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# **Bodily Play in the After-School Program**

## Fulfillment of Intentionality in Interaction between Body and Place



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This article investigates the relationship between children in an after-school program (ASP) and the places where they play. It focuses on the kind of bodily play the children themselves choose and control. The author applies a life-world approach to this study, and his theoretical perspective is based on phenomenological philosophy. The qualitative research included interviews of children in a Norwegian ASP and the close observation of these children engaged in free play at two distinctive locations on the grounds of one ASP facility. The findings show that children's understanding of place closely associates with their own bodily play. Bodily play appears meaningfully directed toward places and offers children the immediate opportunity to fulfill the intentionality of their activities. Such play serves an important role in constituting and adjusting the background for later actions, and the author concludes that this kind of bodily play should be encouraged in ASP. He concludes further that ASP itself should be emphasized as a complementary but contrasting niche in a school's physical-education scheme, an emphasis that requires sound pedagogical judgments by professional staff.

### **Introduction**

**A**SPHALT, a rugged hillock with bushes, a sandpit, a stretch of grass, and a small playhouse among some trees surround the after-school program (ASP) pavilion. The doors to the pavilion open, and the asphalt immediately fills with active eight- and nine-year-olds. One girl runs across the asphalt to one of the trees. She swings up, grabs a small branch with both arms, and swings one leg up and around a branch stub. She grasps firmly with her arms at the same time she swings one leg firmly down. She now sits on the lowest branch. Her rapid expedition up the tree continues, and then she leaps onto the roof of the playhouse. She runs across the roof and jumps onto a tree on the other side. She

seizes a long, thin branch with both hands and quickly lowers herself the five or six feet down to the ground. A number of other children follow her lead.

The asphalt is alive with activity. Two boys play with a tricycle attached to a small cart. Six children ride scooters up the sloping part of the asphalt, kicking their legs out as they turn and, balancing in various positions on the scooters, freewheel down again. Some kids run laps on the path around the ASP building. Four girls play with hoops. They swing them around their waists, their underarms, their ankles; they throw them, catch them, spin them along the ground; one girl joins two together to make a hoop twice big, and—after a few attempts—she manages to swing it around her hips like a Hula Hoop.

All these children playing—or as we specialists sometimes say, engaged in bodily play—I observed at two spots near a Norwegian ASP, places the children call The Climbing Area and The Asphalt Place. I made my observations as part of some fieldwork I carried out in an Oslo ASP in 2007, and in this article, I describe the activities of children at these two locations to investigate the relationship between children and places where self-chosen and child-managed bodily play occurs. By bodily play, I mean self-driven activities that are rewarding in themselves and that include body movements.<sup>1</sup> Body movements can imply changing positions, as children do when they run or climb. Body movements can also involve engaging in balancing exercises or in special physical postures, and these I characterized as stabilizing. A third kind of body movement I might call manipulative—when, for example, a child jumps rope or plays in a sandpit.

In Norway, ASP is a public institution for children in their first four years of school. It is a voluntary program outside normal school hours but closely related to the public school curriculum. Despite the close relationship, ASP stands in some contrast to the schools. When ASP was introduced as a national program in the 1990s, organizers attached much importance to the leisure-time activities of children.<sup>2</sup> Authorities wanted to avoid any extension of the school's function and tradition; there was no desire to combine school and leisure-time activities into an entity based on an official school program.

Norway's Education Act (enacted July 17, 1998) specifies that ASP shall offer children play and cultural and leisure-time activities and shall provide them with care and supervision during these activities.<sup>3</sup> The act emphasizes child-managed play over learning, and it dictates no formal educational objectives for ASP sessions. Thus, the government does not require ASP staff members to have formal pedagogical training, which has resulted in a significantly higher

number of children per professionally trained teacher in ASP than in primary school. Only a minority of ASP employees are trained teachers.<sup>4</sup>

ASP has become the subject of a political debate in Norway about the content of the program and its management of after-school activities. Basically, the debate involves the purpose of education and its relationship to a healthy childhood, and it is driven by a worry that the way children spend their free playtime might have a negative impact on their learning and development. Norwegian schools have scored relatively low on international performance tests, which led the Norwegian Parliament to gradually extend the primary-school day.<sup>5</sup> This has, in turn, led to a higher number of weekly teaching periods in theoretical subjects, and subsequently, to the offering of assisted homework in ASP. In the debate over learning benefits, learning and play appear as inherent opposites. Learning is commonly painted as a product of teaching or as a path toward formal aims. Such views exclude self-chosen and child-managed play as learning activities. When the amount of time required for adult-managed teaching toward formal learning objectives increases, free playtime often decreases.

