
Children’s Experiences with Outdoor, Physically Active Play in After-School Programs

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The authors investigated the outdoor physical play of Norwegian first graders in after-school programs using a study that viewed play from the children’s perspective. The authors identified three themes of the physically active play they observed—“playing with friends,” “no one decides,” and “I can do it.” Their findings highlight the dynamic importance of such play, especially of child initiation in play and of playing with other children. The physical outdoor play fostered fun and playful interaction, leading both to improved communication and movement capabilities. The authors discuss their findings in relation to Scott Eberle’s theoretical understanding of play, findings that indicate the complex conditions that support and extend children’s play in after-school programs and the need to recognize them. **Key words:** after school programs; child’s perspective; physically active play; outdoor play

Introduction

ACCORDING TO THE Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (2021), children should have the time and the opportunity to participate in outdoor play daily while attending Norwegian after-school programs (ASPs). The Norwegian national framework for ASPs claims that play engages and inspires children and contributes to their holistic development and learning. The framework emphasizes that activities in ASPs should take the perspective of children and highlights play as a central aspect of this plan.

Pellegrini and Smith (1998) point out that children’s play often has a vigorous physical component and that children’s physical activity can often be seen as playful. They note that physically active play “may be social or solitary, but the distinguishing behavior features are a playful context, combined with moderate to vigorous physical activity, such that metabolic activity is well above resting

metabolic rate” (577). According to Smith (2009), physical play is relatively neglected by educators. Although play is generally valued in early childhood education, tensions continue concerning incorporating play into early childhood education curricula (Kuschner 2012). The Norwegian framework for ASPs serves as an example of such tensions. The plan holds that ASPs should facilitate play engaging children in activities and inspiring them toward activities. The framework states that ASPs shall allow for all children to participate in outdoor, physically active play during ASP time, preferably every day.

Theorists, regardless of their professional background, agree that play has a central role in children’s lives (Sutton-Smith 2009). There seems to be extensive agreement that play is a typical way of being for children and that it represents an important cultural phenomenon among them (Lillemyr 2020). This is echoed by the United Nations’ (2013) Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 31 that highlights “the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts” (n.p.). However, researchers have expressed concern that institutionalization of children’s time can hamper their opportunities to participate in free, spontaneous play and leisure activities (Frost 2010; Løndal 2011; Smith 2005; Sundsdal and Øksnes 2015; Sutton-Smith 2008).

Although most theories about play emphasize its intrinsic value, there seems to be an underlying belief among educators that children should develop cognitive, social, and motor skills through play (Sutton-Smith 2009). According to Swedish researchers Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson and Niklas Pramling (2013), “free play as a contrast to teacher-led activity has long been an issue of debate in early childhood education,” and they state that “there has been a battle between play and learning” (11). One argument implies that teachers and other professionals have important roles in children’s play to facilitate learning (see, for example, Wallerstedt and Pramling 2012). This perspective seems to resonate well with recent curriculum reforms relevant to schools and kindergartens in the Nordic countries (Øksnes and Sundsdal 2020; Pramling Samuelsson and Pramling 2013).

This argument is complicated, however, by an important aspect identified by Sutton-Smith (2009): play is an unpredictable phenomenon, difficult to control or to steer in particular directions. From Sutton-Smith’s point of view, play cannot be planned by adults to have specific goals that relate to what children can achieve or learn—instead, the central aspect of play is that children experience joy and pleasure. In line with this notion of play, the United Nations’ (2013)

Convention on the Rights of the Child challenges us to understand play from the perspective of children. Childhood researchers also support this idea and emphasize that it is decisive to include children's voices in research if we want to gain in-depth knowledge of their play (Clark 2017; James 2007).

Until now, studies in extended education, such as ASPs, have primarily dealt with activities that promote learning or with social and emotional development through planned activities (Noam and Triggs 2017; Wendelborg et al. 2018). However, we find some exceptions in the Nordic region, where in some studies ASP employees claim that they focus on children's leisure and play and that they aim to assume the children's perspective (Hjalmarsson 2013; Højlund 2002; Pálsdóttir 2012). In a Norwegian study, Løndal (2010a) investigated third- and fourth-grade children's experiences with physically active play during ASPs. The results showed that children experience play with friends as the most important part of ASPs and that they most appreciate play chosen and determined with other children. Hogsnes (2016) investigated children's experiences of the transition from kindergarten to school and ASPs and found that children's shared play experiences from kindergarten contributed as a bridge-building practice in the transition to school. A study conducted in Iceland also focused on the transition from kindergarten to school and aimed at exploring how first-grade children (age six years) recalled and reconstructed their kindergarten experiences (Einarsdóttir 2011). The most memorable activities were generally outdoor play and relationships with other children. In our review of the research, we found no studies outside the Nordic region that focused on child-managed play in ASPs as experienced by children.

