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Childhood Between Nature and Culture: Discourses, Tensions, and Curriculum Reform

Dzieciństwo między naturą i kulturą. Dyskursy, napięcia
i reforma podstawy programowej

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the nature-culture dichotomy, present in the social sciences since the Romantic era, influences discourses on childhood and early childhood education, with reference to the new Polish core curriculum valid from September 2026. The construct of the child's relationship with nature is deeply rooted in Romantic philosophy, according to which the child possesses a special bond with nature that adults functioning within Western civilization do not. This philosophy continues to influence how childhood is constructed today, which is a source of tension due to civilizational discourses that assume a child's transition from the stage of an uncivilized savage (connected to nature) to that of an adult who adheres to cultural norms. An additional factor complicating this relationship is the increasingly rare exposure of children to nature, around which narratives full of fears and anxieties have emerged. By highlighting the interrelated discourses underlying contemporary early childhood education, this article focuses on presenting the tensions between them and recognizing the need to consider a posthumanist perspective, grounded in a specific context, which allows for critical review of nature related education.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

edukacja, natura,
posthumanizm,
dzieciństwo

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia, jak dychotomia natura–kultura obecna w naukach społecznych od czasów romantycznych wpływa na dyskursy dotyczące dzieciństwa i edukacji przedszkolnej ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem nowej podstawy programowej obowiązującej od września 2026 r. Konstrukcja relacji dziecka z naturą jest silnie zakorzeniona w filozofii romantycznej, według której posiada ono z nią specjalną więź niewystępującą u dorosłego funkcjonującego w cywilizacji zachodniej. Filozofia ta wpływa do dziś na to, jak konstruowane jest dzieciństwo, co jest źródłem napięć ze względu na dyskursy cywilizacyjne, których założeniem jest przejście dziecka od stadium nieokrzęsanego dzikusa (związanego z naturą) do stadium dorosłego, który realizuje normy kulturowe. Dodatkowym elementem problematyzującym tę relację jest coraz rzadsze przebywanie dzieci w naturze, dookoła którego powstały narracje pełne obaw i lęków. Wskazując na powiązane ze sobą dyskursy leżące u podstaw współczesnej edukacji wczesnoszkolnej, artykuł skupia się na przedstawieniu napięć występujących między nimi oraz zauważeniu potrzeby uwzględnienia posthumanistycznej perspektywy, która pozwala na krytyczne spojrzenie na dyskursy edukacji o naturze.

Introduction

The recent reform of the Polish preschool core curriculum places renewed emphasis on children's engagement with the natural environment. These changes revive a long-standing debate in educational theory concerning the relationship between nature and culture and their role in shaping childhood. While contemporary educational policy increasingly promotes outdoor learning and contact with nature, it simultaneously continues to frame early childhood education as a process of preparing children for participation in society. This creates tension between two influential discourses: one portraying the children as a naturally biophilic being with an inherent bond with the nature, and another emphasizing the need for civilization and formal education to prepare them to enter society and become competent social actors.

The aim of this article is to examine how the classical nature-culture dichotomy is reproduced in the new Polish preschool core curriculum and to identify the tensions between different constructions of relations with nature in childhood through a qualitative analysis of curriculum documents.

The fundamental child–nature connection, rooted in romantic educational philosophies, has long been regarded as both indisputable and essential. Rousseau's (1762/1933) treatise, *Émile, or On Education*, established nature as an ideal educator

capable of preserving children's innate goodness through learning beyond formal schooling. The opening statement of his educational manifesto: "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man" (Rousseau, 1933, p. 5), encapsulates the enduring and radical opposition between nature and culture that still shapes educational discourses. At the same time, this tradition positions education as a process of negotiating the tension between children's presumed natural innocence and the demands of socialization – a tension that remains visible in contemporary curriculum reforms.

The new Polish preschool core curriculum signals a shift from previous iterations. Rather than emphasising narrowly defined skills, the revised framework privileges a graduate profile grounded in values, personal dispositions, and holistic developmental outcomes. Within this framework, children's agency, wellbeing, and selfdevelopment take precedence over the acquisition of specific competencies traditionally tied to readiness for the next formal educational stage, such as literacy. Against this backdrop, the subsequent section examines how this systemic reorientation reshapes the constructed relationship between the child and nature, interacting with the broader discursive formations established above.

Biophilic Childhood

Rousseau (1762/1933) was among the first to articulate a conceptual linkage of an *essentially good child* with *essentially good nature*. In his view, nature functions as the ideal teacher, uncorrupted by the moral decay associated with civilization. This nature-culture opposition simultaneously establishes a moral dichotomy between good and bad, positioning child alongside nature as morally privileged.

