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# Freedom, joy and wonder as existential categories of childhood – reflections on experiences and memories of outdoor play

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## ABSTRACT

This study conveys how young adults reflect upon their childhood experiences and memories of outdoor play, friluftsliv and outdoor places. Inspired by a phenomenological approach, we conducted walking interviews in nature areas where they used to play as children, revisiting the same informants and places as in a research project 14 years earlier. Today the respondents emphasise the experience of freedom encompassing joy, wonder and communication with surrounding nature and people, associating it with autonomy and self-determination. Joy, wonder and communication in someone's experience are subjective existential categories often used to characterise friluftsliv in outdoor education. Personally meaningful to the young adults, these experiences have become important parts of who they are today. These results differ from previous research on outdoor play as it highlights freedom, joy and wonder. Based on this, we argue for facilitating self-directed outdoor play, and emphasize conscious choice of location for outdoor pedagogical work.

## KEYWORDS



outdoor play; joy; wonder; childhood memories; friluftsliv

## Introduction

This article aims to examine how young women and men at the age of 24 reflect upon their childhood experiences and memories of outdoor play and friluftsliv in nature in a small Norwegian town. The study is inspired by bodily phenomenological perspectives, as explained below. Play is understood as self-organised (Fasting, 2013, 2017; Gadamer, 2004), and the focal point of this study is the intrinsic value of play (Steinsholt, 2010). Our bodies and senses are in constant interaction with our surroundings that, in turn, gives our consciousness its concrete contents (Gadamer, 2004). Through interaction with the landscape, both inner and outer landscapes are formed and cannot be separated (Merleau-Ponty, 2003).

*Friluftsliv* is a Nordic phenomenon of outdoor activity in nature. In this article, we will understand friluftsliv as a practical, social (Gurholt, 1999; Tordsson, 2003) and playful (Fasting, 2016) phenomenon and use the notion outdoor play to describe children's friluftsliv. Friluftsliv includes elements of both body experience and play (Høyem & Fasting, 2019).

Scandinavian countries have a tradition of children playing outdoor, and nature is looked upon as an important place for playing and learning (Gurholt & Sanderud, 2016; Løndal & Fasting, 2016; Nilsen, 2008). This project is situated in a Norwegian context. The Norwegian school curriculum gives room for friluftsliv both as a means and an end in itself, a focus that was strengthened with the new curriculum in 2021. The Norwegian climber and ecophilosopher Arne Næss (1990) argued that friluftsliv 'has the

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possibility of involving the whole person, body and mind, and includes many-sided activeness, it is connected with joy and well-being' (Breivik, 2020, p. 5). Breivik (2020) underlined the relation with the surroundings during *friluftsliv*. Phenomenology and ecophilosophy both show how humans are inextricably linked with nature, creating the basis for a holistic understanding of man's relationship with nature. *Friluftsliv* enables the interaction between emotions, actions and thoughts in a person.

Previous research on memories from outdoor play and *friluftsliv* in childhood has been limited in number and scope (Bischoff, 2018; Fasting, Høyem, & Bischoff, 2022; Rhie, 2020). Waite (2007) pointed out that memories from childhood outdoor play are often positive and exploration is prominent in childhood memories. Skår and Krogh (2009) point out that memories from outdoor play in childhood are linked to a large degree to self-organised activity in the nearby nature, and Sebba (1991) claimed that informants emphasise childhood memories where adults did not mediate the children's experiences. Chawla (1992) suggested that childhood places become memorable when they promote the experience of freedom. Both Rieh (2020) and Aden, 2018, p. 19) described how people remember best the places they have visited repeatedly in childhood. The places that are remembered are often characterised by natural features and have a small degree of human facilitation (Aden, 2017; Chawla, 1992; Rieh, 2020; Sebba, 1991). Both Sandberg (2001;2003) and Skår and Krogh (2009) found that relationships both to places and other children were central in childhood memories from outdoor play, as Waite (2007) and Rhie (2020) had highlighted social factors.

This study is situated where the informants played outdoors in their childhood: in the immediate neighbourhood of a school and the surrounding nature. The informants mostly talked about their memories from outdoor play and *friluftsliv* from these areas, both during school breaks and in outdoor classes, in addition to their leisure-time outdoor activities. Our interest is centred in the memories of a manifold outdoor experiences. The context of outdoor learning lies inside and outside the formal education system, shaping a human from childhood to adolescence.

