



JÖNKÖPING UNIVERSITY

*School of Education and  
Communication*

# Developing social interactions through outdoor

Teachers' perspectives

**Course:** *Thesis Project, 15.0 Credits*

**PROGRAM:** *EDUCARE: The Swedish Preschool Model*

**Author:** *Sarolta Csányi*

**Advisor:** *Tobias Samuelsson*

**Examiner:** *Anna Rainio*

**Semester:** *Spring, 2018*

## **Abstract**

---

Sarolta Csányi

### **Developing social interactions through outdoor education in multicultural preschool settings**

Number of pages: 35

---

The aim of this study was to identify and investigate preschool teachers' experiences and views on the role of outdoor education on social interactions. The research questions were: How do the teachers conceptualize outdoor activities' role on social interactions in multicultural preschool settings? How do the teachers foster social interactions through outdoor education? What kind of challenges have the teachers faced regarding outdoor education in multicultural preschool groups? Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five preschool teachers from three different preschools in a multicultural suburb in southern Sweden. The results showed that – despite children's possible aversions to engaging in activities in the outdoors - outdoor activities are supportive of the development of closer bonds within the group. According to the teachers interviewed, the natural settings bring calmness and openness, therefore this environment facilitates social interactions among children. The lack of strictly preplanned activities offer children opportunities to follow their interests and to have shared experiences through the discovery of nature. Their willingness for collaborative explorations is a basis for joint play, discussion and group work.

---

Key words: outdoor education, preschool, multicultural environment, social interactions, interpersonal relationship

---

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.1 Topic of interest .....	4
1.2 Background/Prior research .....	5
1.2.1. Multicultural preschool settings in Sweden .....	5
1.2.2. Development of Outdoor Education in Sweden .....	6
1.2.3. Social interactions in outdoor settings .....	8
2. RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS.....	10
2.1 Research aims.....	10
2.2 Research questions .....	10
3. METHODS .....	11
3.1 Setting & Participants .....	11
3.1.1 Field site.....	11
3.1.2 Participants.....	11
3.2 Documentation Methods .....	12
3.3 Analysis Methods .....	13
4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION.....	14
4.1. Preschool teachers’ conceptualization of outdoor activities’ role on social interactions in multicultural preschool settings.....	14
4.1.1. Outdoor activities among families living in Sweden.....	14
4.1.2. Developmental potentials of outdoor education .....	15
4.1.3. Outdoor activities’ role on joint play and interpersonal relationships.....	16
4.2. Preschool teachers’ ways of fostering social interactions through outdoor education .....	18
4.2.1. The role of preschool teachers’ personal attitudes toward nature on children’s engagement .....	18
4.2.2. Teachers’ ways of organizing outdoor education.....	19
4.2.3. Creating settings for shared explorations .....	22
4.3. Challenges that the teachers have faced regarding outdoor education in multicultural preschool groups .....	24
4.3.1. Swedish weather and its influence on outdoor activities .....	24
4.3.2. Prior beliefs and experiences of children with cultural backgrounds other than Swedish .....	25
4.3.3. Occurrence of children’s fear during outdoor activities and the coping strategies .....	26
4.4. Limitations.....	28
6. REFERENCES.....	31
APPENDIX 1 .....	34
APPENDIX 2 .....	35

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The study examines the impact of outdoor education on social interactions in multicultural preschool settings. Below the topic of interest and the background based on previous studies are introduced.

### 1.1 Topic of interest

Swedish Preschool Education Model is well-known for the amount of opportunity and time for outdoor exploration during the preschool hours. According to the Swedish Curriculum for the Preschool (Skolverket, 2011) children should spend time outdoors where they can be engaged in various activities. Outdoor activities can take place in a wide variety of outdoor environments in Sweden, outside the preschool buildings – e. g. in parks, forests, forest gardens or on coasts. It is a fundamental part of Swedish culture and preschools' daily life that involves every child in the preschool. It is claimed that in the outdoor settings children tend to play more together and can experience team work, according to Ramsey (2015) the non-predictable outdoor activities support children to have more social interactions with each other.

There is a long history in Swedish culture of valuing outdoor activities. The nature is very close, even for the people living in urban areas as Gelter (2000) argues, and the unwritten law of *Allemansrätten* (“everyone’s right”) allows access to the land for everyone. This focus on outdoor activities may be seen as unusual for immigrants to Sweden who hail from geographically and culturally distinct contexts.

The ratio of immigrant people in Sweden is high, especially in the recent years. According to OECD (2018) in 2013 the foreign-born population was 16% of the population of Sweden. For immigrant children who attend preschool in Sweden, but lack the background of spending time in the nature, outdoor activities can be challenging. Children’s different cultural backgrounds may lead to different feelings about nature, they may be afraid of various reasons: the nature itself, the possibility of a crime, poor weather or the lack of proper information and discrimination from activities (Kloek, Buijs, Boersema, & Schouten, 2015). Certain culturally-specific beliefs and experiences about the outdoors can lead parents and/or children to experience outdoor activities in positive or negative ways. The cultural differences regarding the relationship towards outdoors can have an impact on the level of participation in these activities (Blattel, 2011). Being engaged in outdoor activities provides the opportunity for children to experience joint play and team work with their peers in the nature. It therefore becomes an important part of preschool teacher’s work to establish an environment where diversity is respected and encouraged and at the same time the

sense of community and belonging is present and forming interpersonal relationships is supported. Improvement of social competence of children in the preschool groups is an important value in the Curriculum (Skolverket, 2011). Children are encouraged to function as an individual and as a group member as well. The following thesis investigates teachers' views on the effects of outdoor education on social interactions and on the challenges of outdoor education in multicultural preschool groups. It was also examined how social interactions are fostered by teachers through outdoor education and if outdoor activities can be organized in Swedish preschools as an effective tool for promoting interpersonal relationships in multicultural preschool settings.

## **1.2 Background/Prior research**

Three topics are investigated through the lens of prior researches: (1) multicultural preschool settings in Sweden (2) development of outdoor education in Sweden and (3) social interactions in outdoor settings.

### **1.2.1. Multicultural preschool settings in Sweden**

Although migration became an important issue for many countries in the recent years, the programs and initiatives that targeted integration started decades earlier in Sweden. The country's multicultural integration policy – along with Belgium and the Netherlands - that has started in the mid-1970s was especially progressive (Lunneblad, 2017). The education of immigrant children has always been a very complex topic. Besides pedagogical questions, it involves sociological and psychological challenges as well (Pavlovskaia, 2001).

The curriculum for compulsory school in 1962 did not mention any particular challenges regarding the immigrant children's education as Johannesson states (as cited in Pavlovskaia, 2001, p.14). According to Revisionsrapport (1990) in 1966 auxiliary instructions were proposed to foster immigrant children's progress and social adjustment in school by strengthening their Swedish knowledge. Eventually, it was not implemented as there were no competent teachers and teaching materials (as cited in Pavlovskaia, 2001, p.14). The National Board of Education's Supplement stated two core principles in 1973 (as cited in Pavlovskaia, 2001, p.14). Democratic values were highlighted in the first principle by declaring that immigrant children have the right to the equivalent education that Swedish children get. The second principle was about the importance of the mother tongue and it stated that bilingual teaching is needed for immigrant

children's personal and social development. In 1975 the law regarding preschool education was presented, that clearly declared the right of immigrant children to get adequate support in order to aid their development (Skolförordningen, 1975 as cited in Pavlovskaia, 2001).

