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THESIS

Challenge Courses as a Method of Adventure Education in Early Childhood Setting

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ABSTRACT

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This study explored the application of challenge courses as a method of adventure education in Creative Learning Playschool(CLP). CLP is a daycare center that follows Finland's early childhood education curriculum. Commissioners of this study (CLP) recognized a need for guided activities to develop their curriculum. Four pilot exercises were executed during one month to introduce challenge courses to CLP. Observation, interviews with practitioners, and feedback surveys from children are conducted to collect data. Results showed challenge courses have the potential to create a fun and pedagogical learning environment for preschool children. The result also emphasized the role of practitioners in providing inclusive learning opportunities for all children. As a result, a guidebook has been developed to facilitate the application of the challenge courses for the CLP or any other daycare centers.

Keywords: adventure education, early childhood education, challenge courses, daycare centres, pedagogic methods

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

Creative Learning Play Schools (CLP) is a daycare centre in Finland and the commissioner of this developmental project. CLP's curriculum is derived from Finish's early year's curriculum with a special emphasis on free play and curiosity. The purpose of this thesis is to introduce the challenge courses in the context of a playschool curriculum and to provide a guidebook for tailoring these challenge courses to the specific pedagogical needs of CLP. Having diverse activities and learning theory assist CLP to balance their curriculum and answer all pedagogical needs.

Free play is a dominant and accepted concept in daycare centres in Finland. Besides free play, guided activities like challenge course have a lot of advantages to be used hand in hand in a daycare setting. This development project was formed based on the demand for physical guided activity. At the same time activities need to be fun and stimulate the curiosity of children to participate and learn. Challenge course as a method of adventure education is a type of guided activity that can be applied in a daycare centre and cooperates with the growth and development of the children.

In this project, I have executed four exercises to introduce challenge courses to CLP and evaluate the result. I have used the observation method to collect data. For a more comprehensive picture of the challenge course experience, I interviewed practitioners and received feedback from children.

The Result shows that challenge courses as an adventure education method have a strong potential to be used by practitioners and expand the CLP's curriculum. I have also created a guidebook with concrete examples to smooth the application of challenge courses for CLP. The guidebook provides a structured examples that aim for a specific learning outcome. In this way, the instructor can observe the process and steer the learning to predetermined goals which are daycare curriculum objectives.

2 THE GOALS OF THE THESIS

2.1 Creative learning Play School (CLP)

Creative Learning Playschool OY (Threated going forward as CLP) is a private daycare based in Kirkkonummi, Masala, and Helsinki. CLP follows the Finnish early-year curriculum with an emphasis on the curiosity approach ethos. CLP has a play-based curriculum that provides children with the opportunity to learn, explore, and discover (clp-education 2023). Sustainability is important in CLP operation and administration. CLP is following a sustainable consumption project, and they are holding a green flag certificate for the work and effort they put into sustainable education development.

Physical activities as a part of CLP programs support brain development, help develop social skills and emotional wellbeing, and enhance bone health and muscular development. Obstacle courses are a great way for kids to get a full-body workout. Helping children stay physically active is essential to promote healthy habits that last a lifetime. When you can make physical activity fun, kids are more likely to participate. That's where challenge courses come in.

The thesis will introduce challenge courses as a method of adventure education to CLP's curriculum. We have organized challenge courses while considering experiential learning methods. The results of exercises are summarized in a guidebook to broaden the future curriculum of the CLP.

2.2 Guidebook

The main purpose of this thesis is to build a framework that tailors challenge courses for the application of CLP. The objectives of the guidebook have been set with the actual demand of CLP after brainstorming and discussion with staff and the manager. We found there is a need for children to experience structured challenging physical activity, which is contrary to their routine free-play schedules.

For instance, I understood that some children haven't reached their physical milestones and don't possess certain physical skills. This boosts the need for guided physical activity. In guided activity, an instructor can observe and monitor the progress of the child in a specific skill, also instructor can set the goals of the activity to align with the curriculum to reach the child's milestone. These are some advantages of guided activity that are not obtainable by free play.

The objectives of the program focused on improving the physical and mental capabilities of children while considering CLP pedagogical goals. Free play is a dominant learning theory in CLP but in this project, I have integrated adventure education with experiential learning theory into their programs.

Guidebook built upon theoretical knowledgebase, pilot practices of the challenge course, feedback from children, interview of staff, and my real-time observation. The guidebook will provide structured challenge course examples to expand CLP curriculum portfolio and enhance its operation. Practices in the guidebook are designed and implemented to covers most of the pedagogical goals of CLP. It can be used as it is or improved based on CLP or other daycare center's pedagogical needs in the future.

3 ADVENTURE EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTING

3.1 What Is Adventure Education

There are different definitions of adventure in different contexts. To be able to recognize an experience as an adventure, it is a good idea to break the adventure experience down into its elements. The characteristics of adventure in an educational context include uncertainty, personal growth, fulfilment, and self-reflection (Ewert, Alan & Sibthorp, Jim 2014. 4-9). The idea of adventure is often associated with good, challenge, effort, success, and achievement (Berry, Matthew & Hodgson, Chris 2011. 5-23). Definitions of adventure education by different authors overlap in some areas. Beames and Brown (2016) clearly stated that authenticity, agency, uncertainty, and mastery are the four key elements of an adventure education experience.

Perhaps the meaning of adventure is subjective and participants at the end can call an activity adventurous based on their level of skills and previous experiences. Consistent with this perception, a wilderness expedition tour might be an extraordinary adventure experience for participants but a typical workday for the tour guide.

