Chapter 4
Children’s world of imagination

Play as poetry and passion

I compare play to poetry. The way I see it, it is impossible to state exactly what play is, and it is equally impossible to state what poetry is. Poetry is a quality many phenomena possess. The susceptible finds poetry in the arts (of course), in nature, and in play. Poetry sometimes touches your heart (Fasting, 2013). Poetry may have rhythm and rhyme, and so can play. We often observe rhythm, a number of children in a row do the same things at the same place. Skipping rope includes rhythm, some ball games do, and riding a bicycle is easier when your legs find their rhythm.

Once I observed two boys making a kind of enactment of the Norwegian fairy-tale **Bukkene Bruse** (‘Billy Goats Gruff’) in the wilderness near **Skauen barnehage** (‘the Woodland Kindergarten’). The ‘Billy Goats Gruff’ are the three Billy goats Gruff, ‘Gruff’ being their common name. One of the boys was to act the character of the biggest Billy goat, the other was to play the part of the troll living under the bridge. “Go to that tree over there”, one boy said, and the other agreed. There their performance started. After a while ‘the Billy goat’ began approaching the bridge with ‘the troll’ hidden underneath. ‘The troll’ had to look up twice to see where ‘the Billy goat’ was, and his facial expression told me he found the whole drama incredibly exciting. When ‘the Billy goat’ was as close as an arm’s length from ‘the troll’, he stopped. ‘The troll’ tried to ask who stamped so heavily on his bridge, but the boy did not find the words. The other boy, ‘the Billy goat’, had to help him, and together they found the right words and phrases. When this was achieved, ‘the troll’ was butted down ‘into the waterfall’; the boy acting the troll ran down the slope until he was stopped by a fence.

Next they changed characters; the Billy goat became the troll and the troll became the Billy goat. The ‘Billy goat’ came stamping along the path. “Who is stamping upon my bridge?” “It’s the biggest of the Billy goats Gruff!” “Now I come to do you in”, said ‘the troll’. Instead, however, ‘the troll’ was butted down into ‘the waterfall’. The ‘troll’ ran all the way along the path down to the fence.
The original *Bukkene Bruse* fairy-tale is a story about three Billy goats, one small, one medium and one giant goat, on their way to the mountains to enjoy the summer pastures. They have to pass a bridge, under which lives a gruesome and ever hungry troll. The small Gruff passes first, convincing the troll that he is too small to be of interest. The medium Gruff passes next, also successful in convincing the troll that he should wait for bigger prey. At last passes the giant Gruff, and when the troll attacks him, the giant Gruff knocks him out cold, butting the troll down in the waterfall. Thereafter the three Billy goats wander happily on to their pastures.

The two boys acted the story in their own way. They reduced the number of characters to two: the giant Gruff and the troll. When they both had acted the parts of both giant Gruff and troll, the play was over. There is a lot of rhythm and repetition in this play. The boys knew the story perfectly. I understood that they had

**IMAGE 7:** A wood offers a lot of exciting opportunities for play! Photo: Merete Lund Fasting

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played this story many times before, but those kindergarten employees who took part in the summing up of the research work had not apprehended the fact. This might have been a coincidence, because at this kindergarten pedagogues and assistants usually spent a lot of time outdoors with the children. It would have been nice, though, if the staff had noticed the boys’ play and praised them. Perhaps their little performance could have been played out indoors, too?

On the other hand, there are things children want to keep to themselves, and we should let them. Everything children do, should not be common property. Nevertheless, the Framework Plan states that kindergarten employees should notice, recognize and follow up children’s activities and perspectives.

Children’s time for self-organized play is dwindling, and when time and space for self-activation are taken away from them, the children become less creative. Research workers worry about kindergarten teachers’ education without the necessary ability to see and promote children’s creativity (Biesta, 2014; Sommer, 2015). In my opinion nature is a great source of inspiration when it comes to manifold kinds of play. Children’s creativity and imagination develop better in nature than on asphalt. Here is a little about children’s perception of nature.

**CHILDREN’S PERCEPTION OF NATURE**

The Framework Plan (2017) emphasizes that kindergartens must contribute to children’s love of nature. It states that children’s experiences of nature must be manifold. This is said in the subject area *Nature, environment, and technology*; that children are to experience high-quality outdoor life all year round. Children are to experience, investigate and experiment with nature phenomena. In my article *Det lekende friluftslivet* (“Playful outdoor life”) (Fasting, 2016) I try to describe what outdoor life actually is to children.