According to the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (2009) in Sweden, the emphasis on children's opportunities in developing their knowledge in their native language starts already in the pre-primary level's Curriculum. The Curriculum acknowledges the challenges that can occur in the internationalised Swedish society and the importance of citizens' ability to value diversity. Preschool is a place that can prepare children to live in a multicultural society by fostering the participation in the children's own culture and help them to be involved in the cultures of others (Skolverket, 2011)

According to the Ministry of Education (1988), in Sweden, the majority (90%) of children between ages one to five attend preschools, therefore the important role of these institutions in integration is unquestionable. After arriving to a new, foreign country, the first institution in which the families with children are getting involved can be the preschool. Therefore, in the first months this connection between the parents and the staff of the preschool is very important (Lunneblad, 2017) and should be supportive as this is the family's first main encounter with the culture of the country. Today, the preschools are defined by the policy documents as an "arena for social and cultural interactions intended to strengthen children and prepare them for life in an increasingly internationalized society" (Lunneblad, 2017).

### **1.2.2. Development of Outdoor Education in Sweden**

The Centre for Environmental and Outdoor Education in Linköping University (2004) defined outdoor education as "an approach that aims to provide learning in interplay between experience and reflection based on concrete experience in authentic situations" (as cited in Szczepanski, 2006, p. 90). Davis, Rea and Waite (2006) discerns three levels of the outdoors. The first level means anywhere other than in the buildings of institutions (school, nursery or preschool). Here we can count museums or other indoor activities as well. The second level of outdoors means outer spaces that are somewhere in the open air. It can mean locations other than in a buildings, e.g. sport fields. In this thesis the concept of the third level of the outdoors is used: natural settings. Although the preschool groups go on visits to the city centre or museums, the focus of interest is on the unique outdoor activities that take place in the nature that is so close to these preschools.

In Sweden, outdoor education and play are not just school-based activities and they are not unusual activities during preschool years as well – outdoor activities are common pastime in the society. The nature is in an available distance and people have the right to enjoy it – hiking, picking fruits or preparing meals in the nature (Gelter 2000).

Affinity towards spending time in the nature has a long history in Swedish culture and children are socialized from a young age to have a self-evident relationship with the outdoors. The Swedish Outdoor Association (Friluftsförbundet) was founded originally to promote skiing, but from 1908, when the Swedish Ski Association was formed, Friluftsförbundet began to have a focus on education. In 1957, the Skogsmulle-concept was introduced. Skogsmulle, the imaginary troll-like character, living in the forest was invented to involve children in the activities that take place in the nature and outdoors. In the sixties and seventies when more and more people moved to cities, the demand for spending time in nature continued to increase. At the same time, the characters in the popular books of Astrid Lindgren were nature-lovers who enjoyed the outdoor environments, that had a great positive effect on the generation's impression on nature, and outdoor activities became a social movement (Wendin 2014). This self-evident affinity towards nature also links back to the Biophilia hypothesis. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, biophilia means the “idea that humans possess an innate tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life.” According to Wilson (1984) human beings have a natural, instinctive urge to connect and be surrounded by other living things (as cited in Yanez and Fees, 2017). This internal affinity can help children to get close to nature and overcome their possible negative feelings. Through the lens of the teachers' opinions the research investigates if this intrinsic need can be a stronger feeling in children than the initial fear or aversion to nature.

According to the results of a study investigating the outdoor spent time in 100 preschools in Stockholm (Söderström et al. 2004 as cited in Änggård, 2010) the average time per day spent outdoors was 5.8 hours during summer, 3.6 hours during spring and autumn, and 2.0 hours on a winter day - if it was a pleasant weather. If the weather was bad, the figures changed to 2.6 hours, 2 hours and 1.5 hours. In the preschools that had an outdoor profile, even more time were spent outdoors. Beside the society's positive feelings towards outdoors, the Swedish preschool Curriculum has a policy of promoting and emphasizing outdoor environmental education and sustainability. A great stress is put on the conservation of the environment and nature, and an ecological approach with a positive faith in the future should be a part of the activities. Children have the opportunity to experience how they can contribute to a better environment and they can

acquire a caring attitude towards nature and feel that they are a part of it as well (Skolverket, 2011).

### **1.2.3. Social interactions in outdoor settings**

Social interactions can occur both on an interpersonal level and on the level of groups. In the preschool context, referring to groups usually means the whole preschool group, but according to Forsyth (as cited in McAvoy, Mitten, Stringer, Steckart, & Sproles, 1996) a group consists of two or more persons who interact with and influence each other. That shows that group interactions means any kind of social interactions within the preschool groups that involves at least two children. Priest (1986) gives a definition for outdoor education with a focus on relationships:

“Outdoor education is an experiential process of learning by doing, which takes place primarily through exposure to the out-of-doors. In outdoor education the emphasis for the subject of learning is placed on RELATIONSHIPS [sic], relationships concerning people and natural resources.” (p.13)

The author describes the four types of relationships that are present in outdoor education. The interpersonal relationships are the ones that exist between people, the intrapersonal is a particular person's self-concept and their feelings and perception of themselves. The ecosystemic relationship means the dynamics and interdependence of the parts of the ecosystem, and the ekistic is the interaction that happens between people and their surroundings. In this thesis the interpersonal relationships are in the main focus, the ways children cooperate, communicate and work together in the outdoor settings. As children spend the most of their times during weekdays in their preschool groups it is very important that their interactions and social connections in the groups are developing. Given that the outdoor spent time has a great importance in Swedish preschools, the way it can affect the social relationships in the group is worth to be examined.

Environmental activities have a plenty of indirect connections with social skills, according to Ramsey (2015). If children acquire the biocentric view, they can sense the diversity of nature,

thereby the diversity of human beings in the society as well. Interactions in the outdoors are less intense and more peaceful, as Blanchet-Cohen and Elliott (2011) argues. In their research with educators they found that teachers experienced that children were more relaxed during outdoor play. The children could have more space and more things to be occupied with, hence there were less reasons for conflicts. Ramsey (2015) argues to provide children opportunities of non-predictable activities in nature as it helps to have deep social interactions and a positive view of others – and themselves. Unexpected challenges in the nature can encourage children to work as a team, to get to know each other's strengths and help each other to be engaged.

A school gardening project was presented in the study of Nimmo and Hallett (2008), where they found that focusing too much on safety issues can hinder children's outdoor exploration activities. In the outdoors, children were able to practice group work and were able to learn about diversity – that are important values in multicultural environments. Outdoor environment is a higher level of freedom for children. As Waite, Rogers and Evans (2013) found in their research, not only the bigger space and the presence of nature but the lower level of adult control made the children more likely to engage in interactions with each other. Engdahl and Ärlemalm-Hagsér (2014) investigated the level of children's participation in sustainability education in Swedish preschools. They highlighted the importance of engagement in activities. Engagement in group activities can be a crucial factor in multicultural preschool settings as it helps the involvement of all children. The high level of children's group participation in the different stages of the activities can be a base for Experiential Education. According to Dewey's Experiential Education Theory (1983) a person can learn best if the acquisition of the new experience happens in three steps. First, they can plan the experience, then have the experience, and finally they can review the experience. These three stages and their presence in the practice of the examined preschools are also investigated as they assume high level of children's participation and cooperation as a group. In Swedish preschools the stage of planning is not the exclusive role of the teachers but the activities of the group follow the children's interests and are organized by their initiatives. Besides participating in the activities, revision and reflection of the activity are also key parts, when children are encouraged to discuss their feelings and thoughts in the groups and can work together on future improvements and solutions.

