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Environmental and outdoor education in preschool through family camping: the example of Czech Woodcraft in parents' opinions

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ABSTRACT

The present study focuses on the impact of woodcraft-style family camping on preschool children, using their parents' perspectives. Although the history and methodology of Woodcraft have been well documented, the theme of family camping has attracted very little research attention, and even fewer studies have targeted the impact of this leisure activity on preschool children. By inquiring about the parents' experience, the researchers adopted a qualitative approach backed by a phenomenology and hermeneutics-based philosophy for their empirical research. Data was collected through insightful interviews with seven respondents; parents experienced in Woodcraft camping with young children. Interpretative phenomenological analysis, which aims at understanding the uniqueness of one's experience and the meaning attributed thereto, identified six phenomena describing the fundamental structure of this lifestyle: motivation for family camping; camp life and its principles; outdoor education; education through nature; community; and romanticised experiencing following the Native Americans. Since direct childhood experiences predominantly shape environmental attitudes, this topic should be addressed more in environmental education research.

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Introduction

Study rationale and choice of terminology

We live in an era characterized by a global pandemic of sedentary behavior, rising rates of childhood obesity, and increasing amounts of civilizational diseases, and despite rational knowledge of the causes, no success in addressing the problem can be reported for many decades (Keating, Backholer, and Peeters 2014; Ng et al. 2014; Roth et al. 2004). There is no dispute that rational nutrition, physical activity, and time spent outdoors are the primary means by which the consequences of unhealthy lifestyles can be countered, and the professional and general public have had intellectual knowledge and empirical evidence of the effects of physical activity on health for at least eight decades (Kohl et al. 2012). Around 80% of countries have national physical activity policies or plans, progress in the implementation of national actions to address one of the biggest health challenges of the twenty first century has been insufficient (Sallis

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et al. 2016). Modern society can monitor, observe and describe this problem, not radically counter it.

Our study does not deal directly with this topic, but enters the professional debate by pointing out the possibilities of a different lifestyle than that offered by the majority consumer society, leading to the aforementioned ever-increasing problems. We want to draw attention to traditional forms of being in nature and thus contribute to a deeper insight into what woodcraft-style family camping can bring to pre-school children. However, we do not test such an assumption with the possibilities of quantitative research approaches and statistical analyses, but ask about the understanding of lived experience and explore in detail the meaning respondents give to their experience. Rather than a pre-determined structuring of themes by the researcher, we let it emerge phenomenologically what kinds of phenomena captured in the interviews with campers can be formulated as themes from parents' experiences of camping with preschool children. Without stating hypotheses or research questions (to be consistent with the IPA method used), we suggest that the chosen recreation pathway leads to a significant increase of resilience in pre-school children, who may grow up to be more resistant and robust individuals than the Snowflake generation or Me generation (Cirlig 2022; Zalewska, 2022).

However, because a child's cognitive maturity in this age period is characterized more by thinking in preconcepts and the use of language requires symbolic instruments (Piaget 1966), even in misconcepts, when children's conceptual ideas differ from those of scientists (Sop, Tekerci, and Hançer 2023), we chose to collect data by interviewing parents who can articulate the impact of camping on the preschool children they lovingly care for better than the children themselves could.

Right at the beginning, however, we have to add a terminological explanation, which is necessary for international communication characterized by different cultural contents of the same words used. One of the basic terms used in the past to describe the pattern of this style of outdoor living, and still used in the Czech Republic where the research was carried out, is the word 'Indian'. However, it is not understood in any pejorative, derogatory or in any way dehumanising way, as the term may be perceived in the USA, for example. If in English the word Indian refers to both the indigenous population of America and the inhabitants of India, in Czech different terms are used (Indián and Ind) and therefore there can be no confusion between them. The word 'Indian' is currently perceived as politically incorrect because it is associated with a colonial context. It has therefore been replaced by the terms 'Native' or 'Indigenous' people of America. To avoid a shift in meaning or misunderstanding, it must be radically emphasized that the repeated use of the word 'Indian' in this text is not meant in any pejorative or disparaging way, but solely as historical evidence of the once neutrally understood designation of ethnicities and tribes in the Great Plains region. As a common name, it is still routinely used in Czech and other languages, exclusively with the positive connotation of an ethically and morally mature individual. This is probably a consequence of the extraordinary acceptance of Karl May's adventure novels, famous for the stories of the Indian chief Vinnetou and the ranger Old Shatterhand, including their 1960s film versions. Because these stories are imbued with humanistic values and an idealistic portrayal of the indigenous people as honest, unspoiled and respectable victims of civilisation, the term 'Indian' has retained a positive meaning in the Central European region to this day. Even the specific culture of the indigenous peoples of North America in Bohemia is imitated in outdoor recreation, and words such as 'Indian-ish' or 'Indianism', even 'Indian philosophy' denote this symbolism, ethical and ideological grounding as the best expression for the deliberate choice of this lifestyle.

