Chapter 3
Play
The character of play

Play has often been kind of camouflaged by mechanical theories, emphasizing somewhat partially the socializing effects of playing (Schwartzman, 1998). The mental and psychological parts of play have been given priority, and play characterized as role play or cognitive play has been evaluated as ‘good’ quality play. There are still those who look upon play merely as imitation and preparation for adult life (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1992). Hangaard Rasmussen (1992, 2014) has, by the way, been an important source of inspiration and a mentor for me.

Other research workers have been my sources of inspiration as well. Maria Øksnes has published the book Lekens flertydighet – “The Ambiguity of Play” (2010). Solveig Nordtømme wrote her doctoral thesis on play and the importance of space and intervals for playing children. Jorunn M. Seljeseth (2016) wrote the article De minste barnas lek er et dikt – “The Toddlers’ Play Is a Poem”. In her article she describes her observations of playing children, and her cooperation with toddlers in theater presentations. Turid Skarre Aasebø and Else Cathrine Melhuus (2005) published a book about playing children’s need for space.

Few have so far taken serious interest in children’s outdoor play; a number of research workers at Queen Maud University College on Early Childhood Education (Dronning Mauds Minne, Høgskole for barnehagelærerutdanning, DMMH) in Trondheim constitute the exceptions, however. They have spent years doing research work in this field (Bjørgen, 2015, 2017; Hagen, 2013; Lysklett, 2013; Sandseter, 2010; Storli, 2013, Storli og Sandseter, 2019).

My studies (Fasting, 2013, 2014b, 2016) prove that physical expressions and activities are vital and all-important to children. I have for years spent innumerable hours trying to grasp the profound meaning of their capricious hither and thither-play, rapidly changing, often difficult for adults to fully understand.

The research workers behind the phenomenological research work on play have tried to describe its impulsive features. They try to explain what characterizes play here and now. Play’s impulsive features may be described as spontaneity and
liberty – the liberty to play. Play attracts children because it coaxes into being a world with exciting and fascinating qualities.

With a phenomenological approach we may say that play is an ambiguous and unpredictable phenomenon, transitory and evasive, manifesting itself in a number of forms and shapes. Play is a process of progress or a motion which may choose several directions.

Research workers working within a phenomenological tradition take interest in what is specifically and essentially related to a phenomenon. They wish to adopt a broad-minded approach to stimulate the occurrence of the phenomenon, but such a broad-mindedness also often makes it difficult to interpret and understand what engages children right now.

No child is really in charge of the hither and thither movements of play, movements which give play an unpredictable dynamic. Here I present a case from my doctoral thesis which explains a little how a phenomenological understanding of play may develop: The girls Siv and Kari are engaged in a ‘jungle play’. What happens to the girls, who seem to forget all about themselves, is that they are overwhelmed by the idea that “play is something which happens to us”. This is in my opinion a quite satisfactory description of the situation. Siv and Kari tell me that they often play ‘the jungle play’ while on class excursions in the woodlands, and one day I had the possibility to observe this play. The girls said they had lost contact with their parents and had been abandoned in ‘the jungle’. In the jungle they met people from various tribes, they met tigers, some bad and some nice. All of a sudden, the girls were totally captured by this play, they were in a world of their own and they presented themselves by means of the play. When they met a new tribe or another tiger, the play changed, and the girls made a new self-presentation of themselves.

In the case of Siv and Kari it is quite possible to say that here their play is playing with them. The basis of their play is already familiar to them, but sudden surprises occur: A tiger appears, hostile or friendly tribesmen appear.

My study of Siv and Kari has convinced me that while playing, they use their bodies to substantiate who they are and what they are playing. Their play is to a large degree non-verbal and their communication physical. They glance at each other, they read their playmates’ body language, interpret their attitudes, and they use activities and various kinds of movements to communicate with the space they inhabit as well as with themselves. Their play is created in their dialogue with the space they inhabit and with their fellow playmates: thus, their play manifests itself (Fasting, 2012, 2013).
Ideas about a phenomenological approach to play began to sprout in the 1930s; Dutchman Frederik J. J. Buytendijk (1887–1974), psychologist and anthropologist, was among the pioneers who advocated such an idea (1933). Indeed, he was the very first to write about the original, primary, innocent and childlike play, which is play without any kind of goal or purpose. Buytendijk wanted to find ‘play itself’, he wanted to trace or find play as a phenomenon. His intention was to annul traditional ideas about play as something functionally determined. Play just appears, it has no specific teaching/learning function, it has no predetermined developmental function, in Buytendijk’s opinion.