Although Biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984) states that all human being has an internal affinity towards nature, according to Ramsey (2015), some children can be suspicious of outdoor environments and they need help to get involved. They can experience socioeconomic barriers, lack of knowledge or they can feel discomfort or prejudice, discrimination, marginality or

inequality (Warren, Roberts, Breunig, Antonio, & Alvarez, 2014). The level of adaptation can depend on the familiarity with outdoors or on the possible prior similar experiences, although, according to Richards (as cited in Fabrizio & Neill, 2005) the experience of culture shock is usually included in outdoor programs on purpose and that can make the activities challenging for the whole group. This shared challenge can have a positive influence on group cohesion and cooperation. The personal characteristics and previous experiences can influence the developmental processes of the group (McAvoy et al., 1996), especially in a multicultural setting. Engdahl and Årlemalm-Hagsér (2014) suggest that the more the teachers involve children in education for sustainability the better the children will be engaged. Besides that, the authors refer to teachers' role as bridges between children who can help to teach children the respect of cultural diversity that is an essential value in preschools with a multicultural environment.

## **2. RESEARCH AIMS AND QUESTIONS**

### **2.1 Research aims**

In this thesis the role of outdoor education on social interactions is examined from preschool teachers' perspectives. The investigation takes place in preschool groups with diverse cultural backgrounds and explores the potentials of outdoor education in fostering interpersonal relationships and group formation according to the teachers. The challenges teachers have faced that different preliminary knowledge and feelings about nature may cause in multicultural settings are also a topic of investigation.

### **2.2 Research questions**

1. How do the teachers conceptualize outdoor activities' role on social interactions in multicultural preschool settings?
2. How do the teachers foster social interactions through outdoor education?
3. What kind of challenges have the teachers faced regarding outdoor education in multicultural preschool groups?

### **3. METHODS**

The findings of the thesis are based on a qualitative study. The effects of outdoor activities on social interactions were investigated in three preschools with multicultural groups. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in person with the teachers of the preschools. The study describes the approaches of the teachers working in the preschools of this specific area where the ratio of children with non-Swedish origin is very high.

#### **3.1 Setting & Participants**

##### **3.1.1 Field site**

The preschools are located in an underprivileged suburban area built between the late 1960s and early 1970s, 6 km from the city centre in a mid-sized southern town in Sweden. Originally this area was planned to become a home for 6000 inhabitants. The housing in this area is predominantly government-subsidized and characterized by multi-story apartment buildings designed to save as much nature as possible in the area, therefore the location gives opportunities for time spent outdoors as it is on the edge of the town, surrounded by a forest. Many families with non-Swedish origin live in this area, thus the children in the preschools form multicultural and diverse groups.

Two of the investigated preschools are public and one is private with a religious profile. There are two groups in all the three preschools with ages 1-3 and 3-5. The preschools were built in the same time as the area where they are located. Preschool “Blue” and “Grey” are both ground floor buildings with their own backyards with a playground on it, behind the buildings. Preschool “Red” consists of 4 apartments on the ground floor of a building, with a smaller backyard with some equipment to play with, and a playground in the nearby.

##### **3.1.2 Participants**

Five preschool teachers from the three described preschools participated in the study. In order to have a broader perspective the interviews were conducted with teachers working with different age groups. The interviewed teachers have a wide variety of working experience in the field and in these specific preschools. Although the size of the sample is not representative, it gives an insight of the outdoor approach of the specific geographical area and shows the similarities and differences that occurred.

Participant 1: Elise. She works in preschool “Blue” where they are inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach. Elise works with children between ages 1-3.

Participant 2: Liselotte. She works in the same preschool as Elise, but in a different group, with 3-5 years old children.

Participant 3: Tova. She works together in a group with Ayah in preschool “Grey”. That preschool is an institution specifically for children who have newly arrived (over the last few months) in Sweden. She has been working in that area of the town for 15 years. With Ayah, they work with children between ages 3-5.

Participant 4: Ayah. She works in the same group with Tova and has been working in that preschool for 2 years (since the opening). She worked as a *vikarie* (substitute teacher) in another school for a year before.

Participant 5: Maya. She works in a private preschool with a Christian profile (preschool “Red”), in a group of 19 children, between the ages 3-5.

### **3.2 Documentation Methods**

The preschools teachers were interviewed individually in their workplaces, although two interviewees, Tova and Ayah, who worked in the same group were interviewed together. The interviews were conducted in person, in English language and consent forms were filled in (see Appendix 1). The interviewees participated in the research voluntarily and confidentiality was guaranteed by the interviewer. Pseudonyms were used as the name of the participants. All interviewees were interviewed once, the interviews lasted for 45-50 minutes (for the interview guide see Appendix 2). In addition to the question-based interview, a list of possible fields of the developmental potentials in the outdoors were shown to the teachers based on the research of Miranda, Larrea, Muela, & Barandiaran (2016, see Appendix 2) after discussing this topic spontaneously. As the teachers expressed their worries on the level of their English language knowledge when arranging the time of the interviews, the broad list of developmental potentials were used to stimulate further conversation and reflection to their own experiences. Although this method could have an influence on their answers but at the same time supported them to give more detailed explanation on the fields they chose. Audio recording was done during the interviews in order to reduce the opportunities of errors as the researcher do not have to rely exclusively on their notes. The transcriptions of the interviews were used for the further analysis.

As the language of the data collection was English, semi-structured interviews with mostly open-ended questions were conducted as a way of getting the information more precisely and help the

mutual understanding of the interviewer and the interviewees. Although with questionnaires more people could be reached, the topic could be investigated more thoroughly and deeply through personal interviews. With varying the sequence of the questions, having more general questions and being able to ask further questions to clarify the answers (Bryman, 2015) the possible language barrier can be reduced. As the nationality of the interviewer and the interviewees is different, traditionally this kind of interview is called cross-cultural (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002), and it can cause possible communication misunderstandings that the participant should be aware of. Using the more flexible semi-structured interviews, these problems could be minimalised as the interviewer and the interviewees could have additional questions and comments to clarify the original questions.

### **3.3 Analysis Methods**

In this work, thematic analysis was used to analyse the transcripts of the interviews. This method allows to identify patterns within the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in order to analyse teachers' thoughts on the connection between social interactions and outdoor activities in preschool. The audio recorded interviews were transcribed into texts and the analysis was accomplished on the basis of Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework (also cited in Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

The six phases are the following:

1. Become familiar with the data
2. Generate initial codes
3. Search for themes
4. Review themes
5. Define themes
6. Write-up.

After becoming familiar with the data by repeated, active reading and taking notes, initial codes were generated by systematically organising the data into groups to help discover the patterns. With the help of the patterns, themes were searched for by analysing the codes and combine them in order to form a theme and identify subthemes. After reviewing and refining the found themes, they were defined and developed and the analysis was written by using the framework that these themes offered.

Using Ryan and Bernard's recommendation (2003) to identify themes, repetitions, unfamiliar expressions, analogies, similarities and differences were looked for. Repetitions means the topics that emerge frequently. Unfamiliar expressions or categories are local expressions used by the interviewees, and by analogies the way or metaphor the participants present their thoughts is meant. By examining similarities and differences the various approaches and opinions on one topic can be detected.

## **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Three topics were classified according to the research questions as follows: (1) preschool teachers' conceptualization of outdoor activities' role on social interactions in multicultural preschool settings (2) preschool teachers' ways of fostering social interactions through outdoor education (3) challenges that the teachers have faced regarding outdoor education in multicultural preschool groups.

The first topic focuses on preschool teachers' descriptions, their views and opinions on outdoors and the potentials it has in developing social interactions. The second topic focuses on the way teachers organize outdoor education in order to foster social interactions. The third topic examines the possible challenges teachers face during outdoor education in diverse preschool groups.

