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4. Learning in vital coalitions for green cities
Forest gardens - places for children to connect with nature in times of urbanization

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Introduction: This case study explores a learning situation in which primary school children participate in creating mini-projects in a forest garden in Sweden. A forest garden is an edible poly culture landscape with different layers of mostly perennial vegetation. The forest garden is designed to maximize the yield of useful plants while minimizing the input of energy and resources, human labor included (Crawford, 2009).

Objectives: The objective of this study is to explore how urban children describe their own relationships to other organisms, as well as how they describe the relationships between different other organisms during the first year of a three year long project of participation in developing a forest garden.

Methods: 27 seven to eight year olds participated in the project. Data have been collected as field notes, audio- and video recordings and photos from the children’s visits in the forest garden. The photos have been used for stimulated recall (Stough, 2001) in focus group interviews. The data has been analyzed qualitatively by contextual analyses (Svensson & Doumas, 2013). Kellert’s typology of nine values of nature (italized below; Kellert, 2002) has been used as a complementary tool during qualitative analysis of the children’s expressions.

Results: The children’s expressions frequently related to scientific understanding of nature and ecological relations. However, the children’s explanations mostly reflected facts and simple causal relationships and only rarely included reasoning on a more complex cognitive level. A prominent example of this is that children very often expressed how they can help other organisms (usually insects), but much less frequently described how they themselves (utilitarian values), or other organisms, in turn can benefit from the insect’s activities. The instructors initially explained the benefits of pollination for production of fruit and berries, but during the practical work sessions the emphasis was on how humans can assist insects. Humanistic expressions in relation to other organisms were common amongst the children; needs and attributes of other organisms were often described in symbolic terms. In observations, the children showed a great deal of curiosity for the natural environment (naturalistic value) as well as joy and enthusiasm of participating in the different activities that took place in the forest garden. Aesthetic values were commonly expressed by the children in relation to flowers, shells, berries, etc. In contrast, expressions of negativistic, dominionistic and moralistic values occurred more seldom.

Conclusion: This study shows that forest gardens have a potential to be places where children can connect emotionally and cognitively to other organisms in a joyful way. The activities in themselves, but even more the teachers’ emphasizing of the meaning of the activities, are crucial for the children’s understanding of the relationships between organisms.

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Keywords: forest garden, nature relations, primary school, urbanization, values of nature