In Norwegian schools, the National Curriculum for Physical Education (PE) governs the physical activities for children, but the students nevertheless continue to play in various situations and places beyond the formal curriculum.<sup>6</sup> In this continuum from free play to strictly organized PE and sports, play activities actually resemble extracurricular PE when they are initiated or organized by professionals; in fact, many activities in ASP look exactly like extra-curricular PE.<sup>7</sup>

Results from research conducted in Oslo show that children's physical activities during ASP hours vary extensively, but much of it involves self-chosen and child-managed bodily play.<sup>8</sup> Although bodily play most often occurs in child-managed activities, these activities are ones that ASP staff often initiated. In other European countries, officials have transformed extracurricular PE into modern sport, but in Norway, ASP staff treats self-chosen activities as children's "leisure time."<sup>9</sup> It is just such a practice that the present debate about ASP questions, and everywhere there are calls for a stricter organization and management of children's activities in ASP. Health authorities worry that children do not engage in sufficient physical activity during their institutionalized day.<sup>10</sup> Responding to the argument that physical activity promotes children's health and development, schools take steps to ensure that youngsters receive the recommended daily dose of such activity. These steps are likely to influence the activities in ASP.<sup>11</sup> Again, if authorities believe the benefits of physical activity

might better result from adults managing the activities in ASPs, they will trim the opportunities for self-chosen, child-managed bodily play.

Since time for play in ASP is under pressure from attempts to make ASP meet specific goals, it is highly relevant to discuss what role free play should have in the life of primary-school children and whether they miss important qualitative aspects of life if we reduce the time for this activity. The debate should begin with a basic, theoretical understanding of children and their activities. Such an understanding might complement empirically based arguments about learning and health-promoting activity, as well as contribute to the debate about the structures and the contents of ASP. In the larger scheme, I offer a discussion about pedagogy with philosophical undertones.<sup>12</sup> In this article, I aim to contribute to the debate and to discuss children's activities in ASP. I focus on the children's own experiences of these activities, and my theoretical perspective is grounded in phenomenological philosophy.

### **The Theoretical Perspective**

My professional background involves the study of a life-world approach, so I intend to investigate the experiences of children as they are lived in real-life situations.<sup>13</sup> As I noted, my theoretical perspective is phenomenological, based on the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty substantially contributes to the understanding of human action.<sup>14</sup> He begins with the concept of life-world and describes perception as it is experienced in human life. His phenomenological description reveals that perceptual experience is "that vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life."<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion that humans live in an objective world where they act causally. Instead, he draws our attention to the *background* underlying the perception of isolated qualities and our formulation of explicit judgments, to what he calls the "phenomenal field."<sup>16</sup> He claims that the world of objects is the place we as subjects *inhabit*; that is, the world comes to us because we act and live in it. The phenomenal field presents objects, other human beings, and phenomena as wholes invested with immanent meaning. According to Merleau-Ponty, this is possible because perception has an intentional structure; perception occurs in an environment toward which humans are already directed. It is such directedness toward the surroundings I refer to when I use the words "intentional" and "intentionality"

in this article. This implies that the meaning is immediately sensible and comes prior to intellectual, reflective processes: “My body has its world, or understands its world, without having to make use of my ‘symbolic’ or ‘objectifying function.’”<sup>17</sup> The relationship between the human being and the world is constituted on a perceptual, bodily level. Merleau-Ponty contends this is possible because a human being is first and foremost *bodily* present in the world. Merleau-Ponty claims that “the body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continually committed to them.”<sup>18</sup>

Merleau-Ponty ascribes to bodily movements an important role in human inhabitation of the world.<sup>19</sup> These movements are not causal actions in an objective world that the human being is separated from, but intentional movements that are not explicitly formulated prior to the action: “Movement is not thought about movement, and bodily space is not space thought of or represented. . . . Consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body. . . . To move one’s body is to aim at things through it; it is to allow oneself to respond to their call, which is made upon it independently of any representation.”<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty refers to “being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body” as an embodied directedness; as *motor intentionality*.<sup>21</sup> He shows how intentionality as existence is bodily. On the one hand, body movements are invested with meaning; they are meaningful toward things in the environment, they are intentional. On the other hand, body movements invest things with meaning in being-toward-the-things. In this way the relationship between the human being and the world is constituted on a perceptual, bodily level. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that Merleau-Ponty does not deny that conscious reflection plays a role in the human interplay with the world in life-world situations. He claims that the interplay depends both on the invested background of the situation and on consciousness of the situation. Thus, the operational intentionality of a life-world situation must be seen as a unique totality.<sup>22</sup>

Essentially, Merleau-Ponty argues that human perception is meaningful. He connects meaning to the human intentionality and shows how it emerges directed through the body toward the world. He says intentionality can be fulfilled through the movements of the body.<sup>23</sup> It is such bodily directedness toward the playground activity of the ASP—and how it eventually culminates—that this article describes and discusses.

Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion that human perception is a mere collecting of sensate data. Through perception, the human being “grasps” meaningful things, including other living people and the meaning of open spaces between them.<sup>24</sup> In ecological psychology, James J. Gibson uses the word *affordances* to

describe meaningful conditions in “the world of ecological realities,” which offer the individual a possibility for action.<sup>25</sup> Examples of affordances are surfaces, objects, and substances that allow individuals different forms of bodily action. Paths, obstacles, barriers, steps, slopes, shelters, and objects, in different ways, afford the individual “something to do”—rapid locomotion, climbing, grasping, or avoiding, and so on. Gibson describes affordances as coming in complementary sizes, depending both on the individual and on the environment, which is very compatible with Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. Most importantly, Gibson describes how the physical characteristics of an environment encourage action—emphasizing that events, other individuals, and artifacts can function as affordances.

When Gibson uses the concept of place, he means a more or less extended surface or layout in the environment, as contrasted to a point in space.<sup>26</sup> Places can be named, but they do not necessarily have sharp boundaries. Edward S. Casey has also investigated the idea of place, and his account concurs with Merleau-Ponty and Gibson.<sup>27</sup> Casey gives the concept of place a broader meaning than the concept of space: “I shall presume the distinction between place and space, taking ‘space’ to be the encompassing volumetric void in which things (including human beings) are positioned and ‘place’ to be the immediate environment of my lived body—an arena of action that is at once physical and historical, social and cultural.”<sup>28</sup>

Casey describes place as an interaction between humans and their surroundings rather than as a specific, delimited location. These complementary dimensions of place—where individuals, cultures, and environments interact—make the place unique for each person, and the experience of a place may differ from person to person. Thus, a place does not afford the exact same opportunities for actions to all individuals. It is this understanding of place that I subscribe to in this article.

David Morris has made an interesting contribution to the understanding of the relationship between human movement and place.<sup>29</sup> He begins with Casey’s definition of place and agrees with Merleau-Ponty when the latter affords movement a special role in the interaction between body and world. Morris claims that human perception, which he refers to as “the sense of space,” arises in close interaction between body and world, and that this sense of space presupposes movement. In line with Merleau-Ponty, he emphasizes that body movements are not predetermined by a specific system in a closed subject. Rather, he contends that “what has been called the body schema is

not a possession of the subject but a structure-in-movement. We must keep things open on the side of the perceiver and the world, and seek our schema as arising within movement that crosses body and world, prior to the distinction between the two.”<sup>30</sup> The body is invested with meaning through lived experiences, and these experiences are not immanent representations on a psychological level. We can, rather, understand them as embodied feelings, actions, and imaginations from earlier engagement, all of which intertwine the lived body and its environment, forming a unity that creates meaning for other situations with bodily actions.<sup>31</sup>

Based on all these theoretical perspectives, I consider the lived body to be the main “medium” grasping meaning in the world, and I look upon bodily activity as a close intertwinement between the body and its surroundings. I also consider play to be a typical form of bodily activity in childhood. Given the understanding of human being and the world I have been discussing, I find Hans-Georg Gadamer’s description of play particularly interesting.<sup>32</sup> One of his central discoveries is the primacy of play over the consciousness of the player: “Play clearly represents an order in which the to-and-fro motion of play follows of itself. It is part of play that the movement is not only without goal and purpose but also without effort. It happens, as it were, by itself.”<sup>33</sup> Gadamer describes play as neither an objective nor a subjective action. The play is playing itself through the player; the subject is the play itself. According to Gadamer, play is a universal phenomenon. He points, for example, to the fact that animals play. But the human being also plays; her playing, too, is a natural process.<sup>34</sup> Children thus experience play through their spontaneous behavior, without comprising a thought-out object. This conforms well with Merleau-Ponty’s claim that human understanding is embodied. The entirety of the play situation comes to the child in a spontaneous manner where the child experiences the play without a mere cognitive recognition or an intellectual analysis of the actions.<sup>35</sup>

## **Method**

The phenomenological perspective requires information gathered in the life-world. The researcher has to look at the subjects in concrete, real-life situations.<sup>36</sup> For this reason, I followed the children in an ASP group for an extended period. During a four-month period in autumn 2007, I assembled qualitative informa-

tion, including the material I used in this article. Merleau-Ponty argues that body movements, gestures, and speech are complementary forms of expression and communication.<sup>37</sup> For this study, I gathered qualitative material from the children's experience that captured these interlinked components, and I used two complementary methods—close observation and qualitative-research interviewing.