Risk in adventure education is associated with uncertainty. The results of adventure experience are determined by the amount of risk participants are willing to take, along with their level of competency (Berry, Matthew & Hodgson, Chris 2011. 5-23). For example, it can be falling down, getting wet or being humiliated in front of others. Some scholars asserted that a desirable level of uncertainty helps instructors to evoke learner's interest and curiosity. Indeed, uncertainty motivates participants to learn and be creative in unknown situations. The instructor must acquire the required knowledge and skills regarding psychological aspects of uncertainty to prevent participants from passing the narrow line between safe productive challenges to risky counter-productive experiences. (Beames, Simon & Brown, Mike 2016. 95-105)

One important element of adventure education that influences the outcome is agency. Agency is the result of having autonomy in an adventure program. NOLS's study findings support the theory that developmental outcomes are related to participants' perceptions of autonomy. (Sibthorp, Paisley, Gookin & Furman 2008. 136-151.) One approach to providing students with choices regarding the level of challenge is the challenge-by-choice approach. By using this

approach, students can set their own level of challenge and make informed choices rather than being directed by an external authority (Schoel, Prouty & Radcliffe 1988. 146-149).

The idea of transfer of learning has been a foundational concept in adventure education. The central assumption is that learning that happens in one context can be transferred to another. In an educational context, learning experiences that serve learners in future problems determine the value and effectiveness of adventure education (Gass, Michael 1999. 227-234). The question here is what influences the mechanism of transfer. Three main variables affecting the transfer are stated to be learner characteristics, environment, and instructor's role (Sibthorp, Furman, Paisley, Gookin & Schumann 2011. 109-126).

Experiential Learning

Adventure and outdoor education is based on Experiential learning theory that was developed by Kolb as an extension of work that was started prior by Dewey. Dewey's progressive education theory emphasizes learning through experience (Dewey, John 1986. 241-252). Dewey's theory is in the realm of constructivist philosophy of learning, where the learner is in the center of the learning process rather than being a passive receiver of information from the instructor. The learner builds new knowledge upon previous knowledge through new experience (Kolb, David A 1984). The learner is not like free hard drive that record new information. Their reaction in dealing with new information and experience is highly related to their previous experience, knowledge, values, and schema. The starting point of learning in experiential learning is not by organized knowledge of the instructor rather it is starting from the learner's past experiences (Roberts, Grady 2003).

The experiential learning cycle is a fundamental theory in adventure education that has four elements: experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experiment (Humak University of Applied Sciences 2023). The learning process begins with concrete experience, where a person gains experience by actively participating in an event. During the reflective process, the individual attempts to consolidate and analyze what has happened and look for underlying implications. As the person moves forward to abstract conceptualization, they will try to apply the skills they learned earlier and estimate their chance of success. The final stage of the learning cycle involves applying the skills to handle new challenges.

Reflection from my point of view is the most important element in this learning process because it could bold and remark the meaning behind the experience. “Reflection on experience is considered to be the essential precursor for learning.” (Everley, Suzanne 2011. 126).

3.2 The Pedagogic Goals of Adventure and Outdoor Education

Adventure and outdoor education is a form of experiential learning that facilitates personal and interpersonal skills through outdoor activities. Pedagogically, these forms of education aim to promote participants' holistic development and growth. However, in recent years, there has been an increased effort in literature to predetermine the specific learning outcomes of some practices of adventure education. At least there are several key pedagogical goals associated with adventure and outdoor education, including:

Personal development: Many studies show the impact of adventure-based learning on personal development. There was an improvement in self-concept and self-perception among participants through adventure-based learning programs. (Baena et al. 2012; Garst et al. 2001; Gibbons et al. 2018; Larson 2007) In another experimental study, overall results show a lower rate of depression, and anxiety and a higher rate of self-esteem among schoolchildren who participated in adventure-based training programs (William, Li & Chung, Joyce & KY Ho, Eva 2013. 1478-1492). Adventure education contributes to the development of student learning outcomes such as establishing positive peer relationships and demonstrating positive emotions (Joonyoung, Lee & Zhang, Tao 2019).

Social and Interpersonal Skills: Adventure-based programs help students to improve their social relationships through an increase in self-esteem and working together (Baena, Antonio & Granero, Antonio & del Mar Ortiz, Maria 2012. 369–386). According to Sutherland and Stroot (2010), adventure-based learning trips improv trust between group members.

Physical Health: Increasing screen time and technological advancements have led to sedentary lifestyles among children. There is growing concern about declining levels of physical activity in children. A relevant study concerning exercise behavior identified the positive significant effect of adventure-based programs on enhancing exercise behavior and promoting physical activity levels in children (William, Li & Chung, Oi Kwan & Ho, Ka Yan & Chiu, Sau Ying & Lopez, Violeta 2013. 2601-2610).

Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving: A Study exploring outdoor and adventurous project work addressed a higher rate of problem-solving, collaboration, and communication among participants. And also, the study revealed a positive relation between adventurous work experiences and higher autonomy-supportive climate, autonomous motivation, perceived competence, and task mastery for students in an educational setting. (Sproule, John & Martindale, Russell & Wang, John & Allison, Peter & Nash, Christine & Gray. Shirley 2013. 315–328.)

On the whole, the purpose of adventure and outdoor education programs is to create meaningful, transformational learning experiences that have a long-lasting impact on participants' personal, social, and environmental well-being.

3.3 Early Childhood Education and Pedagogic Goals in Finland

In the Finnish education system, every child under school age has a subjective right to early childhood education and care (ECEC). Sending a child to any ECEC is the parents' decision and if they decide not to send their child to any ECEC they are entitled to home care leave and allowance until the child turns three years old. Alternatively, various options exist for early childhood education and care, including daycare centers, family daycare, as well as clubs and, playground activities (Finnish National Agency for Education 2023).

