door with a few sticks. (field notes)*

The family play theme, established by the children themselves, frames the interaction between the children and the natural environment. As new materials are introduced into the play, the children change the theme and the meaning of the natural environment and materials. The sticks afford a variety of things, in this play however they are prescribed a meaning as wood for making a fire for this family of four. There is a reciprocal relationship between the children's play and the natural environment, as new affordances change old affordances and new interpretations are provided. When Filip brings a snail to the play, the meaning of the

sticks is changed into building material, and the play changes into making a home for the snail. As illustrated by this observation, the process of defining and prescribing the sticks with meaning is a social process that involves the children together in a defined relationship to each other through the family theme.

Throughout the hikes in the forest, there are numerous examples of how this reciprocal relationship between the children and the natural environments develops through ongoing play. A log is transformed into a plane that takes a group of children on holiday with leaves and small stones as tickets, whereas a few spruces or a little bush is transformed into a shelter that houses a little family of cats, a tree is transformed into the ship of an evil king that has to be fought and carefully outwitted by the captains of a nearby ship, using cleverness and sticks transformed into swords. Through the play, the children are actively engaged in a transformation process of the natural environment, as new elements are brought into the play and the play proceeds. The affordance of nature is continually changed by the children, and it keeps changing as new interpretations and new meanings are provided. This transformation is embedded in a social process among the children, in creating and negotiating the play in relation to each other and to the affordance provided by the natural elements. Taken together, they shape the meaning of the nature in an ongoing negotiation, transferring it to a level where they themselves are the agents or providers of meaning. The affordance of nature is complex, continuously changing and shaped by the play interactions between the children. The children are using cultural narratives from their everyday experiences, as well as commercialized and media-created play themes inspired from television or commercial channels (cf. Änggård, 2011).

During the hikes, the staff occupies themselves with practices that in different ways facilitate, prepare and support the play activities of the children. The adults rarely involve themselves directly in the play, but provide support by encouraging the children to be actively engaged in relation to the environment and by responding to the needs of the children. The staff's actions and motives are pivotal to understand how nature is experienced by the children. The next section elaborates and deals with the staff, and the views that underpin their actions during the hikes and play.

### **Nature as a sanctuary**

The staff prefers nature hikes as an alternative to the predefined and crowded spaces in the ECEC institution. It is perceived as an escape from the limitations and stress of everyday life, and to provide the children with richer opportunities to play in a better and more suitable environment. Hence, the nature hikes are constructed as a sanctuary from the bustle of institutional activity, in addition to a place for play, the positive experiences of physical activity, freedom and friendship. It is valued by the staff for the perceived affordance it offers children: a rich play environment with natural challenges suited to the capability and physical/developmental level of any child. These ideas about the benefits to the children correspond to the values of nature and outdoor life in contemporary Norway, as can be seen in this quote from one of the focus interviews:

*...and then I believe that in the forest there are so many alternatives, right, whereas on a playground, there are fewer opportunities. If you don't reach the first step of a climbing wall, well, there is nothing you can do about it. If you can't get upon a rocking horse, so well.... But in the forest, there is something for everybody. For some children, it's enough to simply just wonder about the small creepy-crawlies, whereas others are climbing the trees higher and higher, or they have the courage to walk a little bit higher up on the sledge hill, or they... well yes. (pedagogical leader, focus group interview)*

Underlying the ideas about the benefits of play in natural environments are beliefs of what constitutes a good childhood and the needs of children. Play in nature is considered valuable for the development of the children, to their health and to their bodily-physical growth and development, since it provides them with the opportunities to reach higher, to push their abilities and limits and to increase and improve their bodily skills. However, nature is also valued by the staff for the benefits they perceive nature provides for the children here and now. The staff expresses that play takes on a different character in nature, as it is more enjoyable to the children and more creative than indoor play. In nature play, there are fewer conflicts between the children: "There isn't a spade to argue about, there are enough sticks for everyone and enough trees," one of the assistants says, "they don't need toys, as nature makes them more creative and self-starting." Also, nature is

considered a safe place for children to play, because there are less wounds and small damage while spending the day in nature, with far more dangers considered to be inside the kindergarten than out in nature.

Although nature in itself is considered a good place to be, making sure that nature is accessible and that all children feel safe is important to the staff. The staff highlights the difference in the children, and that they come from different backgrounds. Some children are confident and have spent time in nature together with their families, whereas others have no experience and need time and help to figure out how to play in the forest. The staff ensures that all children learn how to interact with nature. "There are always some children who don't know how to behave outside the kindergarten fence," one pedagogical leader says, "and it is really important that they have the opportunity to feel safe." This is an important consideration for the staff, and supporting the children who are unfamiliar with nature and providing them with the support needed to feel safe and confident in nature is considered an important task by the staff.