Linking the concepts of nature, childhood and ‘primitive’ people together may be a fruitful way to explain in a deeper sense the relation between children and nature. A member of the Makuna people said that white people see with their eyes only and hear with their ears only. Indians see and hear with their minds, according to Tom Tiller (1993). So, children often do, too. Children are empathetic; they understand and show compassion for human beings, animals and their physical surroundings, like trees and plants (Tiller, 1993).

Animism, the belief that all things in nature have a soul, is a fruitful foundation for understanding nature in a way we recognize that many ‘primitive’ people do. Perhaps children understand like the ‘primitives’? Children animate, and to a large degree they experience totalities.
The complexities of children’s experiences were emphasized by professor Arne Næss (1912–2009), who connected these complexities to concepts like motion, agility, and presence (Næss, 2005). Children’s own natural complexity of marveling, micro-cosmos, attention, action-seeking, sense perception, movements and physicality are concepts often called attention to when children’s ways of experiencing nature are to be described. Children’s truly genuine happiness is also often referred to, clarified by their involvement, participation and intimate understanding (Bagøien, 2013).

Children meet nature bodily, like ‘primitive’ people do. We adults tend to see what our eyes tell us: light, views, contrasts. Children care very little about views; details interest them more (Bagøien, 2013). One way of summing up our view of nature may be that human beings live in eternal mutuality with the world, and the world is active, animated and in a strange way alive. There are inner bonds as well as open communication between the individual person and the world, and a deeper relation between Man and nature (Merleau-Ponty et al., 2003).

Children investigate nature, and there are innumerable opportunities of investigation. Children are curious and driven by an inner force when it comes to examining their own bodies as well as their surrounding world. Children are broad-minded and usually totally present. They try and try to find out how things work and how they can be put to use.

“Children approach nature from the inside before they learn to contemplate it at a distance”, says Harald Beyer Broch (2004, p. 3). When children investigate their surroundings, including areas of wilderness, they learn to know them, they inhabit the area, and they establish a sense of belonging. Not all children, however, attain the experiences necessary to look into nature in such a way; to be able to do so a child must be able to feel secure in nature.

Let me present to you a kindergarten girl I once observed. She said she wanted to go under a tree. At the same time, she looked very unsure of herself, saying: “I have never been under a tree before.” To me it seemed clear that this girl needed to feel secure under that tree, and feel secure everywhere else in these woods, before she was able to recognize the woodland with its trees as her own place of playing, her very own playground. It did not take many days, however, before I observed her up into a tree with a playmate.

ESTHETICS

The Framework Plan’s subject area Art, culture and creativity establishes that kindergartens shall organize in order to help children develop their creative processes.
and expressions. Children shall have access to rooms, spaces, objects and materials that allow them to express themselves in playful and esthetical ways which are suitable for inciting their imagination, creative thinking and joy. Children are to be presented to a variety of works of art and cultural expressions, preferably organized in ways which will allow them to study, lose themselves in and progress into the works of art and the expressions.

When girls climb a rock wall, in playing they are taking part in a climbing competition, but to me they are dancing the wall. They move about with total control, and there are moments when I cannot separate them from the wall. Says Siv: “Sometimes we win and sometimes we lose; mostly we win.”

In my opinion these climbing girls are examples of free spirits and creativity. They radiate playfulness, nothing less, and their attitude towards their surroundings is one of playfulness. I observed the girls playing, and the overall picture they were parts of, was one of absolute esthetics. Their physical expressions convince me that they are in a bodily and close dialogue with the rock wall (Fasting, 2013).

This example may be used in order to understand this quotation: “Perception is therefore a kind of esthetical acknowledgment” (Løkken & Søbstad, 2006, p. 110). I do not always recognize esthetics when I observe play, but sometimes, when children are absorbed by rhythm or they have entered their own world of imagination, I find it worthy as well as useful to talk about esthetics. Physical expressions certainly may be esthetical: girls dancing a rock wall. In my opinion this is esthetics most profound.