The Norwegian ASP Context

In Norway ASPs are public programs outside normal school hours available to children in the first four years of school (six to ten years old; The Norwegian Education Mirror 2019). ASPs are commonly located in the school area with access to the respective school's equipment, facilities, and playgrounds. As many as 82 percent of first graders (five to six years old) attend ASPs for ten to twenty hours per week. Thus, the time spent in ASPs constitutes a significant portion of children's overall time after school.

ASPs have received increased attention in Norway in recent years, leading to a political debate about ASPs' content and the management of after-school activities. An educational debate has simultaneously developed in relation to whether play is an educational tool or a self-initiated and pleasurable activity

without goals and purposes (Løndal 2019; Øksnes 2008; Øksnes et al. 2014). This discussion influenced the content of the national framework for ASPs, which was implemented in 2021. The plan states that activities in ASPs should be facilitated distinctly from a child's perspective. Within the limits set in the framework, each individual ASP is free to choose content and working methods. However, employees are supposed to use a different approach for children's activities in ASPs than they do in school, with special emphasis on self-chosen play and other child-centered activities. It is expected that children should have the opportunity to play outdoors every day during ASP time (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2021).

Previous research indicates that children in Norwegian ASPs, to a great extent, are free to choose their activities during ASP time and that children engage in a variety of playful activities indoors and outdoors (Løndal 2010a; Lund and Løndal 2017; Løndal et al. 2020). A study conducted in fourteen ASPs showed that the observed children on average spent 43 percent of the total ASP time outdoors and that much of this time was characterized by physically active play (Løndal et al. 2021). These findings fit well with the evaluation of a report about Norwegian ASPs: ASP managers and employees agreed their most important responsibility is to ensure that children experience care and friendship (Wendelborg et al. 2018). Additionally, the ASP managers and employees emphasized the importance of ASPs as an arena for child-managed play and creative activities.

Aim of the Study

In this study, we emphasize the youngest children's perspective on outdoor, physically active play in ASPs. It is valuable for ASP employees, parents, politicians, and other stakeholders to learn how children experience their play in ASPs. Such knowledge will help employees better understand the nature of children's play and how they can facilitate it during ASP time. The following research question guided this study: "How do first graders experience their outdoor, physically active play during after-school programs (ASPs)?"

Theoretical Perspective

Numerous attempts have been made to determine what play means and what characterizes children's play. The ambiguity of the concept makes it hard to

define. Brian Sutton-Smith (2009), a leading proponent of play, claimed, "We all play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like. But when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness" (1).

Play cannot be planned by adults to have specific goals that relate to what children achieve or learn—instead, the central aspect of play is that children experience joy and pleasure. Theorists who describe the phenomenon seem to agree on some of its aspects: Play constitutes a typical way of being among children; children play because they value the activity for its intrinsic meaning; play leads to joy and engagement in children; and play is an important cultural phenomenon (Lillemyr 2011). For children, play has a unique value for its own sake—that is, play is a goal in itself.

We base our theoretical perspective on play in this article mainly on Eberle's (2014) understanding of play as a dynamic and emergent process. According to Henricks (2015), Eberle's theory is an important contribution that can loosen the scholarly understanding of play or, at least, can free us from conceptualizing play as a carefully directed, cognitively controlled pursuit. Eberle's theories may also help bridge the gap between play perceived only as a tool for learning or only as a joyful activity that has its own values. In this way, the theory might bring together the two sides in what Pramling Samuelsson and Pramling (2013) called a battle between play and learning closer to each other. Additionally, we find that the basic elements in Eberle's ideas about play show an affinity for the experiences of the player but simultaneously highlight the valuable capabilities that might be fostered in play. Thus, we believe that these elements can serve as a fruitful analytical framework for preserving and eliciting children's voices.

Eberle argued for a play ethos that recognizes play benefits both evolution and individual development. He presents a definition of play that considers its dynamic character: "Play is an ancient, voluntary, 'emergent' process driven by pleasure that yet strengthens our muscles, instructs our social skills, tempers and deepens our positive emotions, and enables a state of balance that leaves us poised to play some more" (231).