### **4.1. Preschool teachers' conceptualization of outdoor activities' role on social interactions in multicultural preschool settings**

In the first topic, three themes were identified. Teachers' views on the culture of outdoor activities among Swedish and non-Swedish families, living in Sweden. The skills that can be potentially developed through outdoor education and outdoor activities' role on joint play and interpersonal relationships were investigated through teachers' views.

#### **4.1.1. Outdoor activities among families living in Sweden**

According to the research of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Sweden both the Swedish self-image and other countries' concepts of Swedish people includes their affinity towards outdoor activities, and the importance of nature in general (2005). The interviewees' responses were in

consensus with this image as all the teachers declared that being in the nature is an important and essential activity, and they agreed that it is a usual pastime among Swedish people in general. According to teachers' experiences it is more typical for Swedish families to spend their times outdoors compared to immigrant families living in Sweden. This approach of intrinsic closeness to nature in Sweden links back to the Biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1986) as it assumes that people enjoy spending time in the nature. The self-evident relationship with nature also appears in the approach of "Allemansrätten", the right of everyone to access and enjoy nature, with the principle of "Do not disturb, do not destroy" (Sandell & Öhman, 2010). Although, the interviewed preschool teachers agreed that in general spending time outdoors is a usual activity among Swedish people, Liselotte added, she noticed that recently - especially among families with young parents – going to the nature stopped being a frequent activity in their everyday lives. She explained it with the long working hours and the amount of tasks the parents have to accomplish. It may be interpreted that outdoor activities in the preschool can be the only opportunities to help children to get engaged with nature. Through outdoor activities in the preschool children with any background and traditions can experience the affordances of nature.

#### **4.1.2. Developmental potentials of outdoor education**

In order to have a broader insight on teacher's attitude towards outdoor education in the preschools, their experiences on how outdoor activities can affect children's development was examined. A quotation from the research of Miranda et al. (2016) was showed to them to foster a discussion about their opinions. According to the article the fields with the highest developmental potentials are the following: social competence, motor skills and physical health, reduced levels of aggressiveness and conflict, concentration, imagination and creativity.

The opinions on the presumptive developmental potentials showed a great distribution among the interviewees. Three areas were the most highlighted: health and motor skills, imagination and creativity and the nature's positive effect on the children's mental well-being and openness towards their peers. Although the latter ones are more indirect impacts, the teachers were aware of them and found them essential. This is similar to the findings of a previous longitudinal case study (Mygind, 2005 as cited in Fägerstam, 2012) that confirmed that well-being and social relationships were favoured in the school forest setting. Elise and Maya highlighted the health issues, and Tova and Elise agreed on motor skills. Liselotte added that children want to move, climb and run.

I think children want to do that, their bodies are screaming for using it! (Liselotte)

All interviewees experienced outdoor spent time's positive effect on imagination, Tova and Maya added creativity as well. Liselotte thought that as they do not use any predefined toys in the forest, children's imagination develop. All teachers agreed in the calming atmosphere's relaxing effects in nature and its influence on the interpersonal relationships. They had additional comments on the changes they experienced in children's behaviour in the outdoors. According to Ayah, children play with different peers outdoors and it has an effect on their social competence as they can have closer relationships with more children from their group. Elise found that outdoor education may reduce the level of aggressiveness. Tova explained the lack of walls around children in the nature, therefore they can experience more space and freedom, in opposite to the indoors where they have to deal with a narrower space. She added that children constatly explore something new that they insist to show them, by saying "Kom och titta!", that means "Come and look!". Ayah highlighted the openness to get to know new things that they experience during outdoor activities in children.

And the feeling you can do anything now, you are open to anything." (Ayah)

According to Cosco (2006) the nature itself offers a wide variety of activities that helps sustaining motivation. Children's curiosity is focused on the new opportunities of exploration that they can find everywhere around them in the outdoors, there are a lot of things to be occupied with or challenged by on different levels.

Besides the more obvious fields (health and physical skills, imagination and creativity) teachers highlighted nature's positive effect on children's mental well-being. The interviewees also stated that – although they couldn't explain why exactly – being outdoors make children more open to each other, therefore social interactions and more frequent and varied.

#### **4.1.3. Outdoor activities' role on joint play and interpersonal relationships**

The interviewees explained with diverse reasons why forming new friendships is easier in the outdoors. The teachers reported calmness and lower level of aggression during the activities in the nature. They all had observations on how children made new friends and bonded with each other in the outdoors. Liselotte claimed that in the nature the children's relationships with each other are closer.

I think it can get them together! (Liselotte)

That reflects to Ramsey's findings (2015) about the positive effect of non-predictable activities outdoors. The author argues that these kind of activities help children to have positive views of each other, to be engaged in social interactions and to deepen them.

Tova and Liselotte agreed that in the forest children are more open to their peers, they are more likely to play together with different children than their friends as well. If they have new experiences, they want to share them with the whole group. The natural atmosphere may have an influence on it, according to Ayah, and children get more interested in each other, not only in their close friends. The Biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984) assumes that all human beings have an innate affinity to nature. If children experience this feeling together that can lead to shared interests, not only with their friends but also with other children in the group. Following their interests they participate in explorations together and gain new experiences with their peers. This common urge for exploration fosters social interactions and helps children work together.

According to Maya's experiences not only children who didn't play together before can get closer, but children who have conflicts inside can form a good relationship outside. She had an experience with two boys in her group who made mischiefs together and had fights as well in the group room, but in the outdoor environment they both got calm, and they could play together.

And sometimes when they are inside, they are up here, they shout and they run, and then we go out and they start to play and they play together a long-long time, so often I think it's easier to have children outside than inside. Easier to have a lot of children outside than inside. (Maya)

This observation is similar to the previously mentioned findings of Blanchet-Cohen and Elliott (2011). The authors claimed that the interactions that take place outdoors are more peaceful and less intense. Liselotte also reported the reduced amount of conflicts in outdoor settings. She thought that one of the reasons children can play better together in the nature is the lack of conflicts on wanting the same toys. In the forest they can have as many sticks or leaves as they want to. Elise added that in her group it often happens that children didn't have social relationships with other children before starting preschool. She thinks socialization is the key for good relationships in the group and it should happen indoors and outdoors as well, and none of them are easier in her opinion.

We try to give them different ways to learn to be good friends. (Elise)

She observed that in outdoor settings children can get new experiences of each other or they can explore together what is new for them in the nature. As it is a more exciting place - although she did not give any examples, her intuitions were that- it may also be a fresh start for new relations

in the group, and if they had experiences playing with each other outside they can bring these relationships inside easier, as the relationship is already formed. Liselotte explained how important it is to meet each other in different ways, by using different forms of expressions.

Tova thought that there are some children who behave in a very different way inside and outside, because the surroundings inside has a negative effect on them and it makes bonding with their peers harder. During outdoor play the other children in the group can get a more positive picture of them, and they are more likely to play together.

”And they think oh, that child is very fun, I want to play with them instead.” (Ayah)

On the other hand, playing outdoors offers possibilities for solitary activities (like running, sliding or climbing) and in the natural environment they are not judged negatively by the peers in the group (Spinrad et al., 2004 as cited in Miranda et al. 2016). The children can participate in this kind of activities that they enjoy and their initiatives will be accepted and they can show their skills.

## **4.2. Preschool teachers’ ways of fostering social interactions through outdoor education**

The topic investigates the role of preschool teachers’ personal attitudes toward nature on children’s engagement. The ways teachers organize outdoor education in an efficient way and create settings for shared exploration is also explained and discussed.

