

# The importance of place for learning and teaching – an outdoor educational perspective

Anders Szczepanski, Sweden, anders.szczepanski@liu.se

## Introduction

### Theoretical framework

Outdoor education is an environment-focused educational approach characterized by action-centred and thematic learning processes frequently involving outdoor activities (Dahlgren & Szczepanski, 1998). It aims to foster learning through the interactions between emotions, actions and thoughts, based on practical observation in authentic situations (Dahlgren & Szczepanski, 2004). This perspective on knowledge and learning, where a diverse learning environment is emphasized, contrasts with the traditional educational system, which is based on theoretical knowledge taught in a classroom setting and which limits the interactions between emotions, actions and thoughts. Outdoor education has the potential to become an integrative, complementary education form in a pragmatic and progressive pedagogy tradition, which can offer students and teachers opportunities to learn on the basis of observations and experiences in authentic situations. Moreover, a more movement-intensive form of learning is created in outdoor education (Grahn, Mårtensson, Lindblad, Nilsson, & Ekman, 1997).

### Aim of the study and research question

The aim of this phenomenographic study is to describe the variation in respondents' experiences of outdoor teaching space-related practice, i.e. *what perceptions teachers have about teaching and learning outdoors*. This study focuses on the following two issues: (a) understanding which perceptions teachers consider to be significant for learning and teaching in an outdoor educational context; and (b) can these significant perceptions be observed and distinguished among respondents in the the study group?

## Methods

### Context of the study and data collection

The study comprises a total of 19 respondents (denoted by numbers 1-19). Thirteen work as teachers, five as principals and one as a member of the local education authority all have teaching qualifications. All types of schools are represented: preschool, primary school (preschool, primary and middle school) and high school. To illustrate various physical learning environments, especially outdoors, an interview guide was constructed with "open questions" and photographs: school environment, urban areas ('grey'), aquatic ('blue'), industrial environments ('grey'), and forest habitats ('green') during the interview. The purpose is to highlight the didactics – the issue related to the questions in the interview guide. The following interview questions pro-

vided the conceptual framework: *What is outdoor education for you, what is knowledge for you, how do you teach about environmental issues and why do you teach, as you do*. Data formation rests on a "convenience sample", where principals could choose the respondents (Bryman, 2002). After the completion of 19 interviews "theoretical saturation" was reached (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

### Data analysis

The transcribed interview responses were used as input for the analysis. The analysis was conducted in five stages with nine categories identified and systematized:

First, different keywords in the major text sections were indicated in the margin in order to obtain an overall impression. Second, statements were distinguished and sorted into different categories based on description of possible patterns – similarities or differences, to identify the different views. Third, a clearer picture of the text's content (core beliefs) crystallized after a further reading of the interviews. Fourth, a labelling (naming) and description of what is peculiar to each category was conducted. Fifth, identification and systematization of the teachers' perceptions were presented in a category system (cf. Uljens, 1998).

Marton and Booth (2000, p. 163) sets out three criteria for properties that description should include as categories, namely, that they say something clear about a particular way of conceiving the study phenomena, that they are logically related to each other, and they are limited in number, allowing the critical variation to be narrowed down. These three criteria have guided the analysis. To ensure accuracy in the categorization of the interview material, consultations and negotiations with the co-examiner have taken place in accordance with what is called "Negotiated Consensus" (see Beerman et al. 1997) in order to increase the validity of the categorization.

## Results

The analysis of the results in the form of description categories with illustrative quotations is presented below. Based on the phenomenographic analysis, respondents' perceptions are described through nine main categories, which together form the "room of the outcome" in the study.

### *Learning and teaching outdoors offers opportunities to:*

- A. discover environments for learning other than the classroom,
- B. use larger open spaces,
- C. make use of spatial diversity,
- D. link theory and practice,
- E. support interactions between different learning environments;

- F. apply physical, sensual learning,
- G. create varying meetings with a lot of outdoor phenomena,
- H. use time more freely,
- I. create an outdoor platform for environmental work.

### Conclusions and implications for teaching

The analysis is based on some opinions that are more or less developed than others. The categories represent ideas whose meanings are qualitatively distinct from each other (Uljens, 1989 and Alexandersson, 1994). If outdoor education as a didactic tool is to have a greater impact in the Swedish education system we need more research into and knowledge about outdoor education theory and practice, the relationship to and importance of interactions between different places of learning: what, where, when, how and why teach outdoors? And in what ways may the place and the question “where” be a factor in explaining the basis for the variation in learning results, both indoors and outdoors?

It may be that students and teachers in XX municipality are fortunate with respect to a rich variety of available learning environments. Some uncertainty appears, however, in this study, both in terms of subject and didactic knowledge in outdoor education. It is therefore important in all education of our children and young people to argue for an increased awareness of place and space sense (sense of place) (cf. Grunewald and Smith, 2008). It is learning “about, and in” landscape (urban and rural) and to take the green, blue and grey learning environments in possession (Szczepanski, 2011). The study shows that the “didactic gap” must be filled with knowledge of the various places relevant to learning and teaching and the place of learning; this question must be put in the foreground in relation to both the subjects and topics of current and future teacher training.