Eberle presented six basic elements he considered essential for play and that occur during play. They are anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise. He urged us to look at these elements as moving images that relate to concepts in aesthetics and philosophy. Play begins with the anticipation of those who play—they look forward to it and know when the opportunity for play arises. This can occur when the school bell rings, signaling that it is time for recess. The next element is surprise, which can be a reward but requires that

players are prepared to appreciate the surprise. The third element is pleasure, which is the hub of play. No one would play if it were not fun in some way. Thus, because play involves pleasure, play immortalizes itself. The fourth element is understanding, which points to insight and sensitivity as the rewards of play, delivering emotional and intellectual bonuses. Play with others requires reciprocity with and sensitivity to others; they are prerequisites for play. The fifth element, strength, flows from understanding and combines capability with confidence. Eberle clarified that “much of the pleasure we derive from play is social in nature, and play strengthens our social skills” (226). The sixth and final element of play is poise, which occurs when play adds understanding to strength and, finally, a sense of balance. Thinking of balance in regard to the physical direction to the idea that play pleasurable enhances perception or awareness of the position and movement of the body.

Eberle emphasized that his six elements of play are not static categories but circumstance ranges that display themselves at different dimensions and depth levels. Each element is divided into eight synonyms of varying character, which increase in intensity. To give one example, anticipation may first migrate from interest to openness and then to readiness, expectation, curiosity, desire, exuberance, and wonderment.

Methodology

To collect examples of children’s experiences in outdoor play in Norwegian ASPs, we conducted interviews while walking around with the children in their ASP play area. The first author followed children during their outdoor, physically active play throughout one ASP day. The children’s experiences were addressed through “walk-along interviews,” which according to Kinney (2017) create an interaction between the environment, the researcher, and the participant, encouraging exciting discussions and eliciting important information about the children’s play without relying on the children having to remember previous play experiences. By involving multiple forms of communication, such as speech, body language, facial expression, and play, we were able to refer to this mixed approach—combining interview and participant observation—in the subsequent analysis. This study strove to empower the children and minimize the power differential by allowing them to act as tour guides, guiding the researcher through their ASP outdoor area—an environment that the children knew well.

Participating Children

The participants comprised a subgroup of children who were observed in a study focused on the physically active play of first graders in seven ASPs (Riiser et al. 2017). Based on an expectation that the number of participating children, size of available area, and access to nature areas, might have an impact on children's physically active play, we chose ASPs that differed in size (small, medium, large,) and location (urban, rural) for the main study. Two children from each of these seven ASPs participated in this study. All ASPs had access to outdoor areas with varied play equipment. The seven playgrounds were designed in different ways adapted to the size and location of the area, but all playgrounds offer a combination of open spaces, climbing frames, swings and sand pits, places for ball games, and places with natural elements. The typical equipment available consists of balls, hula hoops, jumping ropes, tricycles and scooters, and sandpit equipment.

For the present study, we needed to recruit children who were willing and able to talk to us and to share their play experiences with us. To ensure participation of children with such willingness and ability, we asked the ASP leader to select two children (a boy and a girl). We specified that we wanted to include children who were able to recall experiences and articulate them verbally. Altogether, fourteen children (age six years)—seven girls and seven boys—from the seven different participating ASPs were included.

Data Collection

We conducted interviews with one child at a time in the outdoor ASP play areas. We asked the children semistructured interview questions that focused on their experiences with physically active play outdoors in ASPs: What do you like to play outdoors in your ASP? Where do you like to play? How do you feel when you are playing? Who do you like to play with? Who decides what to play? What do you feel if you don't manage the activity you want to perform? Each child decided what he or she wanted to demonstrate and talk about in relation to play in his or her favorite outdoor ASP play areas. To inspire the children to talk about their experiences of play outdoors, not other types of physical activities, we chose to use the general word "play" in our question instead of "physically active play." We expected that the children would talk mostly about such play. The interviewer explained that there were no right or wrong answers and that the children were the experts.

In line with Eide and Winger (2003), we conducted one-on-one interviews to avoid individual children becoming dominant in a group conversation. Some-

times, the children answered questions in a manner that demonstrated their skills and preferences for play. The interviews were audio recorded while walking, which the children were made aware of and had consented to beforehand. Each interview lasted fifteen to thirty minutes. During the interviews, the interviewer made notes—for example, “full of energy, smiles, expresses self-confidence, runs fast”—that were recorded when a child was demonstrating instead of verbally answering the questions.

Transcription and Analysis

After we finished all the interviews, the first author transcribed the audio files to secure as many details relevant to the specific analysis as possible (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015).

We used Malterud’s (2012) strategy, called “systematic text condensation,” for the qualitative analysis of the transcribed interviews. This method constitutes a pragmatic approach, despite being inspired by phenomenological ideas, and consists of four steps. In the first step, the three authors of this article read the transcribed material several times to establish an overview of the collected data and to look for preliminary themes associated with the experiences of children with outdoor, physically active play in ASPs. After reading the full text from a bird’s-eye perspective, each researcher wrote down their preliminary themes. Then, we negotiated and discussed the themes for which disagreements arose (Malterud 2012).