Research objectives and epistemological background

Despite many historical and methodological publications, there has been no empirical research on the impact of woodcraft education and summer camping. Therefore, the authors focused

their empirical research on parents' perceptions of the impact of such leisure-time educational activities on the development of preschool children. We focused on parents and not directly on children for several reasons. Firstly, preschool children do not yet have sufficiently developed cognitive and communication skills, nor existential experience (Kohlberg 1968; Piaget 1966), to be able to differentiate, for example, between different types of camping and to perceive the specificity of Woodcraft at all. Similarly, if we ask for the respondents' experience in the area of personal development, such progress can undoubtedly be more accurately and easily identified by parents than by children who are only on the threshold of lifelong learning. Thirdly, children's experiences of camping are largely shaped by their parents' attitudes in terms of what activities they can and cannot participate in, and thus it is parents who can rationally evaluate the rationale for the educational style chosen. The purpose of this article and the goal of the research is to find out how parents of preschool children perceive the impact of woodcraft-style camping on their kids' development.

Being interested in the respondents' experiences of the Woodcraft family camping phenomenon, the authors have not framed their research within a positivist or post-positivist paradigm that translates experienced phenomena into numerical data and statistical calculations. The authors have embedded their epistemological assumptions of empirical inquiry in a constructivist paradigm, supported by a phenomenologically and hermeneutically oriented philosophy, which allows them to choose experience as the central theme of their research (Allison and Pomeroy 2000).

Phenomenology is a philosophical trend that focuses on the study of experience, or how it 'appears' to humans. It is not about psychologizing the assumptions of experience, but about returning 'to the things themselves', since the picture of the world provided by the scientific and technical reduction of reality does not correspond to the natural lived world (Husserl 1999; Patočka 1998). The actual experience, i.e. how things appear, is closer to our authentic experience than the models of the natural sciences and their interpretive schemes provide. For our paper, however, we do not choose the path of a comprehensive phenomenological reduction; we draw inspiration mainly from the epoché step, where we try to avoid any judgments, assumptions or prejudices. In this way we try to get closer to the natural world and the lived experience of our respondents and use the phenomenology-based research method IPA to analyse the data.

The second theoretical underpinning of the considerations presented here is hermeneutics, which does not seek to explain but to understand (Dilthey 1980; Gadamer 2010). In the hermeneutic circle, it is emphasized that our thinking and cognition always move in a circle between a single phenomenon and the overall horizon of its meaning, and that our pre-understanding is inherently open to the constant deepening and correction of new contents of meaning whose horizon is expanding. It is from here that we adopt the thesis that we can also refine and deepen our understanding of child development through camping *via* conversations with their parents.

The respect for the phenomenological approach of 'bracketing' preconceptions and the interest in not bringing the opinion of the researchers and authors of the text into the respondents' statements is reflected, among other things, in the fact that we deliberately do not set specific research questions. Within interpretive phenomenological analysis, IPA (Řiháček, Čermák, and Hytych 2013; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009; Smith and Osborn 2003), research asks how a particular individual perceives or experiences a particular situation and what meaning they attribute to that experience. Thus, the researchers' interest is in exploration, not clarification of experience, which is why the research question is framed in an open way. In this research, the research question could be considered to be formulated as: What are the experiences of parents with woodcraft style camping on the development of their preschool children?

The historical context

Tradition of environmental and outdoor education in Bohemia

In the nineteenth century, the traditions of outdoor activities in Central Europe were closely linked to the sports organisation *Falcon-Sokol* and tourism activities, especially the German *Wandervogel* movement. The international traditions of outdoor education (Martin, Turčová, and Neuman 2016) were significantly strengthened by the concept of *turistika*, which was distinctly developed in Bohemia and included walking, paddling, skiing, cycling, and mountain hiking. However, British and American models also appeared in Bohemia very soon, especially Baden-Powell's *Scouting* (Baden-Powell 2005) and Seton's *Woodcraft* (Seton 2018). The founder of *Junák*, the Boy Scouts, the Czech equivalent of international scouting, sees Powell's contribution in terms of order, discipline and organisation, while Seton's merit is his perception of romanticism, poeticism and love of nature (Svojsík 1912). Seton is perceived as the spiritual leader not only of *Woodcraft* but also of *Scouting* (Hošek 2019). In the inter-war years of the 1920s and 1930s, outdoor education's organisational and ideological diversity was extensive. There were many scouting organisations (Šantora et al. 2012), the writer Jaroslav Foglar and his reading clubs flourished (Jirásek and Turcova 2017; Pírek 1990), and the tramping movement became prominent as a form of a popular protest against civilisation. Its followers advocated freedom and weekend retreats from the cities to camp settlements in the countryside (Krško et al. 2019). At that time, many *Woodcraft* organisations were established, such as the *Czechoslovak Society of Psohlavci*, the *Woodcraft Friends Club*, the *International Socialist Association of Woodcrafters*, the *Czechoslovak Forestry League* and the *Forest Wisdom League* (the *Woodcraft League*).

In the politically bipolar world after the Second World War, independent organisations and associations could only function minimally; however, outdoor education received new impulses that combined positive educational perspectives, regardless of their origin. *Camp schools* appeared (Snopek 1969; Stárek 1974), and experimental and modern forms of outdoor activities were sought within the official youth organisation. The *Vacation school of Lipnice* was founded, which later became part of the international *Outward Bound* movement (Jirásek and Turčová 2020; Neuman and Hanuš 2007). In the 1970s and 1980s, the environmental aspects of outdoor education were primarily promoted by the *Český svaz ochránců přírody* (Czech Union of Nature Conservationists) and the *Brontosaurus* movement, which provided opportunities for alternative lifestyles (Brenner 2018). The individual currents and movements of environmental and outdoor education in the Czech Republic in the second half of the twentieth century, such as tramping, scouting, foglaring, *Woodcraft* and camping activities, were ideologically and personally intertwined (Jehlicka and Smith 2007; Mareš 2018).