Children’s play is its own project, it carries its own weight, and it is essential to children’s lives. Studying the phenomenology, nature, or essence of play, we will find some quite obvious features. Play belongs to what we may call the vital principles, originally one of life’s spontaneous means of expression, distinctive of superior species, humans included. We talk about ‘primitive’ or original play; play as a very early or prehistoric phenomenon. What characterizes children’s courses of action as opposed to adult behavior, and how do we see the differences?

An adult tends to do things with some kind of plan, and when something is done, it’s done. Unlike adults, children seem never quite to finish what they are physically working at; they seem to begin anew and anew. The childlike or innocent move has no definite starting point and no specific aim or target. Children’s courses of action belong completely to themselves.

I agree with Buytendijk when I see play as significant actions, physical motions and bodily expressions. The dynamics of play consist of spontaneity and a large degree of unrestrained kinetic urge. Children’s actions and motions will adjust to the cultural standards of the society they belong to, and when we try to understand the meaning of children’s play, we must consider the context in which activities of play take place (Buytendijk, 1933).

Here I try to describe play as a phenomenon and its spontaneous character. How do children express themselves playing? How do children initiate play? What do children do to be accepted as participants in play? Here are a few examples.

There were three children running laps in the kindergarten playground. They ran up a slope, through a grove, down a slope, around on the asphalt, up the slope again, etc. The runners were one boy and two girls, chasing each other. I observed a third girl who very much wanted to join. When the three of them passed her, she cried: Can I join you?

They said no and kept on running. The three seemed to be the king, the queen and the princess. They cried it out while running. The next time the three children
passed, the girl shouted: Can I play along if I am the maid, all queens have a maid!
The ‘queen’ called out a ‘yes’ and the girl happily joined them. She was accepted.

In the twentieth century phenomenology was a movement whose followers wished to understand and describe phenomena as experienced in everyday life. The phenomenon should be studied unattached from theories, liberated from the coercion and conditions of concepts. In this way the research workers intended to describe something natural and genuine, liberated from traditional ideas and prejudices. Those who studied according to a phenomenological approach, sought people’s lived experiences to learn how they understood phenomena.

We may describe a child’s outlook on its surroundings as patic (as in the Greek word pathos, emotion/emotional. The word patic was created by Buytendijk. He wrote in German, so his word was actually patisch). Children are emotional towards their surroundings, they are deeply moved, touched or affected. These emotional relations carry children into a sphere of play. This play is characterized by being propelled forwards by the children’s impulsive actions and passionate attitudes: they are completely taken over by their own activities. Their play is invented, created and propelled forwards by cooperation, self-denying, and abandonment (Åm, 1989).

The passionate part implies that the player is affected; reflections must give way for the benefit of a more physical approach to the world. “Briefly speaking: the player is easily affected” (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1992, p. 69).

Broad-mindedness, innocence, childlikeness and agility are important patic features. This means you are always open to new ideas; you are not locked forever into old ways of thinking.

All kinds of play are fundamentally pleasant. In the sphere of play, dominated by lack of stability and direction, receptivity of the experience is what counts. Playing takes the child to no place specific, because the outcome of the play is and must be strange and unknown.

The opposite of patic is gnostic, from Greek gnosis, knowledge. When your attitude to this world is gnostic, you are the kind of person who seeks knowledge about it, you are a factfinder. The gnostic attitude is not emotional. You are not emotional when you are in the mood for learning something, investigating something, says Eli Åm, the author of På jakt etter barneperspektivet (1989), in English, “Hunting for the child’s perspective”. The gnostic approach excludes emotions. Play often contains gnostic elements, something we see when playing children take a break in order to discuss details or further progress: are we going to do it this way, or that (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1992)?

According to Buytendijk children are natural bearers of the childlike and impulsive, they are pathos-driven, their feelings dictate their natural behavior. Adults
tend to be a lot more gnostic; we must let go of ourselves to indulge in play. In the sphere of play there is no room for new learning in a conscious way: Play has no specific or determined goals.