In the second step, we systematically reviewed the transcripts line by line to identify meaningful units, and we then marked these units with codes: friends, play and activities, the adults, practice in a playful way (easy), well-being, and fun. We developed the codes by relating the preliminary themes to the research question and identifying interesting aspects of the outdoor, physically active play that should be investigated further.

In the third step, we organized and reduced the data to a decontextualized selection of meaning units. The codes from the second step were honed and placed in three thematic code groups: “playing with friends,” “no one decides,” and “I can do it.” The analysis followed an inductive process—beginning with a basic description, moving on to localization of meaningful units, and ending with incorporation of a theoretical perspective. In the fourth step, we synthesized the meaning units into consistent text in which the investigated phenomena emerged (Malterud 2012).

Trustworthiness

In line with recommendations from Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), we were concerned with conducting a trustworthy study throughout the research process. We exclusively discussed methodological questions, checked transcripts, asked questions about interpretations of interviewee utterances, and discussed theoretical interpretations to ensure that the findings reflected the children's experiences.

We discussed the design of the study, the theoretical framework, and the analysis at the beginning of the project, and we chose a research method that highlights close interaction with the children. The credibility and reliability of qualitative studies can be improved through investigator triangulation (Twining et al. 2017). We discussed the strategies for—and each of our experiences with—data collection and analysis throughout the study. We critically discussed the findings to explore other possible interpretations of the material that did not correspond to our preconceptions.

Ethical Considerations

Initially, we obtained formal consent from the administration of each participating ASP. The project was reviewed by the Norwegian Data Protection Official for research, who concluded that it was in accordance with the Personal Data Act (reference number 46008). We informed the staff members of the participating ASPs about the study and received informed consent from the parents of the participating children. Before conducting the interviews, we obtained oral consent from the participating children by asking them directly whether we were allowed to interview them. In addition, for the sake of anonymity, the children are referred to by fictitious names in the study.

Results

The following overarching themes appeared to be typical in the outdoor, physically active play experiences of first graders in ASPs: “playing with friends,” “no one decides,” and “I can do it.” At first glance the themes might appear as general play-related topics, not exclusively relevant for outdoor, physically active play. It is worth noting that the results are condensed from interview conversations circling around the children's outdoor, physically active play, and that the themes describe aspects from such play.

Playing with Friends

The children highlighted the opportunity to be with friends as a decisive factor for whether or not they enjoyed ASPs. Almost all children expressed that they enjoyed being in their ASPs and reasoned that this was so because they enjoyed playing—especially being able to play with their friends. Outdoor, physically active play was highly appreciated by the children, and they provided examples of a variety of play activities. The most frequently mentioned activities were climbing trees and using monkey bars, cycling, doing gymnastics, swinging, jumping rope, playing tag games, playing soccer, and playing in the sandpit. A typical example of this can be seen in Adam's response to the question about what he engages in during his ASP time.

R: Can you tell me a little bit about what it is like to be in your ASP?

Adam: It is fun!

R: Yes, why is it fun?

Adam: Mmm (thinking) . . . because I have a lot of friends there.

R: What do you usually do with your friends when you are in your ASP?

Boy: Drive the cars and scooters and play in the cable car up there (points to show where it is).

R: Yes . . .

Adam: . . . Then I swing, and I climb—then I slide and, sometimes, I play in the forest, and then . . .

The children had strong opinions about their ASP outdoor, physically active play, which they were able to express clearly, as illustrated in the conversation with Adam. The various activities he mentioned, including play with equipment such as cars, scooters, and swings, are examples of physically active play and were typical of the kinds of activities that the participating children referred to. Adam expressed how important his ASP friends were to him—they were the reason that he experienced spending time in their ASPs as fun. The children who appreciated having other children to play with were a dominant ASP feature.

However, there were exceptions that indicated that playing with friends was not always the most important thing for children. One boy said that he sometimes preferred being alone—he enjoyed simply sitting still and playing somewhere by himself (e.g., in the sandpit). If someone came and asked him if he wanted to play, he would reply that he did not feel like playing with someone right now.

The children had various reasons they considered friends to be important in ASPs. They typically answered that it was important to have someone to play

with and to have the opportunity to choose their own playmates. However, several children mentioned that they did not always have the opportunity to play with the children with whom they wanted to play and that they sometimes experienced being excluded from play. These children had different strategies to deal with being banned from playing with others or having no one with whom to play. One—Leo—said that he did not always like to be in his ASP because two of his friends sometimes excluded him from their play. Leo did not understand why he was not allowed to play with them, and he said that he would get angry and upset when this happened. He dealt with this by playing alone. On the other hand, Lisa's strategy when excluded by others was to go to an area where many children practiced handstands. When she engaged in handstands near other children, she explained, she felt as if she was playing with someone. Some children used the "friend bench" as a strategy. A friend bench is designated for children to sit on when they have no one to play with or when they feel excluded from play. Sitting on this bench makes other children aware of the fact that their classmates are alone or excluded, which allows them to assume the responsibility of inviting their classmates to play with them.