## Participants

The aim of the project was to contribute to an understanding of children in bodily play, not to compare institutions. So I limited the investigation to one ASP connected to a single public school. Because the subjects needed to recall experiences and articulate them, I concentrated on children in the upper two grades Norway permits to attend an ASP. Thus, the study included children in grades three and four. During the study, 41 percent of the children in the third grade and 47 percent of the children in fourth grade in the selected school participated in the ASP, making a total of forty children. I sought permission from the children and their parents to include the kids in the study. Parents of four children had reservations about participating. Consequently, I gathered information from thirty-six children, nineteen of whom were born in 1998 and seventeen in 1999. Twenty-two girls and fourteen boys participated. The children attended the ASP between two and three hours each day.

## The Context

The ASP studied here sits in the suburbs of Oslo. The building that houses the program contains a recreation room with a dining area, a small computer room, a reading room, and a cloakroom. Children use all the areas during ASP hours. A flat expanse of asphalt (The Asphalt Place) lies before the entrance to the ASP building. Nearby sits a big sandpit. A small playhouse, surrounded by trees suitable for climbing (The Climbing Area), stands immediately beside the main building. The grounds around the building slope downward. About half of this area is covered with grass. The rest is rugged terrain with clumps of trees. The ASP has no traditional playground equipment (the school's playground borders the ASP site, and ASP children play with the equipment there).



## **Gathering Qualitative Material**

In my observations, I attempted not only to gather qualitative material but also to bridge the gap between researcher and informant.<sup>38</sup> In other words, instead of observing the child informant from the outside, I tried to enter the life-world through direct participation. The two spots on the ASP grounds where I focused my attention particularly encouraged bodily play: The Asphalt Place and The Climbing Area.

I used video and sound recordings and concentrated on one of the two places each day. I filmed or took written notes when one or more of the thirty-six children were on the spot. I used a main camera to focus on specific actions and a supplementary camera to record general activities. Both cameras had microphones attached. I recorded up to one hour each day, taking my field notes at the same time.

When I had completed all observations, I selected nine children, five girls and four boys, for individual, qualitative research interviews. I intended the interviews to provide depth to my filmed and written observations. Before the interviews, I closely examined the field notes and the video recordings to select my subjects and plan my questions. I identified specific themes that needed follow-up—themes related to the bodily play at the spot of those selected for interviews, their interactions with other children, and any particular events that affected their play. I chose to interview children who took part in especially interesting situations related to these themes. I selected both girls and boys from each age group, and I took care to ensure that they represented a variety of activities. Given all this, I expected to obtain valuable supplementary information. In line with recommendations in *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing* by Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann, I gave the interview the character of a one-on-one conversation where the child could relate his or her own experiences to relevant themes.<sup>39</sup> Prior to the interviews, I prepared a guide with a list of themes and follow-up questions. During the interviews, I sometimes changed the sequence and structure of questions as circumstances required.

I conducted the interviews with one child at a time in a room familiar to the children. Each interview began with our viewing videos featuring the interviewee's play (I had edited these down to a four-minute version for each child). I played the video throughout the course of the interview as a basis for the conversation. During the interviews, I asked the children about my interpretations of specific

events. Several times I also offered interpretations of the child's statements and asked if they were correct. I also video recorded the interviews themselves.

### **Transcription and Analysis**

In this article, I have made a distinction between *gathering* and *analyzing* qualitative material from the children's lived experiences. However, this distinction follows one made by Max van Manen: the two acts are not considered as completely separate processes.<sup>40</sup> Because gathering information itself involved both choices and reflections, the analyzing process actually began in the field. After I had collected the material, I conducted a further qualitative analysis, which included a systematic reading and careful review of the transcript, followed by my description of recurrent themes. In all, the primary sources for this article were six-and-one-half hours of the free play recorded at The Asphalt Place and The Climbing Area, five hours of recorded interviews, and forty-four pages of handwritten field notes.

The transcriptions of the interviews capture the general significance of the conversations, but the actual recordings offer supplementary information in the form of nonverbal gestures. To include these gestures in the analysis, I divided the transcripts into two columns, including the spoken word in the left-hand column and describing the nonverbal signals in the right-hand column. I also transcribed and prepared the recordings from the observation period for analysis.

In the analysis itself, I used a method inspired by the structure of descriptive phenomenological analysis.<sup>41</sup> The interview transcriptions, the transcribed situations from the video recordings, and the field notes were included in the process. The analysis breaks down to a series of four chronological sets of written notes. I moved from (1) a basic description, to (2) the localization of the meaning units, to (3) their incorporation into a theoretical perspective with relevant professional terminology, and to (4) a synthesis of the meaning units in a single, continuous text. It is important to emphasize that I do not consider my writings to be pure description. Each stage of the process included interpretations, and in this sense, the entire process itself can be seen as an interpretation.<sup>42</sup>

During the process of transcription and analysis, I also looked for cases that did not conform to preconceptions. I discussed the analysis with two experienced academic supervisors during the process, who challenged me to provide solid evidence for any interpretations.