Environmental and ecological topics became integrated into the official political structure after the social changes of 1989, e.g. through the Green Party or the establishment of the Ministry of the Environment (Pečínka 2005). The Czech environmental movement, which had developed during the socialist era without contact with the Western world, could draw primarily on the traditions of nature protection and education of children and youth described above (Jehlicka & Smith, 2017). Currently, there are separate organisations of different trends, movements and associations working in the field of outdoor and environmental education in the Czech Republic, in addition to those mentioned above. At the same time, it has become evident that there continued to exist a particular hybrid 'ecumenical' form of their cooperation and mutual influence, including the camping practice. The present article focuses on only one of the organisations, *Liga lesní moudrosti*, that draws most on the roots and traditions of *Woodcraft* in its activities. On the other hand, the described development in the previous decades has imprinted the ideological and practical dimension of its activities and certainly influenced its values and activities.

Liga lesní moudrosti: woodcraft and the Forest Wisdom League

Woodcraft's natural education, which seeks to develop the whole person in physical fitness, personal-social and spiritual dimensions, is based on the work of Ernest Thompson Seton (Seton 2018). Woodcraft builds on the example of idealised Native American prairie dwellers (formerly known as Indian tribes), the symbolism of the campfire (strength, beauty, truth and love), all-round development and service, and the system of trials symbolised by the eagle's feathers and the story of climbing the mountain.

The first tribe of *Woodcraft Indians* (the original name) was founded by Seton in 1902, and the first tribe in Europe was the *Děti Živěny* unit led by Czech high school teacher Miloš Seifert in 1913. He translated Seton's books and devised the Czech equivalent of the name as 'forest wisdom' rather than 'craft' (Seifert 1920). The *Liga lesní moudrosti* (Forest Wisdom League, abbreviated as LLM in Czech), which he founded, experienced a similar development to other youth organisations in the Central European region: after initial ideological enthusiasm, the movement split into several different organisations. A revival was prepared during the Prague Spring of 1968, but the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops prevented it, and the LLM resumed its activities in the spring of 1990. Since the 1960s, however, there have been unofficial woodworking clubs, and the art of tepee camping has been preserved. In this way, the cultural, political and environmental dimensions of this phenomenon of diverse practices of resistance, offering new forms of sociality and immersion in the natural world, can also be perceived (Jehlička and Kurtz 2013). Those interested in a deeper and more detailed understanding of the century-long history of Czech woodcraft culture can find a wealth of information in English (Jehlička 2008).

Currently, LLM is a nationwide organisation for children, youth and adults. Unlike other woodcraft organisations, such as the English *Woodcraft Folk* and *Order of Woodcraft Chivalry* or the American *Woodcraft Rangers*, the Czech LLM seems to have remained the most faithful to Seton's original ideas (Kupka 2019). The tribal organisation allows for year-round activities involving regular meetings, expeditions and nature walks, focusing mainly on summer camping. Unlike other traditions, Woodcraft camping can be characterised by a deliberate simplicity and frugality inspired by indigenous peoples, especially Native Americans, i.e. with the bare minimum of equipment, often self-made. Various rituals, such as the ceremonial lighting of campfires, add to the romanticism. Education and camping are 'slow-paced', emphasising awareness of one's place in nature. The phenomenon of willing simplicity brings woodcrafters closer to environmental organisations, as their educational system instils respect and a positive attitude towards nature through, among other things, romanticism, a sense of community and an alternative to commercial entertainment (Pecha 1999).

A methodological workbook, *Korálkové činy pro skřítky* (Bead Actions for Elves) (Lunerová et al. 2014), was developed for the specific age group under consideration, i.e. preschool children from the age of four. The workbook prepares young children for life in a tribe (community), in harmony with nature and the environment, by teaching camp skills through being active in nature and acquiring new knowledge and skills through their own experience. It offers tasks divided into four areas, based on Seton's original concept, focusing on the children's physical activities and development; the development of their knowledge and relationship with nature and cultural values; handicraft and intellectual creativity; and the development of their relationship with the environment and the building of social relationships, including the will to help others. Beads for achievements are awarded during a ceremony, and the child weaves the beads into a necklace to be worn during assemblies or other ceremonial gatherings of the tribe.

Woodcraft-style family camping

There is no doubt that camping for several days in nature has the most significant impact on the development of individuals in terms of environmental and outdoor education (Bialeschki

and Sibthorp 2010). The possibilities of family camping have been recognised since the beginning of organised outdoor activities. One of the promoters was Eduard Štorch, a historical novelist and reform-minded teacher, who implemented the *Children's Farms* project, introducing experiential pedagogical methods and outdoor education into history classes (Rýdl 2004). As early as 1908, he founded a group of families with young children who camped together on the Adriatic. He later became a passionate advocate of family camping and wrote the first methodological manual (Štorch 1921).