This example illustrates the concerns experienced by one girl as she talks about what it is like to be in her ASP.

R: Can you tell me a little bit about what it is like to be in your ASP?

Ida: I think it's a little . . . I think it's a little scary because there are other children that I do not really know so well, so then it's a little difficult to find someone to play with.

R: I understand that. You are a first grader, so you have not been in this ASP for a very long time?

Ida: No.

R: Have you made any friends since you started here?

Ida: Ehhhh . . . not really, but I have those I know from before, in kindergarten.

R: Are they the ones you play with?

Ida: Mmm (nodding her head).

R: Are they in the same class as you?

Ida: Yes.

R: . . . Can you tell me about what you usually do when you are in your ASP?

Ida: Sometimes I play around, then I might climb a bit.

Ida appeared to be the only child participating in our study who expressed such concerns. She said she thinks the experience is scary because there are many children with whom she is not yet acquainted. She also appeared to be

insecure when she described what she likes to do in her ASP. Ida demonstrated her handstand skills and told the researcher she feels competent in gymnastic activities. She had not experienced being banned from play, and if she had no one with whom to play, she would talk to the adults who worked at her ASP.

Only Luna emphasized how important friends were—not only in terms of having someone to play with but in relation to feeling safe—when she stated that “friends are very important because it is very nice to play with them and then I feel safe.”

No One Decides

All children agreed that they liked to decide what to play during their outdoor ASP time and most said that they could decide what to play for themselves. The children were especially engaged in making decisions about outdoor, physically active play, describing the adults as being more in charge indoors. The following example proved a typical response when we asked the children who decides ASP activities.

Adam: . . . Really—adults do not decide so much what we should do in our ASP, but they do decide what we should do for arts and crafts.

R: In arts and crafts activities in your ASP?

Adam: I really think it's just in arts and crafts that they decide what to do.

R: Yes. But when you are outdoors—who decides what you are going to do?

Adam: Ehh . . . (thinking) no one.

R: Can you decide?

Adam: Yes. Adults sometimes decide—when I take out something (small equipment to play with) without having asked for permission, they say that I really shouldn't.

According to Adam, he could decide on his outdoor, physically active play while in ASPs, which is consistent with what most children in the study experienced. Several children answered “no one decides” when we asked about their opportunities to decide what to play—an answer that seemed to imply that the adults did not decide and that the children agreed together what to play. Some children said that those who invented a game decided, but others said that everyone who participated in the play decided. Some children noted that they got to decide every other time, although others said that they negotiated.

The children were concerned that the process of who could or could not decide about what to play should be fair. The following example shows how Anna and her friend solved a disagreement about what they should play.

R: When you play in your ASP, who decides what to do?

Anna: We decide it ourselves. We agree . . .

R: Yes.

Anna: For example, if I want to play one thing and she wants to play something else—then we do something else that we both want to do.

R: If you still disagree, what do you do then?

Anna: Eh . . . then we can . . . then we take “a blue shoe went for a walk . . .” (a chant), and the one who ends up with the shoe can decide.

R: Yes.

Anna: Then it will be fair.

The children participating in the study had different strategies for resolving a disagreement fairly. Some children voted via a show of hands, while some said that it was only fair if those who started the play got to decide. Other children thought it was most fair if they could all decide by taking turns—deciding every other time.

I Can Do It

Climbing was one activity that the majority of children appreciated. They spoke about climbing trees, monkey bar, slides, and playhouses. The children said they mastered their play activities mostly at their ASPs. The typical phrases they used were: “I can,” “Yes, I can do it,” and “I can do a lot.” Some children explained that they practiced movements, some that they learned new ones, and others that they improved on something they had already mastered.

Most children gave the impression they enjoyed challenges and sought them out. For instance, Simon liked to challenge himself on the swing. He had good swing capabilities and said: “I really like to use the swing when I’m outdoors. I like to swing with my friend. We jump off at high speed and see who goes the farthest. It’s a game. We have great speed when we jump off, and the biggest dream is to jump far.”

Simon showed great confidence in his high-speed swing abilities, knowing when he had to jump off the swing because the swing “told him to.” According to Simon, “the swing does like this” (Simon shows how the swing starts to shake), “then the swing tells me that the speed is big so you can jump now.” Simon had a lot of experience with the swing at high speed, a challenging exercise he especially enjoyed.

