What does snow feel like? Being a ’winterchild’

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Play in and with snow (e.g., skiing, sliding, and constructing) are foundational aspects of children’s everyday life in snowy regions. Snow connotes ‘childhood’, important aesthetic experiences, a joyful lifetime, and is a core theme in outdoor play for many Norwegian children. However, due to a warmer climate, the possibilities of play in snow and on ice have declined. Some pre-schools and local communities have bought artificial snow makers to produce snow in order to stimulate outdoor winter-play and counteract tendencies making children’s everyday-life becoming increasingly digitalised and distanced from nature.

This presentation addresses ways in which a group of pre-school children make sense of snow and winter landscapes through embodied, experiential, and explorative play. The presentation builds on an empirical fieldwork in a Norwegian pre-school in late January (2018), which is the darkest and the coldest time of the year. Thus, the nearby nature and the pre-school’s playground are regularly covered with ice and snow, offering children materials with season dependent ‘agency’ / affordances. The sample consists of ca 20 children (4-6 years) in a ’Nature pre-school’ with outdoor education as its prioritised area. The children play outdoor in natural environments every day throughout the year, only sheltered by a simple, uninsulated, wooden one-room ’hut’. The fieldwork draws on photo-interview and participant observation to generate an understanding of children’s own perspectives.

Theoretically, the presentation is framed by a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach and an analysis of selected empirical examples of ways the children play in and explore their surrounding ‘snowscapes’. Inspired by ’new materiality’ and the theoretical concepts of ‘dwelling’ (Ingold, 2000), ’embodiment’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and ’affordances’ (Gibson, 1979), we discuss children’s play in winter-nature as an embodying of the environment in general and the materials of snow and ice specifically. The discussion highlights the multi-sensorial dimensions of play with winter-materials and interactions between children and nature. The playful interactions with the winter-materials are understood as an interplay between ’playmates’ that inspire and challenge each other and as an existential exploration of nature and oneself.

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