## Theoretical and conceptual framework

### *Landscapes of childhood and the concept of memories*

Natural areas provide opportunities to a child to engage in creative play with friends and form emotional bonds with places and the natural world, as Chawla (2015) amongst others has pointed out. Rasmussen (2004) has discussed how children connect with places where they have played, lived and wondered. These places become children's places (Rasmussen, 2004). Places where most part of time in childhood is spent remain as body experiences within us. 'It is by our bodies that we belong to the place' (Casey, 1997, p. 239). Through play and movement in childhood places, children get connected to outdoor places, and these become their landscapes of childhood (Fasting et al., 2022).

In this work, we understand the concept of memories as embodied beings, and hence memories are considered as revitalizations of moment(s) of the past, placed in time and place (Donohoe, 2014) and stored as bodily experiences (Casey, 1997). How we understand and feel for nature is determined by experiences with nature during childhood (Bischoff, 2018; Fasting et al., 2022; Hendricks, 2001), for instance through play and *friluftsliv*. The extraordinary sensitivity of the child's lived body opens onto and takes in the complex character of place, and the experience of place can be described by the concepts of body memory and place memory (Casey, 1997). The subjective lived body is in constant dialogue with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). This connects people with their surroundings, like experiences in nature enhance peoples' relationships with nature throughout their life. This awareness of our own place in space is closely linked to our emotional development, a sense of who we are. The embodiment is placed into a matrix of spatial relations to our surroundings, where things influence our emotional life (Simmes, 2008).

### ***The feeling of freedom in outdoor play and friluftsliv***

Huizinga(1955) underlined freedom and joy as the main characteristics of play, and this study holds a similar perspective. Children play because they enjoy playing, and therein precisely live their freedom (Huizinga, 1955). According to Buytendijk (1933), children are pathos-driven, that is their feelings dictate their natural behaviour. The feeling of freedom accompanies play and movement. It is the freedom of getting carried away, of letting go—a bodily feeling of freedom (Fasting, 2017, 2019). Rasmussen (2017) focused on how unpurposive movement and play are dynamic and related to the feeling of freedom. Affective feelings and bodily feelings are intertwined and experienced holistically (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999). The experience of being fully engrossed in meaningful actions can be referred to in terms of Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of flow, a state that is intrinsically rewarding (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) assert that flow characterizes play, creativity and aesthetic activities. The flow theory is criticised for placing too much emphasis on the balance between skills and challenges, and too little on providing more nuanced descriptions of subjective experiences and positive functioning (Løvoll & Vittersø, 2014). In play and friluftsliv flow is often understood as a versatile, holistic, mental and bodily experience (Bentsen, Andkjær, & Ejbye-Ernst, 2013; Fasting, 2019), where people feel at one with the environment, experience an altered sense of time and lose themselves in the play (Beames & Brown, 2016; Løvoll & Vittersø, 2014), and this is our approach to the concept.

Children move a lot, and their bodies tell them what the ground feels like under their feet and which loose paving stones to avoid. They must be afforded the opportunity to practice movements as walking, running, jumping and climbing repeatedly to experience the feelings of these movements (Fasting, 2017, 2019). Play is created in the dialogue with the space they inhabit and with their fellow playmates (Fasting, 2019). Gadamer (2004) focused on the interaction between playing humans; the play goes back and forth between the players. Engelsrud (2010) also described how the body and the senses are related with other bodies and the landscape.

Play has a central part in friluftsliv (Fasting, 2016; Tordsson, 2003). Tordsson (2003, p. 44) used the notion 'nature's open speech' about how nature gives humans the possibilities for activity and play. He explained how 'meeting with nature' gives experiences of joy, growth and maturing. Research on outdoor play and friluftsliv has to a little extent focused on freedom, joy and wonder. Næss (1973; also Breivik, 2020) stood out by emphasising the relations between place and joy and how joy is linked to freedom.

