



Increasing access to nature-based preschools in various settings by rethinking what counts as nature

*Education In, About, and For the Environment in the Early Years*

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What do we think  
about when we think  
about Nature?

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Listening to Nature Gives You a Real ...  
[smithsonianmag.com](https://smithsonianmag.com)



Nature - Wikipedia  
[en.wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org)



Europe | The Nature Conservancy  
[nature.org](https://nature.org)



What counts as nature? It all depends ...  
[washington.edu](https://washington.edu)



Nature is thriving during lockdown ...  
[cntraveller.com](https://cntraveller.com)



The Nature Cure - Scientific American  
[scientificamerican.com](https://scientificamerican.com)



nature experiences and happiness globally  
[phys.org](https://phys.org)



Exactly how much 'nature time' do we ...  
[medicalnewstoday.com](https://medicalnewstoday.com)

## Research Question:

- How can understanding early educators' inclusion of sustainability within nature-based programming lead to increased access to nature-based preschools for people of varying social locations?

## Davis' (2010) framework

Early Childhood Education...



**In the environment:** employs the natural environment as a medium for learning

**About the environment:** helps children appreciate the importance and complexity of the natural world

**For the environment:** adds the sociopolitical dimension that is missing from the above forms and is concerned with social action for change

Davis, J. M. (2010). What is Early Childhood Education for Sustainability? In Davis, J. M. (Ed.) *Young Children and the Environment*, 21 – 42. New York: Cambridge University Press.

# Method

## Data Collection

→ A qualitative human participant study design involving semi-structured interviews and small focus groups

## Analysis

→ Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) starting with giving initial codes

→ Employed Davis' (2010) framework

→ Organized into categories and themes

→ To confirm reliability of analyses: classroom observations and member checking (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016)

**Table 1: Preschool Descriptions**

School	Setting	# of <u>Parti- cipants</u>	Access to nature	Time spent outdoors
A	Rural	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• woods</li> <li>• raised bed gardens</li> </ul>	At least 2 hours; weather permitting entire duration of half day program
B	Rural	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• woods</li> </ul>	At least 2 hours; weather permitted full day except for nap time
C	Urban	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• walking trail</li> <li>• raised bed gardens</li> </ul>	30 minutes to one hour
D	Urban	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• raised bed gardens</li> </ul>	One to two hours
E	Rural	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• woods</li> </ul>	At least one hour; full duration of half program when weather permits
F	Rural	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• woods</li> <li>• raised bed garden</li> <li>• farm access</li> </ul>	Between one and three hours
G	Urban	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• raised beds</li> </ul>	30 minutes to two hours
H	Urban	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• raised bed gardens</li> </ul>	One to two hours
I	Rural	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• woods</li> <li>• farm on site</li> </ul>	At least three hours



# Who generally attends Nature-Based Preschool?

## NAAEE (2017) Report on Nature Preschools

- **Over-represented**
  - **White children**
  
- **Underrepresented**
  - **Dual language learners**
  - **Children with differing abilities**
  - **Children of Color**
  - **Families in areas without access to high quality programs (location, cost, etc.)**



# Nature is many things

**Benefits of 'nature' are well known but aren't beneficial if they can't be accessed.**

**In what ways might ideas about nature and nature programming limit who has access to and who attends nature preschools?**

**How can we (re)conceptualize how we think about, enact, and market nature preschools to be more widely accessible?**



## Think About: Who is *this* Nature For?

To be comfortable  
in this space, what  
would a person  
need?



## General Discussion

- ❖ When teachers understand nature as something that they “have to go to,” rather than something that they are already part of, a disconnect is inherently created, which reinforces anthropocentric ecocultural identities in children (Audley, Stein, & Ginsburg, 2020).
- ❖ When teachers shared their attempts to include sustainability and pro-environmentalism within their curricula, they often shared (inadvertently) that they brought together education *in*, *about* and *for* the environment—the crux of sustainability education being education *for* the environment (Davis, 2009)—within specific lessons or units that utilized their definition of the nature that they had access to locally.
- ❖ Our findings demonstrate that it is not entirely necessary to be in a rural or wooded setting to teach sustainability. Therefore, because it is not necessary to be in a wooded setting to teach sustainability, these teachers are utilizing their craft knowledge of sustainability to best utilize the location of the school for teaching purposes.
- ❖ We assert that though many nature-based preschool teachers are employing education *for* the environment (sustainability education), there is a gap in their practice because of their limiting preconceived notions of what the definition of “nature,” is and the unfounded idea that nature-based means the necessity for “woods,” or “wilds.”

