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Nature as a Teacher? Social and Cultural Determinants of Outdoor Education: A Case Study of a Private Forest Preschool

Natura jako nauczyciel? Społeczne i kulturowe uwarunkowania edukacji *outdoor*: studium przypadku niepublicznego leśnego punktu przedszkolnego

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

outdoor education,
early childhood
education,
educational
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educational culture,
case study

The article examines the social and cultural determinants of outdoor education in the context of early childhood education, recognized as the notion of nature as an educational environment. The aim of the study is to identify the factors shaping the implementation of outdoor education in Poland and to analyze the tensions arising from its incorporation into the formal education system. The main research question concerns how social and cultural determinants influence educational practices in a forest preschool. The study was conducted within a qualitative research paradigm using a case study approach. Institutional documents, educational materials, and secondary data were analyzed. The article is structured into theoretical, methodological, and analytical sections, the latter focusing directly on the selected case. The findings indicate that outdoor education responds to children's diminishing contact with nature while simultaneously revealing constraints resulting from cultural norms, the institutionalization of education, and social inequalities. The originality of the study lies in integrating theoretical analysis with an empirical case study of a specific educational institution and demonstrating the local adaptation of global outdoor education models.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

edukacja *outdoor*,
edukacja
elementarna,
środowisko
edukacyjne, kultura
edukacyjna,
studium przypadku

Artykuł podejmuje problem społecznych i kulturowych uwarunkowań edukacji *outdoor* w kontekście wczesnej edukacji dziecka, ujmowanej poprzez kategorię natury jako środowiska edukacyjnego. Celem tekstu jest identyfikacja czynników determinujących funkcjonowanie edukacji *outdoor* w Polsce oraz analiza napięć wynikających z jej implementacji w systemie oświaty. Główny problem badawczy dotyczy pytania, w jaki sposób uwarunkowania społeczne i kulturowe wpływają na praktykę edukacyjną realizowaną w leśnym przedszkolu. Badanie przeprowadzono w paradygmacie jakościowym, z wykorzystaniem metody studium przypadku. Zastosowano techniki analizy dokumentów instytucjonalnych, materiałów edukacyjnych oraz danych wtórnych. Struktura artykułu obejmuje część teoretyczną, metodologiczną oraz analityczną, odnoszącą się bezpośrednio do badanego przypadku. Wyniki wskazują, że edukacja *outdoor* stanowi odpowiedź na deficyt kontaktu dzieci z naturą, jednocześnie ujawniając ograniczenia wynikające z norm kulturowych, instytucjonalizacji edukacji oraz nierówności społecznych. Oryginalność artykułu polega na powiązaniu analizy teoretycznej z empirycznym studium konkretnej placówki oraz ukazaniu lokalnej adaptacji globalnych modeli edukacji *outdoor*.

Introduction

Contemporary early childhood education is undergoing dynamic transformations driven by social, cultural, and technological changes, as well as by the escalating ecological and climate crisis. In this context, increasing attention is being paid to the relationship between humans and nature and to the role of education in shaping this relationship. A growing body of research indicates that children's limited contact with the natural environment negatively affects their psychological, physical, and social well-being.

At the same time, educational theory has revived the question of nature's role in the educational process – a theme already present in classical educational philosophy, particularly in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who emphasized the importance of direct experience and contact with nature for child development (Rousseau, 1955). Contemporary approaches further develop this perspective by highlighting its relevance in the context of the ecological crisis and the urgent need to foster environmentally responsible attitudes.

In response to these challenges, outdoor education has gained increasing recognition. This educational approach views the natural environment not merely as a backdrop for learning but as an active context in which learning occurs. Within this framework, nature becomes a co-participant in the educational process, supporting children's cognitive, emotional, and social development.

These developments reflect both the effects of globalization and the growing concern for children's mental and physical well-being, as they increasingly grow up in environments dominated by digital technologies and characterized by limited contact with nature. In response, alternative pedagogical approaches have emerged, redefining learning environments as well as the roles of teachers and learners within the educational process (Dahlgren & Szczepanski, 1998, pp. 9–15; Sobel, 2004, pp. 21–29).