### ***Joy in outdoor play and friluftsliv***

Children play and move a lot, and play gives playful and good feelings, as the research of, amongst others, Rasmussen (1992) clearly shows. Play can be described as unstructured movement here and there, jumping, and running with joy (Rasmussen, 1992). Winther (2014) explains how joy of movement, including to choose and vary one's own movement, is interrelated with the feeling of freedom. Children often communicate that they love moving around, and this joy is essential for wanting to move again and again (Fasting, 2019). According to Stevens (2017) children's movement are existential, and the joy of movement is central for humans' beings throughout their lives. The message of Csikszentmihalyi (1990) is that joy may not be so much linked to what we do as to how we do it. Lyngstad (2010) adds that joy of movement is situational.

Ingulfsvann, Fusche Moe and Engelsrud (2021) write about the feeling of joy in movement. Their research is done in physical education, not friluftsliv, but some of their points are nevertheless relevant for this study. They underline how situational and relational aspects are essential when facilitating joy. They relate joy of movement to openness, encountering new situations and engaging and

experiencing oneself, other people and the world. Joy of movement brings children together and encourages social interaction and engagement. 'Joy is shared in glances and closeness, and it passes amongst children as well as between children and the environment' (Ingulfsvann et al., 2021, p. 11).

Karjalainen (2020) pointed out how joy is promoted in children's creative actions, as well as related to children's relations, when they are social. Johnson (2020) noted how experiencing joy together allows us to feel more deeply connected to others and how being surrounded by joyful people promotes joy. The social aspect of joy raises questions about the nature of shared joy. Breivik (2020), Næss (1973), and Tordsson (2003) underlined joy as an important part of friluftsliv. Friluftsliv can be the joy of being in nature, alone or with others, and experiencing harmony with the surroundings (Breivik, 2020).

### ***Wonder and curiosity in outdoor play and friluftsliv***

Wonder and curiosity are linked to outdoor play in several ways. Children have an innate motivation to explore and learn through interaction with their surroundings. Children's curiosity for the natural world, and their unique way of knowing, requires discovery and exploratory experiences. White (2006) underlined the power of children's imagination in intimate contact with nature. Outdoor play can contribute to an overall understanding of the human in the world. In play, human beings create the world by doing and by questioning (Eichberg, 2016). Rasmussen (2017, 2020) and Fasting (2017) discussed how outdoor play often is a mix of movement, creativity and fantasy. Children often are emotional towards their surroundings; they are deeply moved, touched or affected. These emotional relations carry children into a sphere of play and wonder. Through playing outdoors, we interact and communicate with nature. Through this interaction, we not only discover nature but also ourselves. Hence, children's outdoor play is a democratic place for learning about the world and about being human (White, 2013). When children move and wander around in diverse terrain outdoors, their patterns of interaction are intimate, fluid and intense. Children feel the surroundings pass through one's body as the body passes through the surrounding (Moore, 2019). When children start moving, their imagination also suddenly starts working (Rasmussen, 1992). Imagination is not isolated merely to our minds, it is part of our bodies and senses (Abram, 1997). When people are in a playful mood, they are open minded, perceptive and investigating (Fasting, 2019). Breivik (2019) also focused on how the playful attitude in movement can be characterised by exploration and curiosity.

Albeit curiosity is an ambiguous term, almost all psychologists and educational researchers view it as a great strength during childhood. Curiosity begins as a feeling of surprise, in response to something unexpected, and while experiencing the feeling of curiosity, we search to observe, touch, smell or listen to whatever sparked our need to know. The excitement can spur action that in turn could enhance learning (Engel, 2015). Curiosity, wonder, exploration and creativity are intimately linked to play, growth and learning (Frost, 2010; Gurholt & Sanderud, 2016). Aggerholm (2015) argued that the notion 'wonder' gives room for dwelling, phenomenological intentionality, openness and responsiveness to a larger extent than the term curiosity.

Nature areas are flexible and offer unlimited options for play. Play with elements of fantasy and curiosity is more often observed in nature than in open play areas (Fasting, 2017, 2019; Hart, 1979; Taylor, Wiley, Kuo, & Sullivan, 1998). Atchley, Strayer and Atchley (2012) asserted that immersion in natural settings is emotionally positive and improves creative reasoning. Gurholt and Sanderud (2016) argued that children's play with natural elements originates in 'a profound curiosity and wonder about themselves and the environment in which they play an interactive role.' They proposed the concept of 'curious play' as a framework to understand children's search for challenges and play, assuming that curiosity is a motivation for children's free play.

