Activating spaces and settings in institutions of early childhood education (ECE)

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Physical activity is considered to be an important goal for ECE institutions and a promoter of the healthy development of children. Nevertheless, efforts to offer more physical education or to certify "activity kindergartens" often neglect children's perspective on physical activity and movement-play.

This paper argues that according to an inter-perspective understanding of quality, in order to create spaces in which children like to be active on their own initiative it is necessary to reconstruct what constitutes a 'good' quality of movement-play from children's point of view.

The data used in the presented study was generated from a qualitative approach during children-led tours in their kindergarten and with the help of video-based observations. The interpretation method to analyse the collected data is the documentary method (Ralf Bohnsack), whose core objective is to reconstruct knowledge that guides action – and in this case, especially implicit and incorporated knowledge based on experience. By using this method, the study reconstructs, on the basis of observations in six German kindergartens, what is children's understanding of a 'good' quality of movement-play.

The central finding was that children love spaces suitable for movement; spaces in which they can move around freely and 'run wild'. They wish for spaces both indoors and outdoors that offer them a great variety of options for movement, and in which they may follow their spontaneous urges for physical activity. They seek exertion, physical challenges as well as a certain level of risk and interaction with their peers. They need adults to make available a safe framework for this and to recognise and appreciate their achievements.

The discussion will focus on questions that educators can ask themselves in order to reflect on the quality of physical activity in their institution. Other discussion topics will be how children can take risks in their play and how instructive competitive games can be replaced by free movement play in a stimulating environment.

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