One of the most significant developments has been the growing interest in outdoor education, also referred to as nature-based education or outdoor experiential learning. This approach puts nature as the primary learning environment, where experience, exploration, and direct engagement with the surroundings play a central role. In this perspective, the natural environment is not only a setting for educational activities but also an active factor supporting children's holistic development (Louv, 2008, pp. 23–35; Waite, 2017, pp. 12–18). Consequently, moving education beyond the walls of the classroom can be understood as a purposeful and natural way of introducing children to the natural world. The essence of this approach lies in adopting a more active and open understanding of education, allowing children to explore the world holistically while fostering their overall development.

Moreover, outdoor education offers an alternative to traditional instructional models, which are often based on the transmissive delivery of knowledge and restrict students' learning activities to the classroom. The literature emphasizes that this approach promotes the development of key competencies, including independence, creativity, cooperation and problem-solving skills. Furthermore, numerous studies have demonstrated its positive effects on children's mental and physical health, including stress reduction and improved concentration (Kuo et al., 2019, pp. 137–145; Mygind et al., 2019, pp. 5–11).

In Poland, outdoor education remains an emerging field whose implementation is shaped by both enabling factors and numerous constraints. Among the most significant determinants are cultural traditions concerning perceptions of education, the organization of the educational system, teacher preparation, and access to appropriate infrastructure and natural environments (Parczewska, 2019, pp. 50–58; Winiarski, 2015, pp. 29–45). Equally important are broader social changes, including growing environmental awareness and increasing concern about addressing children's "nature deficit" (Louv, 2008, pp. 36–41).

The aim of this article is to answer the following research question: **What social and cultural determinants shape the implementation of outdoor education in Poland?** Examining this issue contributes not only to a better understanding of the specific conditions under which outdoor education is implemented within the Polish educational system but also to identifying potential directions for its further development.

Literature Review

Outdoor education is rooted in the traditions of experiential pedagogy and constructivism, emphasizing the active role of the child in the learning process and the importance of direct interaction with the surrounding environment. A central theoretical foundation of this approach is the concept of experiential learning developed by John Dewey, who argued that education should be based on learners' activity and their interaction with the environment (Dewey, 2014, pp. 25–27). In the Polish context, these ideas have been further developed within experiential pedagogy and alternative education, where particular emphasis is placed on educational situations embedded in children's real-life experiences (Kupisiewicz, 2000, pp. 143–145; Nalaśkowski, 2010, pp. 98–102).

The significance of contact with nature for child development has been extensively discussed by Louv (2008), who introduced the concept of *nature-deficit disorder* and highlighted its adverse consequences for children's health and general functioning (pp. 36–48). Similar conclusions have been drawn in Polish literature by scholars specializing in environmental education and environmental health, who emphasize that regular contact with nature supports children's sensory, emotional, and cognitive development (Dymara, 2009, pp. 67–72; Sobel, 2004, pp. 54–60). Researchers have also highlighted the role of natural environments in reducing stress and alleviating attention span difficulties (Formański, 2020, pp. 181–185).

Research further demonstrates that engagement in natural environments contributes to the development of social competencies and self-regulation (Gill, 2014, pp. 10–15). Polish studies similarly indicate that outdoor learning enhances cooperation, responsibility, and problem-solving skills in group (Bąk, 2014, pp. 89–94; Parczewska, 2019, pp. 50–58). Through outdoor experiences, children learn to negotiate meanings, make decisions, and manage risk in ways appropriate to specific situations, all of which contribute significantly to their social and emotional development.

From a sociological perspective, access to outdoor education is closely associated with families' cultural capital, as participation largely depends on parents' resources, values, and educational aspirations (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 243–248). Polish research on alternative education indicates that institutions such as forest preschools are frequently chosen by families characterized by a particular cultural habitus, including higher educational attainment and environmentally conscious lifestyles (Mendel, 2017, pp. 56–60). Consequently, outdoor education may simultaneously reproduce existing social inequalities while also offering opportunities to challenge them through inclusive educational practices.

