

# Outdoor teaching on the school grounds and in the bush

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## Background

Research on outdoor teaching and learning mainly concerns learning in natural or cultural settings away from school, whereas research on outdoor teaching and learning on the school grounds is not as common (Thorburn & Allison, 2010). This presentation will report on results from a PhD project exploring longitudinal school-based learning in a Swedish junior high school. The project also includes a study on outdoor environmental education in Australia. In the literature on out-of-classroom teaching and learning, the significance of the place is often highlighted (Dahlgren & Szczepanski, 1998). In outdoor education as well as in the place-based education approach (Gruenewald, 2003) learning in the community and society as well as in the natural environment surrounding school is considered valuable. The rationale is that the study of places can help increase student participation, engagement and understanding through multidisciplinary and experiential learning. Place attachment and connectedness are other possible outcomes of outdoor teaching and learning. Connectedness to nature is a dimension considered important by many scholars as research suggest that children's experience of nature is decreasing in Western urban societies and schools thus play a key role in enabling children experiencing nature. The school grounds as a place for learning has received some attention (Dyment, 2005) but mainly in primary school. Studies reporting on barriers to outdoor teaching have found that time and cost for travel, inflexible curriculum, disciplinary issues and teachers' lack of confidence are some of the barriers limiting the amount of outdoor teaching (Bentsen et al., 2010).

## Purpose of the research

Regular school-based outdoor teaching, particularly in a high school context is not frequently researched. Thus, the aim with this research was to explore outcomes of regular school-based outdoor teaching in a Swedish junior high school. Another aim was to explore environmental education center officers' and high school teachers' observations and perceptions of children's experience of the natural world in Sydney, Australia.

## The empirical context

The data material consist of semi-structured interviews with twelve Swedish junior high school teachers, thirteen Australian environmental education center (EEC) officers and eight Australian high school teachers. The Swedish teachers participated in an outdoor teaching project where all teachers at a junior high school were involved. They participated in a professional development course in Outdoor education and during the intervention phase of approximately ten months (a Swedish school year) the students were supposed to receive about three to four lessons a week outdoors on a regular basis. The Swedish teachers were in-

terviewed before and after the intervention. The Australian EECs and schools were situated in different geographical and socioeconomic areas of the Greater Sydney region. An inductive thematic analysis, which seeks to find themes or patterns in qualitative data (Boyatzis, 1998) was used to analyze the data. Another set of data were self-reported loggers from two teams of teachers responsible for eleven classes (Year 7: n=4, Year 8: n=4, Year 9: n=3). The loggers comprised data of number of outdoor lessons, and in what subject, which were taught outdoors during the project year.

## Results and analysis

Before the one-year outdoor teaching project, teachers emphasized the significance of the place and discussed place-based learning in the municipality and nearby nature resulting in holistic and authentic learning as a major potential of outdoor education, but these expectations were difficult to realize. Instead, results from the Swedish high school project revealed that particularly social and physical space contributed significantly to teachers' experienced potentials of outdoor learning. It was mainly the school grounds that were used as a learning environment. Contrary to initial beliefs, the school grounds worked well as a place for learning for particularly language and mathematics teaching. However, the desired amount of three to four lessons a week and class was not realized which indicates that changing teaching method is difficult for a majority of teachers. At the end of the project, approximately 4.5 % of the lessons were taught outdoors which equals one lesson a week. There were a rather large variation between teachers and classes and only a few of the teachers taught outdoors on a regular basis. Contrary to initial perceptions of outdoor education as particularly suitable for science teachers and difficult to utilize for language teachers, only 0.6 % of science lessons were taught outdoors whereas 4.5 % of German lessons were taught outdoors. Increased on task communication and participation were two frequently reported potentials of outdoor teaching, particularly in language learning.

Outdoor teaching was considered time demanding in preparation and performance. Other barriers were inflexible schedule and crowded syllabuses. Initial expectations on increased teacher collaboration and multidisciplinary teaching were difficult to realize. The study confirms previous research revealing positive effects on social and emotional outcomes. The contributions from this study are that positive effects on social and emotional dimensions of learning also apply to a high school context and for learning on the school grounds. The context in the majority of previous studies is primary school and natural environments. Disciplinary problems was mainly perceived as a barrier before the project but many teachers reported on a rather long implementation period, up to three month before the students adjusted to the new learning environment. During

that period disciplinary issues were a concern.

If space was significant in the Swedish parts of the study, the place for learning was in focus in the Australian study. According to interviewees, the results reveal a picture of Sydney children as having limited experience of nature. The teachers' observations were that the children were interested and engaged but often were uncomfortable and even afraid in nature. Their limited experience further resulted in a de-contextualized and vicarious understanding of Australian ecology, flora and fauna.

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