## **Findings and Discussion**

I present the results of the study through selections from the video recordings and in the voices of the children interviewed. As a result of the analysis of the qualitative material—and based on its significance in relation to the entirety in the material—I review specific events that show the characteristics and significance of the relation between the children and places where they play. Examples include boys and girls in both age groups. The names of the children have been changed in the transcripts.

### **Understanding of Place**

The introduction of this article begins with a short description of the area surrounding the ASP pavilion. The area contains the places that I, as a researcher, investigate. They consist of geometric spaces that encompass a specific number of objects of different sizes at measurable distances from each other.<sup>43</sup> Such space is not necessarily meaningful. It is not the space that the ASP children experienced. They played in an area, and they divided it into different spots with appropriate place names. They called this place The Climbing Area and that one The Asphalt Place, spots with special names. In the qualitative research interviews, I showed the children photos of the two locations devoid of people and equipment and asked them to comment on the spots. The children did not say anything about the ground surfaces of the spots, the objects resting in the spaces, or the substances associated with the locations. Their comments dealt with their subjective experiences. By way of example, here are Hannah's and Ida's remarks about The Asphalt Place and The Climbing Place.

Hannah (speaking of *The Asphalt Place*): That's the place where we normally play with the scooters and other things (points at the picture).<sup>44</sup>

Ida: That's the place where we go into the ASP building (points at the picture and nods). We often play with scooters there or with skipping ropes and with the Hula Hoops. It is fun when there are things there (points and smiles slightly).

Hannah (speaking of The Climbing Area): I am often around there, by the playhouse. We often play there as it is like a house where we

live. Sometimes we cycle around the trees there (nods energetically and points toward the playhouse).

Ida: That is The Climbing Area. Climbing trees is one of my hobbies, so I often play there. I climb that tree, [and] that tree, and also that tree by the little house there, and then I get on to the roof (self-confidently explains while she leans against the window and points).

Although I showed the children pictures of empty places, it was their own bodily play they discussed. All the children I interviewed used the word *play* to refer to bodily activity related to ASP. Merleau-Ponty describes childhood as a period in human life with special, lived experiences and specific forms of activity and development.<sup>45</sup> Bodily play seems to be just such a specific form of activity, one that takes place during ASP hours. Bodily play appears to play an important role in the lives of the children in ASP, and their understanding of the two places where I observed them playing is closely connected to what they play there. Hannah and Ida had different impressions of The Climbing Area. Hannah first associated the spot with its playhouse, which in her role play she considers a dwelling. She did not include the area around the playhouse in her description. Then, she retreated a little and pointed out that she normally rode her bike in the area and thus—for her—its boundaries extend. In contrast with most of the other children, she does not call the spot The Climbing Area, which is understandable because, as she mentions, she does not normally climb there. Ida sees this spot in a different light. Climbing is one of her hobbies, so for her this area is precisely The Climbing Area—and it includes the trees and the small playhouse. The comments Hanna and Ida make reinforce what I observed in the video recordings. Both the areas are tied to the activities that occur there, but these activities varied considerably from one child to the next.

Children include in their understanding of place both the equipment they use and the other people who play with them. At The Asphalt Place, the typical bodily play is related to freestanding objects. The activities I describe in this article's introduction offer a sketch of this free play. All its activities in some manner involve objects like scooters, tricycles, wagons, and Hula Hoops. As the children's interviews make clear, if the equipment normally available were removed, they would not find the place especially interesting. When I showed Rebecca and Eric a picture of The Asphalt Place devoid of people and equipment and asked them to comment on it, they replied:

Rebecca: It is there, just where the shed is, where we play on the scooters (points energetically at the picture).

Interviewer: Is it just like the picture shows? Here, the shed door is closed.

Rebecca: That's boring. We must have some things such that it is fun there (appears disappointed).

Eric: Sometimes we play on the scooters there, and then we scoot round The Asphalt Place (points at the picture). It's fun. The scooters are good (smiles slightly).

Interviewer: If it had been like it is in the picture, without any equipment, what would it have been like then?

Eric: I don't know (seems a bit hesitant). It would not have been fun. You have to have something there.

In the conversations, the children routinely connected the equipment they used on the spot with the place itself. When I reminded them that the photos do not show any equipment, they told us that The Asphalt Place was “useless” or “no fun” without equipment. Indeed, when equipment was unavailable at The Asphalt Place, the requirements for bodily play did not exist for the ASP children. In such situations, as the observation tapes show, there was only transient activity there. This was not the case for The Climbing Area. The place itself has all that is required, as Ida sums up.