Attention should also be paid to the development of the forest preschool movement in Europe and its adaptation in Poland. As scholars have noted, this educational

model originated in the Scandinavian countries and Germany, where nature-based education has a long-standing institutional tradition (Knight, 2013, pp. 33–40). In Poland, by contrast, forest preschools represent a relatively recent yet rapidly expanding phenomenon, reflecting broader efforts to develop alternative forms of preschool education (Parczewska, 2019, pp. 50–58). Research indicates that forest preschools provide children with greater autonomy, exposure to diverse environmental stimuli, and opportunities to learn through exploration and un.

Outdoor education draws upon both classical and contemporary pedagogical traditions. Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that nature constitutes the primary environment for children's development and that education should be grounded in direct experience (Rousseau, 1955). Contemporary educational theories extend this perspective in response to emerging civilizational and environmental challenges. In particular, Sharon Todd emphasizes the importance of sensory experience in education, highlighting the roles of embodiment and human engagement with the surrounding world (Todd, 2015). Similarly, Claudia Ruitenberg argues for a reconceptualization of education in the context of the ecological crisis, stressing its ethical aspect and responsibility toward future generations (Ruitenberg, 2015). From this perspective, outdoor education can be understood not merely as a pedagogical method but also as a response to the deeper crisis in the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Research Methodology

The study was conducted within a qualitative research paradigm using the case study method, which enables an in-depth analysis of outdoor education as it operates within its natural social, cultural, and organizational context.

The aim of the study was to identify the social and cultural determinants of outdoor education based on the example of a private forest preschool.

The main research question was formulated as follows:

How do social and cultural determinants influence the practice of outdoor education implemented in the studied institution?

The specific research questions were:

1. What pedagogical assumptions support the educational practice of the institution?
2. What social factors influence the functioning of outdoor education?
3. What cultural determinants shape the implementation of outdoor education?

The research material consisted of existing documents (desk research), including:

- the statutes and organizational description of the studied forest preschool;
- information published on the websites of the preschool and the foundation operating it;
- promotional and educational materials provided by the institution (including the description of the educational program, pedagogical assumptions, and information for parents);
- documents concerning the organization of the preschool, the implementation of the national core curriculum, and the adopted safety procedures;
- documents related to the certification of the institution by the Polish Institute of Forest Preschools.

In total, 14 documents produced between 2020 and 2025 were analyzed. These included organizational documents, curriculum materials, information published on the institution's website, and documentation related to the certification process. The documents were selected purposively based on their direct relevance to the organization of the educational process and their potential to identify the social and cultural determinants of outdoor education. The analyzed materials included, among others, the educational program description, informational materials for parents, presentations of the pedagogical assumptions, website content, and promotional materials. Particular attention was paid to how the roles of nature, the child, and the teacher were conceptualized, as well as to the declared educational objectives.

The analysis was conducted in several stages. First, the documents were selected, followed by repeated readings and content analysis in light of the research questions. Finally, the main analytical categories relating to the social and cultural determinants of outdoor education were identified. The analysis was qualitative and employed an inductive-deductive approach: some categories were derived from the predefined research questions, whereas others emerged during repeated analysis of the empirical material. The documents were subjected to qualitative content analysis focusing on the identification of categories related to the institution's pedagogical assumptions, the organization of the educational process, and the social and cultural determinants of outdoor education. The analytical categories corresponded to the research questions and included: the educational model, the child–nature relationship, the teacher's role, safety, work organization, cooperation with parents, and institutional determinants.

The analysis also included secondary data comprising:

- national and international scientific literature on outdoor education;
- research findings on forest preschools;
- studies addressing the social and cultural determinants of alternative education;
- reports and publications concerning the impact of children's contact with nature on their development.

The secondary data were used primarily to interpret the findings of the case study and were comparing the analyzed educational model with conclusions presented in both national and international literature.

Case Description

The institution operates as an educational system implementing the national curriculum in natural conditions. Educational activities take place primarily in a forest setting, where children's learning is based on exploration, play, and direct experience. The institution has been operating since 2020.

