

Prince, Heather ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6199-4892> , Allin, Linda and Hansen Sandseter, Ellen Beate (2013) Editorial: Outdoor play and learning in early childhood from different cultural perspectives. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 13 (3). pp. 183-188.

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## EDITORIAL

### **Outdoor play and learning in Early Childhood from different cultural perspectives**

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**International Editors:** *Ellen Beate Hansen Sandseter & Eva Ärlemalm-Hagsér*

This themed edition of the *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning* focuses on outdoor play and learning in early childhood through a lens of cultural differences and similarities. Five articles are included in this special issue and are preceded by a discussion of the contemporary challenges in this area of research.

During the last century, there has been an overwhelming change in the nature of children's play in western countries (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike & Sleet, 2012). Play is an ambiguous concept concerning children's "own" activity: a voluntary, intrinsically motivated experience where the activity itself is more important than the outcome (Bateson, 2005; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Play can include activities that are voluntarily engaged in, without adult intervention, characterized by fun, intense activity, spontaneity, freedom and self-initiative (Wiltz & Fein, 2006) but it can also encompass structured play with varying degrees of adult guidance.

Within a generation, a rapid decline in opportunities for outdoor play has been noted as children's play in western countries has been domesticated and supervised by adults (Clements 2004; Francis and Lorenzo 2006; Ginsburg 2007; Sandberg, 2012). Children spend less time than ever before outdoors and future generations of children may have increasingly lower expectations of the amount of contact with nature that they will have in their lives (Karsten, 2005). However, in some western countries such as Scandinavia, children's free play outdoors is still an important part of childhood (Sandseter, 2010, 2012; Ärlemalm-Hagsér & Sandberg, in press). In other countries, children's opportunities for outdoor play outside of contexts such as school and childcare have undergone significant erosion. It is well documented that changes in urban environments prevent children engaging freely in their neighbourhoods (Francis and Lorenzo 2006). Changes in urban environments restrict children to 'islands' such as homes, day care and schools (Kernan 2010) In a Swedish study about children's contact with nature in an urban context, Sandberg (2012) argues that social class is influential in the degree of children's contact with nature and of their awareness of its positive connotations, as different kinds of dwellings and neighbourhoods provide different opportunities for outdoor play.

One of the barriers for children's outdoor play identified by Sandberg (2012, p. 185) is children's mobility restrictions *sensu* "increased due to concerns about traffic and so-called 'stranger danger' ". According to Kytä (2004) a child friendly environment is that in which children should have the opportunity to move around freely and access all the various parts ('affordances') of their environment. Without these, they will not be able to create play and

activity that fosters well-being, health and development. The importance of not restricting children's free play due to safety concerns is also indicated (see e.g. Brussoni et al., 2012; Sandseter, 2009, 2010), and research shows that some of the most influential factors for the decline of children's free outdoor play are adult concerns about children's safety, a societal trend moving towards a view of the child as being more vulnerable and in need of protection, and play spaces and play equipment that do not reflect children's interests and needs (Brussoni et al., 2012).

The other important barrier to children's outdoor play is the lack of "proximity to nature areas and places for outdoor play" (Sandberg, 2012, p.185). Play environments are also important for children's exercise and health, and Dymont, Bell and Lucas (2009) found that it is important to ensure a great diversity of design features and green (nature) elements in school grounds to promote children's physical active play, and especially to enhance activities for girls. Several other researchers have studied and discussed the effect of the outdoor environment on children's play. Fjørtoft (2000) found that functional play such as gross-motor activities and basic skills (e.g., running, jumping, throwing, climbing, crawling, rolling, swinging, and sliding) were predominant when children played in nature compared with traditional pre-school play areas. Moreover, landscape structures such as steep slopes, rough cliffs, and trees contributed to play activities such as climbing and sliding. According to Fjørtoft, pre-schoolers consider traditional playgrounds to be more boring than natural playscapes, and children develop better motor abilities when playing in nature compared with traditional playgrounds. Comparing children's play in traditional-equipment play areas, contemporary-designed playgrounds and natural-design playgrounds, Lee (1999) found that children reacted to natural playgrounds enthusiastically and actively and that these afforded the most challenging play. Traditional playgrounds afforded the least challenging play and the most non-play (wandering or standing still). However, evidence from a study by Hart and Sheehan (1986) found that there was no difference in the amount of children's verbal interaction, social play and cognitive play between a contemporary playground and a traditional playground.