The foundation of Finland's education system lies in education, research, and culture, where literacy and continuous development are the basis for learning and knowledge. According to the National Literacy Strategy by the end of 2030, early childhood education and care (ECEC) will be one of the key sectors that promote the literacy of children and young people.

Finland has nationally standardized objectives and standards for childcare that are applied both in public and private daycare centers. In addition to these, each local daycare center can create and follow its curriculum or apply the municipality’s predetermined curriculum. Curricula may be developed locally to enhance the national curriculum but may not exclude any objectives or content stipulated in an act, a decree, or the ECEC curriculum (Ibid., 2023). For private ECEC providers to comply with the Early Childhood Education Act, they must create self-monitoring plans (City of Helsinki 2023). A self-monitoring plan is also the primary method used to control the quality of private ECEC services, including CLP. The main objectives of CLP include diverse forms of expression, thinking, and learning, taking care of oneself and managing daily life, I grow move and develop, rich world of languages, cultural competence, interaction, and

self-expression, me and our community, multiliteracy and competence in ICT, participation and involvement, explore and interacting with my environment (clp-education 2023). CLP developed seven areas of learning including yoga & mindfulness, creativity, nature, physical development, social skills, and sustainability (Ibid., 2023). The main objectives of these activities are all driven from the Finnish early-year curriculum with an emphasis on the curiosity approach. Children are supported holistically through these objectives.

3.4 Adventure and Outdoor Education in Early Childhood Educational Setting

Although the amount of literature around adventure education is increasing, it is worth mentioning that adventure education is a new field of study, and the number of studies regarding adventure education in early years education is limited. Here are some works on the bachelor's level mainly focused on early childhood, Linnea Hakanpää (2021) referred to the positive impacts of forest trips as an applicable adventure method in carrying the pedagogical goals of Pike Daycare Center. In another study, Armi Niskanen (2019) reported an increase in participation and teambuilding in kindergarten by applying the adventure education method. They all provide clear guidance for integrating adventure pedagogical exercises in early childhood education. In another study, Siiri Pirjamo (2021) explored the adventure pedagogy in preschools and stated the meaningful and motivating aspects of adventure education for students and practitioners in preschool settings.

If adventure and the outdoors is beneficial for adults why shouldn't be for children? Characteristics of a setting affects what children do in that setting (Sandseter, Ellen Beate Hansen 2011). Children interact with the environment in which they play and get inspired by features related to that environment. When children are exposed to nature and outdoor activities, they have a stronger respect for nature as adults since their emotions form before their rational thinking. Having such experiences boosts children's self-awareness, motor abilities, and fitness (Fjørtoft, Ingunn 2001. 111-117). Providing such opportunities to children may also engage them at a sensory and intellectual level with their surroundings, as demonstrated in Forestry Commission research (O'Brien, Liz & Murray, Richard 2007. 249-265). This could be seen as the start of Sustainable Development education.

Having a close connection to their environment is important for children in a world where climate change will be a real issue in their lifetime. Adventures and taking risks early in life are

beneficial for children because they expose them to diverse environments, foster curiosity, and independence, and create respect for the environment (Sandseter, Ellen Beate Hansen 2011).

Adventure Experience can be seen on the continuum: at one end is a completely guided experience for children who may have little knowledge or few skills, and at the other end are participants who are involved in planning and decision-making and responsible for their decisions. The important thing is that children need to be exposed to a wide range of activities that offer a variety of extended experiences as they develop in the realm of collaboration, problem-solving, profound thinking skills, and reflection (Solly, Kathryn 2014. 10-14).

Some characteristics of adventure and outdoor education like holistic learning make it a suitable approach to be applied in the early education curriculum. Early childhood learning environment should be holistic, and the curriculum should involve learning through play, practical experience, exploration, individual or teamwork, and discussion (Heald, Chris 1998. 5-19). Children are always learning from everything that happens around them, and it is not precisely possible to divide learning into subjects. Likewise, holistic learning features of a simple challenge course create an environment where learning goes beyond mere physical development.

3.5 Challenge Courses as a Method in Early Childhood Education

In order to advance our understanding of childhood development within the context of experiential education and challenge course theory, this chapter reviews relevant research literature that spans these contexts.

Adventure, challenging, and risky activities in order could be seen in a spectrum in which adventure is an exciting activity, and from the other end risky activity transfer danger to the audience but in between we have challenging activity that assess participant's capability (Solly, Kathryn 2014. 10-14). But from an adventure point of view, I would like to define a challenge course as an exciting activity with a controlled risk that tests participant's physical and mental ability. By this definition any obstacle course, low rope course, high rope course, or combination of them is the subject of this study.

Is an inauthentic or too much like a theme-park ride challenge course really an adventure activity? The key point is the perception of risk by children. The problem is providing a safe activity that seems to be risky. In the end in an educational environment practitioner wants to organize a predictable challenge course in which participants are protected from any foreseeable harm. To create an outdoor adventurous environment, various materials could be used and combined to create unpredictable challenges to be solved.

I believe, for learning purposes soon or later a learner needs to confront challenges to stretch his or her growth zone. As children play, they normally escalate the challenge or level of risk, suggesting a motivation beyond merely pursuing joys. It highlights the idea that learning takes place through pushing the boundaries of one's capabilities and emphasizing that pushing boundaries is fundamental to learning (Tovey, Helen 2015. 213-224). A well-designed challenge course that can be adjusted by a practitioner based on children's needs can provide such an environment that increases a child's holistic growth physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitive.