The case was selected purposively. The studied institution was treated as an information-rich case, allowing for an in-depth analysis of outdoor education within the Polish context. It was chosen because it is one of the few private forest preschools operating in the Silesian Voivodeship. The selection was based on the availability of documentation, the length of the institution's operation, its implementation of outdoor education as the primary educational approach, and its certification by the Polish Institute of Forest Preschools.

The institution's fundamental mission is to provide education in a natural environment, with children spending most of their time outdoors regardless of weather conditions. Although the educational program follows the national curriculum established by the Ministry of National Education, its implementation differs substantially from traditional teaching methods. Learning takes place through direct experience, exploration, and free play in the forest. Educational practice involves elements of outdoor pedagogy, adventure education, the Montessori approach, Waldorf education, as well as environmental and intercultural education.

The preschool operates with mixed-age groups, supporting the development of relationships, empathy, and cooperation among children. A central role is assigned to the adult – the teacher as a guide – who supports children's development through attentiveness, empathetic communication, and dialogue based on the principles of Nonviolent Communication (NVC). The institution also strongly emphasises an individualized approach to each child and provides access to specialist support, including pedagogical, speech and language therapy, and psychological services.

The institution's promotional and educational materials emphasize that this model of education supports children's holistic development – physical, emotional, and social – while fostering independence, resilience, and an awareness of the surrounding world. The preschool has been awarded a certificate by the Polish Institute of Forest Preschools, confirming the high quality of its educational practice (Marzec & Miecznik-Warda, 2025, p. 130). This educational model is consistent with the

constructivist approach to education, in which the child is regarded as an active participant in the learning process.

The analysis of the institution's documents and educational materials indicates that outdoor education is implemented through children's daily, extended stays in the forest environment. Particular importance is attached to free exploration, which replaces traditionally understood classroom-based instruction. From a social perspective, the profile of the families choosing the institution is significant, as they are predominantly families with high levels of cultural capital who consciously opt for alternative forms of education. This finding supports the argument that access to outdoor education remains socially selective.

The analysis of the cultural determinants, in turn, reveals a tension between the principle of free exploration and societal expectations concerning safety and supervision. The institution's documentation demonstrates an effort to balance these two dimensions by introducing formal safety procedures while simultaneously preserving children's autonomy.

Social Determinants

Nature Deficit

The analysis of the institution's curriculum documents and informational materials indicates that one of its primary objectives is to counteract children's nature deficit by ensuring their daily contact with the forest environment. This finding is consistent with Louv's (2008, pp. 36–48) conclusions. The phenomenon referred to as *nature deficit* manifests itself not only in the reduction of children's spontaneous outdoor activities but also in the deterioration of their psychological and physical well-being and the weakening of their social competencies. Polish scholars have observed that contemporary children increasingly grow up in highly structured environments closely supervised by adults, which limits their opportunities for independent exploration and discovery of the world (Nawrat-Borowska, 2018, pp. 318–321). At the same time, numerous studies emphasize the importance of regular contact with nature for children's sensory, emotional, and cognitive development (Sobel, 2004, pp. 54–60; see also Chawla, 2015, pp. 438–440). Within this context, forest preschools represent an attempt to mitigate the negative consequences of what has been described as a "closed childhood."

Changing Models of Childhood

Within the educational model under study, the child is regarded as an active participant in the learning process, reflecting contemporary pedagogical approaches that emphasize free play and exploration as central educational principles (Waite, 2017, pp. 20–25). From a constructivist perspective, children are viewed not as passive recipients of knowledge but as active co-constructors of meaning, while the natural environment serves as a space for experience, inquiry, and experimentation (Klus-Stańska, 2018, pp. 67–72). Polish educational scholarship likewise highlights a shift away from transmissive models of teaching toward approaches grounded in experience and meaningful interaction with the surrounding environment (Śliwerski, 2015, pp. 203–205). Forest preschools exemplify this educational orientation by providing children with greater autonomy and opportunities to learn through action, thereby fostering agency as well as social competence.