### **4.2.1. The role of preschool teachers’ personal attitudes toward nature on children’s engagement**

Although the Swedish Curriculum claims the importance of outdoor and environmental education (Skolverket, 2011), preschool teachers’ personal attitudes can have an additional impact on the way they accomplish outdoor activities. The answers to the question about teachers’ personal feelings regarding outdoors showed that all the five teachers have a good relationship with nature, but to different extents. Not all of the interviewees considered themselves a person with a strong affinity towards outdoors, but they all claimed to enjoy being outside. Elise said she spends time in the nature but “not as much as I should or would like to”. Maya and Liselotte stated that they spend a lot of times outdoors in their free times as well. Liselotte was very passionate about nature and she believed that if children learn about and got engaged with the nature in an early age they will care about it later, as an adult as well. This observation is in consensus with the findings of Cheng and Monroe (2012) which states that children’s closeness

to nature predicts their environmental friendly practices in the future. This value is also highlighted in the curriculum: “Preschool should contribute to ensuring children acquire a caring attitude to nature and the environment, and understand that they are a part of nature’s recycling process.” (Skolverket, 2011, p.7). Tova highlighted that in the nature they (the teachers) feel better as well. Ayah agreed with her statement and added that she feels like she can “get positivity” and the feeling of freshness. The impact of adults’ feeling toward nature on children is indisputable. The adults who are around the children can have a strong influence on their engagement. In the research of Chawla (2007), the huge importance of this influence was proved by making interviews with environmental activists. The author found that they all got connected to an outdoor place in their early childhood and to a particular adult who helped in engaging them to the natural environment (as cited in Blanchet-Cohen & Elliott, 2011).

#### **4.2.2. Teachers’ ways of organizing outdoor education**

The way preschool teachers organize outdoor activities is flexible therefore different approaches were found among the examined preschools. The time spent outside, the outdoor groups and the preplanning of activities showed a variety in the groups. On average in all the three preschools they go out one or two times per day, usually to the backyard. Maya said that being outside two times usually happens during summer and autumn – when the weather is lighter. They go out first mostly in the morning and it varies how long they stay – Maya said one hour is the minimum, according to Elise and Tova it can be 1.5 or 2 hours. Elise, who works with children between ages 1-3 added that during the colder season they mostly stay indoors in the afternoons. Ayah claimed that they go out together in the morning, but in the afternoon children can decide if they feel like going outside or prefer to stay inside. Liselotte agreed that in her group if children feel like going out in the afternoon, they can spend their time outside, because one of the teachers can go out with them while the other one stays with the rest of the children inside. As the children’s competence and responsibility is respected and going outdoors is not a duty, they are more motivated and can get engaged in outdoor activities easier. As Engdahl and Ärlemalm-Hagsér (2014) found if teachers involve children to the decision-making in education they will be better committed.

The forest visits happen mostly once per every week. Maya claimed that she brings her group there every Wednesday. Tova and Ayah and Elise didn’t talk about any specific days when they used to go out, but they said that it can happen two times per week as well. Although the specific time of forest visits were not relevant for the teachers (except for Maya), all the teachers highlighted that the groups have a specific place in the forest that they always visit and where

they can notice the changes of nature. The teachers found the constancy of the group's place in the forest and children's close relationship with it important. This fidelity to the constant place links back to Tuan's (1977) concept: "a place is constituted through experiences as humans get to know it better and connect it with social meaning (as cited in Änggård, 2010, p.6).

The size of the groups during outdoor activities in the nature varies in the different preschools. During forest visits Tova and Ayah bring their entire group at the same time to the forest. Elise prefers to take smaller groups of the children there, she felt she could pay more attention to them in that case and that the children could bond better to each other. She claimed that they always bring different children from the group together to the forest to help them have new experiences together and give a possibility to play with each other, even if they do not do it inside. Maya described the way they organized going to the forest with her group. They divided the group to three subgroups to make organizing activities easier, and they work with these smaller groups during some activities, e.g. lunch and outdoor trips. They go to the forest together but there the three groups have different activities with one teacher each. In the group of Liselotte they may go out with the whole group, or only with some of the children, so they can focus more on their activities.

Sometimes we go with the whole group, sometimes with smaller groups,  
because we can listen to them, we can see them better. (Liselotte)

The dispersion on organizing the forest visits of the groups shows a diverse picture on preschool teachers' approaches on outdoor activities. Some find it more effective and pleasant for children to have smaller groups, some see a better potential of explorations with the whole group and the combination of these two activities also occurred.

Both Ayah and Maya stated that most of the children's indoor activities can be performed outdoors. For example, Maya described taking a blanket outside to sit on it, and bringing books to read, tools for painting or LEGO to play with. This links back to Cosco's findings (2006) that mixing the settings and the materials of the manufactured and natural worlds increases children's attention as it sustains their attraction towards challenges. Liselotte explained that sometimes they have a plan for outdoor activities and sometimes the children decide what to focus on in the nature. This links back to the Experiential Education Theory of Dewey (1983) that highlights the positive effects of children's participation in planning. It results a more efficient acquisition and fosters group work and collaboration. According to Ayah their group also brings out toys, bicycles and equipments for various activities very often to the yard. They often play games, like hide and seek that everybody knows or they learn new games from the children - games they

brought from their own culture. In their group they try to build a bridge between outdoors and indoors. As Tove described, in their group they have a project with the aim of getting to know the flowers better. In the beginning, they explored and planted the flowers outside and then they brought many of them inside and planted seeds inside as well.

In our project, we are working with flowers, and of course we look at the flowers outside and planting seeds outside, and we also take the nature in. We take a lot of plants and seeds inside as well. (Tova)

The teachers' approach of the bridge and close relation between outdoors and indoors is similar to the concept of Jordet (2010). The author considers the experiences that take place indoors and outdoors as a hermeneutic circle, "wherein outdoor activities continuously interact with indoor reflections, which further prepare people for new outdoor activities" (as cited in Fägerstam, 2012, p.63).

Only Maya claimed that they have more adult-directed activities during the time spent outdoors. The groups get a sheet in the forest with various tasks on it, e.g. collecting a specific amount of objects (gravels, sticks or leaves) or do physical activities. She believed they can learn a lot of things outside that they can discuss in the group later. If they find something unknown they can search on the internet for it together. In the other groups the teachers did not report such preplanned activities and did not see themselves as dominant organizers, although they highlighted the importance of their accessibility and attentive presence during outdoor activities. Exploring the nature by following the children's interests has a dominant role in their time spent outdoors (especially with the 1-3 years old ones), although it happened in Tova's and Ayah's group that they created a shared imaginary world together with the children on the basis of a previous indoor activity (the tale they heard about the troll and the three goats).

We had a project about a story, maybe you heard about the story, the three goats and the troll. And we were playing this like a game, when we came to the forest, and they found bridges and they found the troll, it was a piece of tree.  
(Tova)

Connecting the indoor activities with the outdoors through a mutually known story appears in the case study of Murakami, Su-Russell and Manfra (2017). The children brought the tale of the Three Little Pigs into the garden following their own initiatives. With the encouragement of the teachers the children re-enacted the scenario and the characters of the story by working together.

Yes, we worked with the story and when we went to the forest, the kids found a piece of tree, a log which was left there and they pointed out, it's a troll. And

then we decided to take every possibility to be a little open for them, for their imagination, so we put on music, there is a very good music about the troll king, and we played it and then they danced around it and then they paint that troll, eyes of them, all of them did that and they were very attached to that troll, every time we went there and they saw the troll and said hello. (Ayah)

These responses reflect to the research of Waite et al. (2013). The author found that the lower level of adult presence has a positive effect on children's interactions with each other in outdoor settings. Although the teachers in these examples were present and involved but they did not control or dominate the activities in order to let children follow their own interests. By letting children explore on their own supports the social interactions among the group. Shared experiences and ideas give greater room for children than simply following the teacher's plans.

