



# Childhood in the **Anthropocene**

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## **Urban or sustainable? Rethinking children growing up in cities**



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### **Abstract**

Most children today grow up in urbanised landscapes. This article reflects on how we can raise an awareness of possibilities for encounters with green and blue environments located in urban areas. Walking the landscape is a slow way of experiencing the landscape and its places. Pockets of green and blue places are places with more biodiversity and at the same time places with wild elements for children's exploration and play. The text is based on a walk along a river revealing places of importance for children's connection with natural landscapes in their local environments.

### **Background**

For decades, many of my colleagues and myself working with learning for sustainable development have embedded this theme into our university outdoor education teaching, mostly taking students out into the forest or other nature areas. Working at a university located in the centre of Oslo, OsloMet, the

environment surrounding the campus is urban. Most of our early childhood teacher students will work in urbanised landscapes. At the same time, there is an increased pressure on green areas. 80% of Norwegians live in cities or densely built-up areas. Compared with the 1950s, only 20-30% of green areas still exist (Miljødirektoratet, 2023). Sustainable development is a core value defined according to the UN, including environmental, social, and economic aspects. From the Norwegian Framework Plan for the content and tasks of kindergartens (UDIR, 2017): Sustainable development is about how people who are alive today can have their basic needs met without denying future generations the opportunity to fulfil theirs (p. 10). In addition: The children shall be given outdoor experiences and discover the diversity of the natural world, and kindergartens shall help the children to feel connectedness with nature (p. 11) The first quote follows the UN definition (Brundtland, 1987), and the second gives direction for the use of the outdoors connected to education for sustainable development. The second points towards the necessity to take the children outdoors and promote an awareness of the natural diversity in the local areas around kindergartens. In the following, I reflect on ways to raise awareness of how to work with education for sustainable development during early childhood.

## **Sustainability, biodiversity and children's play**

Suburban landscapes are commonly transformed from a rural to a more densely built housing area with high-rise blocks, detached houses, and villas. Urban environments are different, they are diverse and of importance for the children living there (Beery et.al, 2020; Malone, 2013). There are several studies analysing landscapes for children's play using the theories of affordances and theories of visual perception (Fjørtoft, 2001; Heft, 1986; Kyttä, 2004; Sandseter, 2010).

Just as affordances refer to the function of the landscapes, biodiversity connects to diversity and the numbers of species. Looking only at the landscape function for play may leave out important aspects to be addressed in education for sustainability such as nature connections and the richness of sensory experiences.

In an action research project to promote increased physical activity for all children, we saw the importance of small pockets of green areas inspiring the children regarding play and movement. These places were not designed as playgrounds, most of them were hidden in-between built-up areas and busy roads. (Jørgensen-Vittersø & Kaarby, 2021). A further investigation of registration of plant species across the neighbourhoods of three early childhood institutions combined with the registration of the places the children preferred to play showed an interesting pattern. Places with high biodiversity overlapped with places preferred for play and movement by the kindergarten children.

## Art of seeing, walking the landscape

One way to be aware of the local environment is simply to walk the landscape, slowly. Walking with children following their pace is to become aware of the qualities of the landscapes, not only for humans, but also for other species.

In Oslo, there are environmental city projects re-opening streams and rivers to restore blue and green environments (City of Oslo, 2023). One award-winning example is Hovinbekken, a stream within the same area as the early childhood institutions reporting above about the importance of green areas in their local environments.

Walking along this waterway from its origins down to the city centre gives an insight into the places with rich biodiversity and sensory experiences for children. The effect on wildlife is well-documented, however, the experiences this environment offers children is less explored. Their experiences can be explored in light of life phenomenology as being embodied (Bengtsson, 2002; Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and emplaced (Casey, 1993). Across all the places depicted in Figures 1-4, there were different smells, sounds and the ground offered different tactile and kinaesthetic experiences.



Figure 1: Road



Figure 2: Into the wild



Figure 3: Pond habitat for birds



Figure 4: Trees for climbing.

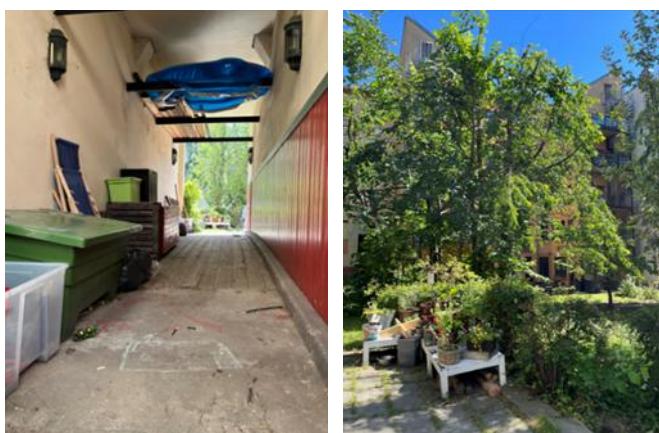
If we are not aware of these places, they are often not used by children. I argue early childhood student teachers do not learn to look for these places, if they are not trained to do so.

## Entanglements and the more-than-human

Even in the inner city of Oslo, we find small areas that offer important connections between children and the more-than-human. One example are the pigeon houses that can be found in parks, backyards and vacant lots as depicted in Figures 5 and 6 a & b.



Figure 5: Pigeon House



Figures 6 a & b: Backyards

## Urban or sustainable?

Answering the question urban or sustainable, I argue that we go for both. We need to work with lenses to see the potential of urban landscapes and develop good practices for sustainability in education. One way is to develop methods combining data from biodiversity and children moving and dwelling in biodiverse and sensory rich environments.

I see a need for new perspectives on how and where we teach sustainability and engage in the environment when working with early childhood teachers in urban and suburban areas. As educators in early childhood teacher education, we are challenged to empower pre-service teachers to see the possibilities, find good places for encounters with plants and animals and good places for outdoor play and exploration.

Rethinking early childhood teacher education in times of the Anthropocene, we need to look at what education for sustainability may be. In this respect, there are some possibilities I suggest we investigate further:

- Transformative and interdisciplinary teaching and learning (Wals, 2014). Adding the action aspect to education for sustainability.
- Slow pedagogy (Clark, 2023), think time and pace when working with children.
- Wild pedagogy (Jickling et.al., 2018) especially looking for wild places in densely built areas.
- Awareness of the web of connections and ways to work with the children in their local environments will be a challenge for the future.

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