## Outdoor play, friluftsliv and outdoor education

A review of research literature reveals more former research on friluftsliv as outdoor education than as outdoor play. The Scandinavian outdoor education emphasises free play, exploring activities, place-based knowledge, local nature and cultures and sustainability (Gurholt & Sanderud, 2016). Høyem (2020) states that friluftsliv can form a basis for establishing a conscious relationship with nature. Research also shows that people who played in nature as children are more likely to choose natural areas for recreation later in life (Thompson, Aspinall, & Montarzino, 2008).

Lamnina and Chase (2019) assessed that uncertainty fosters curiosity and concludes that curiosity is important for learning. In an outdoor learning setting, Beames and Brown (2016) supported the concept of uncertainty in learning and emphasised the process and the need to create space for learners to exercise curiosity. Mygind, Bølling and Barfod (2019) explained how being in nature during school time involves all senses and creates new social relations, and that children are more curious in these situations. They also described how the pupils express joy and enjoy bodily activity. Lund and Jensen (2020) underlined the importance of first-hand experiences—joy and movement in pedagogical work. Positive feelings activate and motivate us. Ingulfsvann et al. (2021) related the educational value of joy of movement to invigorating, gathering and engaging forces of joy.

Næss argued that a central goal in childhood education should be to offer possibilities of all-embracing joy where all parts of body and mind are active (Breivik, 2020, p. 5). Miller (2019, p. 9) asserted that awe and wonder should be the first goals of education, and Næss (1999, p. 25) also spoke of wonder as a central part of our education. Wonder is an important motivator for lifelong learning (Wilson, 1997).

Children today have few opportunities for free outdoor play and regular contact with the natural world. Childhood of wandering and exploring has for many been replaced by a childhood of adult supervision and scheduled improvement (Chawla, 2015; Mygind et al., 2019). Experiences of outdoor education are believed to have significant impacts on participants. But research on the lasting influences of extended programs is limited (Beames, Mackie & Scrutton, 2020). The long-term experience gained from outdoor play in nature, friluftsliv and outdoor education is investigated to a small extent.

Based on this, our research question is: *How do young adults reflect on experiences and memories from outdoor play and friluftsliv during childhood?*

## Method

### Phenomenology

This research takes a bodily phenomenological approach to lived experience, and hence it's essential to be as open minded as possible (Gadamer, 2004). Children remember and tell a lot with and through their body, and like Kampmann (2017) we believe that young people and adults also do. According to Finlay (2005) 'Researchers need to try to grasp something of the other as a *living, lived body*. Second, they also should attend to their own bodies as researchers—specifically a body that is in relationship with the participant' (p. 272). Phenomenology relates body movement with the movement of thoughts.

### Sample

In the summer of 2019, one of the authors met with eight respondents, five girls and three boys at the age of 24. The encounter took place in their childhood's schoolyard and in the surrounding nature area. The researcher had first met these informants in 2005, when they were ten years old and went to a public school focusing on outdoor education, outdoor play and friluftsliv. The then 10 children, 5 girls and 5 boys, were selected out of a class of 29. They had experiences with outdoor play and friluftsliv once a week the first 4 years of school, as well as in their leisure time. The selection

was done after observing the class for three days, and was based on differences in their approach to outdoor play experiences, for instance the amount of moving and talking, and varying degrees of participation in leisure activities. The research in 2005 focused on understanding the informants' world of outdoor play and their relation to their play areas in school and leisure time (Fasting, 2013). Two of the ten informants in 2005 were not available in 2019, and hence the number of informants in this study adds up to eight. The shared experiences from 14 years ago made it easier to meet again. In this article, we use numbers to anonymize girl 1–5 and boy 1–3.

### ***Walking and talking***

The researcher met with the young adolescents, one by one, walking and talking in their childhood outdoor places. The method has different names like 'walking interviews' (Kinney, (2019).; Moles, 2008), 'observation-based interview' (Kampmann, 2017) and 'sensobiographic walking' (Järviluoma, 2017). The walk-and-talk methods are often criticized for not taking into account the context and landscape in which the interviews take place. In our research the location plays an active role in the generation of data. With this method, the young adults returned to the places in nature close to the school where they had experiences from childhood. In the former research project, the walk-along interviews and observations took place in the same area, in addition to in play areas closer to the informants' homes (Fasting, 2013).