When we asked Mia what she was good at, she went to the monkey bars and showed us her capabilities, releasing her arms and hanging by her legs from

the frame. During the demonstration she smiled and expressed great joy and satisfaction. She said she had learned to master this by herself but had practiced “a lot” before she had first dared to release her hands.

Another child—Lise —told us she liked to jump from roof to roof on the small playhouses as well as from one roof down into the sand. She said she thinks the activity is a bit scary. The first time she did it, older children assisted her so that she would dare to try.

R: When you jump between the playhouse roofs—can you tell me what that is like?

Lise: It tickles in my body; it tickles a lot in my body when I jump.

She showed that she had abilities, as well as courage and joy, while playing on the playhouse roofs. When we asked her whether there are other places where she likes to play, she clearly stated, “Yes,” and then she ran off to another part of the outdoor area.

R: There’s a lot of exciting playground equipment here. Do you like all of it?

Lise: Yes! I like everything because I love gymnastics, swinging, climbing, and spinning on that carousel.

Lise demonstrated how she mastered the spider web by quickly climbing up, balancing, hanging upside down by her legs, getting up again, and sliding down like a firefighter. Almost all the children immediately ran off to demonstrate their skills and endeavors when asked about their outdoor play.

Several of the children explained that they practiced achieving the same skills as their friends. Trine stated: “I practice all the time to be able to do something on the monkey bars like a friend of mine does. I think it looks so fun. I can’t do it now, but I’ll practice learning.”

To acquire the same abilities as their friends, the children pushed the limits of what they could do or dared to do. Not mastering skills did not seem to stress them—on the contrary, they expressed that the process of practicing was something they thought fun and playful in itself. However, there were also some children who found it scary to try new activities. One girl said she was afraid to spin on the carousel because she had fallen off and injured herself several times before. She said that she practiced not being scared so that she could eventually rehearse the activities she wanted to learn. One boy said he liked best activities that were not so difficult. He liked the ones that were easy for him to accomplish.

Discussion

In this study, we explored how fourteen first graders attending Norwegian ASPs experienced their outdoor, physically active play. The results show that first graders find it important to be able to choose their own playmates and to choose what to play during outdoor, physically active play. The children also highlighted challenging movements when playing and mastering movements at different places on the playground. In this section, we discuss the findings in light of previous research and Eberle's theoretical understanding of play.

Children as Important Agents in Outdoor, Physically Active Play

The children who participated in this study appreciated having the opportunity to determine what to play and with whom to do so during their outdoor ASP time. This is consistent with the results of other studies (Løndal 2010b; Einarsdóttir 2005) and is outlined as an important ASP aspect in the recently launched national framework for Norwegian ASPs (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2021).

When children play without adult intervention in adult-free spaces, they have the freedom to form their own play experiences as well as to decide what they bring to the play. According to Sutton-Smith (2009), play is an unpredictable phenomenon difficult to control and guide. Play cannot be planned by adults to aim at specific goals children can achieve or learn as they engage in it. Regardless, many adults seem to want to structure, direct, control, and set outcomes for play (Canning 2007; Skar, Gundersen, and O'Brien 2016). In a general comment on Article 31 of the Convention on the Right of the Child, the United Nations (2013) warned against increasing the pressure on children to learn. As a possible consequence of such pressure, children's spontaneous play becomes marginalized.

In the educational debate about whether play should be an educational tool or a self-initiated activity without goal and purpose (Greve and Løndal 2012; Løndal 2019; Øksnes 2008; Øksnes et al. 2014), the Norwegian national framework specifies that ASPs should prioritize time and space for play and recognize that play is a typical way of being among children that has an intrinsic and unique value. Although ASPs and schools might envision complementary roles for play and learning, play should still be given priority in schools (Løndal 2019). ASPs constitute an arena for outdoor, physically active play that lies between preschool and primary school. Consequently, such play can create continuity for children

and offer them meaningful experiences across (Hogsnes and Storli 2019). However, it is crucial that preschool, ASP, and primary school employees collaborate and view children as “key players in transitions to school” (Einarsdottir 2013, 69). Therefore, we argue for the importance of maintaining a child’s perspective on issues that concern children’s outdoor, physically active play.

