

89 Does nature support the integration of immigrant youth? A study on adolescents in the city of Lahti, Finland

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Introduction

Successful integration of immigrants has been identified as the key for future social and economic well-being in EU. In Finland, a great share of the recent immigrants consists of people who have come to Finland as asylum seekers from countries whose cultural and natural environment is different from the Nordic countries. Nature has traditionally played a central role in the Finnish identity, although there are signs of polarisation in relation to nature among younger generations (Hakoköngäs & Puhakka 2021). Meanwhile, it is increasingly recognised that contact with nature promotes psychological, physiological, and social well-being and health (Keniger et al. 2013). Contact with nature can play an important role for social cohesion and immigrant integration (Jay & Schraml 2009). Green spaces seem to be especially important for immigrant youth to make contacts and friends across cultures (Seeland et al. 2009). Hence, nature can be an important means for integration, but it should also be understood as a resource that should be equally accessible to all (Gentin et al. 2019). Gentin et al. (2019) have suggested that the relationship between nature and integration can be understood in terms of structural and cultural integration that emphasises the importance of equal access to natural environments and knowledge related to nature. Nature is also important for interactive and identificational integration by offering a platform and means for social interactions and a meaningful target to form emotional bonds with other people and places.

This study applies the framework of integration (Esser 1999; Gentin et al. 2019) to study how nature supports the integration as well as the well-being of immigrant youth in Finland. We explore adolescents' participation in outdoor recreation and their well-being experiences of and relationships with nature in the city of Lahti. We analyse the differences between the immigrant and non-immigrant groups to discuss how nature can support the health and well-being as well as

interactive and identificational integration of immigrants, and how structurally and culturally inclusive nature is to the youth.

Method

The study is based on the survey data (N=1121) collected from students in 7–9th grades in autumn 2020. The survey questions were related to outdoor recreation, relationship with nature, and the perceived well-being effects of nature. The survey was delivered through SurveyMonkey Inc (www.surveymonkey.com) online survey tool to five schools in Lahti. Altogether 84 respondents were first- or second-generation immigrants whose both parents were born outside Finland. The data was analysed with statistical methods.

Results

Immigrant adolescents spend less often time in natural environments than non-immigrant adolescents do – both in summertime (p=0.008) and wintertime (p=0.011). Especially immigrants that are from culturally different countries to Finland (countries in Middle East, Africa, and Asia) spend less often time in nature than others do (Figure 1). The main reasons for not spending more often time in nature are similar among immigrants and non-immigrants: they use leisure time for other hobbies, schoolwork, or playing with digital devices.

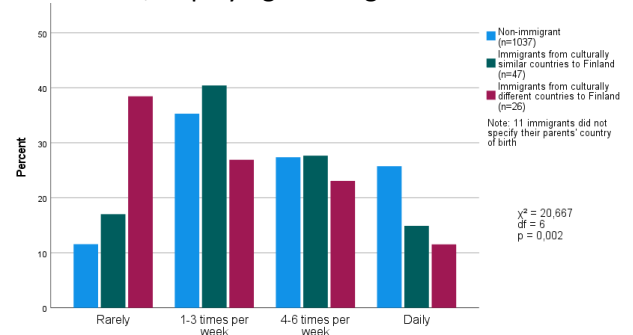


Figure 1. The frequencies of spending time in nature (e.g., in forests, urban parks, shores, water areas) in summertime.

Immigrant adolescents spend most often time in their own or shared yard, and green areas and parks near home. The most popular nature-based activities among them are mountain biking, hiking, and boating/canoeing/SUP boarding; 22–31% of immigrant adolescents participate in these activities weekly in summertime. Compared to non-immigrants, however, there is a greater share of immigrants (a third of them) who never go hiking ($p=0.012$) or boating/canoeing/SUP boarding ($p=0.002$). Furthermore, immigrant girls are less likely to get out into nature alone than non-immigrant girls ($p=0.026$).

In nature, immigrant adolescents experience positive feelings (e.g., calmness, safety; medians from 3.5 to 4 on a scale of 1–5) more often than negative feelings (e.g., nervousness, depression, loneliness; medians 2). However, immigrants feel themselves more often depressed in nature than non-immigrants ($p=0.007$). Both immigrant and non-immigrant adolescents responded that when spending time in nature, they feel restored and relaxed, their concentration increases, and they feel calm (medians 4 on a scale of 1–5).

Discussion

Our first results indicate that there are differences between immigrant and non-immigrant adolescents in how nature is part of their everyday lives and how they perceive well-being benefits. Immigrant adolescents spend less often time in natural environments and participate less often in some outdoor activities. In particular, a great share of immigrants from culturally different countries to

Finland spends rarely time in nature, which raises concerns over structural and cultural inclusiveness of nature.

Immigrant adolescents' willingness to spend time in nature with friends or family rather than alone gives support for the use of nature as a platform for social interactions. Hence, natural environments have the potential of supporting the interactive integration of immigrant youth. Similarly, positive feelings experienced in nature are an important contributor to the emergence of positive place affiliations and indicate potential support for identificational integration. However, the greater variation of feelings experienced in nature by immigrants than non-immigrants suggests that some immigrant adolescents may also perceive natural environments as alienating.

Despite the differences, the results show that nature is an important part of immigrant adolescents' everyday lives in Finland and can support the social integration of immigrants. The study results can be used in developing new nature-based solutions for the successful integration of immigrants.

However, ethnic background is not necessarily the most important decisive factor, but other things such as gender and income could be important in explaining the differences in how the Finnish youth interact with and perceive nature. Therefore, further studies are needed on the adolescents' participation in outdoor recreation and perceived well-being effects.

References

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