In the article Magien i utetiden (“The magical outdoor hours”) (Løndal & Fasting, 2016) the authors explain: “This mesmerizing or magical condition, where play just happens and the child is totally absorbed by what he/she is doing, twined with embodiment, coping, togetherness and imagination” (p. 98).

Breaking kindergarten habits may be esthetics, too, according to Hege Hansson (2016). To create patterns may imply combining, repeating and erecting things. To break patterns or to put elements together in a new way, may be an expression of esthetics. For example: Collect all pine and spruce cones that can be found in a woodland area, and let the children do whatever they want with them. The employees of Sletta (‘the Plain’) kindergarten brought the children along to the woods, also bringing along arts and crafts students who had prepared a certain task for the children. A boy lay down on the ground, and the rest of the children and adults constructed a frame of sticks around him. When this was done, he rose from the ground and together with the rest he filled the frame with all kinds of natural materials, leaves, pebbles, etc. This was autumn time and the woods were rich in colors. To many the result would classify as ‘esthetical’, and so thought the
present adults. What, however, did the children think? Teachers and students took a number of snapshots of the material-filled frame, but the children seemed to have lost all interest. They simply did not care about the result.

The whole project was an adult idea, and the adults were the ones who cared for the product or result. The children did not care; they were busy collecting things and investigating the area. So, what did the children think? Obviously, they understood nothing esthetical about the project. Of course, they observed and identified colors and materials, but so what? The boy who had lain down on the ground was dissatisfied, because some of us had made a braid of straw for him: “I’m not a girl”, he said.

The way I see it, adults must be better at appreciating children’s esthetics in children’s self-organized play. We should invite and encourage them to use their own language to describe, discuss and talk about esthetical expressions as colors, shapes, light, connections and physical activities.

We may look upon various kinds of play as phenomena with their own characteristics; at the same time children’s games are flavored by their surrounding culture. I often feel slightly provoked while reading Gunilla Lindqvist (2001), because she always demands that we must search for a more profound understanding of the structure of play. She points to the fact that children often are very good at exaggerating as well as diminishing. The idea of play’s physical expressions belongs to the process of imagination and the esthetical shapes of play. The esthetical dimension implies that games may assume new characters, and it is at such points that children’s imagination is a factor (Lindqvist, 2001). For instance, when children pretend they are cats, they move like cats, with great agility. Suddenly their game changes a bit, they are not cats any more, they are tigers! Their motions become more forceful, more ‘brutal’. This is an esthetical change. Esthetics sometimes are about movements. The children chase each other, they run alongside each other, they leap with parallel feet, they jump rhythmically lifting both knees high simultaneously. This kind of behavior may be seen as free and creative display of life, and from an esthetical point of view this may be seen as esthetics.

**Creativity and Imagination**

Qualities like creativity and imagination have often been downgraded in Western society. Play is not always creative, but all kinds of creativity contain elements of play (Lerdahl and Rømo, 2003). Why? When we are in a playful mood, we are open-minded, perceptive and investigating. These qualities resemble the emotion called ‘patic’.
Creativity must be practiced and maintained, says Hege Hansson (2016). In the Framework Plan’s subject area *Art, culture and creativity* it is stated that kindergarten employees shall help children process impressions and emotions they receive from art, culture and esthetics, by means of creative activities outdoors and indoors (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017). I find it thrilling to register that ‘outdoors’ is mentioned before ‘indoors’. Perhaps this signals that outdoor art activities are ‘in’ for the time being? Jan-Erik Sørenstuen (2011) has worked with and written about the arts and artwork at kindergartens and schools for years, including art and nature, for instance how to create sculptures from ice and snow.

I take interest in understanding how children’s imagination influences their ways of playing and their relations to places and premises. I find support in the thoughts of David Abram (2005), American philosopher, ecologist and performance artist, who says that imagination is a quality of our faculties themselves. Our imagination is not isolated merely to our minds, it is part of our bodies, of our physical faculties, and is a hand and foot thing, too. When children start moving, their imagination also suddenly starts working.

Torben Hangaard Rasmussen (1992), Danish kindergarten pedagogue and author, is interested in imagination as a physical phenomenon:

> The child’s hands, feet, ears, eyes and mouth all ask questions to the world. This is possible because of their already embodied experiences. The child’s memory and imagination are physical potentials waiting prepared in its hands and feet. This is the way a child experiences the world. It is not an inside thing, it is not an outside thing – it all happens in the middle; we see the child’s hand seize a piece of wood of adequate shape and size, the child’s eyes recognize this piece of wood as a pistol, and with this pistol the child can shoot. The memories and experiences of the hand make it possible for a piece of wood to become a pistol (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1992, p. 89, translated from Danish by AS).