#### **4.2.3. Creating settings for shared explorations**

Teachers found that in the outdoors children are more likely to participate in collaborative exploration and they cooperate with each other more often on their own initiatives. For the teachers having the children participating in group activities was sufficient, they did not give further explanations on group development in outdoor settings. Liselotte told about their activities with a big hole they found in the forest. The children were amazed by it and while observing and examining it, the whole group worked together. They measured the hole with their bodies:

We can go into the hole, and we can hold each other's hands and see how big the hole is. (Liselotte)

This activity in the nature is a good example for the impact of biophilia on social interactions. According to Wilson (1984 as cited in Yanez, Fees and Torquati, 2017), people have a natural, intrinsic need to connect with nature and the components of nature. In the preschool settings, with the teacher's support in free exploration this common affiliation can create a shared interest that leads to shared experiences and interactions among the participants. Maya also found that children like to explore together and share their experiences within their group in outdoor environments.

If they see animals and all the children go there, oh, what's that animal, and the others come. (Maya)

She emphasized that the motto of their preschool is “Here we learn together” and they find it very important to experience together with the group, with the teachers included. She said that sometimes they use outdoor education directly to foster group development – they go outside with the purpose of giving children opportunity for playing in a calmer environment - and sometimes “it just happens”. She found that children can efficiently work together in the smaller groups they go to the forest with. She explained that they have a project about sounds and they were searching for sounds in the forest with the groups and children had the opportunity to work together.

Tova and Ayah shared a story that happened during their previously mentioned project with flowers. The flowers they brought inside the group room started to fade, and the children had different theories on how to save them. Finally they decided to bring them back to the forest and put them on the bushes and on the ground. They worked together as a group during the planning – they checked and discussed the weather conditions and they had conversations and decisions together on the presumptive best places for the flowers. Although it didn’t change the condition of the flowers, the children practised to discuss and decide together in a group.

And they decided to go themselves to the forest and to plant them again. And they checked the sun and checked that yes, there is going to be rainy, or this is a good bush for them, they were very happy and it was a group job for them.  
(Ayah)

Learning how to work together is an important social competency for children. Murakami (2017) argues that by working as a group in the outdoors, children’s relationships with their peers becomes stronger and they develop a sense of empathy.

Elise explained that group development is not linear in their group as new children may come anytime of the year that affects the whole group and it can take longer for some children to feel the sense of belonging and make friends. Going outside with different children each time in smaller groups helps to strengthen the interpersonal relationships with their peers.

Tova and Ayah mentioned the presence of democracy in the preschool group several times. They encourage children to have their own opinions and theories and they don’t correct them, because all the opinions are valid to have. All the children can express their thoughts and they practice how to listen to each other and accept other’s opinions. Liselotte explained that they reflect in the group on their previous activities with using objects they collected, photos and videos they made. She found it a good opportunity for sharing thoughts and listening to each other’s ideas and memories and have a joint discussion.

With having different ideas, they can discuss the topics and it may strengthen the relationships within the group. In their project with flowers in Tova's and Ayah's group there were some children who expressed more ideas on how to save the flowers and some were just listening, but after that they could all plan and work together with respecting each other's views.

I think it's a way of making democracy. You have the right to have your view of the things, but you also have to listen to others that have other views of things.

(Ayah)

Having discussions during the phase of planning an activity and reflecting to it is not only a way of practicing democracy, but accomplishes the three steps model of Experiential Education (Dewey, 1983), namely planning, having the experience and reviewing it. Children participate in the planning of the experience, they have the experience and then they can reflect on it in their groups. With following these steps not only the acquisition of new knowledge will be more effective but it will have an impact on social interactions as the children participate in this process together. They have the discussions in groups and they realize their plans together by cooperating with each other. During the reflections they can bond with each other that further strengthens children's interpersonal relationships within the groups.

### **4.3. Challenges that the teachers have faced regarding outdoor education in multicultural preschool groups**

The last topic focuses on the challenges that emerged in the practice of the preschool teachers. The first theme is the discussion of Swedish weather and its influence on outdoor activities. The second theme is the prior beliefs and experiences of children with cultural backgrounds other than Swedish and the occurrence of their fear and the teachers' coping strategies with it is also discussed in the third theme.

#### **4.3.1. Swedish weather and its influence on outdoor activities**

Nordic countries are well-known of the severe weather conditions that can presumably have an influence on outdoor activities, although most of the interviewees did not find it as a hindering factor. Both Tova and Maya mentioned the Swedish phrase, „There is no bad weather, only bad clothing!” and Tova was the only one who added that if it is really cold or rainy, they would not go out, or only for a short walk. She added about the phrase:

“But it's not true, really. There is bad weather. But in some other cultures there's no need to go outside if it's bad weather.” (Tova)

According to the research of Maynard & Waters (2007) they found that poor weather conditions can hinder outdoor activities in Welsh schools, as 3 of 4 schools reported the lack of outdoor activities in case of a bad weather. There is an interesting contradiction with the answers of the Swedish interviewees in this paper. According to them, poor weather does not necessarily mean that the preschool group should stay outside, only one of the five teachers claimed that they do not go out when there are poor weather conditions (as mentioned in the previous paragraph). That means that outdoor activities are present not only in case of sunny weather but they are more of a natural part of the preschools' daily lives - regardless of external factors.

#### **4.3.2. Prior beliefs and experiences of children with cultural backgrounds other than Swedish**

As families with diverse cultural backgrounds live in the investigated area, preschool teachers encountered various attitudes towards nature. When the preschool is closed, according to Maya, children spend most of their free times inside, especially when it's winter. It can also be a problem that children don't always have suitable clothes for the different weather conditions.

A few years ago, we had one family, and when it was cold, they stayed at home. And they called us on the phone: we come when you go inside, then we come to the preschool. They didn't want to be outside. (Maya)

Ayah confirmed this possibility, as they had children whose parents thought that it was such a bad weather or too much snow that it was obviously a day off in educational institutions. Participating in outdoor activities in the winter can be unusual for immigrants who moved to countries with a cold, Nordic weather. Despite enjoying outdoors in the summer, Blattel (2011) reported that ethnic communities in Canada stop participating in outdoor programs and stay indoors during the cold season. The author found that besides their reluctance from going outside in cold weather, immigrant families can lack the knowledge to know where to go, the suitable equipment to wear or the social network to join a group. Immigrant families can easily get excluded the same way in any countries where the weather conditions and the relationship towards nature are greatly different than in their own tradition.

Maya highlighted that according to her experiences all children like to be outside in the forest, regardless their cultural backgrounds. This statement reflects to the Biophilia hypothesis (Wilson 1984) that assumes that all human beings have an inner drive to connect with nature and that this affinity is stronger than any external factors. Both Maya and Elise thought that children's former

experiences can be different with outdoors though, as they claimed that Swedish children are more likely to have outdoor experiences than non-Swedish children.

They have no experience. Swedish children say, “yes, I’ve been there with mom and dad”, but not them. (Maya)

Although the interviewees found that the lack of experiences can cause a big difference among children in the beginning, it does not have to have a long-term effect on children’s relationship with nature. During preschool years they have the opportunities to get closer to nature regardless their previous knowledge and experiences.

Elise reports that it happened often in her group that a child’s first time in the forest was with the preschool group and it was a whole new experience for them, they examined the nature with all their senses. Maya explained that they have families who came from countries where forest was a dangerous place with wild animals. According to her, these parents may have negative feelings towards nature that they can project onto their children. This observation is confirmed by the suggestion in Kals’ article (1999, cited by Cheng & Monroe, 2012) that the family members’ attitudes and values that are transmitted to young children about nature have a strong influence on the children.