Family-of-Origin Cultural Capital

Access to outdoor education is closely associated with families' values and resources, which may contribute to its selective and potentially elitist character (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 245). Families choosing this type of educational provision often possess substantial cultural capital, reflected not only in their educational attainment but also in their lifestyles and beliefs regarding child-rearing and education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2011, pp. 88–92). Within the Polish context, alternative forms of education – including forest preschools – remain more accessible to middle-class families, which may reinforce existing educational inequalities (Szymański, 2021, pp. 134–136). Consequently, despite its inclusive educational philosophy, outdoor education may simultaneously contribute to the reproduction of existing social inequalities.

Cultural Determinants

Safety Versus Risk

Contemporary culture draws a lot of attention to the children's safety, which may restrict educational practices based on exploration and risk-taking, thereby conflicting with the fundamental principles of outdoor education (Gill, 2014, p. 12). The literature suggests that excessive adult supervision limits children's autonomy and their ability to assess and manage risk independently (Ball, 2002, pp. 45–47). Polish researchers likewise argue that the social perception of risk has changed considerably, with preventive and risk-averse approaches now predominating. Such attitudes may

hinder the development of children's adaptive competencies (Woynarowska, 2010, pp. 98–100). Outdoor education offers an alternative perspective by treating risk as an integral component of the learning process rather than solely as a source of danger.

Institutionalization of Education

The institution operates within the formal requirements of the education system, creating tension between pedagogical flexibility and standardization. The obligation to implement the national core curriculum limits the flexibility of educational practice and requires spontaneous learning activities to be aligned with predefined curricular objectives. As the literature indicates, the institutionalization of education is closely associated with the bureaucratization and standardization of pedagogical practice (Potulicka & Rutkowiak, 2012, pp. 56–60). In the context of forest preschools, this necessitates continuous negotiation between the principle of free exploration and formal educational requirements, often resulting in compromises regarding the organization of educational activities.

Adaptation of International Models

Outdoor education in Poland has been strongly influenced by Scandinavian educational models; however, their implementation requires adaptation to local social and climatic conditions (Waite, 2020, pp. 30–33). In countries such as Denmark and Sweden, forest education has a long-standing institutional tradition and is deeply embedded in the cultural context, whereas in Poland it remains a relatively recent phenomenon (Bentsen et al., 2010, pp. 31–34). Adapting these models involves not only responding to different climatic conditions but also transforming public attitudes toward children's education and learning (Dymara, 2010, pp. 77–80). Consequently, the process requires the reinterpretation of international educational models within the framework of local cultural norms and the Polish educational system.

Within the Polish context, a significant challenge lies in the predominance of the traditional classroom-based model of education, which has long reinforced the belief that formal instruction is inherently more valuable than experiential learning (Dymara, 2010, pp. 81–83). As a result, despite its growing popularity, outdoor education is still frequently perceived as a complementary or alternative educational approach rather than an equally legitimate method of teaching. The literature emphasizes that changing this perception requires both systemic reforms and grassroots

educational initiatives, such as forest preschools and field-based schools (Jagodzińska & Strumińska-Doktor, 2019, pp. 63–66).

Another important aspect of adapting Scandinavian models concerns Poland's climatic conditions. Compared with the relatively mild climate of the Nordic countries, Poland experiences more variable and often harsher weather conditions, requiring appropriate infrastructure and well-prepared educational staff (Okoń, 2003, pp. 154–156). In practice, this involves providing children and teachers with suitable outdoor clothing and preparing alternative learning scenarios for periods of extreme weather. At the same time, research indicates that regular exposure to changing weather conditions contributes to the development of psychological resilience, independence, and adaptive competencies among children (Jagodzińska & Strumińska-Doktor, 2019, pp. 63–66).

The example of the *Mysikrólik* Forest Preschool in Rogoźnik demonstrates that the adaptation of international outdoor education models does not involve their direct transfer but rather their creative reinterpretation in accordance with the local socio-cultural context. The institution combines elements of nature-based education with the implementation of the national preschool curriculum, thereby integrating formal and informal educational approaches (Ordon, 2019, pp. 111–121). This educational model facilitates the gradual acceptance of outdoor education among both parents and the local community, who often expect the achievement of conventional educational objectives.