Since then, summer camping has been an opportunity for intergenerational learning and personal development in the form of family members 'living together'. Such experiences help to strengthen skills such as perseverance, physical endurance, teamwork and cooperation (Lee and Graefe 2010). The main characteristics of family camping can be seen in the phenomena of family, community, nature and spirituality (Jirásek, Roberson, and Jirásková 2014). The interplay of these factors subsequently strengthens family bonds, self-confidence and self-reliance during family tipi camping, and profound experiences linking social and natural relationships can be perceived. The following quote illustrates this phenomenon:

The stars are shining, and I am inside in a teepee with my three children. It's a humble abode, with a fire ring in the center, hastily assembled beds made of wood with mattresses woven from branches. Yes, the first night is usually not easy until your body gets used to the change. It is night, and the scent and warmth of the fire burning in the middle of the tent permeates the entire interior. And I'm lying next to our 3-year-old youngest son who is pressed up against me as I gaze at the fire and the stars visible through the smoke flaps through which the smoke escapes (Jirásek, Roberson, and Jirásková 2017, p. 80).

Key elements of the camp experience, such as nature, family social interaction, special places and children's learning, suggest that their meanings resonate even more strongly in contemporary society than in research conducted half a century ago. Despite this, the topic has received limited scholarly attention (Garst, Williams, and Roggenbuck 2009).

Woodcraft-style camping (Macek 1990; Porsch et al. 2011) uses a range of activities based on direct contact with the natural elements, a deeper appreciation of nature and a practical schooling in camping skills. It deliberately incorporates a degree of primitivism and simplicity and can be characterised by a spirit of community, a preference for the picturesque, an appreciation of the magic of the campfire and a move towards a spiritual dimension. It is, therefore, undoubtedly an alternative to the hurried and superficial lifestyle of the contemporary majority. Basic camp skills include using a knife, axe and saw, building a teepee (a large conical tent for 4-6 people with a fire in the centre) and its interior (low beds, usually made of poles), building other camp facilities such as a fireplace, kitchen and dining room, latrine and washroom, etc.

Methods

Research sample

The selection criteria for inclusion in the research sample was solely based on participation in the activities of the individual *Liga lesní moudrosti* tribes and their family camping, based on accessibility. Respondents were contacted by telephone and email, and two were approached in person. Seven participants (three males and four females) aged 34-64 years (mean age 43.57 years) from different locations in the Czech Republic (Prague, Pilsen, Zlín, Olomouc) participated in the research (see Table 1).

Data collection

The method of understanding interviews (Kaufmann 2010) was chosen for data collection. This method assumes that the respondents are active social creators whose knowledge needs to be

Table 1. Research sample.

Respondent	Locality/Region	Age	Sex
R1	Zlín	64	Female
R2	Praha	46	Male
R3	Zlín	38	Female
R4	Zlín	35	Female
R5	Praha	41	Female
R6	Plzeň	47	Male
R7	Olomouc	34	Male

understood through the individual's value system. The social aspect under study is Woodcraft-style family camping and such individual experiences cannot be measured or evaluated, but can be understood.

Unstructured interviews were conducted in person and online with a video camera in January and February 2023. The interviews lasted 36-55 min (with an average of around 45 min) and were recorded on a dictaphone. The recordings were transcribed verbatim into Excel (about 9000 words in Czech).

Data analysis

The authors were interested in the respondents' personal experiences. Therefore, the method of interpretive phenomenological analysis, IPA, was adopted for data analysis (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009; Smith and Osborn 2003). IPA focuses on understanding a person's unique experience and allows one to explore how individuals attribute meaning to their experiences in detail. Interpretive credibility relies primarily on the respondent's statements supported by direct quotes. The general IPA analytical process can be characterised (Řiháček, Čermák, and Hytych 2013; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009) as reading and re-reading, breaking down the entity into its components, making initial notes and comments, developing emerging themes and finding connections between themes. Such topics refer to areas of life related to the phenomenon under study, and their conceptual capture can be described as categories. Thus, the process involves the creation of codes as conceptual labels for semantic sections of the reality described, their subsequent reduction and final thematic incorporation using labelled categories. The intended phenomenological insight into the quotations and their evaluation is, thus, not defined by the researcher and their research question but is fully open to the semantic range of phenomena described by the respondents as their understanding of their own experiences. Subsequently, another case analysis follows, looking for patterns across themes.

The transcribed interviews were entered into the middle column of a three-column table, with the left column used as a space for emerging themes and the right column for notes and comments, mainly of a descriptive nature. Prior to analysis, the transcription of the interviews was accompanied by repeated listening to the recordings, using the tone of voice and the participant's non-verbal communication as a tool to add meaning to the words.

The text was interpreted using a three-level coding process. The first level was open coding, used to identify and descriptively categorise key themes in the data. The authors focused on the content of each respondent's statements and the structure of the ideas and experiences that shape their world. Initial notes were made by underlining significant sections of the reading, followed by a search for an adequate designation for each semantic unit of the underlined text or paragraph. Some of these notes formed the core of future interpretations (Smith and Osborn 2003). Thus, 294 codes were generated in the first phase.

