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**Are Polish kindergartens ready for the outdoors? The state of (im)maturity of the Polish educational system and its selected members for outdoor education**

Czy polskie przedszkola są gotowe do wyjścia w teren? Stan (nie)dojrzałości polskiego systemu edukacji i jego wybranych członków do edukacji outdoorowej

**Abstract:** As human beings, we are moving dramatically away from nature, which results in negative consequences for both mental and physical health. Highly developed countries see a special need to restore contact with nature as early as possible (Simonienko 2021, 74). Are Polish kindergartens also ready to provide children with education in nature? This article aims to describe the regulations of the educational law related to outdoor education in Polish kindergartens and to present the offer of educating teachers of early childhood education in the field of outdoor education at universities in Poland. Outdoor education is a term that does not have a clear equivalent in Polish. Depending on the translation and understanding, we can attribute different origins and meanings to it. The article presents terminological inaccuracies regarding outdoor education in Poland. The functioning of the education system is based on the activities performed by teachers, working both with the students and (indirectly) with parents. The last part of the text presents a description of selected attitudes of parents and children attending a forest kindergarten towards outdoor education.

**Keywords:** outdoor education, forest kindergarten, teacher education, education system

**Streszczenie:** Współczesny człowiek drastycznie oddala się od natury, co skutkuje negatywnymi konsekwencjami dla zdrowia zarówno psychicznego jak i fizycznego. Wysoko rozwinięte państwa szczególnie dostrzegają potrzebę przywrócenia kontaktu z przyrodą, możliwie od najmłodszych lat (Simonienko 2021, 74). Czy polskie przedszkola także są gotowe, aby zapewnić dzieciom edukację w terenie? Celem niniejszego artykułu jest opis regulacji prawa oświatowego związanych z edukacją outdoorową w polskich przedszkolach oraz przedstawienie oferty kształcenia nauczycieli wczesnej edukacji w zakresie outdoor education na uczelniach wyższych w Polsce. Edukacja outdoorowa to termin, który nie posiada jednoznacznego odpowiednika w języku polskim. W zależności od tłumaczenia oraz sposobu rozumienia edukacji outdoorowej możemy przypisywać jej różne pochodzenie i znaczenie. W artykule przedstawione zostały nieścisłości terminologiczne dotyczące edukacji outdoorowej na gruncie polskim. Funkcjonowanie systemu oświaty jest oparte na czynnościach wykonywanych przez nauczycieli, pracujących zarówno z uczniem, jak i (pośrednio) z rodzicem. W ostatniej części niniejszego tekstu przedstawiono opis wybranych postaw rodziców i dzieci uczęszczających do przedszkola leśnego wobec edukacji outdoorowej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja outdoorowa, przedszkole leśne, kształcenie nauczycieli, system edukacji

## **Introduction**

Outdoor education is not (currently) popular in Poland, which causes, among other things, the fact that it does not have an exact equivalent in Polish literature yet. Terms such as outdoor, field and forest education (Wierzbicka 2022, 62), pedagogy of experiences (in Poland as a literal translation of the German *Erlebnispädagogik*) (Ryszka 2016, 34), and adventure pedagogy (Palamer-Kabacińska and Leśny 2020, 13) are used and mixed up. Forest kindergartens (Szlaużys 2019) and schools are the type of institutions where this type of education is conducted. The above terminology appears in studies on the methodology of upbringing and educational work in the field. Empirical research on education in natural space is a separate area. Polish researchers often refer to foreign examples, although recently the first articles concerning, among others, the problem of the forest as a pedagogical medium have appeared (Paluch 2022, Rykowski 2022)<sup>1</sup>.

### **1. Who invented outdoor education? Terminological inaccuracies**

As Agnieszka Leśny states, “every Polish researcher interested in the theories of (...) outdoor and adventure education faces semantic and linguistic problems” because there are many definitions and interconnections of these concepts. (Leśny 2020, 12-13). Researchers do not agree on the roots and differences between adventure and outdoor education, and the border between these concepts is blurred. In addition, adventure education is carried out by practitioners who do not focus on defining the boundaries of this discipline. Nevertheless, Gilbertson et al. defines outdoor education as “a method of teaching and learning that emphasizes direct, multisensory experiences and takes place in the outdoor environment” (Gilbertson et al. 2006, 5). In Poland, Rajmund Tomik, Waław Sonelski and Ewa Palamer-Kabacińska attempt to organize the theory of adventure and outdoor education. Tomik defines outdoor education as “conducting the educational process in the «open area»” (Tomik 2020, 42). Palamer-Kabacińska proposes a model based on three overlapping terms – outdoor education, adventure education, and environmental education (Palamer-Kabacińska 2020, 12), while Sonelski points out that “from a practical perspective, Polish discussion on the differences

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<sup>1</sup> Forest pedagogy is described as a problematic area aspiring to a sub-discipline of scientific pedagogy, dealing with research into the educational environment (Paluch 2022).

between outdoor and adventure education is barren because these are “concepts with clearly blurred boundaries, sets that partially overlap” (Sonelski 2020, 34; Leśny 2020, 45).