The theme “no one decides” shows the intuitive emergence of physically active, outdoor play in ASPs. When children understand that no one decides, it seems to mean for them that the adults in ASPs are less involved in choices made in outdoor, physically active play, and that the children themselves make the decisions. In their descriptions, the children nuanced the meaning of “no one decides” and emphasized that they reached agreement together—preferably on the basis that choices during outdoor, physically active play should be fair. The children’s experiences may indicate that the intuitive negotiation process that occurs during outdoor, physically active play contributes to fostering communication capabilities based on mutuality and sensitivity. This corresponds neatly with Eberle’s element of understanding, which deepens when children learn to play together, providing emotional and intellectual bonuses. Eberle (2014) further pointed out that playing with others sharpens children’s appreciation of fairness and requires mutuality and sensitivity to occur simultaneously because they are prerequisites for play. Alvestad (2010) also showed that children attending Norwegian kindergartens use pragmatic strategies to come to an agreement when playing outdoors. In their negotiations, the children participating in the study manifested ingenuity, creativity, enthusiasm, an urge for action, involvement, and activity; furthermore, they proved solution oriented. We argue that it is important for children to have the opportunity to experience many different contexts for outdoor, physically active play in ASPs so that they can adapt their play to enable their own participation as well as that of their peers.

Our findings suggest that the most fun and enjoyable part of ASPs—from the children’s perspectives—was playing with their friends. All children highlighted the opportunity to be with friends as a decisive factor in whether they enjoyed their ASP time. These findings agree substantially with previous research on early childhood programs (Løndal 2010a). Playing and being together with friends involve emotional dimensions, such as excitement and joy, and are important for children’s kindergarten and ASP experiences to be meaningful (Greve 2007; Løndal 2010a). Although some types of outdoor, physically active play are solitary, most are social. Play seems to foster communication capabilities

by challenging children to share, understand each other through direct interaction, and communicate ideas (Zosh et al. 2017). Eberle (2014) also pointed out that much of the joy that comes from play is social, and that, consequently, play with others strengthens children's social capabilities. Important prerequisites for this are good routines and a firm structure that allows children to experience a sense of security and predictability. It is not the play activities themselves that should be predictable, but the opportunity to have time dedicated to self-initiated play with friends (Riiser et al. 2019). The Norwegian national framework states that ASPs must have routines that allow children the opportunity to be outdoors every day. Children in ASPs should have access to equipment and areas that are adapted to their age to promote their physically active play. According to Eberle (2014), play begins with anticipation, and the beginning of outdoor ASP time can be viewed as "the keen moment that announces play's arrival" (222).

In our study, children's outdoor, physically active play seemed to run smoothly and with few conflicts. However, several children mentioned that they were not always allowed to play with the children with whom they wanted to play and that they had experienced being excluded from play. Ida found it difficult to find someone to play with and experienced being in an ASP as scary. Ida, who was very good at gymnastics, could have used the same handstand strategy as Lisa. Greve (2009) pointed out that observing the play of other children can be a way of gaining access to their play. Lisa put a lot of effort into being included. The reason could be what Luna expressed so clearly: the importance of having someone to play with because it is nice and feels safe. Again, play with friends seems to promote communication. It allows children to exercise self-control and to develop what they already know, take turns, cooperate, and socialize with others (Glover 1999). According to Greve (2007, 2009), friendship is multifaceted and complex—it consists of much joy but often also of conflict. Friendship is about participating in a relationship in which communication plays a central role in the ability to participate (Greve 2009). Having friends is very important for children's well-being, and friendships develop when children are doing something together (Greve 2014; Øksnes and Greve 2015).

Challenges and Capabilities of Outdoor, physically active Play

Overall, we found that the participating children were physically active during their outdoor play in ASPs and that their play included different types of physical activity. These findings are in line with our previous ASP research (Løndal 2010c; Lund and Løndal 2017; Løndal et al. 2020; Riiser et al. 2019). Eberle

(2014) insisted that play promises fun and pointed out that children “would not play if play were not, at least in some measure, fun” (224). Because play involves pleasure, which Eberle stated is “the keystone or hub of play,” play also immortalizes itself (223). When children in ASPs experience pleasure during their outdoor, physically active play, this increases the probability that their play will continue, as well as the positive emotions associated with playing.

Rasmussen (1996) argued that physically active play is fundamental and attractive to children. He pointed out that children are constantly moving—rarely standing still on their playgrounds—and are interested in exploring the possibilities of their bodies. Lise demonstrated her movement capabilities and strength by quickly climbing up the spider web, balancing, hanging upside down by her legs, getting up again, and sliding down like a firefighter. According to Eberle (2014), such activities combine capabilities with confidence. Presumably, Lise experienced poise during her play, which resulted when understanding was added to strength during play. Thus, understanding, strength, and poise are satisfactions in themselves, and they contribute to new levels of comprehension and capability that help children do new kinds of things (Henricks 2015).

