



The “Great Outdoors” – The materiality and contexts for learning motor skills in the outdoor environment

Ingunn Fjørtoft is Professor emerita, Dr. Scient., University South-Eastern Norway, Faculty of Humanities, Sports and Education Science

Several studies have shown the value of outdoor environments for children’s development in different ways: developing motor skills, more harmonious and imaginative play, improving quality of playing and perception of landscapes. Children interpret landscapes as functions to play and they operationalize the affordances as an awareness of the environments and their functional meaning into action. The methodological approach to outdoor motor play will be based on a Dynamic Systems Approach, the Theory of Affordances, and the environment as the “Third Teacher”. These approaches introduce the outdoor environment as a context for learning, affording children different challenges to be explored through problem solving and experiential learning. Stimulating fundamental motor skills in early years is the basic approach using these theories to support these perspectives. Young children comprise a special group within motor development through learning motor skills. Because they have rapidly changing body characteristics, they are still in the process of establishing the full repertoire of fundamental motor skills. Children perceive environments as functions: functions to move, functions to build, functions to hide, to play etc. Outdoor environments afford such challenges to children in different ways: nature, trees, woodland, shifting topography, meadows, shaded areas, places for climbing and construction, and challenging places for exploring and experience. The pedagogical and didactic approaches to motor learning can be exemplified through analyses and description of environmental qualities that promote motor play and the particular motor competences that will be stimulated by outdoor environmentally based games and motor skill acquisition attained in learning through landscapes and seasonal qualities. Previous studies show a close connection between the environmental contexts and fundamental motor skills in young children (Fjørtoft 2001, 2004, Fjørtoft and Sageie 2000, Fjørtoft, Kristoffersen, Sageie 2009). A recent review study by Johnston et al. (2022) indicated that nature based Early Childhood Education afforded higher intensity of physical activity and challenging play, which may improve motor competence domains. Findings indicated associations between nature-based ECE and increased moderate to vigorous PA, and improved speed/agility and object control skills. There were positive associations between nature-based ECE and reduced sedentary time and improved balance. From the qualitative analysis, nature-based ECE affords higher intensity PA and challenging play, which could improve some MC domains. Conclusions: More controlled experimental designs that describe the dose and quality of nature are needed to better inform the effectiveness of nature-based ECE on PA and MC. This places both more demands and more responsibilities in the hands of physical educators.