THE MAGIC OF PLAY

Play just happens. Neither children nor adults can fully control play. Sometimes play is a self-forgetting activity, in which case the activities of play play the children. Professor Kjetil Steinsholt at NTNU (the Norwegian University of Science and Technology) in Trondheim calls this ‘the play of self-forgetting’. The play plays the child. “By means of active physical play the participants are absorbed into a sort of dance of mutual attentiveness which partakes of a unique pattern of movement” (Steinsholt, 2010, p. 109).

When I am with Siv and Maia up in the rock face of a cliff, they are parts of the activity. They are active and engaged, they climb back and forth, they are swept along; they are played. The play develops in the space between the children and the cliff wall, and sometimes they fantasize about taking part in a climbing competition. They tell me that sometimes they win, sometimes they lose, but they win more often than they lose.

“… we are completely absorbed together with the others who are also spell-bound by the magic of play”, writes Steinsholt (2010, p. 113).

I picked this example from my studies of pupils in school, but it is just as relevant for kindergarten children. When I observe kindergarten children completely absorbed by what they are doing, I often think that these children should be given the opportunity to go on playing for as long as they need and want. They should not be compelled to take a break because of an obligatory meal indoors. A meal can wait, especially if a teacher or assistant can stay out with them a little longer. Sometimes we may be able to postpone a meal or a meeting for a quarter of an hour or so when we understand the situation of the play.

I later observed that Siv climbed another climbing wall. Halfway up a twig stuck in her hair. All of a sudden, she gave out a loud shout. She had turned into an Indian girl! Siv was for some seconds absorbed by her new personality as an Indian, and she forgot about time and place and herself. For a little while she enjoyed a magic experience, and the reason was the twig which had stuck in her hair. Perhaps she associated the twig with a feather of a kind used by Indians, so ‘really’ she suddenly wore a feather in her hair. Siv appeared as mesmerized, the play swept her along as she had no will of her own, to refer to German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004) (1900–2002). The sounds she made, her facial
expression and her body language revealed an immense power of empathy. It happened all of a sudden and very quickly, and just as quickly Siv’s Indian episode was over.

Sometimes a movement can inspire you, and suddenly you are absorbed by an activity of play. I have written about this in the book *På spor etter lek* (“Tracking play”) (Hangaard Rasmussen, 2014). Here I say that play may arise from playful motions, and in such cases, it is rarely appropriate to talk about imaginative play or physical play. Motions or movements may inspire the child’s imagination, or its imagination may inspire the child’s movements; this is how play displays itself.

To separate kinds of play into too many kinds, might make our understanding of the overall picture of play collapse. Concentrating on this overall picture, we are closing in on what I like to call the magic of play (Fasting, 2017).

Being in a mood for play is comparable with being absorbed by play. Being in the mood for play means something like being in the middle of a passionate rehearsal; your whole person can think of nothing else.

Suddenly a boy comes running up to a girl, and a moment later they run along together for a while. Their common actions create their common play. Their play demands cooperation, and they must see what they are doing in order not to crash into one another. Their activity is not just physical, energetic and with gross motor ability movements; it also requires finer adjustments. In rugged terrain running is often a very challenging task, but in plains with few or no obstacles it is much easier. I often see children start running when they tread into open meadows, or when they enter a large, spacious, sparsely furnished room. They see there is space and they make it their own! When children inhabit a space in such a way, their bodies seem to radiate liberty. Their play develops in dialogues between the children and their surroundings and between the children themselves. In children’s movements, in this example running, we may observe play’s essential characterizations (Fasting, 2014b).

When I observed children running, I often registered how they became absorbed by their own play. Their way of running changed continuously as their play changed character depending on the children’s changing moods. Concepts such as flow, rhythm, adjusted strength or magic may describe more thoroughly this mood or state which takes hold of the performer. When your body performs various movements and gestures, you may feel overwhelmed by the movements themselves, and this sensation may be experienced as *patric* or overall.

The school children, the pupils, ran to the top of a steep slope, and jumped down from it. Thanks to their physical abilities they had the adaptability which allowed them to go on without interrupting their activities.
My approach to play is inspired by Gadamer (2004) and Steinsholt (2010). “Play’s movements hither and thither constitute unpredictable dynamics which none of the participants can control” (Steinsholt, 2010, p. 112). Play as a phenomenon may transform into new appearances; it is ambiguous and unpredictable. It is energy. You may be captured by your own activities, and you may ‘lose yourself’.