Liselotte observed that the children whose parents have a job and are more integrated in the Swedish society can adapt easier to the preschool’s culture. She also added that when they invited the parents to their place in the forest, the parents unfolded that they have never been there before, despite living in the area for a long time. They were amazed and expressed their satisfaction that their children have activities in the forest. As mentioned, immigrant families can feel uncomfortable and ignorant about activities in the nature and can experience discrimination (Warren et al., 2014). The endeavour of preschool teachers to show the outdoor opportunities to the families both in a direct (parents’ invitations to the forest) and indirect way (children’s outdoor activities) may reduce the feelings of exclusion.

#### **4.3.3. Occurrence of children’s fear during outdoor activities and the coping strategies**

According to the interviewees observations, although children could be afraid of the forest initially, but this feelings didn’t hinder them later from engaging with the nature. According to Elise, the small children experienced fear but their curiosity won over it. This observation is in consensus with the Biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984) that presumes a strong internal

willingness in people towards nature. Although the children were afraid initially in the outdoors, the inclination to be close to the nature overcame it.

Elise observed that they can be a bit shocked by the high trees, the strong wind and the unknown sounds but they are interested in exploring. Sometimes when they see spiders or too many ants, they get scared. According to Elise's opinion it is because these animals are unpredictable and can't be controlled. Liselotte also experienced fear, but she thought children can change their views after frequent visits to the nature.

Yes, we have children who are a little bit scared at the first time to go to the forest, and they look where we go, "oh wow", they are scared of the ants and of the spiders, so yes! We have a lot of children that has been afraid for the forest. But we go there every week and then they like it. (Liselotte)

Sometimes children are not enthusiastic about going to the forest, but – as Maya argues – it's more about that they don't like to walk there, when they finally arrive, they enjoy the activities there. Tove and Ayah had experiences with children who didn't feel comfortable in the forest when they started the preschool. They highlighted that they never try to force or convince them verbally, the children can take their time even if the accommodation can take for months. If it is required they involve them step by step in the outdoor activities, by going closer and closer to the nature.

We just go for a walk, and stay where it's comfortable to go for them. (Tova)

The teachers' attitude reflects to the observations of Ramsey (2015). The author found that some of the children can be suspicious of nature and they may need external help to get over it. According to the teachers' experiences, fostering the children, let them take their time and work step by step on their relationship towards nature help them efficiently to get involved.

Tova explained her experiences of a child in their group who has never walked on anything other than flat pavement before. She felt stressed by the bumpy paths, full of grass in the forest and the up and downs on the roads. She often fell but she started to like to go outdoors, and now she's engaged with it, although she still falls sometimes. In their group, as Tova and Ayah explained, they measure the children's feelings to nature, therefore they can see the development that happened in a school year.

In the beginning of the term, we usually fill in a paper about how they feel, and we do it again later. We can see that the same kids have changed their views a lot about the nature. (Ayah)

Discussing coping with children's fears Ayah told that when they felt that children were a bit afraid of the troll from the story they used, they started to talk about the troll's feelings to bring it closer to the children. They came up with a lot of different ideas about the troll's emotions – they thought that maybe it was hungry or sad, because he didn't get any food. As they could empathize, the troll stopped being that scary anymore.

The interviewees shared stories about children's fear in the nature but none of them stated that it was a factor that hindered or stopped children from being engaged to the outdoors in the long term. The teachers believed that with some help, every children will find their way into nature. This approach supports the Biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984) as it claims that every children have the affinity to nature – although some of them need additional help. It also reflects to Gullestad's findings (1997) who argues that in Scandinavia there is a widespread concept that nature and children belong together (as cited in Änggård, 2010) and as the interviewees presumed, sooner or later all children get engaged with outdoor activities.

#### 4.4. Limitations

The study based on the investigations of a small sample, where the age group of 1-3 years old children was underrepresented as only one teacher worked with this age group. Although all the preschools are located in the same area, one of them is a private school with religious profile that was not a point of examination. These possible differences that can be caused by the different basis of values is worth to be investigated in the future. The perspective and opinion of the teachers were in the focus point of the study, although to get a broader view the children's and the parents' perspectives could be examined as well. Although the language of the conducted interviews was English - that was the second language of all the participants and the interviewer - with the help of longer explanations, the use of dictionary and nonverbal communication, mutual understanding was reached.

## 5. CONCLUSION

	RESEARCH QUESTION	CORE FINDINGS
1.	How do the teachers conceptualize outdoor activities' role on social interactions in multicultural preschool settings?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Swedish people are more likely to spend their free time outdoors than immigrant families.</li> <li>2. The areas with the highest developmental potential through outdoor activities were health and motor skills, imagination and creativity and the nature's positive effect on the children's mental well-being and openness, according to teachers.</li> <li>3. In the outdoors, children are more open to their peers, to play together with them and to share their new experiences.</li> </ol>
2.	How do the teachers foster social interactions through outdoor education?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Preschool teachers have a personal affinity towards nature.</li> <li>2. The teachers organize the outdoor activities in a way to give children opportunities to follow their interests and to foster social interactions among every children in the group.</li> <li>3. Democratic discussion and cooperation is promoted through explorations in nature.</li> </ol>
3.	What kind of challenges have the teachers faced regarding outdoor education in multicultural preschool groups?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Bad weather is not a hindering factor for outdoor activities in the investigated preschools.</li> <li>2. Immigrant families may struggle with Nordic weather, but it does not have a long-term effect on children's relationship with the outdoors as children from all cultural background have an affinity toward nature.</li> <li>3. Children may experience fear in the nature but through gradual involvement to the activities they can get engaged.</li> </ol>

Table 1.2. Core findings according to the research questions

In this thesis the impact of outdoor activities on children's social interactions were investigated in multicultural preschool environments. The focus was laid on teachers' perspectives as they were considered as possible facilitators of children's engagement in outdoor activities. One of the main findings that were identified through the analysis of the interviews was the relaxing impact of nature that makes children calmer and more open to each other. The teachers experienced less conflicts among the children and stronger willingness to interact with each other and share their experiences. These factors makes forming interpersonal relationships easier in the outdoors.

The interviewees reported that the engagement of the children in outdoor activities could be challenging if they did not have previous positive memories of nature. Although some children experienced initial fear or aversion, as a result of their gradual involvement and their innate

affinity towards nature these fears were overcome. Teachers expressed that they respect the children's initiatives in outdoor activities and they do not have a dominant role in planning. Following children's interests or having a shared experience based on the previous activities of the group were both usual activities and the teachers believed that these activities brought children closer to each other. By planning before and reflecting after activities together with the children, they accomplished experiential education in the groups and granted opportunities for democratic discussions and cooperative team works. The open and flexible attitude Swedish teachers have toward children in the examined preschools is worth to be investigated deeper and studied by other countries as well, who face the challenge of migration and multiculturalism.

