Comparison of Physical activity Behavior Affordances of Natural and Manufactured Elements in preschool's Outdoor Playground Settings

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Abstract

Interacting with natural environments during childhood can impact children’s mental and physical well being. Comprehending children’s environmental orientation is a significant topic as their chance for contact with nature is decreasing. In this research, natural environments are considered as spaces that incorporate a variety of trees and vegetation that are free of human control, or part of human’s manipulation (such as in zoo, park, gardens, etc.). However, urbanized conditions and lifestyles have limited children’s daily contact opportunities with natural environments. This disconnection with nature is defined as “natural deficit disorder” (Louv, 2005), which can impact children’s knowledge, environmental orientation and affinity towards nature. While there is limited research on the outcomes of this disorder, this research hypothesized that the perceived diminished access to natural outdoor spaces in Tehran, Iran, may impact children’s preference and sense of care towards nature, and thus an indication of a natural deficit disorder. Typical schoolyards in Tehran are lacking trees or vegetation, and mostly covered with asphalt, while few children have daily access to proximity parks. This research aims to accentuate the significance of schoolyards as daily accessed outdoor space in which children can experience and learn about nature. Nature perceived in school playground was based on the categories previously used in “Percieved Nature questionnaire” for accessing children’s perception of nearby nature. The questions were categorized into “Eco- Affinity”, and “Eco – Awareness” groups based on Larson’s et al. (2011) definitions. Eco affinity items were related to attention and curiosity towards nature and interest in participating in pro environmental behavior. Eco awareness displays the relationship between children’s awareness, behaviors and knowledge The research was conducted among 257, 10 to 11 children within eight primary schools of Tehran. The yards were diversely different in terms of number of trees and covered vegetation. Data was collected through open and close ended questionnaire and drawings and analyzed through chi square. The results indicated a positive correlation among the amount of perceived access to natural spaces and children’s sense of affinity and awareness towards nature. While most children perceived the lack of natural spaces within schoolyards, children in more dense urban areas had fewer access opportunities and preferred their yard to be greener. The results of this study accentuate the importance of design policies that integrate and combine natural features and settings within schoolyards in order to provide daily contact opportunities for children residing in urbanized condition.

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