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The Social Construction of Place Meaning: Exploring Multiple Meanings of Place as an Outdoor Teaching and Learning Environment

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Abstract

This investigation explores the meanings primary school teachers who apply outdoor learning and teaching methods associate with the places that encompass their teaching practices. A symbolic interactionist framework coupled with a social constructionist orientation was employed to analyze data collected from semi-structured interviews and photo elicitation techniques. The findings illustrated that meaning ascribed to place derived from the interactional processes between the study's respondents and the physical setting within which educational interventions occurred. The nature of these interactions also appeared to be highly influenced by the social worlds in which informants participated and their featured social processes. The results elucidated that the attribution of meaning to learning landscapes was impacted by school administrative factors, institutionalized school practices, the respondents' university education and the perspectives they held about outdoor teaching and learning. Findings from this enquiry make progress towards gaining an insight into the social construction of meanings ascribed to outdoor learning environments. Additionally, they contribute to a theoretical discussion regarding the impact of social contexts encompassing teaching and learning interventions on the educational potential of outdoor places.

Nyckelord
Keywords
Place Meaning, Place, Outdoor Learning and Teaching, Symbolic Interactionism, Social Constructionism, Grounded Theory

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Research Aim

1.1 Background of the study

Learning in outdoor spaces is currently gaining ground in the field of educational literature. While a variety of definitions has been formulated to describe outdoor learning and teaching, the importance of location for education has been broadly acknowledged by numerous scholars (e.g. Dahlgren & Szczepanski, 1998; Ernst & Tornabene, 2011; Gruenewald, 2003 a, b; Sobel, 2004; Harrison, 2010). The authors above render place as a key concept of learning outside the classroom which exerts significant influence on the nature of educational conduct. Nevertheless, most educational researchers have only studied place to a limited degree, mainly in the context of Environmental Education where focus has mainly been on conceptualizations such as ‘sense of place’ and ‘place attachment’ (e.g. Kurdyavtsev et al. 2012a; Raymond et al. 2010, Sanger, 1997; Semken & Freeman 2008; Wattchow, 2008). Theoretical explanations of the meaning that teachers attribute to learning landscapes, and investigations of the processes that underlie the creation of such meanings are rarely encountered in the existing literature. Therefore, there is an emphasized necessity for enquiry which focuses on exploring the social construction of meanings ascribed to outdoor learning environments in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the role of place within the context of educational conduct.

1.2 Problem formulation

Research on the relationship between people and landscape has narrowly focused on the conceptualization of human-place bonding and the “exclusive examination of the phenomena within natural resource contexts” (Kyle & Chick, 2007:213). In the context of education, such approaches fail to consider the social origin of interactive processes that determine the nature of the relationship between place and learning, disregarding the conceptualization of place within educational studies.

With regard to these limitations, this thesis aims to explore the meanings that teachers ascribe to outdoor learning environments. Additionally, it seeks to provide a theoretical explanation of the processes that underlie the social construction of the

above meanings and raise a theoretical discussion regarding the implications of the social nature of outdoor learning landscapes for their educational potential. In order to address these issues, an attempt is made to provide an answer to the following intellectually challenging question: “how do the social worlds of Swedish primary school teachers who practice outdoor learning and teaching influence the meanings they associate with place?” This overarching aim of the study can be broken down into the following research questions:

1. What meanings do Swedish teachers associate with place as an outdoor learning and teaching environment?
2. How do teachers’ social worlds influence the construction of place meanings?

The purpose of this study is to outline an analytical framework for understanding the ascription of meaning to outdoor learning environments by examining the relationship between theoretical conceptualizations of place and teachers' personal constructions of place meanings, stemming from a Social Science perspective. It is thus important that enquiry in this direction takes into account the social worlds within which outdoor learning and teaching interventions take place. In the context of this study, social worlds are considered as ‘universes of discourse’ that comprise communication, symbolization, activities, organizations and memberships (Strauss, 1978). The understanding of social worlds requires their study with regard to their particular structural processes and the role of participants who “may bring active perceptions and judgments” (Strauss, 1978:126) to the events within them but who are also constrained by their institutional canons.

In this sense, a symbolic interactionist theoretical framework is introduced in order to study the emergence of meanings, attributed to place by teachers through interactional processes. The social world perspective leads this enquiry to focus on the impact that social processes, institutions and institutionalized actions, as well as social actors as individuals exert on the construction of such meanings of place. This is achieved by adopting a social constructionist orientation, in order to explore the influence that the social worlds of the study’s respondents have on the interactional processes through which they derive place meanings.