**Forest schools and kindergartens**, in turn, are separate fragments of forests, where students and teachers have a building adapted to the needs of children. It can be in the form of a brick house, container, dome or yurt. However, children and teachers stay in this room only when the weather conditions do not allow for free exploration of the surroundings. Most of the time, appropriately dressed, they eagerly play and learn in the field (Williams 2017, 247). Children who attend such settings have a better ability to assess risk and are therefore less likely to have accidents. Their teachers observe stronger curiosity and motivation to act, and better performance in maths and reading (Sampson 2016, 58). The idea of forest kindergartens was initiated in the Scandinavian countries. From there it spread to other European countries as well as the United States and Japan. In Sweden, its advocate was already the eighteenth-century Carl Linnaeus, a physician and biologist. In Danish, *udeskole* means “outdoor school” (Åkeson McGurk 2017, 169). Unfortunately, in Poland, the vast majority of forest kindergartens and schools are non-public institutions or foundations, associations and individual entrepreneurs where children fulfil their schooling obligation as part of home education. Therefore, these places are paid, which affects their kind of elitism.

It is worth mentioning, however, the “outdoor schools”, which were established in the interwar period, mainly as a result of the tuberculosis epidemic<sup>2</sup>. These institutions were established far from cities, in forest and mountain areas. Classes were held outdoors. The play areas were grassy or sandy, unlike the commonly used asphalt. Gardening classes were held, own vegetables and fruits were grown. Class sizes were twice the norm at the time. Learning took place through the direct observation and experience of the students. The first school of this type, Waldchule in Charlottenburg, was founded in 1904 in Germany. It was a model for other institutions of this type in Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, Spain, the United States and Australia (Szpytma 2022, 39). Also, the Private Sanatorium Gymnasium in Rabka, operating in the years 1924-1939, fulfilled many of the contemporary assumptions of forest kindergartens and schools. In addition to the location and the applied educational and upbringing methods, the fact of the elitism of the facility deserves attention. Pupils were to be equipped with appropriate clothing enabling outdoor recreation in various weather conditions. Attending school also involved paying high tuition fees that only a

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<sup>2</sup> At the same time, ecological education was also implemented in many institutions. Edyta Wolter conducts an in-depth analysis, interpretation and criticism of selected examples in this regard (Wolter 2011).

few could afford. The school was outside the city, in the forest. When the weather was fair, classes were held outdoors, and the crops of the school garden were used (Świder and Urlńska 2016, 233).

Particularly noteworthy is the interwar activity of the Workers' Society of Children's Friends, which contributed to the creation of Jordan gardens, summer camps and outdoor schools (Oleńska-Pawlak and Jedynek, 1988, 139). Jordan gardens were created in Poland at the end of the 19th century. These were objects where the children's play took place in nature. At the same time, great importance was attached to the upbringing and education of children. The novelty of this concept resulted from the fact that the idea of establishing parks or gardens dedicated specifically to children was revolutionary on a global scale. Doctor Jordan's first city park was established in 1887 in Krakow. There were playgrounds and playing fields, a pond turned into a skating rink in winter, a gymnasium pavilion, and a dairy. Busts of famous Poles were placed in the space for didactic purposes. Animators also conducted classes, exercises and workshops (Czałczyńska-Podolska 2016, 114). Conversations, talks and singing were an integral part of games (Majdecki 2008, 366). Realizations of such spaces were few and innovative until the end of the 19th century<sup>3</sup>.

A modern preschooler also knows that physical activity and healthy eating are important (Reimann 2018, 140). What is often forgotten is the fact that it is outdoors activity rather than activity in the gym that is most beneficial for human health (Louv 2016, 205). It is good for both physical and mental health. Norwegians refer to this lifestyle as *friluftsliv*, which can be translated as "living in the open air". Nils Faarlund, a Norwegian engineer, was a promoter of using the idea of *friluftsliv* in education of children and youth. Already in 1972, he introduced the "Outdoor Life" subject to the curriculum. He emphasized that "friluftsliv is a way of returning home, to nature, for a man lost in the modern world" (Faarlund 1994, 6). Living close to nature is one of the factors that give residents of the Nordic countries the top place in the happiness ranking. In 2020–2022 Finland, Denmark and Iceland held the first three places while Sweden was the 6<sup>th</sup>, Norway the 7<sup>th</sup> and Poland, in comparison, 39<sup>th</sup> on the list (Helliwell et al. 2023, 34).