This time they met in the schoolyard and the informants initiated the walk. Their choices contributed to access their memories. Everyone wanted to climb a cliff wall and expressed memories of playing here. They all had memories from playing in the schoolyard but were more focused on talking about their play in the nature area. We also walked along a gravel road and a path to an area in the forest where they used to have outdoor classes.

Each walk with an informant lasted around 70 minutes and pivoted around their play experiences in this area. When naturally, the researcher asked questions about their play and their relation to these places, she tried to create an atmosphere where it was possible to wait, think and be quiet for a while. As Kinney (2017) has underlined, it is a better flow in the conversation when you walk next to each other. When being outdoors on familiar places, people tend to talk more spontaneously (Kinney, 2017 2019). Moles (2008) discussed three-way communication in walking conversations. Both the researcher, the respondents and the places are central to the communication. Using this method, we were able to come close to and observe the young adults' places and their movements on these places, and, at the same time, observe mental phenomena such as feelings, atmospheres and moods (Kinney, 2019).

Memories consist of imagination, emotion, rational reflexivity and consciousness. Memory is 'on' and working all the time, in our bodies, our subconsciousness and through our emotions (Jones, 2003). The young adults expressed their experiences and memories from their movements, the physical environment, their relations to these places and the social network. Some of them expressed orally how it was easier to remember when returning to these childhood places. Through their body language, they also conveyed how walking made it easier to talk. Shared previous experiences in these places promoted the possibility to ask questions and talk about memories. Some remembered more than others.

The first author conducted all the interviews. The rest of this work was done by the two authors in collaboration. The analysis was inspired by the six steps of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Both researchers read the transcripts repeatedly and discussed how to interpret and understand the results. Gradually some central categories crystallized (Giorgi, 1997), and entries were marked that related to the categories. Then the data set was read in its entirety for each of the themes, and these themes were further elucidated (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2018).



## **Ethic**

We initially sent the young adult's information about this project, then called them to arrange a meeting. 'The researcher's integrity, knowledge, experience, honesty and fairness in an important part of ethical considerations' (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2018, p. 108). The research topic was in a way sensitive, because the schoolyard did not offer only good experiences to the young adults and some of them had experiences of solitude and exclusion there.

Language not only provides opportunities to take part in the world of another's life but also sets limits as respondents might lack appropriate terminology to describe thoughts and feelings. One can also question whether the researchers could understand what the respondents wanted to express. In addition, there is a risk that responses were coloured by wanting to please the researcher, by saying or doing what they guess is expected of them. The methodology of talking and moving together, and the place chosen for this, can delimit these challenges by easing the atmosphere between the researcher and the respondent, by bringing memories forward and giving the researcher impressions of the body language as well as the spoken words. The researcher's sensitivity, combined with knowledge of the topic, provides an opportunity to go in depth into what subjects perceived important while steering clear of minor issues. It is essential that the researcher knows the codes, language and symbols within the topic researched to understand the meanings that interviewees put in their answers. Therefore, the researcher's knowledge must be regarded as a resource in an interview situation. The present study is notified to the Norwegian social data services (NSD).

## **Results and discussions**

The analysis reveals two main, interrelated themes that we will unfold further: joy and wonder. These are again related to the feeling of freedom and are highlighted both in the informants' reflections on experiences and memories and in who they are today. These topics recur in all the interviews and all eight respondents elucidate this from different angles to a greater or lesser degree.

### ***Reflections on experiences and memories of joy in play and friluftsliv***

The young adults are enthusiastic when talking about their childhood play in this area and focus on all the possibilities when playing in nature. Girl 4 underlines the joy of being in nature during school time. Boy 3 remembers how he experienced the joy of movement in the forest: 'we ran back and forth without goals and meaning, it was just for fun.' 14 years ago, as children, the informants also expressed with their bodies and words how they loved their play and play areas, and how they experienced joy when running and climbing. Rasmussen (1992) and Fasting (2017, 2019) have highlighted the joy and feeling of running. The respondents' words illustrate how children's movements are existential (Stevens, 2017), dynamic and in relation with the surroundings (Rasmussen, 2017). If we apply the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi), the experience of self is conditioned by both body, actions and environment. Girl 5 explains: 'I remember how we were good at balancing from rock to rock.' When walking together with the researcher on the path through this forest, jumping from rock to rock to avoid getting wet, girl 5 underlines these dynamic body movements and express both body memory and place memory. The respondents point out how their bodies sense the environment. Fasting (2019) discussed how children's play to a large degree is communicated in a bodily manner and how play is created in dialogue with the space they inhabit and with their fellow playmates.