Interviewer: When you climb the trees, do you need any equipment?

Ida: I just use my fingers and my body, together with the branches and such things (appears happy and satisfied).

The interviewees also indicated that playing with other children was important to them. All the interviewed children emphasized that bodily play in ASP should include friends. The truth of this was easy to observe—children seeking other children to play with was a predominant feature of the ASP hours. When encouraged to speak about the areas, the children often mentioned the friends they play with there by name, and they almost always said “*we* are playing” rather than “I am playing.”

These observations fit Casey's definition that place is an interaction between the child and her surroundings instead of a defined locality.<sup>46</sup> A spot is not just a place in and of itself; we have to relate it to those people who live and move (or play) within its confines. The children described the ASP area in spots based

on—first and foremost—what they played there, and they included descriptions of the familiar equipment and of their friends. It is how they understand the idea of place and come to recognize the places they play.

### **Bodily Intentionality toward the Place**

I observed predominately child-managed activities while I gathered qualitative material at The Climbing Area and The Asphalt Place, which is in keeping with the vision of ASP that emerged from a 2003 survey.<sup>47</sup> The survey showed that 95 percent of ASP time involves child-managed activities, a trend that my investigation confirms. Of all the activities I observed at The Climbing Area and The Asphalt Place, only one was adult managed—when one of the staff initiated a dance session for the children at The Asphalt Place.

What about these two places attracts child-managed play? Gibson's theory of affordances would explain the play activities at The Climbing Area by the children's acceptance of the opportunities for climbing, swinging, and balancing.<sup>48</sup> At The Asphalt Place, Gibson's theory suggests that it is the children's acceptance of opportunities for manipulative movements using various equipment. This is an acceptable explanation if the children are already *at* the place; they accept spontaneously the opportunities for action available at that particular moment. We can see examples in my written observations about The Climbing Area (first), then The Asphalt Place.

Jane and Mari-Ann each come to the place on a scooter. During the first minute, they are scooting under and between the trees. They then lay the scooters down, and Mari-Ann climbs into one of the trees. She swings herself up using the lowest branch and balances on it.

One boy stops playing with the tricycle, which rolls into the group of girls who are dancing. Sophie seizes the opportunity and commences cycling instead of dancing.

In the first example, the girls casually enter the area and stay there. The opportunities for action exist in the immediate vicinity, ready to be taken advantage of—and the children do so spontaneously. In the example from The Asphalt Place, a situation suddenly arises that creates a new opportunity for action just where Sophie happens to be standing. She seizes it.

When we study the video recordings, we can often see very determined children enter The Climbing Area. They come running directly to the spot and immediately launch into the bodily play they associate with the place. Sometimes they come alone, sometimes they come with others. They might not come when there are no other children there; they might come when other kids are already deep into an activity. And just as Merleau-Ponty's account of bodily intentionality would have it, when one of these children captures objects, other people, or phenomena in her perceptual field, she sees wholes invested with immanent meaning.<sup>49</sup> Her perception has an intentional structure, and it occurs in an environment toward which she is already directed. The children's bodily play can be interpreted as a fulfillment of such intentionality. Consider what Merleau-Ponty calls motor intentionality, i.e. "being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body."<sup>50</sup> Two examples about The Climbing Area illustrate Merleau-Ponty's point.

Roger comes running from The Asphalt Place and directly to The Climbing Area. He is alone and begins immediately to climb one of the trees. He swings up into the tree using the broken branch on the left and tries out the tree through balancing and careful climbing.

Toni and Karen follow their permanent "obstacle course" in The Climbing Area. They swing up to the trees with the broken branch, jump on to the roof, and then into another tree, continuing from the slim branch down to the ground. It is a challenging exercise that not all dare to do nor can carry out as yet. The girls complete the exercise with speed and skill.

Even though we see bodily play at The Climbing Area, the play is not necessarily determined solely by the structure and organization of the places in which it occurs. The individuals clearly determine the play as well. Roger, as a newcomer to this ASP, had spent much of his first weeks in The Climbing Area. In the beginning, he preferred careful play, and probably he spent the first weeks investing this particular spot with meaning. Later, he barreled down directly on the area to start climbing and balancing. His situation contrasts sharply with the girls in the second example.