Significance of the study

If the volume of literature published in major journals is accepted as an indicator of knowledge in a field of study, it is essential that a deeper understanding of place in education is sought. Drawing on the limited consideration of outdoor learning interventions in the context of Social Science, this thesis intends to contribute to the ongoing literature in the field of Outdoor Education. Studying place from the perspective of Sociology allows us to transcend narrow conventional conceptualizations of human-environment interrelation in the context of education. Seeking deeper awareness of the influence that teachers' social words exert on the construction of meanings ascribed to learning landscapes can potentially maximize the chances for learning outcomes within them. Possible constraints that prevent teachers from applying outdoor learning and teaching methods can be addressed and attention can be focused on factors that encourage them to adopt such practices. Furthermore, the educational potential of a variety of diverse places can be unlocked by revealing their less obvious features, which can be integrated into the learning process. Deeper reflection on the social nature of outdoor spaces creates numerous opportunities for learning through addressing issues such as community development, environmental awareness, racial and sexual equality etc. as a significant number of scholars has argued (e.g. Gruenewald, 2003a, b; Hart, 1997; Haymes, 1995; Massey, 1994; Barnfield & Humberstone, 2008). Taking the previous assertions into account, approaching place from this perspective emphasizes the 'why' and 'where' questions of Outdoor Education's didactic identity (Dahlgren & Szczepanski, 1998; Szczepanski et al. 2006).

The overall contribution of this thesis can be summarized as follows: it (a) discusses the meanings that teachers attribute to place as the location of learning; it (b) explores the social processes that influence meaning attribution to learning landscapes, it (c) provides a theoretical explanation of the social construction of place meaning, and (d) it raises a theoretical discussion regarding the implications of the social constructionist approach for the educational potential of outdoor learning landscapes.

1.4 Structure of the study

The thesis consists of five chapters. The first chapter comprises the background of the study, the research aim and research question as well as the study's overall significance. The second chapter conducts a literature review. This chapter, starting from a presentation of Outdoor Education's theoretical background and the position that place holds within it, constructs a conceptual framework for understanding the concept of place. Additionally, it discusses a number of scholarly approaches to place in the context of education with regard to the proposed theoretical conceptualizations. The third chapter focuses on the ontological and epistemological grounding of the thesis and discusses the methodological tools that are implemented for data collection and analysis. In addition, it discusses the properties of the study's sample, the criteria and procedures of participant selection and the ethical considerations that were accounted for during the overall process. The fourth chapter attends to data analysis and findings. A detailed explanation of the analysis strategy is provided by outlining the different stages of the process and the categorization of the findings, presented and supported by verbatim quotes. Finally, the fifth chapter conducts a discussion of the results, addresses the limitations of the study, and makes suggestions for further enquiry.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

While the previous chapter clarified the aim and background of the thesis and underlined its contribution, this chapter discusses the literature on which the study is theoretically grounded. Initially, Outdoor Education theory will be discussed in terms of its features in order to address the significance of place to outdoor learning and teaching practices. As the review progresses, it will elaborate a conceptual framework for understanding the concept, according to which a number of approaches to place in the context of education will be later on considered.

2.2 Outdoor Education theory

Outdoor education has been defined in a variety of ways. This variety of conceptualizations reflects the influence of cultural diversity on educational practices as well as the individuality of learning. The common ground of this wide array of conceptions of outdoor education is that all participants in the learning interventions aim to attain educational outcomes beyond the classroom. This assertion does not suggest that knowledge should only be pursued outdoors. Instead, it argues that class-based learning and Outdoor Education should be combined (Higgins & Nicol, 2002:2).

According to the European Institute of Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning, Outdoor Education is considered to include “outdoor activities”, “environmental education” and “personal and social development”. In this sense, educators should be capable of touching upon all three areas individually but also jointly. What this approach specifically emphasizes is the importance of achieving professional status through appropriate decision-making, and through the provision of a safe environment for the conduction of educational activities (Higgins et al. 1997:6).

Another significant attempt at defining Outdoor Education has been made by the National Center for Outdoor Education at Linköping University (<https://www.liu.se/ikk/ncu?l=en&sc=true>). The center's research group has developed the following definition:

Outdoor Education is an approach that aims to provide learning in interplay between experience and reflection based on concrete experience in authentic situations. Outdoor learning is also an interdisciplinary research and education field, which involves, among other things:

The learning space being moved out into life in society, the natural and cultural environment

The interplay between sensory experience and book-learning being emphasized

The importance of the place being underlined (Center for Environmental and Outdoor Education, 2004).

Even though both approaches highlight significant aspects of Outdoor Education, the key strength of the definition formulated by the Linköping University research group is the emphasis it exercises on the importance of place to learning. This conceptualization of Outdoor Education contends that place, in other words the physical, cultural and natural environment, constitutes a key aspect of the phenomenon's didactic identity and provides both the content of learning and the opportunity for undivided learning experiences (Dahlgren & Szczepanski, 1998; Szczepanski, 2006).