How a challenge form? From my point of view, there is an instinctive tendency in human nature for movement and growth that pushes us into accepting a challenge or creating one. If you leave a child or a group of children with similar interests free to play, after a while they get bored, and they start to build a challenging situation for themselves to change the routine. A challenge also forms when an observant practitioner provides the right equipment or environment for the children at the right time with the minimum amount of guidance. An aware observer follows the flow and recognizes the right time for intervention to change the level of difficulty in an activity to prevent mundane. In terms of learning outcomes and effectiveness, challenges that are formed based on one individual's initiative and interest are more likely to result in the extension of safe zones and new learning. The instructor can then observe what is the main interest of the individual or group and build upon that activity the right amount of challenge and pedagogical objectives. Challenges should be manageable because too much can lead to frustration and anxiety.

I believe, the concept of flow can happen when we are involved in an activity with such quality that we can't feel the time passing and a challenge can facilitate this situation. The perspective of success in a challenging situation gives us motivation to focus on the activity and experience flow. Real learning happens when someone is fully concentrated without any distraction and that is when we are in flow. The concept of flow is even more relevant in early childhood

education since children have shorter concentration time and challenging activities can keep them focused on a deep concentration.

Another aspect of challenging activities is risk. Activities that involve a reasonable amount of risk help children develop resilience and self-reliance, manage risks, and achieve health and developmental goals (Gill, Tim 2007. 15-17). Adventurous play features are about being brave to new experiences, taking some risks, and the desire to explore uncertain and unknown situations (Tovey, Helen 2015. 213-224).

Low-element challenge courses are getting more popular among formal and informal practitioners who concern with life skills issues like communication, problem-solving, and group cooperation. A successful challenge course needs cooperation, trust, and communication among participants. Their findings show a direct relation between Low-element challenge courses and experiencing group cohesion among adolescents. (Scott, Glass & Benshoff, James 2002. 268-277.) Although our target groups in daycare centers are younger children but there are studies that substantiated the positive outcomes of challenge courses for participants of all ages (Lee, Gillis & Speelman, Elizabeth 2008. 111-135).

4 METHODS & DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

4.1 Methods

There are valuable academic literature resources about adventure education and early childhood education that I used to form a knowledge base for my thesis. Comparison is also an essential part of this study. I learned and practiced experiential learning as a theory for adventure education, but CLP applies vastly play-based learning theory. For this study and to build a knowledge base I had to explain both theories and compare them based on relevant literature.

To expand my knowledge and support the outcomes I discussed with CLP's staff, we had brainstorming sessions on the topic and planned activities. I also conducted an interview to collect data and see the topic from the perspective of real workers in CLP who have experience. To evaluate the participants' experience, I also organized regular feedback sessions after each activity that provided data to find the effect of the activity on the participants. Additionally, I documented my observations to record the behaviours, interactions, and informal feedback to provide valuable real-time data. In order to have an experiential example and a better understanding of the theories described in this text, I tried to refer my observation to pertinent theories described.

4.2 The Planning Process of the Challenge Course

After identifying the need for the project that I explained in Chapter 2.2, I delved into understanding the core pedagogical goals at CLP. We discussed potential challenges, available equipment, resources, timetable, objectives, and desired outcomes. Consequently, I agreed with the manager to conduct 4 pilot activity sessions scheduled every Wednesday in November 2023. Meanwhile, I explored challenge course practices and available online literature to find suitable challenge course setups for my target group (children between 3 to 6 years old). For each activity session, I wrote a separate project plan (Appendix 2) according to the real needs of the commissioner and their educational goals. Throughout the entire design process, I was committed to a goal-oriented approach. The objectives for the activities are derived from the CLP's curriculum. I underpin a storyline to activity to make them more interactive. Stories are designed to be fun, interesting, and foster pedagogical learning outcomes of the activities.

Since one of the goals of this study was integrating adventure education in the preschool setting, I had to complete the experiential learning circle as an essential part of Adventure education theory. Therefore, as a part of activities I organized regular feedback sessions so that kids could talk and reflect on their own learning. Equally important and paying attention to pedagogical benefits of engagement in planning for participants in an activity. I also tried to include children in the planning stage by asking them to help us with the story of the upcoming activity.

Our planning process was dynamic, and I tried to change the plan based on our learning from previous experiences. Consequently, I could change the details in planning for the next activity and improve the setup according to my learning from the past.

4.3 Executing of the Challenge Course

I organized four challenge course sessions as part of the adventure club activities. To ensure safety and functionality, I tested the setup the day before each session and personally tried the activities. The location was a fenced forest area next to the daycare center, with flat ground and several trees. To prevent boredom, non-participants were given engaging tasks to prevent them from getting bored. The challenge courses consisted of slacklines, obstacle courses, or a mixture of both. These additional activities involved collecting balls, hitting bells with balls, throwing balls into baskets, and transferring water. To maintain the children's continuous engagement, I carefully wrote a coherent and engaging narrative for each activity. A variety of tools and materials were used to execute the challenge courses, including ladders, slacklines, stools, ropes, boxes, crates, wooden planks, and car tires.

I initially gave the group instructions in the form of commands and directives. Moreover, children who were navigating the obstacles received guidance and individual attention from the instructors throughout the activity. Besides providing technical guidance, we provided them with encouragement and support to persevere. For effective communication, instructions were delivered gradually to prevent children from getting confused or mixing up the instructions. Considering the children's attention span during activities, I limited each session to a maximum of 15 minutes, suitable for the average age of the participants.