Taylor (2013) demonstrates that contemporary research frequently reproduces the assumption of an innate bond between children and nature. This perspective was popularized by Louv's (2016) *Last Child in the Woods*, which stimulated debate on restoring children's contact with nature. Empirical studies have documented numerous developmental benefits of outdoor education (Chawla, 2015; Kiviranta et al., 2024), while Adams and Savahl's (2017) review show that nature is predominantly conceptualized as children's space, reinforcing the taken-for-granted assumption of childhood as inherently biophilic.

Recent posthumanist perspectives on nature shift the attention from essentialised categories to relations between humans and the more-than-human world (Kamińska, 2023; Taylor et al., 2012). The human is no longer positioned at the epistemic centre, instead the pedagogical focus shifts toward the relational networks between human beings and their environment. As the recently implemented Polish preschool

curriculum places renewed emphasis on outdoor education and children's engagement with the natural environment, a posthumanist perspective provides a useful analytical framework for examining these changes.

The dominant construction of nature as the opposite of culture reinforces the image of childhood as an inherently biophilic state, while adulthood becomes associated with culture, rationality, and civilization (Jenkins, 2008). At the same time, educational thought as Taylor (2013) notes, shifted from learning *in* or from nature to learning *about* nature, reflecting a broader epistemological transition from experiential immersion to analytical understanding. Although these approaches differ, both continue to shape contemporary educational discourses and are reflected in current curriculum reforms.

From "Wild Child" to Civilised Pupil in Early Education

Several scholars (Fallace, 2015; Saminaden et al., 2010; Taylor, 2011) have demonstrated that historical discourses on childhood and "savages" share important similarities, particularly in their relationship to nature. Both groups were historically constructed as having an inherently good and privileged relationship with nature, while simultaneously being perceived as "not fully human": simple, primitive, carefree, and undisciplined. Within this framework, both children and "savages" were understood as requiring education and discipline to conform to social expectations. Within developmental discourses, childhood is commonly understood as a state of "becoming" rather than "being" (Corsaro, 2018). The child is therefore positioned as an unfinished subject whose successful transition into adulthood depends upon processes of education, socialization, and civilization. This developmental model closely parallels colonial narratives in which the "savage" was likewise represented as requiring civilization before being recognised as fully human.

Consequently, the metaphor of a "wild child" portrays childhood as a developmental stage requiring education and socialization before entry into adult society, closely paralleling colonial narratives of "civilizing" so-called savage populations (Fallace, 2015; Saminaden et al., 2010). This dual perception – nature as both wild and noble – may lead to considerable tension and anxiety in a world of multiple expert discourses. These discourses highlight, on the one hand, the need to restore children's contact with nature (Louv, 2016), and on the other, they continue to prioritise educational models centred on measurable competencies and school readiness. These historically rooted constructions provide the analytical framework for examining how the new Polish preschool curriculum reproduces, negotiates, or reconfigures these competing understandings of childhood and nature.

New Curriculum and Nature

Methodology

To identify how the relation between child and nature is constructed in preschool education, a qualitative discourse-oriented content analysis (Schreier, 2012) of curriculum documents was conducted. The analysis focuses on how institutional discourses shape the child-nature relationship and how this relationship is embedded within policy frameworks.

The corpus of the analysis includes two documents containing the core curriculum for preschool education, namely:

1. The Regulation of the Minister of National Education of February 14, 2015 (Rozporządzenie..., 2017).
2. The Regulation of the Minister of Education of March 11, 2026 (Rozporządzenie..., 2026).

The first document will remain in force until September 2026, while the second is scheduled for implementation from September 2026. This selection enables a comparative content analysis of how the institutional vision of the child-nature relationship evolves over time. The analysis examines selected learning outcomes, thematic domains, and regulatory provisions, focusing on dimensions such as the character of the child–nature relationship, institutional orientations towards the natural environment, and underlying conceptualisations of nature (e.g., anthropocentric and ecocentric framings), as well as forms of children’s direct engagement with the natural world. Rather than treating curriculum content as neutral descriptions of educational aims, the documents are approached as discursive artefacts that reproduce broader social, cultural, and historical narratives concerning nature–culture relations.