Outdoor play is regarded as beneficial for children's development and learning in many areas. For example, children's outdoor play might benefit them because they practise and enhance different motor and physical skills (Fjørtoft, 2000, Grahn, Mårtensson, Lindblad, Nilsson & Ekman, 1997, Vigsø and Nielsen, 2006), and are able to develop perceptual competences such as depth, form, shape, size, and movement perception (Fiskum, 2004, Rakison, 2005) as well as general spatial-orientation (Bjorklund and Pellegrini, 2002). Research also indicates that children show improved risk assessment and learn how to master risky situations through challenging outdoor play, (Ball, 2002, Boyesen, 1997, Smith, 1998, Stutz, 1999, Sandseter, 2010, Sandseter, 2012). Outdoor play is also considered important for children to develop democratic values and practice through social interactions (Aasen, Grindheim & Waters, 2009). Child self-worth and independence are also strengthened by learning how to manage the environment and nature, in which they live, play and explore (Nilsen, 2008).

## **The studies**

The first two papers examine the environments of play in different parts of Europe, the value placed on them and their optimisation.

In *Provisions for outdoor play and learning in Slovene preschools*, Kos & Jerman scrutinize the opportunities for outdoor play and learning from the perspectives of teachers, parents and the children themselves. They examine the amount of time pre-school teachers dedicate to play and learning in playgrounds and in natural environments, the activities of the children therein, the barriers to outdoor play and learning and the value that parents and teachers attribute to them. The results show that a majority of the Slovene pre-school teachers and parents see outdoor activities as an important part of the everyday life of pre-school children and emphasise the need for children to spend more time in natural settings, although the potential of these is not optimised. It would seem that the evidence here from Slovenia supports that from Sweden (Sandberg, 2012) that a key factor driving time spent outdoors is proximity to nature

Luchs & Fikus' paper, *A comparative study of active play on differently designed playgrounds*, also emphasises 'affordances' (Gibson, 1979) as the potential provided by the surrounding environment through their research which focuses on play environments in urban areas for kindergarten children aged five and six, in Germany. They highlight differences in the amount of time ('episodes'), duration and types of play activities between naturally structured and contemporary types of playground, suggesting that the most complex and long-lasting play takes place in natural play areas.

Risk is an important consideration in outdoor play. Niehues, Bundy, Brown, Tranter, Ragen & Engelen in Australia show how altering adults' perception of risk could enhance the sustainability of outdoor play, *Everyday uncertainties: Reframing perceptions of risk in outdoor free play*. Risk aversion can lead to the overprotection of children and potentially limit their potential for learning through challenging and risky play activities. Risk is often used negatively, but Niehues et al show how a risk reframing intervention can help educators and parents to respond to risk and uncertainty in new ways, to enable them to view the benefits of engaging in risky play and the common outcomes of health, happiness and resilience.

The next two papers focus more on the processes and outcomes which can be achieved through outdoor play.

McArdle, Harrison & Harrison describe the 'Nature Nuture' project which sought to promote resilience in early years children from challenging backgrounds in Scotland: *Does a nurturing approach that uses an outdoor play environment build resilience in children from a challenging background?* Again, the importance of a natural setting (woodland) in addition to a nurturing approach is seen as key to the success of the project as evidenced through an ethnographic study.

Waite, Rogers & Evans' paper, *Freedom, flow and fairness: exploring how children develop socially at school through outdoor play* explores outdoor play in England. They suggest that outdoor and natural contexts allow children to be more self-directed in their activity and provide opportunities for children to negotiate and resolve arguments without adult

arbitration. In their ESRC supported study, children wore felt bags with mobile digital recorders to capture their conversations away from adults. Analyses of dialogues show fascinating insight into children's social interactions including sustained inter-child play and the potential social and educational implications of outdoor play-based learning.

### **Concluding comments**

As Davis and Elliott (2009) and Elliott (2008) propose, there is an absence of a critical discussion in relation to children's outdoor play. Several knowledge gaps remain to be explored further: firstly, hierarchies of power are rarely mentioned in research on outdoor play and learning; secondly, children and childhood are often viewed as universal and neutral; thirdly, the relationship between human and nature as an anthropocentric world-view is often subject to multiple interpretations (Elliott & Davis, 2008; Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2013a; 2013b) and finally gender differences (Waller, 2010; Ärlemalm-Hagsér, 2010; Ärlemalm-Hagsér & Sandberg, in press). Young children learning and playing in the outdoors can transcend traditional compartmentalisations and Ärlemalm-Hagsér and Hellman (2012) stress that children often challenge stereotypic understandings within the day-to-day activities in the pre-school.

This is an important time for early childhood practitioners and researchers to re-evaluate approaches to outdoor play, and to consider the different opportunities available for outdoor play and play in natural environments in early childhood (Waller 2007). It is hoped that this themed edition will make a significant contribution.

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