4.4 Collecting Data

Interviews with teachers and instructors at CLP have been developed to collect data. I have sent structured interview questions (Appendix 1) by email to five practitioners. The answers are

interpreted, categorized, and represented based on similarities and common main ground including replicability, difficulties, safety, advantages, and other key elements of application of the challenge course in a daycare setting. On the other side, a feedback survey conducted to collect information from children, and quantitative results will enable the assessment of children's experience. I tried to keep the survey simple and precise. Questions are in Finish and English to make sure all the children understand the meaning of the questions. The questions in order are: Did you like the adventure today? Did you learn something new today? and do you want to have this adventure again in the future? Positive answers are counted and used based on the proportion of them to the sum of participants.

Observations as a method of collecting qualitative data are used. I directly observed activities taking place at CLP. Children's skills can be assessed best through direct observation since it provides information about their behaviors, interaction with others, and learning abilities (Heald, Chris 1998. 19). I took notes and recorded behaviors, interactions, and informal feedback that I received from children during and after each activity. In order to extract insight and maintain consistency, I developed a structure and set of questions for observation (Appendix 3). Observation provided valuable real-time data that have been used either in the guidebook and the result. Finally, I have applied available literature and academic work related to challenge courses and adventure education in an early childhood setting to deepen the concepts, identify a theoretical framework, support my hypothesis, and validate my findings. I have tried to relate my ideas and findings to experiential learning and free-play learning theories. In addition to that, I applied literature to explain the application of challenge courses and risky play concepts in early childhood education.

5 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Creating a Guidebook

The guidebook I developed for my thesis (Appendix 4) outlines adventure educational activities aligned with the CLP learning objectives. Each activity is conveniently organized by theme, making it easy to find and navigate. By utilizing this resource, CLP can seamlessly integrate adventure education into unique challenge course activities. This way, instructors can maintain an engaging and impactful pedagogical experience during the challenge course.

At the beginning of the guidebook, I have included a concise overview of adventure education fundamentals and its relevance to early childhood education. This preemptive inclusion ensures that readers are aware of the essential knowledge they need to understand this subject.

A primary objective of this guidebook is to assist CLP instructors in smoothly implementing, structuring, and applying challenge courses in their pedagogical framework. Moreover, it seeks to promote adventure and outdoor education holistically. Despite the fact that the guidebook highlights specific activities, there are numerous other possible activities that can be used in addition to or as a replacement for those highlighted.

5.2 Discussion

Results

After analyzing answers from practitioners at CLP in response to the interview questions, some meaningful similarities and recurring insights emerged. Here I have explained the importance of these highlights about using the challenge courses in a daycare center:

All interviewees pointed out the role of challenge courses in supporting different aspects of growth and development, including cognitive skills, interpersonal skills, personal development, and physical health. A meta-analysis revealed challenge courses are highly effective for increasing team building, self-efficacy and physical health of the participants (Lee, Gillis & Speelman, Elizabeth 2008. 111-135). Respondents directed risk-taking, problem-solving, motor skills, emotional control, cooperation, resilience, and confidence-building to challenge course learning outcomes. In addition, respondents refer to the engagement and enjoyment that

challenge course brought to children. They recognized the benefits resulting from such activities in terms of children's motivation, happiness, and willingness to participate in learning activities. They precisely stated having regular challenge courses in a daycare schedule benefits children's growth and development.

Two practitioners emphasized the role of the instructor in the success of the challenge course. They mentioned instructor should tailor the challenge course based on skill level and the needs of the group. On the other side, they expressed the difficulty of designing a challenge course that is both challenging and achievable for all children. They also stated the importance of inclusivity and the role of the instructor in facilitating and ensuring a positive and safe learning environment. They refer to adjusting the challenge course during the activity and redesigning the setup based on individual level as an important role of the instructor. Safety management regarding the rules of the instructor was among all respondent's main concerns. They emphasized the active presence of instructors to foresee potential risks closely and prevent them. The characteristics of instructors have received the most attention from researchers out of all the factors contributing to adventure education's effectiveness (Berry, Matthew 2011. 24-45). Instructor's role is also important in the transfer effect. The studies conducted for NOLS alumni revealed that the instructor's role is among the significant factors that can help the transfer effect happen (Sibthorp, Furman, Paisley, Gookin & Schumann 2011. 109-126).

To see and understand the success of challenge courses in a daycare center, seeing the program from participant's points of view is essential. The feedback collected from children after each activity session shows:

The feedback revealed that 25 out of 28 participants expressed they had found the activities fun and liked the activities. Furthermore, 21 out of 28 children said they learned new things during the activities, highlighting the educational value of an adventure-based program. In addition, 22 of 28 participants expressed an eagerness to engage in similar adventure activities in the future, indicating a keen interest in continuing participation in such activities.

Observation

Observation also helped me to identify complex behaviors and interactions during the program and relate them to the objectives of the study. It was clear that the program created a safe, engaging, and positive learning environment. I observed that the program facilitates improving

personal and interpersonal skills including teamwork, compaction, problem-solving, confidence, communication, and participation. Consistent with this perception, a study about using challenge courses in pre-kindergarten conducted by Jeffrey Wade (2019), concluded that children demonstrated a greater level of knowledge and details about other children, as well as cooperative abilities within a team. The program also was successful in the sense of fostering focus, environmental awareness, and achievement.

I witnessed adventure programs and experiential learning experiences develop children's physical skills including motor skills, balance, and resilience. In addition, the observations demonstrated the importance of interactive storytelling, well-designed setups, and feedback sessions for keeping students engaged and motivated.