Consecutively, axial coding was carried out, involving finding connections between the themes, assigning them to thematic clusters and labelling them with catch-all categories. This phase aimed to structure the main categories that emerged from the text, look for connections across the themes and demonstrate how they related to each other. Some themes naturally

became overarching or main themes (topics), while others merged. Thus, a list of overarching themes emerged, with sub-themes clustered under or around them according to an interpretive key. The key point is that the parent (overarching) themes are also grounded in direct quotes from respondents (Pringle et al. 2011). Thus, they are linked to the primary text, even though they have been formulated from an interpretive perspective.

Finally, the data were subjected to selective coding across cases, extracting associations between themes and capturing cross-cutting themes, presenting the integration of results as final categories made available in the study's results section. The authors posed the following questions: Given the respondents' experiences, how are they related? Which of the cross-cutting themes stands out as the strongest across the analyses? It became apparent that specific categories needed to be revised or renamed within the context of other cases that had been previously overlooked.

Quotations were left in their original form; only filler words that did not convey the statement's meaning were removed. However, common linguistic expressions and spelling mistakes were left in their original form to maintain the authenticity of the statements. The analysis was conducted in Czech; only the concluding research report was translated into English. Therefore, some of the subtle linguistic expressions may have been lost in translation. The authors have opted to label each referenced quotation with numbers for potential identification, the first referring to the anonymised respondent and the second to a line of the transcribed interview.

Ethical aspects and limitations of the research

The research complied with all requirements of professional ethics and established regulations and international guidelines for research involving human participants. The authors adhered to the rules of voluntary participation, the right to privacy, the confidentiality of information provided in the research, including notification that the interview would be recorded for research purposes, and the anonymization of respondents.

The authors consider the research pool to be the main limitation of the research; its size was based on the availability of respondents. It cannot be ruled out that the resulting categories might take a slightly different form with a different structure of interviewees. In fact, the participants proved incapable of describing their practical camping experiences in more detail but limited themselves to only a few sentences. Difficulties in recruiting suitable respondent-campers with experience with preschool children who would agree to be interviewed significantly impacted the research population created.

Results

Analysis of the data from the unstructured interviews revealed six primary categories in which parents of preschool children see the developmental potential of Woodcraft-style camping. Motivation for this style of experiencing often arises from their own childhood experiences and their desire to pass on similar experiences to the next generation. The principles of camp life are characterised by a peculiar structure of freedom and organised activities. Education in nature is a form of holistic human development with the possibility of increasing the resilience of children, which is a highly topical issue especially today. Education by nature has emerged as a different category, a specific contrast to life in modern civilization burdened by excessive child sitting in front of screens. The community that is strengthened by camping goes beyond the horizon of the family and extends interpersonal relationships. And the specific romanticism associated not only with Seton's books but also with May's adventure stories also accentuates specific ethical principles of natural life and emphasizes the value of rituals. However, each of these categories needs to be introduced in greater detail.

Motivation for family camping

This particular lifestyle choice may stem from the experience gained in LLM in childhood (5), in the generation of our respondents 'in the late eighties and early nineties' (3; 2), and they intended to treat their children to the same personal formation. It is a question of taking up the baton and passing it on to the next generation: 'Actually, I was born into a tribe to a mom and dad who would basically make a regular programme for us back then, both for us and for our friends. They would go like this with other families and do camps both during the year and in the summer' (7; 2-4). Another impetus for such activities can be a personal relationship with nature, reinforced by a similarly oriented profession, as testified by the coordinator and lecturer in environmental education (4). The leisure-time educational activities can also become an impetus: 'We tried to organise a children's tribe, but there were too few of us and not enough children. So, we decided to change it to the family way of working' (6; 35-36). The key is establishing contacts and good relations with other similarly oriented families: 'When our child attended kindergarten, a group of parents began to form who were looking for something like that and were interested (...). Thus, I got back into the flow, and then we led the next generation, which has been going on ever since' (2; 9-11).

The children's young age does not constitute an obstacle: 'We started camping when our children were babies, our son was not even a year old, and our daughter was three months old. I believe being in nature is very important, and age is not an issue. You can start at any time' (4; 28-31). Because young children 'can sometimes be afraid of going somewhere on their own' (2; 17), family camping 'can overcome all those issues of fear, loneliness, having to be with parents, but at the same time, they're already getting a whiff of Woodcraft activities' (2; 25-26). 'Of course, if we take the kids camping at preschool age, they'll easily follow in afterwards.' (5; 42). Family camping can then continue in later years: 'We have a little daughter who's preschool age (...). I'm in contact with very young children, and we do some activities for them. Then, actually, later on, they progress higher and higher and grow up' (7; 8-10). Meeting other families at summer camps is the culmination of year-round activities, although family camping 'is not an organisation. It's actually made up of us, the parents, and there are kids ranging in age from six months to 15-16 years old. It brings together a heterogeneous group of different ages. And because they've known each other for many years, they form micro-communities in the community. The great thing is that the older children actually help the younger ones, and the younger kids learn from the older ones. Moreover, the older kids act as the caregivers. I am convinced that it is very enriching for all age groups of children' (4; 95-104). The youngest children, 'we have a five-year-old; however, they are in the same groups as the fourteen-year-olds, and maybe we do it more or less because we just want and need to involve everybody' (7; 20-21).