In the world of play our material ordinary world is unimportant. This is what makes play fascinating, but this is what may make play a risky business, too. We risk ‘forgetting ourselves’, losing self-control (Gadamer, 2004; Fasting, 2017).

Siv ‘the Indian girl’, one of my informants when I wrote my doctorate thesis, taught me a lot about play. Siv was ten years old. She said to me that she could play anything, even imitating an ant! Siv also said she felt different from her friend Kari. “I do not know why, but I feel I have a play mind, and Kari has a school mind.” Being able to play was something enjoyable and important to Siv, and she really felt play was her domain.

RISKY PLAY

Various research works have made a point of children’s ability to cope with risks. In order to cope with risks, children need to experience risky situations. Professor Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter of DMMH in Trondheim has for years made children’s physical play her professional subject area. Sandseter (2010, 2013) is of the opinion that children need to test themselves with what she calls ‘scaryfunny’ play, and she has coined the concept ‘risky play’. She defines risky play as physical play which is challenging and exciting, and which may actually harm the child if anything goes wrong.

Playing children often test their limits, and thus they create situations exposing themselves not only to excitement, but to fear as well as intense joy. In risky play hormones like adrenalin and ephedrine are produced, enabling children to experience joy (Sandseter, 2010). According to Sandseter (2010) there are six categories of risky play:

- When there is risk for falling from great heights. Children climb trees, jump from rooftops or slopes, hang from branches or eaves gutters, or they balance on top of a drying rack.
- When there is risk for losing control because of very high speed and the child may crash into something or another child. Uncontrollable speeds may be attained on a bicycle or a sled, etc.
- When children wield dangerous tools as knives, axes, saws, hammers, etc.
- When frequenting potentially dangerous environments, like rivers, lakes, swamps, precipices, or sitting by a campfire.
- Martial arts-like play, including pole fencing, wrestling or regular fist-fighting.
- When there is a risk for a child getting lost, for example during excursions in the wilderness.

It is absolutely natural for children to investigate themselves and their surroundings. They enjoy challenging and exciting activities and what Sandseter calls scaryfunny play. They love to put themselves to tests, trying out something they did not believe they dared to, and their reward is the scaryfunny experience and the tickling tummy. In the intersection between what is fun and what is scary, children seek risky play. At the same time, it is important to notice that children are different; some children do not appreciate risky play at all. To what degree children want and seek risky play is an individual business (Sandseter, 2013; Sandseter & Sando, 2016).

During my research work I, too, have observed children engaging in risky play. I have chosen not to use the term ‘risky play’ myself, but I find it sensible that children are allowed to put themselves to the test. That kind of play often gives them high-quality playing experiences, and in addition they learn to know their own bodies as well as their surroundings. I have registered, as Sandseter has, that kindergarten employees seldom restrict children in their play. Teachers and assistants let the children have free rein to a large degree. Children are seldom interrupted by teachers and assistants fearing they may harm themselves. They are allowed to climb, run around, jump across creeks or from the top of quite large rocks, etc. They are, in short, allowed to test their motor capabilities by means of challenging – ‘risky’ – play. This is all according to the Framework Plan, which explicitly states that children must be allowed to test themselves in play.

Yet I am aware of the fact that many kindergartens today indeed do restrict children’s play opportunities. Assistant professor Lisbeth Ljosdal Skreland at the University of Agder (UiA) (2016) discussed this fact in her doctorate thesis På man-dager er det ikke lov med papirfly (“On Mondays paper planes are not allowed”). A number of Norwegian kindergartens tend to give outdoor play less priority nowadays, and quite many have introduced a safety policy for fear of children harming themselves by accident. It is important, however, to bear in mind that children who have the opportunity to learn by physical experiences, learn what they can cope with and what they cannot. A developed balance ability, strength adjustment, agility and good general physical competences are in fact accident-preventative
qualities which help protect a child from bodily harm the rest of its life. We shall always bear children’s safety and soundness in mind, and we shall remember that in due time these children are no longer in kindergarten or at school, they are in fact going to be adults. If you, the adult, are to avoid injury the next time you fall on slippery ice, you, the child, should have to test yourself on slippery ice a lot of times. If you have to perform a narrow escape when a car passes by dangerously near you, your chance of a successful narrow escape is better if you are an agile person. Children with good motor faculties are better protected!