Based on my observation it is crucial to find an optimum challenging point of activity to ensure that children do not get bored or frustrated. Equally important, having extra support strategies to help children accomplish the task and enhance safety is essential.

Children exhibited positive group dynamics including peer support and low conflict. I was satisfied with the meaningful adventure experience that allowed the children to exercise challenge, develop new skills, and achieve a sense of accomplishment. More important participants expressed a keen desire to participate in the planning process and for upcoming adventures in the future.

6 CONCLUSION

In my thesis, I explored challenge courses as an adventure educational method in early childhood settings. In my thesis, I developed and implemented 4 pilot challenge courses for children aged 3 to 6, as well as created an activity guide for adventure education at the CLP daycare center. During my project, I aimed to promote both adventure and outdoor education in early childhood settings.

The results from all four feedback sessions revealed a positive attitude toward adventure activities. They expressed they had fun experiences during activities. A significant number of children reported that they learned something new from activities. This can be seen as the potential of a challenge course as a method of adventure education in an early childhood setting not only for the engaging aspect but also for the learning opportunities that it provides. According to practitioners' interviews, activities help kids improve their thinking, increase their confidence, and work better together. In addition, they stressed that the person leading the activity is crucial to making it the right one for every child. As a whole, the feedback from the children and respondents to interviews indicates that adventure activities are extremely effective in creating a learning environment that is engaging and immersive for children.

From observations, it is evident that finding the optimum challenge point for children is essential for preventing boredom and frustration. It was recognized that additional support strategies were essential for children to accomplish tasks and to remain safe. It was evident in my observation that children's emotional well-being and essential life skills were both facilitated by the program in an early education setting, which provides substantial evidence of its effectiveness.

In adventure education, an instructor’s role is stronger than a free play-based activity. I believe this is the challenging part of integrating a guided activity into an early childhood environment in which children learn by playing. This isn’t a limitation for this study but developing an instructing method or creating a framework that facilitates the guided activity in an early childhood setting could be a subject for future studies and benefits anyone who wants to apply adventure education in an early childhood environment.

Overall, the adventure activities appear to be beneficial to both teachers and children alike. As a result, daycare is more enjoyable for children, and they are able to grow in a variety of ways.

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APPENDICES

6.1 Appendix 1 – Interview questions

1. What growth and development objectives of the children do challenge course support and how?
2. Is there a repetitive structure in the execution of the challenge course or are they individually designed?
3. Would you like to have challenge courses as a regular activity in your timetable?
4. What safety measures are taken into account in challenge courses?
5. How challenging is organizing a challenge course for the instructor?
6. Anything else you would like to comment on or add?

6.2 Appendix 2 – Sample of project plan

Plan for CLP Challenge course 27th September 2023

Saving the Lake

For the fourth activity, I installed a slackline on top and used multiple slings (or rope or other material) that hung from the slackline. In the bottom, I have a rope that participants can step on to pass through the course. This activity will show how much progress participants had in crossing the slack line. It needs more balance and fine motor skills. The top slack line is tight enough that a person can swing with the help of a hanger.

Story:
Adventurers should help the lake's dragon to save the lake. The lake is getting dry, and adventurers need to bring water and other lake creatures to this lake. Teamwork and environmental awareness are significant goals in this activity. A person carries a small creature and takes it to the new lake from the shortcut(slackline). The rest of the group will go into the area and find water to take to the new lake with different objects.

Group: 14 participants aged 3-6

Time: Wednesday 7.9.2023, 9-10 am

Place: Enclosed fenced forest next to CLP

Goals:

Participation

Teamwork

Environmental awareness

Developing physical and motoric skills

Improves focus and confidence

Compassion or caring nature

Participation

Having fun

Gear: first aid kit, Cargo strap, Shackle, Tow strap, Top rope, Tightener, hanger,

Clothing: Clothing suitable for the weather

Weather: Cloudy around 15 degrees

Teaching style: Command Style-A reproducing a precise predicted response. The instructor is the only decision-maker to keep safety at a high level.

Feedback: Feedback survey questions from participants:

1. DID YOU LIKE THE TODAY ADVENTURE?

2. DID YOU LEARN SOMETHING NEW FROM TODAY ADVENTURE?

3. WOULD YOU LIKE TO DO SUCH AN ADVENTURE AGAIN?

Other facts that promote safety:

• Checking the ground for any potentially dangerous objects

• Being aware that cognitive processes in participants are different

• Emphasize clear and precise instructions

• Being patient

• Asking for help from the participant's instructor at CLP to transfer the instructions if needed

• All activities are being rehearsed prior to the event

• Organizers are familiar with the surroundings as well as the equipment being used in the activities

• Obstacles are soft plastic that can bend to reduce the risk of getting hurt in case of falling over

6.3 Appendix 3 – Sample of observation

CHALLENGE COURSE OBSERVATIONS 27.9.

ACTIVITY:

Saving the Lake

For the fourth activity, I installed a slackline on top and used multiple slings (or rope or other material) that hung from the slackline. In the bottom, I have a rope that participants can step on to pass through the course. This activity will show how much progress participants had in crossing the slack line. It needs more balance and fine motor skills. The top slack line is tight enough that a person can swing with the help of a hanger.

Story:

Adventurers should help the lake's dragon to save the lake. The lake is getting dry, and adventurers need to bring water and other lake creatures to this lake. Teamwork and environmental awareness are significant goals in this activity. A person carries a small creature and takes it to the new lake from the shortcut(slackline). The rest of the group will go into the area and find water to take to the new lake with different objects.

What are the goals for the activity?