In line with the research of Sheets-Johnstone (1999), the informants' movements and feelings are related. They highlight the feeling of being able to do what they want while playing and focus on how these positive feelings activate and motivate them. The young adults describe their joy of movement as physical, emotional, social and in relation to the surroundings. They connect their joy of movement in outdoor play and friluftsliv with existential feelings, and they talk about their play



and activities as important and as parts of themselves. Some of them were introduced to activities like skiing, sledging, running and climbing during school years, and these activities still give them the experience and feeling of joy.

The young respondents emphasize the joy of the social dimension of their outdoor play. They underline how joy of movement felt stronger when they could share their experiences. 'We built a foundation. Thinking back; our dialogue was very diplomatic, so to speak. Everything had to be fair, and we had to talk a special way,' boy 1 says. White (2013) underlined how being outdoors has a potential to support holistic and social experiences, and Tordsson (2003) and Gurholt (1999) emphasised social experiences in friluftsliv. Boy 1 continues: 'It was educational just being together outdoors, making decisions and investigating the relation between us and nature.' 'In outdoor play I felt like everybody were included. In outdoor play we got experience with social relations, to play together and to communicate with the bodies,' boy 3 explains. The young adults also remember being together with joyful classmates outdoors. Karjalainen (2020) and Johnson (2020) point out joy as a social practice and how joyful people experience joy more frequently. The young adults in this study express how their communication during childhood play in the forest felt unique. 'In the forest, it was in a way that everyone should be together and enjoy the outdoors and it was so cosy to sit and eat together' (boy 3). 'The feeling of being together in the forest was special—it was a highlight for me to come here. That's the feeling I remember, and I still feel proximity to nature' (boy 3). Most of the informants mention how nice it was sitting around the campfire, and they experienced to be an interdependent group. They express how outdoor play and friluftsliv had allowed them to feel deeply connected to each other.

They describe these places in the forests, hills and in between trees, as exciting and magical. Boy 3 describes the forest as mystical, cosy and nice. He expresses that he remembers to have had no sensation of time here, only presence. Girl 3 describes this area in the forest as exciting; 'we never had problems with starting playing' and 'it was so nice with this hilly terrain with many small heights'. These places in nature were the child's domain. Girl 1 explains: 'I was so lucky to have the possibility of free bodily unfoldment. When we could play here, we were so happy.' Their experiences of these places are layered in their bodies, and they connect them to these places. The relationship between the children and their places, and how the places inspired the children in their play, were evident 14 years ago (Fasting, 2013), and now the adolescents highlight this themselves. As Sheets-Johnstone (1999) and Næss (1999) have mentioned, the young adults focus on the relation between movement, places and feelings. They feel whole and connected to the world when being in nature, and their bodies feel related to the surroundings. They relate to the joy of movement to openness, engagement and to experience of oneself, other people and the world.

### ***Reflections on experiences and memories of wonder in play and friluftsliv***

The young adults underline wonder, creativity and curiosity as important parts of their childhood experiences outdoors, and they convey how this blossomed while playing in natural surroundings. In a way, they describe human beings as questioning beings, in line with Eichberg (2016). 'We enjoyed building huts and to wonder about different things, and the places had different names in relation to the landscape there,' boy 1 explains. Huizinga (1955) and Eichberg (2019) both have described how creativity and play can build a foundation of contentment.

'You had to think creatively and find solutions not to get caught when we played hide and seek. Creativity and finding solutions were a part of it,' says boy 3. Girl 5 continues: 'The imagination was a central part of our play.' Being in nature motivated the children to wonder. In line with White (2006), they underline how their wonder was a central part of their play and movement in nature. Boy 1 says: 'Being creative in nature made me feel content and satisfied.' 'It gave me a feeling of happiness to be able to use the imagination,' girl 3 explains. The respondents underline the importance of imagination and how this often was related to play and movement outdoor. 'You become more creative when you are outdoor,' girl 1 claims. Girl 5 says: 'we had so much fantasy.' In

line with Abram (1997), the young adults promote how imagination is not isolated to our minds but is part of our bodies and the surroundings. The informants underline the link between wonder and exiting or mystical places. 'There was a bit of mystery and a little scary here,' boy 3 explains, while walking in the forest. 'The places where we played were mystical,' girl 5 reveals. Both girl 3 and 5 claim they were happy when they could unfold their creativity, fantasy and curiosity. Many of the informants emphasise how movement initiate creativity and wonder. We recognize the findings from 14 years ago, were Fasting (2013) described creativity, movement and fantasy as main characteristics of children's play.