There is an emphasis on the continuation of family tradition and the transmission of experience within the family over time: 'Today, the children (...) are 40 years old' (1; 153-154). The closeness of the family is evident not only at the time of the camp but also in its preparation: 'On Saturday and Sunday, I sewed two new teepees with my children because they actually go alone with their families, and they actually follow the whole mission of the Woodcraft, and the principles of the Woodcraft' (1; 154-157). The children, thus, adopt the lifestyle and continue it with the next generations. 'Now, both my children are running the club today (...). And it's important to them' (3; 63-65).

Camp life and its principles

Woodcraft-style camp life is a unique combination of an organised programme and spontaneity. 'The programme is prepared with age and Woodcraft's laws in mind. The basic knowledge and skills include how to light the fourfold fire: truth, love, power, and beauty' (1; 99-100). The

programme is intended for 'all ages (...) they always meet for three days. They announced who wanted to do what, there was some basic but very rough outline of what should be done in terms of the programme for that week (...); whoever was interested in contributing something to the programme came and wrote down what was going to be done for those three days' (2; 54-57). The camp programme is devised by adults who ask others to collaborate. 'The programme is always based on a story continuously read to the children around the campfire. We meet at the communal circles around the fire, where the children listen to part of the story and then do activities based on the story. (The activities) are aimed at developing forestry skills, at strengthening the collective, but also, for example, there are competitions where the dynamics of that group are addressed' (4; 113-115). Programme activities connected to bead-achieving can be performed by families 'continuously throughout the year, and well, they had it as a programme. Some families only remembered it at camp' (3; 56-57). Because the children's programme relies on their own activities, it evolves from education to self-education. 'It's about finding some way for them to try to move themselves somewhere. To learn something new, or just to understand something' (5; 56-57). The point of summer camping is then that 'they gain experience, they gain independence, they function in a group of children and they can have some fun even without our guidance' (6; 26-29). Therefore, it is about achieving 'some kind of independence' (7; 81), and 'overcoming oneself and getting out of one's comfort zone' (4; 130-131).

Education in nature

LLM uses educational means to achieve holistic human development with individually chosen progressive goals. The praise and honour system in the form of beads (for younger children) and eagle feathers (for older children) are sufficient motivation for activity. It is, in fact, a competition without rivalry, of surpassing oneself, because 'no one forces them to compete with each other. (...) They can decide for themselves if I'm going to go and jump rope twenty times now, or I'm going to do something else. However, I don't have to compete with anybody. If he's going to do it that way because I want to, I want to do it myself' (1; 55-61). However, when the children are rewarded for completed activities, 'with beads assigned to him at the assembly, he gets them on a string and he can, sort of, gain some kind of comparison with the other kids' (7; 37-39).

Woodcraft education promotes a higher level of resilience, there is clearly 'quite a good physical condition, some endurance, the kind that doesn't care much about the weather, as well as good health' (2; 37). Children are more agile, 'more skilful, they can make decisions, movement is natural to them' (4; 80). Being motivated to be active and adventurous helps 'to develop a healthy self-confidence that I can do it; and especially how the development proceeds; that the child wants to do it on their own, that nobody is forcing them to do it, and that's what I would say is the most important thing' (1; 117-118). Children's adaptability and courage increases; 'it's natural for them to go swimming in the stream. It's natural for them to have to go to the wood, and it's normal for them to have to, I don't know, bring something and help with the construction, for example' (3; 9-11). The children 'participate in the whole operation of the camp' (1; 93-94), they develop their skills because they have the experience of cooking lunch, for example, 'they have to be able to make a fire pit and start a fire' (4; 124), 'he was not even six years old and he could cut the wood, that daddy had taught him to do it like a master' (7; 67-69), 'a six-year-old kid (...) knows how to hack with an axe, so it's the handicraft things, when they build, for example, tepees, when children embroider and decorate leather bags or parts of clothes with beads' (1; 106-107). The fundamental prerequisite for this kind of education is the trust that the child has 'in adults, so that when they give him that trust, he gets it and gives it back' (7; 75-76). The skills they acquire distinguish them from the general population of children, for example, because they 'know

how to get around in the forest, they know how to take a knife or cut something, help chop wood, start a fire, and so I think it's not quite as natural as it is for kids who don't live in it, don't have the opportunity or their parents won't let them try it because they're scared' (4; 65-71).

The education is not only aimed at physical endurance and work activities, such as making equipment for teepees, which they continue to use. The social dimension of these activities is also essential: 'The children gather in the tepee, live there for some time, and gather around the campfire, so that they build up a sense of belonging, of belonging somewhere, of belonging to a group, and, of course, the basic human qualities are built up' (1; 154-156). 'The children are taught aesthetics in everything they do and how it should look' (1; 109-111). Educational effects also include the nurturing of the social and spiritual dimensions of life as they learn about 'communication and rituals' (4; 88). 'And I would say there's the importance of following the rules. Children learn to follow the rules, so there is actually a system and order set up, and they learn to follow the rules' (1; 50-52).