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<sup>3</sup> In the brochure of the Central Society of Jordan Gardens published in 1938, we can read that "theoretically, every mother is aware of how important outdoor activity is for her child's health. Meanwhile, in practice, this beautiful theory (...) is limited (...) to an hour-long «walk» on the street" (Centralne Towarzystwo Ogrodów Jordanowskich 1938, 1). This quote, despite the fact that nearly a hundred years have passed, seems to be alarmingly relevant today.

## **2. (Im)maturity of the education system**

The lack of systematization of concepts related to outdoor education is partly due to the legal and organizational conditions regarding the education system in Poland. The Regulation of the Minister of National Education of February 14, 2017, on the core curriculum for pre-school education and the core curriculum for general education for the primary school, includes the content and forms of education that could be successfully implemented during outdoor classes. Some provisions refer to outdoor education. One of the tasks of the kindergarten was “creating conditions that allow for safe, independent exploration of the nature surrounding the child, stimulating the development of sensitivity and enabling learning about the values and standards relating to the natural environment” (Regulation 2017, 3). A child prepared to start learning at school should also see “the emotional value of the natural environment as a source of aesthetic satisfaction” (Regulation 2017, 5), and use “concepts about natural phenomena (...), about the life of animals, plants, people in the natural environment, use of natural resources” (Regulation 2017, 7). However, the implementation of these provisions is not monitored or enforced. Unfortunately, learning about nature is commonly limited to the issues of environmental protection or recycling. Moreover, learning through artificial aids (such as boards, drawings and models) is still popular (Brudzińska 2021, 85). Also, the recommendation regarding daily outdoor activities (“organization of outdoor activities should be part of everyday work with a child in every age group” (Regulation 2017, 8)) is not implemented by early childhood education teachers.

There are many reasons for this state of affairs. Both the surveyed parents and teachers point to the lack of appropriate children’s clothes, reluctance of some parents motivated by their fear of the child catching a cold, difficulty of controlling the group in the space outside the classroom or the kindergarten room (Michalak and Parczewska 2019, 138), lack of independence of children in terms of clothing. In addition, organization of the class-lesson system should be mentioned, in which classes take place at specific times, the teacher must be on duty during the break and students must be on time for lunch in the canteen. A teacher who wants to leave the kindergarten or school premises with a group must report this fact to the director of the facility. If the statute provides so, before planning to go outside, the teacher should also ask the children’s parents for their consent in writing. The number of teachers must be adjusted to the number of children, and the educator is responsible for the safety of children outside the kindergarten (Act 1982, Art. 6; Regulation 2001, §7; Act 2016, Art. 68). All the above legal regulations constitute a certain limitation on the way to free exploration of the area around the facility. The aforementioned forest kindergartens and schools are an alternative to

this state of affairs. Unfortunately, in Poland, these are still non-public institutions or foundations, associations, informal groups or individual entrepreneurship, most often conducted based on all-day educational workshops. This is another proof of the immaturity of the Polish education system for public, widely available outdoor education.

The above considerations refer to the initial stages of education, such as kindergarten and primary school. The stage of higher education is important in the consideration of the (im)maturity of the education system for outdoor learning as well. Properly educated teaching staff is necessary to conduct classes in natural space. Meanwhile, curricula for students of pedagogical faculties practically do not include content related to outdoor education. One of the few exceptions is the subject “Pedagogy of the Forest - Getting to know and experiencing yourself in nature”, carried out at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw. It is a “theoretical and practical course intended for people sensitive to the experience of transcendent values (good, truth, beauty and freedom) in biocenotic forest conditions.” The program provides for “elementary concepts in the field of physical and geographical regionalization of a selected forest area and their impact on humans, philosophical anthropology explaining the need for the source experience of oneself in nature; ecology, forestry and natural science allowing for the identification of the most common species of forest animals and plants in the local environment”. In addition, “basic exercises in camping techniques will be carried out for safe, ecological and effective staying in the forest area. The acquired knowledge and skills will allow you to plan and conduct one-day practical classes in the forest” (USOS UKSW 2023)<sup>4</sup>.