## 6. REFERENCES

- Blanchet-Cohen, N. & Elliott, E. (2011). Young Children and Educators Engagement and Learning Outdoors: A Basis for Rights-Based Programming. *Early Education and Development*, 22(5), 757-777.
- Blattel, A. (2011). Using Outdoor Recreation to Foster Intercultural Understanding and the Integration of New Immigrants in Montreal. *Pathways: The Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education*, 23(4), 10-13.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cheng, J., C-H., & Monroe, M. (2012): Connection to Nature: Children's Affective Attitude Toward Nature. *Environment and Behavior*, 44(1), 31-49.
- Cosco, N., G. (2006). *Motivation to move: physical affordances in preschool play area*. Doctoral, Edinburgh College of Art, Heriot Watt University, Edinburgh.
- Davis, B., Rea, T., & Waite, S. (2006). The special nature of the outdoors: Its contribution to the education of children aged 3-11. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, 10(2), 3-12.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and Education*. Indianapolis: Kappa Delta Pi.
- Engdahl, I., & Ärlemalm-Hagsér, E. (2014). *Education for sustainability in Swedish preschools*. In J. Davis & S. Elliott (Eds.), *Research in early childhood education for sustainability: International perspectives and provocations* (pp. 208–224). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fabrizio, S., & Neill, J. (2005). Cultural adaptation in outdoor programming. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, 9(2), 44-56.
- Fägerstam, E. (2012). *Space and Place. Perspectives of outdoor teaching and learning*. Linköping, Sweden: Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning.
- Gelter H. (2000). Friluftsliv: The Scandinavian Philosophy of Outdoor Life. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 5(1), 77-92.
- Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method* (Eds.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Kloek, M.E., Buijs, A. E., Boersema, J. J., & Schouten M. G. C. (2015). 'Nature lovers', 'Social animals', 'Quiet seekers' and 'Activity lovers': Participation of young adult immigrants and non-immigrants in outdoor recreation in the Netherlands. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism* 12, 47-58.

- Lunneblad, J. (2017). Integration of refugee children and their families in the Swedish preschool: strategies, objectives and standards. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 25(3), 359-369.
- Maynard, T., & Waters, J. (2007). Learning in the outdoor environment: a missed opportunity? *Early Years*, 27(3), 255-265.
- McAvoy, L. H., Mitten, D. S., Stringer, L. A., Steckart, J. P., & Sproles, K. (1996). Group development and group dynamics in outdoor education. In *Coalition for Education in the Outdoors Research Symposium Proceedings* (3rd, Bradford Wood, Indiana, January 12-14, pp. 51-62).
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs Sweden (2005). Images of Sweden Abroad. Stockholm, Sweden: Alfa Print AB.
- Miranda, N., Larrea, I., Muela, A., & Barandiaran, A. (2016). Preschool Children's Social Play and Involvement in the Outdoor Environment, *Early Education and Development*, 28(5), 525-540.
- Murakami, C., D., Su-Russell, C., & Manfra, L. (2017). Analyzing teacher narratives in early childhood garden-based education. *The Journal of Environmental Education*. 0(0), 1-12.
- Nimmo, J., & Hallett, B. (2008). Childhood in the Garden. *Young Children*, 63(1), 32-38.
- OECD (2018). International migration database, *OECD International Migration Statistics* (database), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/data-00342-en> (accessed on 20 May 2018).
- Pavlovskaja, E. (2002): Education of immigrant children at the pre-school level in Sweden. Lund, Sweden: Department of Education.
- Priest, S. (1986). Redefining Outdoor Education: A Matter of Many Relationships. *Journal of Environmental Education*, 17(3), 13-15.
- Ramsey P. (2015). Teaching and Learning in a Diverse World: Multicultural Education for Young Children. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ryan, G. W., Bernard, H. R. (2003). Techniques to Identify Themes. *Field Methods*, 15, 85-109.
- Sandell, K., Öhman, J. (2010). Educational potentials of encounters with nature: reflections from a Swedish outdoor perspective. *Environmental Education Research*, 16(1), 113-132.
- Skolverket (2011). *The Swedish Preschool Curriculum*. Stockholm: Skolverket.

- Waite, S., Rogers, S., & Evans, J. (2013). Freedom, flow and fairness: exploring how children develop socially at school through outdoor play. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 13(3), 255-276.
- Warren K., Roberts N., Breunig M., Antonio M., & Alvarez G. (2014). Social Justice in Outdoor Experiential Education: A State of Knowledge Review. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 37(1), 89-103.
- Wendin, Å. (2014) "All kids are monkeys at heart": Nature as the Child's Natural Habitat in a Southern Swedish Outdoor Preschool. In: Catherine Burke, Ian Grosvenor & Björn Norlin (ed.), *Engaging with Educational Space: Visualizing Spaces of Teaching and Learning*. Umeå, Sweden: Institutionen för idé- och samhällsstudier.
- Wilson, E., O. (1984). *Biophilia*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA: Harvard University Press.
- Yanez, R., E., Bronwyn S. Fees, B., S., Torquati, J. (2017). Preschool children's biophilia and attitudes toward nature: The effect of personal experiences. *The International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education*, 5(1), p. 57-67.
- Änggård, E. (2010). "Making Use of 'Nature' in an Outdoor Preschool: Classroom, Home and Fairyland." *Children, Youth and Environments* 20(1), 4-25.



## APPENDIX 1

Adult Consent to Participate in Student Research

International Master's Program in Swedish Preschool Education (Educare)

Spring 2018

Sarolta Csányi is conducting a study as part of her requirements for successful completion of the Thesis Project course in the International Master's Program in Swedish Preschool Education (Educare) at Jönköping University. The general focus of the study is to examine pedagogical and didactic questions concerning preschool policy and practice. More specifically, this research study examines the interaction between outdoor education and group development in multicultural preschool settings.

Sarolta Csányi is conducting this study in order to (a) contribute knowledge to our overall understanding of preschool education; (b) gain experience conducting empirical research in education; and (c) fulfill requirements needed to graduate with a master of science degree (60 credits) from the International Master's Program in Swedish Preschool Education in the School of Education and Communication at Jönköping University.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to do one or more of the following

\_\_\_\_ Participate in an interview or interviews related to the research topic.

\_\_\_\_ Grant your permission to be observed engaging in daily school activities.

Any information that is gathered will be anonymized to ensure that you cannot be identified. Additionally, all information gathered will be stored securely to prevent loss or theft.

You have the right to withdraw your consent to participate in the study at any time, for whatever reason, without any consequences.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this research study and/or your participation, please contact Sarolta Csányi (sarolta.livia.csanyi@gmail.com) and/or the course leader and master's program director, Robert Lecusay (robert.lecusay@ju.se).

If you agree to participate, please print and sign your name below. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records

Participant's contact number and/or email: \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant Name (printed)

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Student Researcher Name (printed)

\_\_\_\_\_

Student Researcher Signature

## APPENDIX 2

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

#### OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

1. How many hours do you and your group spend outdoors per day on average?
2. What is the main activity during outdoors?
3. What is the biggest benefit of outdoors in your opinion?
4. What was the most challenging situation during outdoor activities?
5. Would you consider yourself outdoorsy?

#### DIFFERENT FEELINGS TOWARDS OUTDOORS

1. Is there any children who don't like to be outdoors? If yes – what is the reason in your opinion?
2. Have you experienced any fear in children of outdoors?
3. Have you experienced any differences regarding outdoor activities between children who has Swedish and non-Swedish origin?
4. Have you experienced differences among children with Swedish origin? (e.g. town vs. rural origin)

#### OUTDOORS & GROUP COHESION

1. What is the developmental potential of outdoor activities according to your experience?

„A considerable amount of research has clearly demonstrated the positive influence that outdoor activity can have on various aspects of child development. For example, outdoor activity was found to promote children's **social competence**, to promote **motor skills** and **physical health**, and to **reduce levels of aggressiveness and conflict** by encouraging affiliative behaviour. Some studies have found that outdoor activity has a positive on children's **concentration, imagination** and **creativity**.” (Miranda, Larrea, Muela, & Barandiaran, 2016)

2. Do you think that team work among children is more effective during outdoor activities?
3. Do you think that outdoor education is a good way to foster group cohesion?
4. Do you use outdoor education directly to foster group cohesion? If yes - in what ways?
5. Have you experienced any situations in your practice when outdoor activities had a positive effect on group cohesion?