A photograph of a dense forest. The ground is covered in a thick layer of bright green moss. Numerous thin, dark tree trunks and branches are visible, some of which are also covered in moss. The background shows taller, more vertical trees, possibly evergreens, creating a sense of depth. The overall lighting is soft and diffused, typical of a forest interior.

Next... quote  
example

## “The magic mushroom:” the quintessential amalgamation of education in about and for the environment

The magic mushroom is the perfect preschool example... there's a path that goes across the swamp... at the end of the path there's this mushroom on the log that the kids found. It's huge, it's like two hands big. So, they found this mushroom in the summer. Of course, it's magical, it looks like it has a face, and of course we made a big deal out of it saying: 'this is a magical mushroom, you have to be really careful.' It was right at the end of the log bridge and so the kids had to go around it in order not to break it. The two times that they came in the summer the magic mushroom was this huge deal. But, what was so amazing was that over the winter we had a group of kids come back ... and we didn't know if the mushroom would still be there, but it was. We were playing out in the swamp, and the mushroom was still there, and some of the same kids who saw it in the summer immediately went into protection mode, and they took turns standing guard over the mushroom while the other kids played around so that it wouldn't get broken, and like, does it matter if that mushroom got broken? Not really, but that idea of creating this reverence for this cool thing in nature and they took it on themselves. They would yell at each other as they were coming down the hill saying, 'remember the mushroom! Don't break the mushroom!' It was very intense. I think that's a perfect example of being there with them when they found it and taking that moment to help them be so in awe of how beautiful it was instead of that impulse to kick it over, which I probably would have done when I was a kid... But to have an adult there to be like, 'wait, this is a really special thing, I've never seen this before.' So it's that idea of grasping those moments and creating a story or a narrative for the kids, and I know that some of those kids will remember that for the rest of their lives. And having had that experience of caring for a thing simply because it was uniquely beautiful in nature is really powerful, and nothing we planned for... We know what we're going to find [in the classroom]... but when we're outside, you never know what you're going to come upon, and I think that is so exciting.

## Description of “this cool thing in nature”

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## “Of course we made a big deal out of it”

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# What we don't think about when we think about nature.

## Unequal distribution of Nature in U.S. AND Unjust outdoor experiences

### Center for American Progress (2020) reported:

- Racial discrimination impacted human settlement patterns and the patterns for conservation areas
- Public conservation lands were created after violent dispossession of lands from Indigenous peoples.
- US systematically segregated and excluded people of color from public lands.
- People of color are threatened, intimate and subjected to violence while in “nature”
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## What we don't think about when we think about nature.

1. **Communities of color are three times more likely than white communities to live nature deprived places. Seventy-four percent of communities of color in the contiguous United States live in nature-deprived areas, compared with just 23 percent of white communities.**
2. **Seventy percent of low-income communities across the country live in nature-deprived areas. This figure is 20 percent higher than the figure for those with moderate or high incomes.**
3. **Mikhail Martin, co-founder of Brothers of Climbing, explained why so few Blacks participate in rock climbing (REI, 2017)**
4. **Sobel (2016) in writing about tuition and fees of nature-based preschool programs, notes,(p. 167), which makes it all the more difficult for families of lower socioeconomic status to participate in nature-based preschool programming.**

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"In the black community, there's this misconception that, 'Oh, Black people don't do that. Only White people do this.' And they have every right to believe that, because their outlet to the world is what you see on the TV and internet, and if you don't see any Black people, or any people of color climbing, you're not going to think you can do it"

# What we don't think about when we think about nature.

**the highest-quality  
preschool programs have  
the highest tuition rates**

1. Communities of color are three times more likely to live in nature-deprived places in the contiguous United States than white communities, with just 23 percent of white communities in nature-deprived areas compared to 70 percent of communities of color (REI, 2017).
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## Think About: Who is *this* Nature For?

Has your view of this space changed? If so, how? What are you thinking now?



## Concluding thoughts: Tools for rethinking what counts as nature.

1. Informal green spaces
2. More-than human world = nature
3. Big nature and small nature
4. Beyond “In”: including for and about the environment
5. What does/can nature play look like?
6. Questions for helping kids (re) think about nature
  - a. What are you noticing? What are you wondering?
  - b. Where do we feel comfortable? Where do we belong?

Thank you to the 20 teachers and two administrators who participated in this study.

Thank you to my former Professors Shannon Audley and Rosetta Cohen from Smith College for helping me with this study from my master's thesis.

Questions?

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