Boy 1 and 2 explain how factual knowledge of geography and history were important parts of their childhood play and hence inspired their fictive place names. For instance, Finse is the name of a mountain area, and knowledge of this inspired them to name one of their childhood places in the forest 'Finsefjell' (fjell meaning mountains in Norwegian). 'I have always been fascinated of mountains, and we liked to mix movement, fantasy and things I had read about—facts,' boy 1 explains. 'We had a fantasy world, but it was very factual,' boy 2 continues. Boy 1 highlights the transition from fiction to reality and how these two overlaps: 'where the distinction goes is not necessarily so clear.' Molander (2018) has described this when discussing how children are most curious when a specific thing attracts them, and how creativity and knowledge is related.

'Play is fantasy and body expression; play is a lot about moving,' girl 5 express. The informants underline how fantasy and movement is related. Girl 5 had played a lot in the cliffs as a child and she recalls: 'I loved to climb.' Looking back, all these eight young adults enjoyed climbing as children (Fasting, 2013). After 14 years, all of them want to repeat the climb up a steep mountain slope during the interview. None of them had experienced this steep wall as dangerous when returning. Climbing is an activity they remember. These intense activities involved all senses, the whole body was activated. Sometimes fantasy was a part of their climbing activity. Girl 3 told us: 'when we played like this, we often fall down the cliff.' Climbing and fantasy play were parts of their childhood landscape (Fasting et al., 2022).

Boy 1 was attracted by a cliff in the schoolyard during the interview. He lay down on the cliff and said he had been lying like this during breaks at school, scratching a stone against the cliff. He still has this stone at home. During the interview, his body language conveyed how his memories were connected to the place. The interviewer could in a way feel and share his wonder, somewhat similar to the research situation 14 years ago. During the interview, this young man reflected on the relation between his childhood play and his choice of higher education in creative arts: 'While studying I have been allowed to relieve some of these memories and emotions ... obvious to me as a child. It's obvious to me that it has had a great value.' He emphasizes how joyful experiences of wonder in outdoor play in childhood still is a part of who he is today. Boy 1 underlines the magical and sensual of his childhood outdoor play in nature: 'The play area was magical. I remember the tactile feelings of wet twigs, bark and mud and solid cliff has become a part of me.' Girl 1 also underlines the feeling of nature: 'when you go out you kind of feel like it smells like nature.' Simmes (2008) had discussed how some children experience the world more deeply, and our informants show some of this. 'The teacher was good at taking us outside. We looked forward to the trips to the forest, and we were curious about everything,' girl 5 remembers. She claims that the teachers made them curious. The results of this study indicate that wonder develops through childhood play in nature and has followed the informants in their adolescence and adult life. They underline the feeling of wonder and curiosity both as children and young adults.

### ***Reflections on experiences and memories of the feeling of freedom***

The young respondents highlight the self-organised outdoor play in nature. They articulate that they mostly remember to be allowed to do what they wanted in the forest during outdoor classes. Boy 3 says: 'I guess there was a kind of plan, but we were often free to play and to do things we wanted.' They remember few or no rules. 'It was peaceful to be able to do what we wanted. When the play was

more adult led, it was not the same. There was more stress, I didn't like that so much' (Boy 1). Boy 3 tells he had fun, felt free and enjoyed being in nature during school time. He reflects on the teachers' thoughts: 'They may have seen the benefit of how we enjoyed ourselves here.' This can be seen as encompassing the concept of didactic sensitivity (Sanderud, Gurholt, & Moe, 2021)—an approach that is open to children's own initiatives to learn to 'to handle themselves within a complex mesh-work of socio-material relationships' (p.12).