Education by nature

Being in nature, meeting without the technologies and conveniences of civilisation increases the ability to be entertained by natural things. 'It is about balancing the kind of contemporary technology these children use today and actually knowing how to do without it' (1; 88-89). The children accept the changes in their experience of nature quite naturally. 'We have reached an understanding that we don't want electronics' (5; 11); hence, when my daughter 'wanted a story on her tablet, I told her that there's no computer or tablet here, and she was able to entertain herself. She didn't even seek it out afterwards although she would still require it at home' (5; 15-17). Finding out that 'one can function without electricity, without water - more or less, I mean the shower, the bathroom... That was quite interesting too actually, when they started asking how are we going to do the bathing. I mean, there's not the bathroom here... And now they actually know that this can work' (5; 18-21). By staying in nature, they accept the extraordinary circumstances as ordinary: 'Because the only thing they can use for bathing and the only place to go to wash is just the stream, so I thought it was normal. But actually, when you think about it, it's a fact that a lot of kids just don't take that as normal' (3; 16-17).

Children 'actually learn to understand nature and to understand the laws of nature and to approach nature humbly. Not to destroy it, to really only take from nature what they need and not to take from nature everything that nature gives us, but to take only what I need' (1; 53-55). Environmental education does not have to be sophisticated. It uses elementary activities and actions: 'For example, they were playing in the stream, jumping into the water, and just building with sticks. Yeah, it was like Mowgli, it was just like they became part of the environment, so they enjoyed it, and they remembered it. Of course, it shaped them somehow' (2; 48-51). In retrospect, one might realise, 'oh, that's what was so cool about it. This was what I was trying to achieve, to get away from that civilisation and get back to that nature for my children as well' (5; 7-8). Parents teach their children to respect nature by pointing out the devastating effects of alienation, of the unawareness of civilisation's comforts: 'Because not all places on our planet take it for granted, that people have something to eat, that they have clean water, for example, that they have a roof over their heads, so that's why I think it's beautiful, and I think it's important to lead children to that' (4; 44-47).

Community

Interpersonal relationships, intergenerational transmission, adult-led self-governance, and other categories co-create community as a specific social group that emerges in family camping.

Spending active leisure time together later in the year is also relatively common. 'As a community, we do other activities during the year, such as going down the water, or other joint events, for the whole family' (4; 23), because meeting in a community is very inspiring. Some groups meet approximately once a month, 'either it was an outing, or it was, I don't know, like a traditional spring welcome event. Yeah, or we went somewhere, it was a weekend; otherwise it took just one day' (3; 38-40). 'Yes, we meet, we are friends. We're still friends to this day, the parents of those kids' (1; 149).

As the entire organisation camps together, strong social networks are also formed across geographic regions: 'The centre is the Forest Wisdom League and the Blackbird Creek (Kosi potok), where 200 to 300 people get together' (7; 13), which is 'really important for the kids because they actually get to know other children from other tribes and they actually make great friendships there' (3; 41-44). There, whole generations come together and naturally go on with their lives, forming strong community bonds, establishing lifelong friendships, and building groups capable of organising camps or expeditions and large-scale social events. 'By being accustomed to each other from a very young age, they can actually organise or deal with almost anything, at least it seems to me. (...) They have no problem organise a big festival for the public, concerts or even some cultural events' (7; 52 and 55). The confidence they gained in early childhood, the encouragement 'that they are capable or that they can like do something and try it themselves, even if it maybe like doesn't turn out well or something, so I think that's like very beneficial for them in the future, that's (...) self-management under adult guidance' (7; 58-61).

Romanticised experiences modelled on the Native Americans (Indians)

The educational benefits of Woodcraft-style family camping mentioned above, namely increasing environmental awareness and kinship with the natural world and building respect for nature, are intertwined with romanticised notions of a model worthy of being emulated. The organisation adopted the model of the Native American tribes present in Seton's books. Being in nature intensifies spiritual perception: 'Indians also perceive plants as beings; in fact, they have a completely different view of the world than we, the Western culture. They appreciate the Sun, the universe, and everything that lives and grows on the planet and worship it. If they take anything, it's just so they can live. They carry out rituals to thank the spirits for being able to eat, to thank the soul of a hunted animal for giving them the body so that they can live, and I find all that nice (...), and I think it's important to lead children to that, even though it may sound fairy-tale sometimes, but I find that Indian philosophy absolutely wonderful' (4; 43-58). Tying knowledge of this indigenous culture and tools involved in preparing programmes in the Czech Republic broadens the children's cultural overview: 'They learn to embroider because this is what the Sioux knew and this is what the Crow Indians knew. That's what they did. So, they learn how we do it in Slovácko and Haná and so on. They're learning the differences between the steppe Indians and the different nuances. But they're also learning to actually compare it with our customs, for example' (1; 128-132). Music becomes an educational tool and a spiritual experience as well: 'We play guitar quite frequently, and the preschool children learn to sing Indian songs, which are, kind of, rhythmic, which are drummed out. The children use rattles they have made themselves, so they cheer or drum the syllables out. By doing so, they practice rhythmic and breaking the words down into syllables' (1; 121-125).

Discussion

We are not aware of any research that has looked at the impact of Woodcrafter camping on preschoolers from the perspective of their parents. Therefore, we cannot discuss and compare

our results directly with other findings, but this does not prevent us from placing them in the broader context of environmental and outdoor education.