Several of the children liked to push their limits, practicing the acquisition of new movement abilities—already possessed by their friends—in a fun, playful manner. Some seemed to create play situations in which they were not always completely sure of the outcome, resulting in tension associated with whether they would manage to do it. This uncertainty resulted in sensations described by Lise as “tickling in the body.” This corresponds well with Eberle’s (2014) observation that fun often comes from the unexpected—from surprise. “Surprise is itself a reward, but it is a reward that we must first be prepared to appreciate” (223).

Previously published results from the project Active Play in ASP showed that children’s physically active play contains barrier-breaking movements that are beneficial for the development of motor competencies and the learning of movements (Løndal et al. 2020). Children like to challenge themselves with movements and positions that seem to be at the limit of their motor capabilities. According to Sandseter (2013), children often test their limits and like to engage in challenging and risky play. In this way, they create situations that expose them to tension, fear, and intense joy. Sutton-Smith (2008) also focused on primary emotions in play, such as surprise, fear, and happiness. He claimed that these are motivating factors for different types of play. Fear is, according to Sutton-Smith,

an important motivator for risk taking. However, it is important to acknowledge that children are different and that some children do not value risk taking. For instance, one of the boys in this study said that he preferred activities that were easy for him to accomplish.

Each of Eberle's (2014) six elements—anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise—can be regulated up or down in accordance with children's outdoor, physically active play. At high speeds on the swings and having great confidence and abilities, Simon likely experienced strength and poise. In his case, strength came as a result of the fact that he mastered and controlled the swing at great speeds, while poise resulted from the quality of his personal stability, vision, and resolve (Henricks 2015). For Simon, as the swing gained so much speed that it began to shake, anticipation seeped in—anticipation and excitement (surprise) attached to when he would jump off the swing and how far he would go. Proprioceptive awareness delivered feedback that allowed Simon to jump off the swing at the right moment—when he had a sense of balance.

Strengths and Limitations

One important strength of this study is its data collection method—conversations with the children participating in the study during walk-along interviews with them in their play areas. The children guided the researcher, decided where and what they wanted to show, and when they wanted the researcher to engage actively in their play. This made it possible to establish a good relationship between the children and the researcher and facilitate a study with a clear child's perspective. We could have strengthened the study even further by spending more time with the children over a longer period. In addition, triangulation of data through multiple data sources would have provided a more competitive perspective on the children's play.

We recruited the children interviewed from ASPs that participated in a larger research project. The ASPs were strategically sampled. We consider this a strength in terms of the transferability of the results to different ASP contexts. The ASP leaders selected the participating children based on their willingness and expected ability to share play experiences with the researchers. This strategy ensured that the interviewees had the ability to articulate experiences verbally. The results may have been influenced by the lack of access to the experiences of less verbal children, which may have been a weakness of the study.

Receiving feedback from informants on written transcripts increases the

trustworthiness of a study. However, due to the young age of the participants in this study, feedback was not provided by the children regarding the written transcriptions and analysis, which could also limit the trustworthiness of the study. To minimize the weaknesses based on these challenges, we conducted regular discussions within the research group. The transcribed material was read, categorized, and grouped by three researchers, and disagreements were thoroughly discussed until agreement was reached. In relation to the analysis, the themes generated based on the written transcripts were a result of interpretation; thus, it was not possible for our findings to avoid being shaped by the researchers' own understanding.

Concluding Remarks

Our study investigated Norwegian first graders' experiences of outdoor, physically active play during ASP time. The children greatly appreciated having someone to play with in ASPs, and they highlighted playing with friends as an especially important aspect of outdoor, physically active play. The children found it important to be able to choose their own playmates for physically active play, but they also described experiences of not being chosen as playmates and what strategies they could use to find other friends with whom to play.

Great pleasure, excitement, and joy seemed to surface when the children mastered different kinds of movements, such as at the swings and the spider web, and they enjoyed demonstrating their strength and balance through play. The children practiced barrier-breaking movements in a fun and playful manner and described how they practiced achieving the same capabilities that their friends possess during outdoor, physically active play. Thus, we argue that facilitation of outdoor, physically active play can contribute to fulfilling Norwegian ASPs' aim of providing a good framework for holistic development and learning (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2021). In a holistic view of learning, we can assume that the development of motor competencies and the fostering of social communication can occur in children's physically active play. The experiences of children during physically active play can be understood in relation to the six basic elements of play. (Eberle 2014) and to the children's emotional, physical, and intellectual dimensions.

What approach to children's play ASP employees choose—and how they understand play as a phenomenon—is very important because it influences

how they will ultimately facilitate children's play. Our findings regarding children's experiences of friendship and opportunities to choose during outdoor, physically active play highlight the importance of child initiation related to play in ASPs. Therefore, it is important to listen to children as experts and as important agents in their outdoor, physically active play. This agency is in accordance with the child's perspective highlighted in the Norwegian framework for ASPs.

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