Underpinning the actions and motives of the staff are beliefs about the positive values that play gives to the nature experience of children within the everyday life of ECEC institutions. Their support and encouragement are important in order to provide each and every child with the necessary prerequisites to act upon, experience nature and take part in the social explorations afforded by nature. Another aspect of the hikes influencing the nature experiences of the children is the question of safety outside the fences.

### **Invisible fences**

Safety and security are important when hiking outside the fenced area of the institutions. Because ECEC institutions are governed by public authorities, it is required to prevent damage and accidents (HO D 1995). When hiking, it is the responsibility of the staff to ensure the safety of the children in every situation during the day, and there are many practices at the hikes for maintaining security and control. The children wear yellow signal vests, with their names and contact information for the ECEC institution, to help ensure visibility in the forest and signal where they belong. Before the hike, the children line up by the gate and wait for each other and the staff before they walk as a group towards the destination. There are usually three adults supervising a group of 17-18 children, and the outdoor hikes are regulated by a set of disciplinary rules that the children are expected to comply with in order to accomplish the hikes. The staff spends quite a bit of time imposing these hiking rules, particularly in the early months of the ECEC institution year; however, as the children learn the rules they are expected to comply with them as they become more self-regulated.

One way for the staff to supervise the children without controlling each child is by imposing what the staff calls *invisible borders*. The staff defines the area where the children can move freely and the perimeter borders. The staff knows where the children are and makes sure they do not move outside the permitted area. Children who move beyond the borders are met with warnings or sanctions such as having to stay closer to the staff. In order to achieve independence and the benefits of being trusted, children will have to learn to incorporate or internalize these rules and borders. The children contribute to the maintenance of the invisible borders by disciplining among themselves when someone is not complying. Nonetheless, the children are exercising influence upon these borders by negotiating them through exploration and play:

*A boy (four years old) has located a bog just outside the area. The bog is soft and wet, and when he tries to walk in it, his foot easily slips into it and the water runs over his shoes. He calls a group of children playing nearby for attention and they come over to look. After testing it for a while, they all line up on the height along the ditch, and taking turns they run over the bog. Elias (staff) comes over to watch them, and says to Mathias when he comes running: "Mathias, you just have your training shoes on." The game goes on for about 15 minutes until Elias, who has been standing on the side watching them, calls the game off: "Now you have to stop this game, look at the bog, it's being destroyed; we have to leave it alone to mend now." (field notes)*

In this observation, the children cross the invisible border in their fascination for the bog. The staff, being attentive to their interest and the play of crossing the bog, silently accepts the discovery of the bog and the play for as long as they find it acceptable. In so doing, the invisible borders imposed and set by the staff are flexible to some degree, and open up an opportunity for the children to influence, adjust and negotiate. The staff accepts and allows the children to discover and experience nature, and the children are provided with an

opportunity to go beyond the invisible borders and to negotiate their placement. Even if the staff sees the nature as a sanctuary from the everyday bustle of institutional life and vocalizes the importance of the freedom of the nature, it has limits. The fences of the institutions have been transported from the institution out into nature as invisible borders, and the staff invests a lot of time to teach the rules and practices of invisible fences throughout the year.

There is a fine line between the staff being able to pay attention to the children and the inattentive, more authoritarian adult. In our observations there was a lack of staff, and in many cases the hikes were cut short or disrupted due to the lack of staff. The staff themselves find this dissatisfying, and talk about how they feel stressed and how it influences their ability to pay attention and support the children. With a lack of adults, there are few opportunities to be attentive to the children's needs and interests, as the few who remain are busy counting and keeping the children under surveillance. Furthermore, the group often has to hurry back to the ECEC institution, as the staff has tasks waiting at the institution or other considerations.

## DISCUSSION

Play is central to the outdoor practices of the ECEC institution, especially initiated by the children themselves. The staff facilitates and supports the children's play when hiking, and expresses the view that playing is important in order to realize their aims, thus forwarding the ideals of nature as a rich and good place for children. They also express that hiking is an important supplement to the life inside the fences. The children's play during hikes is associated with exploring the affordances in nature as a social process, in which they themselves can be agents and decide the rules. Based on these observations, we will discuss the implications of the institutionalization of play during hikes as a process in which cultural, legal and institutional conditions are involved and negotiated.