Environmental attitudes are often shaped by direct experiences rather than any programme (Newhouse 1990), particularly during childhood in wild environments and by family influence or unsupervised exploration common to children, rather than by intellectual interest in environmentalism (Bixler, Floyd, and Hammitt 2002; Ewert, Place, and Sibthorp 2005). However, early childhood educators are more inclined to use maintained outdoor settings than natural outdoor settings (Ernst and Tornabene 2012) because they are swayed by beliefs about their difficulty, including concerns about weather and safety (Ernst 2014). Quite contrary, the experiences of the parent - respondents in this study - declare that enabling children, including preschool children, to trust themselves to use a knife or axe, not perceiving cold water as a sanitation challenge, or respecting simple lifestyles, may not be accompanied by fears and instead amplify environmental educational impacts.

The current research reinforces and refines previous findings and evidence that children's engagement with and experiences of the natural environment can be associated with a range of positive developmental benefits (Chawla 2015; Sabirah and Shazly 2017), including a strong family influence for effective environmental action (Chawla 1999). Although there have been calls for teachers to redesign and create new courses and programmes (Meier and Sisk-Hilton 2017) and new ways of teaching preschool children (Caiman, Hedefalk, and Ottander 2022) in the pursuit of better nature and environmental education in early childhood, the experiences of our respondents seem to indicate the importance of enduring values and the power of tradition not to be dismissed.

Clearly, the results of the present empirical research have shown that the knowledge shared in methodological manuals on Woodcraft-style camping (Macek 1990; Porsch et al. 2011) is not just a record of historical data but a lived experience. Parents perceive direct contact with the elements (exemplified, for example, by washing in a stream) as a way to develop children's sense of respect for nature and reinforce environmental values. Direct contact with nature is also reinforced by the necessity to develop camp skills (e.g. using a knife and an axe by children as young as six years, their ability to make a fire), to use their own handiwork, and not to succumb to the trappings of civilizational consumerism hedonistically. Deliberate modesty and simplicity, a peculiar dialectic of order and freedom, reinforces the spirit of unity and mutual learning of an age-heterogeneous group, strengthening the principles of self-education and the building of an inspiring community (applying initiative and organisational skills together to organised social events such as the festival). The patterns of indigenous peoples (music, rituals, activities and attitude towards nature) are mimicked with the intention of a targeted reception of nature spirituality, its whole experience and transmission to the next generation. Woodcraft-style camping and educational impulses that evolve into individual self-educational endeavours appear to be a deliberate demarcation against the superficial majority's sojourn in a mode of impersonal 'it-ness' and, in turn, a promotion of authentic existence (Heidegger 2008).

The research literature indicates that family camping provides a distinct space for intergenerational learning and personal development, including reinforcing perseverance, physical endurance, teamwork, and cooperation (Lee and Graefe 2010). Parents of preschoolers describe similar educational influences and, from their observations, explicitly report strengthening physical fitness, perseverance, health, diverse skills (not just bushcraft), self-confidence, adaptability, and courage, as well as trust, belonging, or adherence to rules. The experience of summer family camping has been described in the past through the phenomena of family, community, nature, and spirituality (Jirásek, Roberson, and Jirásková 2017, 2014). The interviewees involved in the present study confirm these aspects as well. Moreover, focusing on the Woodcraft setting further refines the educational influence of the natural environment as an education in and by nature, with spiritual experiences simultaneously shaped by patterns of ritual, nature worship, and Native American 'Indian philosophy'.

Conclusion

Sympathy for Native Americans has a long tradition among the Czech population, thanks to adventure writers such as Karl May, who were able to convey the exotic and adventurous nature of this ethnic group, although the degree of 'Indianness' in the life of a modern person depends, among other things, 'on the depth and persistence of one's efforts to be inspired by Indian spirituality' (Pecha 1999, p. 262). Thus, preschool children participating in Woodcraft-style family camping trips differ in many ways from their mainstream peers. Nevertheless, it is surprising that this topic has attracted only limited research attention, given the increasing importance of such experiences in contemporary society (Garst, Williams, and Roggenbuck 2009). Therefore, the authors of this article have attempted to bring the benefits of Woodcraft-style family camping for the environmental education of preschool children to the attention of the professional community.

LLM, which represents the ideas and activities of the Woodcraft movement in the Czech Republic, is one of the members of the Czech Council for Children and Youth, which brings together more than 100 organizations dedicated to children and youth. It supports the extra-curricular education and activities of its members, especially by striving to create legal, economic, social and cultural conditions suitable for their activities. Thus, Woodcrafter activities are also part of non-formal education as organised educational activities outside the established official school system. At present, we can witness debates for the validation of non-formal and informal learning taking place in the countries of the European Union. This brings new possibilities and new opportunities for children and youth organisations, including LLM, within the potential collaboration of formal and non-formal education. It would undoubtedly be interesting to develop concrete ways in which collaboration between schools at different levels of education (from pre-school to university) and camping organisations such as Woodcraft could be realised, as well as to speculate on the involvement of parents in environmental education. Given the scope of the paper, however, we must leave this challenge without a detailed response. However, we hope that the findings we have presented may inspire potential stakeholders in the formal education sphere to possibly invite woodcraft representatives to collaborate, especially in the field of environmental and outdoor education.

Disclosure statement

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