COPING / NOT COPING

I once wrote a thesis for my major titled *Barn med astma og mestringsopplevelser i friluftsliv* (“Asthmatic children and their experiences of coping in outdoor life”). During this work I followed asthmatic children at Geilomo hospital for children for five weeks. This hospital specializes in treating asthmatic children. Here the children may attend something called the Environment School, and I could observe children at the age of ten to twelve carrying out 16 outdoor spells.

An essential statement for me during this research work became this: You do not become merely the person you become; you become the person you are expected to become.

I observed that the expectations mediated to these asthmatic children by parents and others to a large degree determined how well they coped. I also registered that those children who knew themselves and their bodies well enough to recognize symptoms and fatigue, obviously functioned better with their asthma than children without this insight. It is important not to ignore the disease, but it is important not to pathologize asthmatic children beyond what is absolutely necessary, too (Fasting, 1996).

After having finished this research work, I published a book about asthmatic children and their coping with life (Fasting, 2000). These children are important to me, but equally important is that adults recognize their responsibilities: we must do everything we can to give these children high-quality coping and living experiences when they have their good periods.

In the Framework Plan (2017), chapter 1, *Core values*, we find the subchapter *Life skills and health*. Here it is stated that the kindergarten shall contribute to children’s happiness, welfare, coping and inherent worth. It also states that children have the right to happiness and coping in social and cultural communities and fellowships. In the subchapter *Children and childhood*, we are taught that children should be seen as individuals and that kindergarten employees must respect their
experiences and childlike ways of seeing the world. Children are affected by their surroundings, but they also execute their own influence on their own lives. An important task of kindergartens is to let children who in many ways are different when it comes to abilities, skills, experiences and physical competences, together with their playmates find opportunities to develop self-confidence and belief in their own abilities (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017).

I am satisfied with how children’s coping is given priority in the Framework Plan. Experiencing coping, being able to deal with tasks, is important to the child’s self-confidence, and necessary in order to motivate the child to take on new challenges. How do we assist the child? First of all, we must give priority to what the child is already good at, which will improve the child’s chances of success. In their book Læring gjennom mestring (“Learning by coping”) (Nordahl & Misund, 2009) the authors present a number of examples on how outdoor areas and nature may be utilized as arenas for coping. Authors Aina Nordahl and Sidsel Skappel Misund introduce their readers to the woodland group method (‘skoggruppermетоден’), which is about treating children with respect, involving them in processes and activities. The woodland group method contains three elements: planning, execution and evaluation. Children should be involved in the planning of activities, they should be encouraged to speak their mind; what do they really want to do? Let the children draw the things they want to bring with them in their knapsacks.

Nordahl and Misund emphasize the opportunities for linguistic development connected to the planning process, to the concrete outdoor activity and to the evaluation work afterwards. They also make a point of the fact that for a child to belong to a group makes it feel accepted and ‘at home’, which supplies it with security and a sense of solidarity. A positive understanding of oneself depends not merely on coping as in possessing certain abilities; just as important, or even more, is the capability to cope socially (Nordahl & Misund, 2009).

What about those who do not cope so well? Children are different, like the rest of us. Children’s experiences with outdoor play may vary. What may the pedagogical consequences be? Children who do not have very much experience from outdoor play must not be excluded from taking part in good experiences. We should help them to avoid always lagging behind, from always being a bad hat. We have to help each child at the child’s own level. There will be days when some children should be allowed to stay indoors, for example, very cold days, very rainy days, or days with very icy conditions, although other children find it all right to play outdoors. Composing groups with children of different ages is often a wise thing to do. Some children are better at motivating and helping their playmates and better
at taking initiatives, something adults should take into consideration when composing groups.

Children usually develop their skills and faculties rather rapidly. During a period of a few months we often observe great differences in their abilities to move about in rugged terrain, depending on how much practice each child has been able to attain.

Children who feel secure, being surrounded by conscious adults who let them find exciting places to play, will usually enjoy experiences of coping at kindergarten. After a while they will enjoy their physical competence. It is important that children understand that teachers and assistants expect them to cope — adults, also the children’s parents — demand it. Simultaneously, the kindergarten employees should offer the children a lot of varied experiences.