Another example of good practice is the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, where in the summer semester of the academic year 2020/21 the “Outdoor Education” subject was implemented at the Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology, the assumption of which was, among others, “shaping the skills necessary to plan and conduct field activities using the method of educational projects; showing nature education in the field as a kind of organized learning process through independent activity, experiencing, being in nature and experimenting” (USOS UMCS 2023).

The “Outdoor Education” subject was taught in English in the winter semester of the academic year 2022/23 at the Academy of Special Education in Warsaw. As we read on the university’s website, “It is a subject that allows students to acquire skills and shape attitudes, values and knowledge necessary to use the outdoor space as a psycho-pedagogical tool. The

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<sup>4</sup> The coordinator of the subject, Michał Paluch, PhD, in 2021 has begun promoting Forest Pedagogy both as an academic subject and as a possible sub-discipline of science. At that time, interdisciplinary expert seminars on Forest Pedagogy gathered nearly 100 researchers from various disciplines.

course refers to the basic theoretical concepts such as: learning through experience, outdoor education or pedagogy of adventure (...). The program covers participation in field trips, which include the process of preparation, dealing with challenges and assessing the learning process” (USOS APS 2023). In addition, the remarks reminded us that there is no bad weather, only bad clothes and that students will go outdoors in the sun, rain and snow. The above examples prove that it is possible to implement content related to outdoor education in the training programs of future teachers.

These initiatives have been noticed, but so far they have little importance in shaping the teaching staff in Poland. The reasons for this state of affairs can be sought both in the unpreparedness of academic lecturers and in the unwillingness of students to educate themselves in this field. Without recognizing the value of nature in human life, however, it is impossible to share the passion for nature with students.

### **3. (Im)maturity of parents and children**

Outdoor education, regardless of the difficulties associated with its definition in Poland, is associated with the recognition of humans as an element of nature that does not dominate it but coexists with the surrounding organisms (Cree and Robb 2021, 13-14). Such an approach collides with the constant desire to dominate, accumulate goods, increase income, and consume. Although we have examples of using outdoor education methods in Poland reaching back to the beginning of the 20th century, it seems impossible to popularize this idea as widely as in Scandinavian countries or Western Europe. Poland’s political and economic history can be considered as one of the potential causes. It seems that our society is still stuck in the need to saturate itself with well-being, travel, exotic food products, and disposable products, after a long period of significant limitation of both civil liberties and access to all material goods. Małgorzata Litwinowicz-Drożdziel states that “Polish society did not produce surpluses. The sense of safety resulting from having any resources (...) as a result of historical events is not well established in our culture. On the contrary, the fear of constant lack is entrenched” (Litwinowicz-Drożdziel 2022, 32). The author indicates that “turning non-possession/resignation/renunciation into a value must result from cultural norms” (Litwinowicz-Drożdziel 2022, 29). Comparing the process of making outdoor education public and popularizing in countries such as Poland with, for example, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, the Nordic countries, Germany, or Great Britain does not fall within the thematic scope of this article, but it is a research gap that would be worth filling by designing further research in this area.

The functioning of the education system is based on the activities performed by teachers, working both with the students and (indirectly) with the parents. This part of the article, which presents a description of selected attitudes of parents and children attending a forest kindergarten towards outdoor education, was developed based on qualitative research conducted according to the constructivist grounded theory method of Kathy Charmaz (Charmaz 2006) in one of the forest kindergartens in Poland. The subject of the research is the process of organization and functioning of a forest kindergarten in Poland. The procedure includes a 1.5-year participatory observation, unstructured interviews with parents and teachers and visual data. Research problems concern areas such as:

1. Formal, law, and architectural organization of the forest kindergarten,
2. Education and care in the forest kindergarten,
3. Reasons for choosing a forest kindergarten by parents of preschool children,
4. Similarities and differences between public institutions and a forest kindergarten.

The first of the attitudes presented by parents is associated with concepts such as climate depression/mourning, solastalgia, i.e., suffering caused by changes in the living environment, e.g., as a result of climate change, war, as a result of gentrification (transformation of social space into a commercialized area, e.g., gallery). Parents of small children are most exposed to difficult emotions related to the climate (Budziszewska 2021, 221). Outdoor education is perceived as the last chance for their children to experience the world they remember from their childhood - free fun outdoors, healthy food, clean environment. The researched children, on the contrary, raised the topic of climate warming in free discussions among themselves, but they did so without fear, treating the topic rather as obvious. They discussed, for example, the impact of various means of transport during holiday travels on the environment or the origin of purchased exotic fruits and the way they had to travel to our country.