Consequences of the Construct of “Nature Deficit Disorder”

The competencies expected of children after finishing the preschool stage of education are organized into three categories: fundamental, cross-sectional, and agency-related. Among the fundamental ones – alongside mathematical, digital, and linguistic skills – a newly distinguished area concerns physical development, which emphasises body awareness, motor abilities, and the cultivation of healthy habits. It resonates with broader discourses connecting children’s physical activity to outdoor environments, where movement is perceived as more natural and less constrained. Narratives concerning children’s absence in nature intertwine with a lack of physical activity in

childhood, the rise in the of number of obesity cases (WHO, n.d.) and restricted independent mobility (Brudzińska, 2021; von Benzon, 2018).

Unlike romantic conceptions of childhood, in which outdoor play was assumed to be a natural part of everyday life, children's physical activity is becoming increasingly formalized through organized programs. Consequently, curriculum guidelines now explicitly promote outdoor movement, reflecting concerns over the declining presence of nature in children's lives (Taylor, 2013).

A key change is the introduction of a dedicated "nature domain" within the expected outcomes of preschool education. Unlike the 2017 curriculum, where nature appeared only marginally within cognitive development, the new framework emphasises direct engagement with and care for the natural environment, aligning more closely with romantic conceptualisations of the child-nature relationship and signalling a shift from an Enlightenment-oriented approach towards a more experiential understanding of nature.

In the document from 2017, nature appeared in a single point (no. 18) within the cognitive development domain. The new framework, therefore, marks a clear shift from a narrowly cognitive, terminologybased approach toward a more holistic and experiential understanding of children's encounters with the natural world.

This change reflects both the discourse that positions nature as an inherently child-centred realm, and the growing concerns about the modern world, where the direct engagement with the natural world is increasingly limited, especially for children. These concerns are linked to the transformation of the urban areas, shrinking green spaces (Louv, 2016), and the diminishing autonomy of children's independent outdoor mobility. The curriculum does not simply expand environmental education; it redefines how the nature-child relationship should be.

Research on children's independent mobility (CIM) indicates a decline in children's ability to move freely in their neighbourhoods and engage in unsupervised play (Malone, 2011). This trend is reinforced by media discourses that emphasize the risks and harms while overlooking the benefits, shaping parents' attitudes toward their children's outdoor activities (Bennetts et al., 2023). Growing concerns about safety have also led to intensified risk-management practices in the design of play areas and other child-oriented spaces. Play environments are constructed to ensure continuous adult supervision and minimize risk through standardized and certified materials (Bobik, 2023). As a result, contact with nature is frequently reduced to highly controlled and "civilized" settings: a dedicated corner in the preschool facility (as outlined in the 2026 curriculum) or artificially reproduced elements (e.g. snow brought into the classroom

in a bowl¹). Parental concerns (Brudzińska & Śmieszek-Formela, 2022), teachers' low acceptance of risky play (LeMasters & Vandermaas-Peeler, 2023; Jerebine et al., 2022) contribute to increasingly controlled outdoor environments, limiting opportunities for spontaneous engagement with nature.

A further element of the curriculum, which may generate challenges and tensions within the preschool ecosystem – among parents, teachers, and children – is the newly articulated requirement specifying the minimum amount of time children must spend outside the preschool building. The document mandates at least one hour of outdoor activity per week, with the provision that this requirement does not apply on days when alerts from the Government Security Centre are in effect or during particularly adverse weather conditions (which have been left to individual interpretation). The imposition of a compulsory amount of time spent outdoors, including in varied weather conditions, may provoke resistance and misunderstanding among parents and teachers. Such responses are likely shaped by adults' desire to protect children from exposure to inclement weather and by concerns that time spent outside could be allocated to activities perceived as more “productive” or academically valuable. As a result, what is intended as a developmental or pedagogical measure may instead become a point of negotiation, conflict, or contestation within the preschool community.

Research conducted in the United Kingdom (Parkin et al., 2026) highlights the challenges of accessing nature within institutional spaces: on the one hand, it fosters development and becomes a space of liberation; on the other hand, contact with nature becomes a marker of social distinction – the lack of appropriate shoes or clothing limits the ability to spend time in nature, to which access is theoretically free. There is also a significant pressure to meet standards and curriculum requirements, as well as to demonstrate measurable progress – which, in the case of outdoor education, is more difficult to assess than with traditional tests.

Taken together, these changes illustrate how the new curriculum attempts to reconcile two competing constructions of childhood: the romantic image of the child as naturally connected to nature, and the developmental discourse that continues to frame education as a process of regulation, assessment, and preparation for formal schooling.