In the Framework Plan’s subchapter Body, movement, food and health (in chapter 9, Learning areas) we are taught that children have the right to experience happiness, welfare and coping by means of versatile physical competences indoors and outdoors all year round (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). Kindergarten children need challenges they can cope with every day, and to supply them with the right kind of tasks is the responsibility of the pedagogues. The teachers at Geilo proved themselves very competent at offering the children appropriate challenges. At the end of the period all the children caught a cold which affected their asthma to the worse. On the last day’s ‘examination excursion’ several of the children breathed hard. The group was divided into halves; one half paddled back to camp; the other half walked. Each party chose a suitable challenge. One of the girls proved to be a very skilled paddler, and she was able to maneuver her canoe back to the camp in spite of a strong headwind. One boy was allowed to carry the heaviest knapsack including a ground pad, and he was extremely proud of being able to carry the heaviest load (Fasting, 1996).

ADULTS’ PART IN PLAY

The Framework Plan states that kindergarten employees are obliged to observe, recognize and follow up children’s activities and perspectives. The presence of employees, outdoors and indoors, is all important. For some children the outdoor spaces may seem overwhelmingly large and they may need the guidance of a teacher or an assistant in order to make contact with their friends and playmates. Other children find themselves more at ease outdoors.

As already mentioned, teachers, other professionals and parents organize children’s time to a larger and larger degree. Being organized by adults is quite the
opposite of children organizing themselves. We should think back to our own childhood, with intense excitement, jubilant joy, thrilling challenges and coping—often with no adult in sight.

Adult organizing may be a set-back for children’s spontaneous play. Some may think that children’s free play depends on the absence of grown-ups. In my opinion, qualified pedagogues have to engage themselves in children’s outdoor play. The teachers must be present, they must observe and register, and they must cooperate in order to assist the children when necessary. They may involve themselves in various ways; they may observe from a distance, they may introduce initiatives, they may intervene when they feel they should, or they may simply inspire the children. At other times they may participate more concretely (Løndal & Fasting, 2016; Løndal & Greve, 2015). At such other occasions adult observers may intervene in situations occurring, and they may engage children in discussions about what is going on there and then. In the Framework Plan it is stated that the relations between children and employees are to be of a considerate and thoughtful nature, between one child and another likewise, thus, to create a foundation for happiness, joy and coping.

Pedagogues being present when children engage in outdoor activities may discuss between themselves and with the assistants how the children behave, how they cope, the quality of their motor faculties, their ability to learn, etc. Such internal discussions may give them a greater understanding of each child’s needs, wishes, and coping and learning abilities. How can the staff develop their professional work based on these kinds of more or less informal discussions? Perhaps the assumed value of outdoor play can be upgraded to the (assumed) value of indoor activities? If such a thing happens, the outdoors playgrounds must be as well manned as the indoors. We need the amount of staff necessary to allow professional observation of children at play, to intervene when necessary, to prevent children from excluding each other and to face other kinds of challenges which may deteriorate to bullying and victimizing.

Perhaps we should concentrate on outdoor play one month and indoor play another, alternatively? Children are often very dedicated, but nevertheless some of them have a hard time gaining access to activities. Some lack in physical capacity, too.

One of my students told me that her son, who had just become a schoolboy, was so slow at dressing at intervals that the other pupils already were busy playing when he entered the school yard. As a result, he was never included. My point is that it is important to teach children to dress effectively before they attend school.

If you happen to have special interests or specialized knowledge of some kind, that may be something a kindergarten can utilize. Perhaps you know how to make
and walk on stilts, and perhaps you would like to engage the children in that kind of activity. Perhaps you like to sing, then your woodland excursions may be accompanied by group singing, and singsong around the campfire. If you are the administrator, you will probably find it important to organize work in such a way that your staff finds it satisfying, professionally as well as personally. You will find it useful to learn about everybody’s individual interests and strong sides.

Remember that adults, too, need to put themselves to the test physically. Some years ago, I arranged a course about outdoor play for kindergarten assistants. I and my co-organizer had found a little valley for the purpose. In the valley there was a relatively steep slope; as it was raining the slope was quite slippery and the assistants found it slightly frightening. After having climbed it for an hour or so, sliding downwards and hanging in ropes, they nevertheless finally agreed that a slope like this was suitable for children, too. There were no dangerous rocks underneath the slope, and when the rain stopped and the stony slope rapidly dried up, it became much less slippery.