The inconsistency of the parents' lifestyle and the forms of preschool education they choose manifests itself in the desire to enrol the child in a forest facility, while the family does not spend free time in nature, as well as in presenting non-ecological attitudes, such as excessive consumption. Mehmet Mart argues that while parents perceive outdoor activities as a positive phenomenon in general, their preferences for their children are mostly for indoor activities (Mart 2021, 358). Discrepancies between parents' behaviour in the home environment and those declared during their presence in kindergarten were most often revealed as a result of children's stories, e.g. about littering and wasting food. The teacher faced with such stories is

in a difficult position, not wanting to negate the parent's authority, and at the same time feeling the need to confirm the child's assumptions about the right behaviour.

Fears related to nature are revealed by most parents in the initial stage of recruitment to a forest kindergarten. Mart claims that "although all parents feel favourably towards outdoor activities, some of them have concerns with safety aspects" (Mart 2021, 363) which are associated with hypothermia of the children's body, the possibility of falling, cuts, stings and tick-borne diseases. Cevher-Kalburan reveals that parents are concerned also with "(...) ill-intentioned strangers, kidnapping and injuries" (Cevher-Kalburan 2014, 114). Despite these fears, parents decide to enrol their children in a facility where they will spend most of their time outdoors, regardless of the season or weather. The researched children did not duplicate their parents' fears, which they demonstrated by playing in the rain and snow, climbing trees, using sharp tools and rolling in the grass. However, the youngest children, around three years old, in the initial stage of their stay in the kindergarten told stories related to wild animals, in which wild boars and wolves were supposed to attack people. Arrindell identified that predatory animals are one of five categories of animals that cause fear (Arrindell 2000, 535). For example, Kubiatio's research on kindergarten children's perception of animals showed that the bear is disliked by them because: "it is big" or "it can eat people" (Kubiatio 2012, 3184). This was probably the result of listening to or watching fairy tales and children's books in which wild animals are sometimes presented as a threat (Kubiatio 2012, 3186). As children stayed in kindergarten, after a few months, these visions subsided in favour of caring for the surrounding flora and fauna. For example, children warned themselves against stepping on an insect or a plant on their way and also reprimanded themselves for unjustifiably picking plants without need.

Disagreement for public education is the last attitude presented by the surveyed parents about the choice of outdoor education for their children. Parents emphasized the value of spending time outdoors, but also the possibility of free play, the style of communication between carers and children, healthy food and lack of aggressive and oppressive behaviour towards children, which parents experienced during their education. Many parents declare that they do not intend to consider public system facilities at the next stages of their child's education. These are also the reasons for choosing home education, which include failure to meet expectations and a sense of wasting time in a traditional school as well as parents' school trauma and the desire to protect their children from it. The possibility of developing passions and individual approaches to a child is also indicated (Szafrńska and Pawlak 2020, 209-210). Children, in turn, when asked about the differences between kindergartens and schools in

buildings and forest schools, expressed sympathy towards children spending their days in classrooms. At the same time, they believed that what they were doing in kindergarten (including children attending the obligatory “zero class” of kindergarten education) was not learning in any way, although they acquired the ability to count, read and write, in addition to numerous skills in physical, social and emotional development. They think that learning “is when the teacher writes something on the blackboard”.

## **Conclusion**

Numerous discrepancies are revealed in juxtaposing the attitudes of parents and their several-year-old children. It seems that for children many issues about which adults have doubts and fears are natural. This should result in greater confidence of teachers and parents in children’s abilities, also outdoors.

The education system, and in particular the failure to sufficiently carry out recommendations for the implementation of outdoor education in public educational institutions, as well as insufficient preparation of teachers and inappropriate attitude of parents, contribute to the low popularity of outdoor education in Polish kindergartens and schools. Reducing adults’ fears related to outdoor education should be done through appropriate education of future teaching staff and parents, visits to institutions providing outdoor education, and exchange of experiences with educators working outdoors.

Turning to nature could, however, contribute positively not only to the better development of children but also to adults - parents, teachers and tutors. Well-functioning examples of institutions implementing outdoor education, both in the private and public sector, in the country and abroad, in recent years, but also over a century ago, give hope for further popularising outdoor education in Poland. It seems, however, that it will not be challenging to convince children to this type of education, but it may take more time to convince adults that public outdoor education is possible in Poland, so priority should be given to activities aimed at increasing the awareness among parents as well as future and current teaching staff in Poland about the benefits of outdoor education.

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