Toni and Karen are a kind of social pair typical at The Climbing Area. When they arrive, they quickly run a routine obstacle course, rapidly climb one tree, "jump through space" to the playhouse roof, dash across the roof, leap to a new

tree, and use one of its long, thin branches to swing down to the ground. This is advanced bodily play, a kind of self-taught exercise, where the girls combine climbing and balance with daring hops through the air. Their intention clearly reflects the special characteristics of the place, characteristics that encourage special body movements. But their intention is also influenced by the “previous lived experiences” at the place.<sup>51</sup> Their bodily play is already invested with meaning toward the trees and the playhouse that define The Climbing Area, meaning that has been influenced by their earlier bodily play there, meaning that is embodied.<sup>52</sup> Thus, we can say that their intentionality toward the place arises in the interaction between the child’s body and the place.

### **Bodily Play as Fulfillment of Intentionality toward Places**

In this article, I contend that bodily play is a typical form of childhood activity. During the play I observed at the two spots, the ASP children performed their body movements with a conspicuous spontaneity and familiarity. They never stood still for more than a few seconds. Either they were active on the spot, or they were running through the area on their way to another place. Their activity resembled closely the “to-and-fro motion of play” that Gadamer writes about.<sup>53</sup> The children appeared to be playing in home territory, regardless of their level of experience or development. Among the children I interviewed, there was no doubt about what to call the bodily activities they perform in ASP: they all called it *play*. The following example shows that just because bodily play is spontaneous, it does not mean that its development and performance is the same for all children or in all situations.

Some children ride their scooters from the grassy knoll down to The Asphalt Place. Andreas, Jonathan, and Edward take part in this play. This is something where they are experts. They race at considerable speed down toward The Asphalt Place, continue across it, and head directly between the sandpit and the house on the path around the ASP building. They pass several other bodily active children during the race. They do this several times. Amanda watches the boys’ activity a few minutes, and then she also wants to have a go. She is more cautious than the boys on the first trip, but dares to go down



to the place more slowly. On the second trip she increases her speed, and she follows the boys around the house.

The play here depends on the place, but it is clearly influenced by each child and each situation. The three boys become engrossed in an activity with which they are familiar and which they carry out as a matter of course. Amanda's first attempt to join in has the features of a barrier-breaking activity for her. But by the second trip, she is following the boys, and after that, she shows much more self-confidence and races at high speed. The children's intentionality during this play relates to the spot where the activity takes place, but based on previous experiences, they are also aware that the place itself is meaningful.<sup>54</sup> The three boys certainly are more experienced in racing than Amanda, but she quickly improves her performance. Although this is first and foremost a barrier-breaking activity, the place also seems to be meaningful for her. There is an established relationship between Amanda and this spot that precedes reflection. That the place is constituted on a perceptual, bodily level makes it possible for her to so quickly adapt to the racing. In Merleau-Ponty's words, her perception has an intentional structure; the perception takes place in an environment toward which she is already bodily directed.<sup>55</sup> This can happen so spontaneously because, as Gadamer would say, she is played by the play activity itself.<sup>56</sup>

However, there is reason to be aware of the differences between Amanda and the more experienced scooter riders. She spends a few minutes observing what the boys do before trying it herself. She needs some time to consciously reflect on the movements before she throws herself into the interplay with the place. During the first attempt, her movements appear to be more thought out and consciously controlled than the movements of the more experienced riders. We can see how the intentionality is influenced both by the individual person and the place and how the person's earlier experiences seem to play a crucial role. Merleau-Ponty claims that every movement depends on both the background of the movement and consciousness of the movement, that the operational intentionality of a life-world situation is a unique totality.<sup>57</sup> This example of children riding scooters illustrates the difference between barrier-breaking and habitual movements. For the experienced riders, the embodied background of the movements seems to be more prominent than consciousness of the movement. When it comes to Amanda, the consciousness of the movements seems to play a crucial role prior to and during her first attempt. It does not take a long time, however, before her consciousness of the movement

recedes to the background—her experiences from the interplay with the place is being embodied. This example shows how the interaction between children and places that occurs in bodily play can play an important role in constituting and adjusting a background for later actions.

The experienced boys also had to adjust their exercise according to the particular situation—as in the example when they pass other children at play during the race across The Asphalt Place. Thus, their intentionality is not the recalling of ready-made psychological representations. Morris cites Merleau-Ponty when he describes the human perception in such situations as not merely cognitive, but rather as a synthesis rooted in body movement itself.<sup>58</sup> Merleau-Ponty explains this synthesis when he writes: “What we have called the body schema is precisely this system of equivalents, this immediately given invariant whereby the different motor tasks are instantaneously transferable. It follows that it is not only an experience of my body, but an experience of my body-in-the-world.”<sup>59</sup>

What Merleau-Ponty describes as the body schema is not a possession of the subject but rather a structure-in-movement.<sup>60</sup> It can be understood as a primary, current awareness that is embodied; it has its roots in bodily inhabitation and is thus closely associated with those places toward which its intentionality is directed.<sup>61</sup> The body schema exists spontaneously in play when humans take actions that are adjusted to particular places and situations of their life-world.<sup>62</sup> Thus, when the experienced children ride their scooters from the grassy knoll and directly across The Asphalt Place, they perceive their world in a prereflective manner, and when their intentions unfold, they “receive the responses they expect from the world.”<sup>63</sup> In such situations in bodily play, the experiences of the movements are embodied, and reflection of the movements is moved to the background of consciousness. The playing children seem to understand the meaning of the situations in an immediate way, and this understanding comes *prior to* intellectual reflection.