It may be wise to play together with the children a few times. I usually tell my students that they should practice or work with their children as often as possible when they begin their kindergarten careers.

Learning their mother tongue is extremely important to kindergarten children, and that is why language is very important to the employees, too. It is exceedingly important that teachers and assistants speak the language correctly and well, continually introducing words and concepts, ideas, notions, phrases and expressions, in order to help the children develop their language. Talk with the children about what they are doing right now, talk with them about the squirrel or the porcupine you all observed outside a little while ago. Bring inside a little stone, a leaf or a branch and engage the children in a conversation about such objects: what do they look like? Do we need them for anything? Let the children draw the stone or the leaf. Let them search for something similar in books or on the internet.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC) and the American pedagogue John Dewey (1859–1952) tell us that pedagogy and learning are processes of communication. I agree. These processes are something the teachers, the rest of the staff and the kindergarten children do together. The quality of everybody’s participation means a lot for every child’s learning. A flourishing child is a happy child who copes – and learns. In such a perspective, qualified and competent professionals are very important. Secure, confident and happy children play better, and it is the responsibility of the staff to see to that the children are just that.

Bullying and violation are central themes in the Framework Plan (2017). Under the subtitle Life skills and health (chapter 1, Core values) it is clearly stated that the
kindergarten employees are responsible for keeping the children safe, preventing such actions. To prevent bullying outdoors, there must always be adults present.

OUTDOOR PLAY AS CULTURAL EDUCATION

As I wrote in my introduction, Norwegians associate outdoor play with a high-quality childhood. In the winter of 2017, the movie *Barndom* (“Childhood”) by filmmaker and director Margareth Olin was shown at Norwegian cinemas. “Childhood” is mainly about children’s outdoor play. Olin followed kindergarten children closely for a year. She emphasizes that children are playful and inventive, they are knowledgeable and they attach to places. Olin, being interviewed, said she fears that the vigorous kind of play which has its origin in children themselves, may be endangered. Are Norwegians about to lose their outdoor playing culture? Most kindergartens cultivate outdoor life, so of course outdoor play is not endangered at those kindergartens. On the other hand, we see that quite a large number of kindergartens keep their children indoors, especially in wintertime. Why? Do the pedagogues not understand what they are keeping the children from? Is the staff head unable to motivate her staff to take outdoor play seriously?

Outdoor play organized by children themselves in the vicinity of their homes and in their neighborhoods obviously is under pressure. If this kind of outdoor play is to persist, parents and professionals must help. They must forcefully protest against building projects which ruin parks and green lungs. We need adults who guide the toddlers and who let the older children play alone with their playmates.

One reason why outdoor play is endangered is that more and more children take part in adult-organized activities. Another reason is that more and more children spend more and more time at personal computers, laptops and iPhones. We, their parents and teachers, must therefore make an effort in order to rescue those unique and precious outdoor activities from disappearing from the neighborhoods. We must protect from building projects, etc., the areas and spaces children use as playgrounds. Some apply for public funds in order to restore an old playground, others build exciting new meeting places meant for children as well as adults. Much good work is done locally; this has to be continued. The efforts of parents, professionals and other interested persons are essential if we want our children to have neighborhood playgrounds in the future.

Is it appropriate to say that coping and outdoor play are kinds of cultural education? Gunvor Løkken (2013), whose professional interest in particular is the kindergarten’s cultural education assignment, is of the opinion that motor capabilities
like agility and coordination are important. Children who know their bodies well often benefit better from outdoor play, achieving high-quality experiences more often. In my opinion outdoor play is an important part of children’s own culture, which again is a part of the foundation of cultural education.

In the Framework Plan for the content and tasks of kindergartens, chapter 3, Objectives and content, under the subtitle Kindergartens shall promote formative development, it is stated that kindergartens are to contribute to children’s ability of critical thinking, ethical assessment, ability of opposition, and ability of taking action, by means of play, dialogue, cooperation and investigation, so that the children in due time may contribute to changes in society. The plan’s subject areas Body, movement, food and health and Nature, environment and technology (chapter 9, Learning areas) inform about physical education, play culture, embodiment and non-verbal communication.

PHYSICAL COMMUNICATION AND BODY LANGUAGE

Non-verbal communication and children’s many ways of communicating are important parts of the Framework Plan. In chapter 3, Objectives and content the subchapter Kindergartens shall promote communication and language states that kindergartens shall recognize and appreciate children’s various ways of communicating. This subchapter also states that the employees shall appreciate, stimulate and respond to children’s verbal and non-verbal ways of expressing themselves.