In order to understand children’s physical and imaginary worlds we must in an unbiased way investigate those children’s worlds. Children are actively investigating their surroundings and in this process their imagination and creativity are essential (Abram, 2005).

Children at play sense the world actively with their bodies. To children this world is alive, and in their dialogue with it they can animate it. “To describe the animated life of certain things is simply the most concise way of elucidating these
things as we spontaneously experience them, before the creation of concepts and definitions” (Abram, 2005, pp. 63–64).

Abram makes it clear that we must approach children’s physical and imaginary world with an open mind. For example: Some children walk around in the woodland, and one child stops at a tree. The child ‘hears’ the tree: Climb me! Use my branches, I’ll help you.

Children possess the talent of animating; they can make trees friends and playmates. Adults often have a hard time understanding this. Children’s games tend to contain a lot of imagination. When playing, children interpret their experiences, animating them, they dramatize, transform and exaggerate. Children’s games are not merely recreating things they have experienced, such games are also a creative way of processing their impressions. Children are fond of experimenting and they prefer playgrounds that allow experiments. Some children, some more than others, are looking for the adventurous or magical. Some children love the feeling of being mesmerized. Siv, suddenly turning into a mermaid when I was climbing below her, was such a girl.

Not many members of the pedagogical tradition have taken interest in imagination and creativity. One who did was Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896 – 1934, born in Belarus). In Vygotsky’s opinion imagination has its origin in pieces of reality, which in turn is a product of earlier experiences. He says that all human beings are creative and that there is no contradiction between imagination and reality. The richer our reality, the more opportunities for imagination, and vice versa. The quality of adult and childhood imagination may differ a lot, mainly because very few adults retain their creative powers after puberty, although this is also culturally conditioned. In some cultures, superstition and imagination are more important than in others (Vygotsky, 1995).

Grown-ups often forget how overall important the world of imagination is to many children. Try to remember your own childhood! I still recall my trembling body and the fear I felt when we dug deep holes into the ground. We must not dig too deep, for fear of digging down to China! I imagined there would come people up from below, and maybe they would take us back with them. The children I have spent time with in later years, as a professional and otherwise, have uncovered an imaginary world to me, a world I have learned to understand to quite a large degree. Achieving this new understanding has been necessary, thus making me able to mediate some impressions from children’s imaginary worlds.

To me Hangaard Rasmussen has been a very important source of inspiration in this work:
To watch the world from the child’s point of view is difficult for an adult human being. The ability to take such a point of view requires that the adult as far as possible can forget about his predetermined and ready-made theories about children’s development. The adult’s eye should watch the child as a physically existing individual, an individual communicating with the world by means of its material experiences. That kind of watching represents the natural entrance to the child’s perspective of the world (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1992, p. 87, translated from Danish by AS).

PLAY AS A WORK OF ART

Play, according to German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), is a work of art’s particular way of being. We cannot expect to find the essence of a work of art in the consciousness of the artist or of the spectator, but rather somewhere in the middle – there we also will find space for imagination and creativity (Steinsholt, 2010).

A genuine spectator must participate, dedicate himself or let himself be carried away. He must open his mind and let the play – the work of art – merge with him. Gadamer (2004) explains that this kind of play or game takes place within a defined playground, and the poles of the playground space are the work of art and the spectator. In this playground, some place between the work of art and the spectator, dialogue and interpretation take place (Steinsholt, 2001).

The representation of this game is a result produced by the dialogue between the game which represents the work of art and the spectator. The play as subject is influenced by the character of the playground, by the players, and by the play itself. The play as subject will change its character as it is interpreted and as the participants introduce new elements to it. The playground itself may return feedback to the performance of the game. The game may develop along new and creative paths quite mysteriously; we are being played by ‘something’ we do not control (Steinsholt, 2001). Play ‘just happens’.

Abram (2005) says something about such phenomena: we are incapable of always seeing and understanding right away what is going on. Neither children nor adults are capable of grasping all details and nuances the very moment they take place.
REFERENCES