1 Example from social media of kindergartens: <https://www.facebook.com/100065051017513/posts/1273299594848396/?rdid=bSVK2gtxToyrg7wi>, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1411520550375593> (access: 23.03.2025)

Nature, Childhood, and the Presence of Civilising Narratives

The “physical development area” further contains elements that explicitly refer to direct contact with nature. For instance, point no. 2 emphasises participation in outdoor games. In another area of the document – terms and conditions for implementing the core curriculum – point no. 5 is also about child relation with nature and the “unbreakable human-nature bond”. Such formulations reproduce long-standing discourses about a pure connection with nature made by “savages” (but also children). These overlapping constructions reveal internal contradictions within the curriculum. As Affrica Taylor (2013) observes, these contradictions juxtapose a rational, positivist orientation – centred on the description and scientific study of nature – with a romanticised, primordial connection to nature imagined as inherently noble. During the colonial era, this “noble underdevelopment” served to legitimise interventions that sought to “civilise” non-Western populations; a structurally similar dynamic can be observed in discourses concerning children.

The child’s presumed special bond with nature is simultaneously celebrated and problematized: it is valued as an aspect of innocence yet also construed as a potential obstacle to meeting normative expectations of healthy development or acquiring skills associated with future success (Bieńko, 2021; Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2020). Kindergarten schedules are filled with additional activities and only few of them relate to nature encounters, because they are not leading to measurable results. The effects of outdoor education and nature experiences are harder for parents to notice, which may cause concerns about the reasonableness of this form of education, or even its existence in the daily schedule. Despite this, the popularity of outdoor kindergartens and forest education is on the rise (Śliwerski, 2022). According to Brudzińska (2022), outdoor education is inextricably linked to freedom, which requires adults to trust that children possess the necessary skills to cope in a natural environment. Forest kindergartens focus on fostering children’s agency and self-governance in a natural environment, which aligns with the previously described construct of the biophilic child.

Desirable and essential skills are related to writing and reading, not only because they can give a child a better start in the primary school, because they are a sign of civilization process (Rakoczy, 2023). A child is becoming a part of society by using the same written communication as adults and can take advantage of all the knowledge that is secured in that form. If a child spends more time in nature, they will have less time for learning practical and useful skills. That leads to a constant battle between child agency and wellbeing, which in current discourses are related at some point to nature, free play, self-determination, and the need to provide a child with the best start in the adulthood as possible by “moulding” them in the first years of life. This tension,

when situated within a broader analytical frame, reflects the enduring socialscientific dichotomy of nature versus culture – a bifurcation that continues to structure contemporary debates on childhood, development, and pedagogy.

Conclusion

What may seem surprising, even something as obvious as child engagement in nature can be subjected to critical analysis. This article examines how the enduring nature–culture dichotomy continues to shape contemporary understandings of childhood and early education, and how these discursive legacies become embedded in the new preschool curriculum scheduled for implementation in 2026. The analysis demonstrated that neither the concept of childhood nor the meaning of nature is neutral; instead, both are produced through historically layered, often contradictory narratives.

Furthermore, curricular expectations related to outdoor activity expose frictions within the preschool ecosystem. The policy aims to institutionalize children’s presence outdoors, because of the threat of a child’s absence in nature – as parents’ and teachers’ concern about safety, productivity, and adverse weather reveal – demonstrates the persistence of neoliberal logics in which childhood becomes a project requiring optimization and measurable outcomes. In this context, encounters with nature risk being instrumentalized or reduced to tightly controlled, highly mediated activities that limit the very spontaneity and agency the curriculum claims to support. Nature and childhood are both entangled in developmental and colonial discourses which lead to the many tensions and concerns among all actors in the kindergarten ecosystem.

Taken together, these findings underline that educational reforms cannot be understood solely as administrative adjustments; they are cultural artefacts that both reflect and reproduce broader societal narratives that can reinforce existing discourses about the nature of childhood. In practice, this means that teachers will need to reconcile the curriculum’s outdoor requirements with existing schedules, weather-related discretion, and parental expectations of measurable progress, and at the same time bearing responsibility of interpreting ambiguous provisions – such as what counts as “particularly adverse weather” – and safety of the children.

Ultimately, the tension between nature and culture does not merely organize discourses about childhood; it exposes the limits of current educational imaginaries. Moving beyond this binary may allow educators, policymakers, and researchers to envision pedagogies that acknowledge children as coparticipants in multispecies, more-than-human worlds. Such a shift invites a rethinking of childhood not as a project to be optimised, but as a form of life embedded in complex ecological, social, and material relations – a perspective that holds significant promise for the future of early education.

Future research should follow the first year of implementation empirically – through classroom observation or teacher and parent interviews or surveys – to establish whether the curriculum's stated aims of fostering children's agency and connection to nature translate into altered daily practice, or whether they are absorbed into existing routines with little substantive change.

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