The spontaneous play I observed in this investigation seems to reflect the immediate bodily directedness of the children toward their surroundings. Their bodily play is directed to places in the ASP area, and it can be seen as a fulfillment of the intentionality that Merleau-Ponty describes.<sup>64</sup> Their bodily play is meaningfully directed toward these places, and the play experiences invest them with meaning. The play experiences will be intertwined in the embodied background underlying the perception of isolated qualities and the formulations of explicit judgment. Thus, the interaction between children and place that occurs in bodily play can assume an important role in establishing a background for later actions.

However, it is interesting to note that the meaning the self-chosen and child-managed play invests in The Climbing Area and The Asphalt Place appears largely unconnected to the way the playground was supposed to be used. For example, consider how the children understand the small playhouse to be part of The Climbing Area. We can say that, when they play, the children tend spontaneously to exploit the playground to its full potential.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This study intended to investigate the relationship between ASP children and places where child-managed bodily play occurs. The study lies in the children's life-world, and it attaches importance to their experiences in concrete, tangible, real-life situations. The study shows that children's experiences of a place closely associate with their own bodily play there. Their concept of place is not linked merely to a specific, delimited spot. Also included in their understanding of place is the equipment they normally use in bodily play and the others normally involved in their play at the place. The children's understanding of place largely agrees with Casey's definition: a place occurs as an interaction between individuals and their surroundings.<sup>65</sup> In addition, the ASP children always associate their own bodily play with the understanding of place.

The investigation clearly shows that these ASP children carry a bodily directedness toward their surroundings; they carry an immediacy, intentionality directed toward the observed places. The children's bodily play and its related movements are already invested in their notion of what The Climbing Area and The Asphalt Place means. The intentionality relates to the characteristics of the place, but it is also influenced by an awareness of the experiences on the spot, both of which—as I said earlier—seems largely independent of how the playground area was originally meant to be used. Children's bodily play, as it appears in ASP, can be interpreted as a fulfillment of their intentionality toward places. Through the child-managed play, they fulfill their bodily directedness toward the world; through such play the children use immediate, body movements related to meaningful places in their surroundings. In self-chosen bodily play, children spontaneously exploit the playground to its full potential. The interaction between children and places that occurs in bodily play can also play an important role in constituting and adjusting their background for later actions.

The findings in this study can increase the general understanding of child-managed bodily play in ASP. They show that through such activities children grab the opportunity to interact with their surroundings, surroundings that happen to consist of meaningful places. Child-managed bodily play in ASP offers children the opportunity to experience fulfillment of intentionality in a spontaneous, childish manner, experiences that are crucial to the personal investing of places with meaning. In this way, child-managed bodily play fills a complementary niche in relation to adult-managed physical education and sport, and it should be encouraged in the ASP in the future. Such encouragement should also affect the role of the ASP employees. Members of the ASP staff are important to facilitating, initiating, and encouraging the allotment of sufficient time, space, and equipment for self-chosen and child-managed bodily play to occur.

Elsewhere I have shown that some children fall by the wayside with regard to child-managed play in the ASP and that this may have negative consequences for their opportunities to experience a coherent, homelike being-in-the-world.<sup>66</sup> Children definitely benefit from the creation and maintenance of good conditions for self-chosen and child-managed play, but the framework for children's activity should be adapted and adjusted to minimize the exclusions of individuals in the play activities. This study shows the importance of the broad and varied nature of incidental to-and-fro movement in play. Nevertheless, we must give attention to the individual child's needs for sufficient predictability and participation in shaping outcomes. These two tug in opposite directions, between complete freedom and the strict organization of the ASP time. Thus, after-school programs require professionals who can make judgments and adjustments, and this, in turn, requires that they have knowledge of children in the respective age groups and an ability to make appropriate evaluations and adaptations for all children in the group. In other words, a profound, pedagogical competence should characterize wise and mature professionals. There is a need for educated staff members who are able to make such judgments. Based on the findings in this study, I recommend we emphasize ASP as a complementary niche to school itself in the education of teaching professionals.

#### NOTES

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