Another important issue concerns the social perception of safety. In Poland, education conducted in natural environments is frequently regarded as more hazardous than classroom-based instruction, influencing both parental decisions and the attitudes of educational authorities. However, research demonstrates that well-designed outdoor education can be equally safe while offering substantial benefits for children's physical and emotional development (Ordon, 2019, pp. 111–121). In this context, increasing public awareness through parent education and the dissemination of good practices appears to be of particular importance.

In summary, the adaptation of outdoor education models in Poland requires a multidimensional approach regarding organizational, cultural, and attitudinal change. Forest preschools play a particularly significant role in this process, serving as a bridge between the traditional education system and contemporary, environmentally oriented approaches to teaching and learning.

Discussion

The findings of the study confirm that outdoor education can be interpreted as a form of pedagogical innovation that responds to contemporary social challenges, including children's diminishing contact with nature, declining levels of physical activity, and the growing dominance of digital environments. These findings are consistent with the existing literature, which demonstrates that education based on direct experience and interaction with the natural environment support the development of children's social, emotional, and cognitive competencies (Andrzejewska, 2020, pp. 152–155).

The analysis of the case study demonstrates that outdoor education redefines both the role of the teacher and the educational environment. The teacher takes on the role of a guide and facilitator of children's learning experiences, while the natural environment becomes a setting that encourages exploration, independent discovery, and knowledge construction (Dylak, 2000, pp. 63–82). At the same time, nature does not replace the teacher; rather than that it provides a context that supports the learning process. Its educational potential can only be fully realized when combined with purposeful pedagogical guidance and the deliberate design of learning experiences (Budniak, 2017, pp. 63–65).

The findings also indicate that the implementation of outdoor education is strongly shaped by its social and cultural context. On the one hand, its development is facilitated by growing environmental awareness among parents, increasing concern about children's diminishing contact with nature, and the search for alternative educational approaches. On the other hand, the expansion of outdoor education is constrained by prevailing social norms concerning children's safety, the formal requirements of the educational system, and selective access associated with families' cultural and economic capital. This suggests that the successful implementation of outdoor education depends not only on its pedagogical assumptions but also on broader social acceptance and supportive institutional conditions.

The findings therefore support both the classical principles of nature-based pedagogy and contemporary concepts of environmental education while simultaneously highlighting the constraints imposed by the local social and cultural context. The analysis suggests that outdoor education has considerable potential to promote children's holistic development. However, its wider implementation requires changes not only in pedagogical practice but also in educational policy and public perceptions of learning taking place beyond the traditional classroom environment.

The present study is exploratory in nature and is based on the analysis of a single case; therefore, its findings cannot be generalized to all institutions implementing outdoor education. The analysis relied exclusively on documentary sources and

educational materials without incorporating interviews or participant observation. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as an in-depth analysis of a particular case, offering insight into the possible social and cultural mechanisms that shape the implementation of outdoor education.

Conclusions

The study made it possible to answer the main research question concerning the influence of social and cultural determinants on the practice of outdoor education. The analysis demonstrated that the functioning of the investigated private forest kindergarten is determined not only by its adopted pedagogical assumptions but, above all, by the interaction of social, cultural, and institutional factors. The development of outdoor education is supported by parents' growing environmental awareness and their search for alternative educational models. At the same time, its wider implementation is constrained by prevailing safety norms, the formal requirements of the education system, and unequal access resulting from families' cultural and economic capital.

The findings confirm that outdoor education is a valuable form of early childhood education, supporting children's cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development. At the same time, its effective implementation requires appropriate teacher preparation, close cooperation with parents, and the development of organizational and legal frameworks that facilitate education in natural environments.

In light of the findings, nature cannot be regarded as an autonomous "teacher." Rather, it constitutes a significant component of the educational environment whose potential is realized only when combined with teachers' reflective pedagogical practice and the intentional design of the learning process. This suggests that the educational significance of nature is constructed through both pedagogical practice and broader social processes.

Given the exploratory nature of the study and its focus on a single case, the findings are not intended to be representative but rather to indicate directions for future research. Future studies should be extended to include interviews with teachers, parents, and children, participant observation, and comparative research involving different types of institutions implementing outdoor education. Such approaches would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms shaping the development of outdoor education in Poland.

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