- Teamwork
- Environmental awareness
- Developing physical and motoric skills
- Improves focus and confidence
- Compassion or caring nature
- Problem-solving
- Participation
- Having fun
- Planning the activity

Top Rope and obstacle

pictures

Number of children: 13

Number of instructors: 3

Duration: Approximately 60 minutes

Start time: 9:15

End time: 10:15

Notes:

First, all the children were instructed to go to the bathroom and get dressed. We divided the children into two groups and each group had 15 minutes' time for the activity. The first group was 7 participants and the second group was 7 participants.

What happens at the destination?

- We made a circle and sat. I explained the story. And I showed them the lakes and we started all at the lake then I chose a person to pass the slackline (Sequential instruction). If I told them first about the slackline, they all wanted to go on the slackline, so we started at a second activity that engaged 6 participants and then I had one to do the course. I demonstrated to them how to pass through the course. The course was difficult for them, I had to help them all the way through. They had to carry a small plastic fish to the lake. The rest of the group was carrying water to the dry lake(pan). At the end, we made a circle, and I gave them the badges. And we went back in the yard. We sat around the table to glue the badges on the map. We had reflection and feedback in the afternoon around 3pm. We didn't have any conflict. All did the activity except one who tried but didn't want to continue after a couple of unsuccessful tries. It was easier for the big children, but I had to help the little ones at some point.

How are the children instructed?

- The instructors gave verbal guidance on the area where the children are allowed to be and where they should not go. Additionally, the instructor demonstrated passing through the line and how to hold the hangers (Sheet). And I also demonstrated how to carry the water to the new lake by scoop.

What kind of instructing styles are used?

- In the beginning, the instructors give instructions to the entire group more in the form of commands and what the children should/should not do. During the play, the instructors give guidance and communicate with the children more on an individual level. Especially with the person on the slack line instructor provides support and courage for continuation. And gave technical guidance.

How do the children react?

- The slackline activity was really challenging for them, and some couldn't do it by themselves, but it was good in a way that they confronted their limitations and faced with the reality of some of the activity that they might have in their life. To improve their motor skills and push their binderies they had to deal with their boundaries first. On the other hand, the other activity was fun and joyful because it was a progressive activity. A child could see how their small amount of water was fulfilling the pan and that this gradual advancement gave them a feel of accomplishment and motivation to continue. From another point of view, they were doing all the same thing, and they could see it as teamwork and how others are putting effort into accomplishing the same task and reaching the same goals. The story behind the activity made it meaningful for them. It was a real-world authentic problem that should be solved. It awakes their sensation toward nature and how they can affect the natural elements(water) and how their effort can save the environment and give a chance to other creatures to live. They are all actively engaged in the activity. They were all in the flow of activity and we didn't have any distractions. The level of concentration was satisfying as well.

We tried to engage them in the process of planning for the next activity and the result was significant. Most of them had an idea for the theme of the next activity. This might be because they saw we were seeing them, and we used their opinion in the previous activity. We asked them what animal they wanted to have on the next adventure day: Tiger, lion, party, butterfly, skeleton, worm, jumping rope, and Zebra were all answers.

As happened in previous activities they were excited to get their new badges and I helped them to glue the new badges to their maps. In the way back they were happily jumping and showing their badge to other practitioners. They were saying again "Bye bye dragon",and "bye bye".

What was the best part?

- The story of the activity was meaningful and evoked children to engage. Dry lake and the progressive activity of filling it with water. This is something that I would like to point out. seem when they could see the result of their work. It gave them a sense of completion and happiness and eagerness to continue.

What worked well?

- The teamwork was remarkable, and participants cooperated actively to fulfill the tasks. Participants didn't have any conflict and the atmosphere was positive. They support their teammates on the slackline.

- Participation in the planning for the next activity was high and most of the participants had an idea for the next activity's animal theme.

What did not work so well?

-The level of difficulty was high, and some participants couldn't finish the course by themselves. And there was one participant who left the activity in the middle because of difficulty.

What could be improved?

-I have used dynamic rope for the bottom line. Participants had to walk on the bottom line and the dynamic rope added an additional movement that was supposed to not. Maybe for this age group having either a static line or even a tight slack line at the bottom is essential.

Feedback session:

We planned the feedback session and reflection session in the afternoon and there were in total of 10 participants.

We made a circle, and the manager helped me with the translation and feedback.

All 9 participants in the activity also participated in the feedback.

We asked them if they liked adventure or not?

9 out of 10 raised their hand.

-"Oli kiva"

-"I liked"

-“Minä like it”

Today what kind of adventure club did you have?

-“Dragon”

What did the dragon need help with?

-“The water”

Who did we have to save?

-“Kala”

Did you learn something new from today’s adventure?

9 out of 10 raised their hand.

-“Hypimään” (To jump)

-” minä hypi narusta” (I jumped rope)

-”minä hypi lampala” (I jumped like a sheep)

-”Minä hyppä myos”

-“Kävelee naru ylhäällä”

Do you want to do this adventure again?

9 out of 10 raised their hand.

-“Minä Haluan.”

-“Minä kin Haluan”

6.4 Appendix 4 – Adventure Educational activities guidebook

CLP ADVENTURE EDUCATION GUIDEBOOK

Mojtaba Kazemi

This guidebook is designed to be a framework for applying challenge courses as a method of adventure education in the Creative Learning Playschool (CLP) or any other daycare center. It provides concrete examples of different challenge courses that are drawn to foster the growth and development of children. A challenge course is defined as an exciting physical or mental activity that involves a controlled risk. Challenge courses are presented in this guidebook as a form of adventure education with technical information regarding equipment and setups. The activities start from easy tracks and then the level of difficulty progresses with new activities. To make children more engaged in the activities, we organize the activities as adventure club and create a map that children follow the process of the activities. After each activity, we also give them a badge that they can glue on their maps. Finally, we give them a certificate for the accomplishment of the period and becoming adventurers.