The outdoor living practice in ECEC institutions in Norway is embedded in a complex framework of cultural, institutional and legal conditions, which influence and shape the outdoor living and nature experiences of the children and staff. Despite the view expressed that nature represents an alternative to indoor life, and the symbols used by the staff to indicate the difference to the children, the framework from the institutions is continued and expressed during hikes. Culturally, these practices draw upon, and deeply reflect, the Scandinavian outdoor-living tradition and view of nature as a place intrinsic to physical and mental health. Nature hikes also have other values such as recreation and positive nature experiences that are considered beautiful, healthy and good (Sandell & Sörlin, 2008; Tordsson, 2003). The cultural context is interpreted within the institutional framework and coupled with the insight and acknowledgment of the importance of play to children. The idea of the value of play is central to the tradition in Norwegian ECEC institutions, as well as containing a permeating knowledge in the institutions (Lillemyr, 2009). The Norwegian outdoor-living tradition and the institutional tradition form a powerful ideological platform upon which the practice of hikes in the ECEC institutions is built. On this platform, the practices shaped through the space for children's play during hikes are negotiated at different levels within each specific institution.

No matter how powerful this ideological platform might seem, the outdoor living practices in ECEC institutions cannot be understood as a set of simple or coherent practices. Instead, it represents a cluster of ambiguous meanings and reasons that have to be balanced and compromised in each specific case. The staff negotiate and weigh different types of considerations in order to respond to the framework of cultural values and ideas, pedagogical aspirations, given options and feasible possibilities in an institutional structure, as well as juridical responsibilities and potential penal sanctions. There is a tension between these different considerations, which is reflected in several ongoing trade-offs during the hikes. We will present the trade-offs we find the most prevailing. Firstly, there is a trade-off between the cultural demand for children to freely experience nature on their own terms, with risks and self-determination, which is balanced with the legal demand that they have to ensure the safety of the children and avoid injuries. The view that nature is a better place for children to grow up, where they can experience freedom, self-determination and the "real life," is balanced against the demand for control by continual observations and reactions toward children who violate or challenge the expectations of the adults. Secondly, there is a trade-off between nature as a place where children become better and healthier persons by the rich and varied environment that challenges every child at just the right stage of their physical and emotional development. This consideration is traded against the fact that not all children have rich experiences of nature, are familiar with nature or feel safe. Nature, which is considered as an intrinsically good place for children, needs to be adjusted and facilitated in order to support certain children. The last trade-off

includes aspects from some of the ones above: The need to keep an eye on the children and to (re-)produce their understanding of the invisible fences requires a minimum of number of staff being in the woods together with the children, as does the need for an adjustment of nature and extra support. This has to be balanced against the total number of staff and their other tasks. The staff's negotiations between the different trade-offs bridge and balance the different concerns, shaping the practices and allowing children to freely play during hikes. This ongoing negotiation is an important aspect of the institutional context, both facilitating and hindering children's play during hikes.

It is within the ECEC institutional context, negotiated and balanced by the staff, that the children shape their nature experience and their play. Play is central to the way the children experience nature in Norwegian ECEC institutions. Through play, children utilize, discover and act upon the natural environment, with the transcending character of play being central to the way children explore affordances in the environment. In play, the natural environment's affordances are constantly transforming as the children together give them new meanings according to the ongoing and changing play situations. In this way, the children are exploring the latent affordances of the environment and the wide range of possible relationships to the environment that they prefer according to - and constrained by the logic of the play itself (Michael & Still, 1992). By defining the situation as play, the children are free to respond differently than in an activity defined or led by an adult. Adults could intend to teach a knowledge- or curriculum-based aspect of the nature experience. For the children a tree could represent a variety of affordances, and serves a wide range of functions in play, such as a ship, a train, a bridge, an airplane, etc. Thus, the transcending potential is present in the play act that is emancipatory in relation to the defined institutional context and the defining power of the staff (Michael & Still, 1992).

The institutionalization of children's play in nature can hence be described in terms of an adult influence and presence, as well as the question about control and freedom in the play. The staff structures play in the ECEC institutions; however, the children are expected to manage and explore nature themselves, so the play situations are therefore not primarily adult led or managed. Children's nature experience in ECEC institutions is set within an institutional context that maximizes the potential of experience given its institutional, cultural and legal conditions, and the limits imposed by these. The space for children's agency in shaping their own experiences of nature is negotiated with the staff, and conditioned by the expectations and the rules provided by the adults. The question of control is a matter of trust, and the children have to comply with the adult's expectations, in addition to the institutional conditions and limitations framing the hiking in the forest. Failing to stay within these limits is associated with a withdrawal of the right to unsupervised, self-regulated play. This shows that the question of freedom versus control is a matter of a continuum rather than a dichotomy.

Facing increased governmental regulation in Norway, there is a risk that the opportunities of children to play in natural environments in ECEC institutions are challenged. Consequently, the conditions and opportunities for children and staff to negotiate the space for play in nature is decreasing and eroding. In order to ensure the agency of children to shape their own nature experience, and for the ECEC institutions to provide children with opportunities to discover, act in and explore the natural environment on their own terms, attention has to be directed towards the conditions and means of the staff to negotiate this space.



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