The informants remember their emotions at these places as parts of their play in nature as children. They articulate the feeling of freedom in nature and in their childhood places outdoors. 'You felt in a way you were on a trip without the teacher, and you felt the freedom,' girl 1 says. It could be the feeling of walking or running or the feeling when sitting down and enjoying the view or just sitting there. They played freely outdoors, were active and did things that adults did not guide or sanction. In these situations, in nature, they could find tranquillity. 'The feeling of freedom was important for us,' girl 4 explains. Girl 5 now tells she felt free outdoor, and boy 3 articulates: 'In the forest I had the feeling of freedom and the feeling of mystery.' In line with Chawla (1992) the young adults underline how their places become memorable through the experiences of freedom. This sensory experience, movement feelings and feeling of freedom connected them to nature. In line with Tordsson (2003), they experienced 'the nature's open speech.' These places had become 'children's places' (Rasmussen, 2004) and their 'landscapes of childhood' (Fasting et al., 2022).

'We were allowed to be outside as kids and we were close to nature,' boy 2 reveals. The informants feel safe in nature; they feel at home in nature; nature is a part of them. They convey how play and activity in the forest was an important part of their outdoor experience and education. The young adults remember activities organised by the teachers as well, but they did not talk much about that during the interviews.

### ***Joy and wonder as existential categories emerging from childhood outdoor play***

The informants underline holistic and social experiences through outdoor play and friluftsliv. Close to nature, they have experienced the joy of movement and the feeling of wonder. Outdoor play and places in nature have given them experiences, and they articulate a feeling of freedom in nature. These sensory experiences and feelings of freedom have connected them to nature.

With outdoor play almost every day, they played a lot in what they describe as exciting places, like hills, rocks and in between trees. Boy 1 told us how play is a real thing. Play has been central for him during childhood and is still important for him today. The informants underline their playful mood and feeling of joy and wonder in nature and how this motivated them to explore as children and young adults. Girl 2 says, 'I think my outdoor play in childhood have had a strong impact on whom I have become.'

They also communicate the importance of feeling free to explore and learn. Girl 4 says 'everything comes back to the feeling of feeling free, and the freedom maybe makes us learn more'. In line with Molander (2018), the young adults link emotions, curiosity and learning. When researching the same informants as children, they gave a similar impression, but as adults they highlight these connections more explicit. Joy, wonder and the feeling of freedom are existential categories that are personally meaningful to the adolescents. These are categories that current research on play and outdoor education does not emphasise much. The respondents have turned these experiences into their foundation of life. The young men and women in this study express connections to their childhood landscape—places they have visited repeatedly during childhood. They underline how their childhood memories are mostly from places where adults did not facilitate, and they underline the social dimensions of their memories.

## Conclusions and implications

This project underlines the importance of children's opportunity for direct and spontaneous contact with nature and their ability to grow through joy and wonder. The young adults talk about their self-organised outdoor play and friluftsliv as an important part of their childhood experiences and memories. They are grateful for the possibilities of outdoor play and friluftsliv and highlight personally meaningful memories. The informants describe their play, without restrictions, and outdoor experiences during school time as important. The feelings of freedom, joy and wonder, which they convey, are existential categories. They express how playing outdoors and friluftsliv have given them unique experiences. This study supports earlier research that shows how joy and bodily movement are important in pedagogical work. In addition, the young adults underline how wonder is central in education.

Based on our results, we emphasize to facilitate children's experiences of freedom, joy and wonder through play and friluftsliv. We assert that these results provide an argument for self-directed outdoor play in nature in pedagogical contexts. This is not only about what the pedagogues do, but also how and where one does it. In light of these findings, the choice of location for pedagogical work outdoor is important for creating the context of education in a broad sense, regardless of country and culture. We can argue, like Fasting et al. (2022), that access to nearby local nature for children contribute to shaping identity, relationships with others and what one experience as meaningful. More research is needed to connect experiences of joy, wonder and freedom with learning and teaching.

The young women and men in this study emphasise the mutual relationship both with the play area and the friends. This interaction has influenced who they are today and how they relate to the world—both to nature and to fellow human beings. Outdoor play and friluftsliv in childhood have given them belonging and anchoring. Memories of the good feelings have given emotional experiences of wonder, movement and joy, and they have experienced to be connected to the world. These sensual, social and connected experiences in relation with nature have equipped our respondents to face life. They state that outdoor play has given them a foundation of life.

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## Disclosure statement

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

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