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To give the nature cultural meaning; pretend play in the forest

In Scandinavia 'the nature' traditionally has played an important part in preschool pedagogy. In an ongoing project nature as a symbol for an ideal childhood is focused. Discourses concerning the connections between nature and childhood are explored as well as children's and adults' use of natural resources in a preschool with an outdoor profile. The preschool is an *I Ur och Skur*- preschool (which means approximately 'in all kind of weather'). These preschools are connected to *Friluftsförbundet*, a large Swedish outdoor life organisation that since 1956 has organized forest schools for children.

In this paper the children's pretend play in the forest is analysed. Pretend play is an important area for aesthetic activity used by young children. Pretend play is multi modal, all kind of aesthetic expressions are used and integrated. In play children also appropriate the aesthetical resources available in the surrounding society, for example the culture directed to children. Data includes video observations from children's play in natural environments. The study has been going on from August 2006 to June 2007 and approximately 35 children between 1½-6 years old divided in two groups have participated.

When preschool children play the physical environment is of great importance. Small children need to use concrete material to symbolize other objects. When toys are used in this purpose they often symbolize and look like certain objects; a doll looks like a baby etcetera. Contrary to toys natural material do not have meanings that are taken for granted. They are interpreted and given significances by the people who use them. The children who go to preschools with outdoor pedagogy in a sense live their lives in a tension between nature and culture. At the same time as they spend most of their time in natural environments, mostly without toys, they live in an urban society characterized by media figures and consumption. From that perspective it is interesting to explore how the children use the natural material and which cultural meanings nature and natural objects are given in their play.

A preliminary analysis points toward different tendencies. In the youngest children's play (1½-3 years) the nature is domesticated. They often pretend to cook, eat and sleep. There are urban elements in their play; they use a pine to symbolize a motor bike which they ride on when they go to the shopping mall. In their play media characters like Pippi Longstocking are included. Contrary to the younger children the older ones often exoticize the forest when they play. A part of the forest is for example pretended to be a jungle with crocodiles, tigers and snakes. Media figures that occur are among others Disney characters and super heroes. A significant part of the play is that a large part of the time is used to negotiate how different natural objects should be interpreted. In comparison with toys and other artefacts natural material can be interpreted in many different ways.

Of importance for the children's play is the staffs' pedagogy. When new children join the groups in August the staffs work actively to demonstrate the play possibilities in the forest. They take part in the children's pretend play and show the children how natural material can be used to symbolize other things. In the tradition of *Friluftsförbundet* imagination is an important part. Different fairy characters, the most well known *Skogsmulle*, sometimes visit the groups in the forest played by dressed up staffs. In stories and talk the nature is animated and animals are given human traits. In that way the pedagogy contributes to give the nature an enchanted atmosphere that invite the children to play.