Children communicate a lot by means of body language, non-verbal ways of communication. Although this is common to all children, little research work is done in order to learn more about the character of various forms of non-verbal communication. We seem ‘to know’ a lot about how important body language is to children and adults alike, and therefore perhaps we take it for granted in our Nordic kindergarten culture? In the Framework Plan (2017) it is stated that we shall recognize and appreciate children’s various expressions of communication. A child’s body is the boy’s or girl’s chief instrument in this respect.

In the Nordic kindergarten tradition children’s individuality is respected. Gunvor Løkken, a pioneer in the field, emphasizes the necessity of seeing each and every child. We are in this world, we inhabit our environment (Løkken, 2012).

Løkken writes about 20-month-old children who invented leg propelling as a way of saying hello to each other in the kindergarten. This way of expressing themselves bodily became important to their interaction. They developed a (body) language of their own before they could actually talk. The movements of the physical subjects (the children) were intertwined with the message of the movements.
When the children lay on their backs kicking their feet, they created a common meaning. All the children performed the same movements, although with a twist. If this play had been a mere mechanical repetition of the same, the play would have faded out after a while, but the children were able to add small surprises and personal twists, which is why leg propelling greetings continued (Løkken, 2012). The children expressed enthusiasm: “… the sight of the children’s faces, the sound of delighted shrieks, and the energy radiating from their movements” (Løkken, 2012, p. 140).

The language of silence is important to me in my research work. I have observed children’s body language, trying to understand it. Children want to understand each other. They observe other children’s movements in order to understand their own bodies. I have been studying physically active children’s delight, and their pleasure when feeling attachment to a place. Feelings like joy, happiness, presence and confidence are all to a large degree communicated by means of physical expressions. We who are professionally concerned with children, wishing them all the best as they enjoy outdoor life, have to see, observe and interpret children’s bodily expressions.

Experiencing the qualities of a room, a place or a space will influence the way children express themselves physically (Lindquist, 2001). Such thoughts are interesting when it comes to how children experience ‘their’ places, and how play originates, is and develops. Lindquist (2001) takes interest in children’s physical expressions, and she points at the living room which the children are parts of. The children are alive and the world around them is alive because of them.

Perception is, as I have already indicated, an action of creativity. Everything I have said so far about physical expressions and body language should be seen in connection with what I am going to present in the next chapter about imagination and creativity. But first a little more about children’s intrinsic value.

**CHILDREN ARE SENSATION SEEKERS**

This title is inspired by a Norwegian phrase originally created by Asbjørn Flemmen (2003). He spent his workdays concentrating on children’s outdoor play and play in nature. His efforts have for decades helped professionals focus on outdoor life and outdoor play at kindergartens and schools.

My studies show that children utilize their senses as well as their bodies while playing. They copy each other, they invent new ways and patterns, and they help each other. They enjoy the sensation of running rapidly downhill, and the feeling of muddy, sticky fingers. These minute moments are great and important to
children. These experiences of meaning, coping and joy are delightful and magical to them (Fasting, 2017). Flemmen is concerned with the seasons, winter especially, and he wishes children to learn all about the elements of nature. Snow is a phenomenon with many varieties and qualities, and Flemmen developed ski play in just as many varieties, as ski play is his favorite.

Personally as well as professionally, I want to raise confident children who are able to enjoy high-quality outdoor activities all year round, winter included. I want children to grow up with this kind of knowledge, bringing it with them, developing it, as they approach adulthood. After all, you will never find the ultimate truth about snow, and no one ever will. The movie “Childhood” (Olin, 2017) presented children with interesting ideas about snow. They pretended it was chewing gum, and it was delightful to chew. “We have enough till we die”, they said, watching all the snow in front of them.

Creating art from snow and ice is a popular means of expression, and such kinds of artwork may be relevant at kindergartens, too.

Flemmen underlines that children seek motions, creativity and excitement; they are sensation seekers. This we must not forget. The Framework Plan states that children must be allowed to play, create and investigate (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). I find it thrilling that creativity and investigation are seen as related. In the next chapter I will make an attempt at understanding and describing children’s creative enthusiasm.

REFERENCES