What is Adventure Education:

Adventure education is a goal-oriented education method that applies adventurous activities to foster the growth and development of individuals. However, there are always holistic learning outcomes underlying each activity including teamwork, communication, decision making, problem-solving, and resilience. The main characteristics of adventurous experience are challenge, agency, uncertainty, and mastery which usually take place the outdoors. Adventure education relies on experiential learning theory. Experiential learning theory has four stages: experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experiment which creates a new experience. Therefore, experiential learning is a continuous learning circle. Adventure education can be tailored for different target groups including children. Consequently, practitioners in daycare settings can use adventure education as an effective method of guiding children toward reaching their developmental milestones.

Instructors' role

Adventure education is a type of guided activity, therefore, practitioner's work is important to facilitate learning experiences for children. Practitioners need to be present and guide children

toward predetermined goals of the activity. The challenges course should also be safe and tailored according to each individual's skill level. Practitioners can adjust the activity and provide extra support considering different children's capabilities. In the reflection and conceptualization stages of the experimental learning process, practitioners assist children in understanding their experience and figuring out what they have learned. After that, they provide a new experience where kids can use and try out what they've learned.

Adventure club challenge courses and their pedagogical goals

1. Crossing the river:

Crossing the slack line by using the top rope. We tell a story about the crocodile in the river. (there was a crocodile picture under the slackline). The children already had an introduction in the morning circle, and they received a map and a short story about the first activity. Simultaneously other kids who are not on the slack line collect balls from the area and put them into a crocodile bucket to feed it and distract it from the person that is on the line. At the end, we will have reflection time and they will receive a badge that can be glued on their map. The badge is a small picture of a crocodile.

The activity can be mixed with another activity like a puzzle. When a participant gets to the other side of the line, they can collect a puzzle or object that is going to form a shape or pictures with the rest of the participant's objects.

The pedagogical goals of the activities include thinking and learning, taking care of oneself and others, I grow move and develop, rich word of language, interaction and self-expression, participation, and involvement, and exploring and interacting with my environment. At first activity, we always try to get to know each other and build a safe group dynamic.

Gear: first aid kit, Cargo strap, Shackle, Tow strap, Top rope, Tightener
Setup detail: Low rope 30 cm in height, Distance between threes 9 meters, top rope height 150cm.

2. Ruined castle

For the second activity, I have added some obstacles to the slackline to make it more complex and challenging. Participants need to walk on the slackline and step over some obstacles on the way.

Story:

In continuation of our story, adventurers arrive at a ruined castle that is home of a hungry gorilla who likes to eat. When a person is on the line the rest of the group should start to collect fruit for the hungry gorilla and throw it into the gorilla's basket that is attached to the tree. If the basket is empty gorilla feels hungry and stands up to look for food and may step over the line and break the line, because it is a heavy fat gorilla. Indeed, the participants help their friends on the slackline by feeding the gorilla.

The pedagogical goals of the activities include thinking and learning, taking care of oneself and others, I grow move and develop, rich word of language, interaction and self-expression, participation, & involvement, and explore & interacting with my environment. Improving focus, confidence and compassion or caring for others are highlighted in this activity.

Gear: first aid kit, Cargo strap, Shackle, Tow strap, Top rope, Tightener, plastic circle, basket, colorful ball.
Setup details: Low rope 30 cm height, Distance between threes 9 meters, top rope height 150cm, obstacles height between 35cm to 50 cm with logical distance, and bucket height 160 cm.

3. Ruined castle

For the third activity, I installed a slackline on top and used multiple obstacles at the bottom that child needed to pass through. I used a hanger (sling) that a person can hang when the obstacle is wobbling under the feet. It needs more balance and fine motor skills. The top slack line is ascending as the height of obstacles arises.

Story:

In continuation of our story, adventurers go into a mountain that is home of dinosaurs. Adventures on their way face an angry mother T-rex who is mad because a Pterosaur (flying dinosaur) taken her eggs and brought them to its nest. Our fellow needs to bring back her eggs to be able to pass the mountain but they need to first climb up to Pterosaur nest. After taking eggs the person should go to Trex nest and put the eggs by a long stick into the cave. The rest of the group help their friend; they need to hit the ring with the balls to make noise and distract the Pterosaur (flying dinosaur).

Pedagogical Goals of the activities include thinking and learning, taking care of oneself and others, I grow move and develop, rich word of language, interaction and self-expression, participation, & involvement, and explore & interacting with my environment.

4. Saving the Lake

For the fourth activity, I installed a slackline on top and used multiple slings (rope or other material) that hung from the slackline. In the bottom, I have a rope that participants can step on to pass through the course. This activity will show how much progress participants had in crossing the slack line. It needs more balance and fine motor skills. The top slack line is tight enough that a person can swing with the help of a hanger.

Story:

Adventurers should help the lake's dragon to save the lake. The lake is getting dry, and adventurers need to bring water and other lake creatures to this lake. A person carries a small creature and takes it to the new lake from the shortcut(slackline). The rest of the group will go into the area and find water to take to the new lake with different objects.

Pedagogical Goals of the activities include thinking and learning, taking care of oneself and others, I grow move and develop, rich word of language, interaction and self-expression, participation, & involvement, and explore & interacting with my environment. Teamwork and environmental awareness are significant goals in this activity.