Despite the compatibility of the previously discussed definition with the orientation of this research, the notion of Outdoor Education will not be employed in the context of this study in order to avoid misinterpretations that are sometimes associated with the concept (Thorburn & Allison, 2010 as cited in Fägerstam, 2012:6). Alternatively, a variety of other terms will be put to use, such as 'outdoor learning and teaching', in order to describe outdoor learning interventions that take place within the school curriculum and teaching hours.

2.3 Theoretical conceptualizations of place

The enquiry focusing on the relationship between people and physical environments has led to a variety of heterogeneous terms describing the phenomenon, such as “sense of place” and “place attachment”. This plurality of conceptions derives from the diversity of ontological and epistemological assumptions to which researchers adhere, as well as the varying attributes of the studied contexts (Chick, Kyle 2007:210). The current study focuses on the relationship to place as developed in the context of outdoor teaching and learning, and on the resulting meanings that teachers attribute to the places that encompass their teaching and learning practices. As previously stressed, place is regarded as the natural and cultural environment which constitutes the location of learning but is also considered to provide “a teaching theme, a content and a way of learning” (Szczepanski, 2013:3).

The concept of place has been mainly studied within the fields of Human Geography and Environmental Psychology, areas of expertise that specifically focus on human-environment relations (Milligan, 1998:5). From a Human Geography perspective, Tuan (1977) argues that place is a type of object which defines space giving it “geometric personality” (p.17). Outlining the relationship between space and place, he stresses that the first is more abstract than the second, and supports that both concepts are required for each ones’ separate definition. In this sense he contends that “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it and endow it with value” (p.6). Relph (1976) highlights three components that comprise place’s identity. These are: the place's physical setting, its activities, situations and events, and finally the meaning that derives from peoples’ experiences and intentions and is ascribed to the place. Drawing on Environmental Psychology studies, Canter (1977a) proposes a similar three-facet conceptual framework arguing that place is derived from the relationship developed between actions, interpretations and physical features.

Such articulations of the concept emphasize the importance of human interpretations and activity within spatial context to the accomplishment of place. Studying place from the perspective of Sociology though allows a more in-depth understanding of its unique qualities. This angle of enquiry contends that place “stabilizes and gives

durability to social structural categories, differences and hierarchies” and “arranges patterns of face-to-face interaction that constitute network-formation and collective action” (Gieryn, 2000:473) and therefore highlights the significance of social structures and routinized interactive processes to its conceptualization.

A model of understanding place from the perspective of Sociology has been proposed by Gieryn (2000) in his “Space for Place in Sociology” work. In his effort to bring together unrelated literature on the concept, he argues for a definition based on three attributes: ‘geographic location’ which implies that places have boundaries that yet are elastic; ‘material form’ according to which places have physicality that allows social processes (e.g. collective action) to emerge; and ‘investment with meaning and value’ which suggests that places can be narrated, interpreted and perceived and that these narratives, interpretations and perceptions may differ across cultures and times (Gieryn, 2000: 426).

A profound exploration of the concept of place as it has been employed within the Social Science discipline is provided by Agnew (1987) in his “Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society” publication. He asserts that place corresponds to “locale, the settings in which social relations are constituted (these can be informal or institutional); location, the geographical area encompassing the settings for social interaction as defined by social and economic processes operating at a wider scale; and sense of place, the local structure of feeling” (Agnew, 1987:28). According to this approach, meaningful places come to existence in a social context through social relations, and thus are geographically located and connected to their social, economic and cultural surroundings (Agnew, 1987).

Adopting a critical perspective, Massey (1994) argues that many studies of place have led to a conservative and reactionary conceptualization. She stresses that the specificity of place derives from “a particular constellation of social networks, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” (p.154) therefore places should not be treated as “areas with boundaries around” but “as moments in networks of social relations and understandings” (p.154). This approach to place exceeds its conceptualization in terms of geographical separation. It supports that the particularity

of economic, political and cultural relations between a local place and the wider context in which it is embedded is what defines the place itself. In this sense, what specifies a place is the “distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations” (p.155). Therefore Massey argues that place should not be viewed as a static entity but as a process corresponding to altering social relations.

A synthesis of the above articulations of place can lead to the construction of a theoretical framework for the understanding of the concept in terms of its key features. Apart from the physical structure of places as well as the meaning and value that individuals or cultural groups invest in them, place is argued to comprise social processes and social relations occurring at a local or wider scale. Additionally, activities and interactions within spatial contexts appear to be essential for understanding the concept. This conceptualization of place can be visualized in the following model.

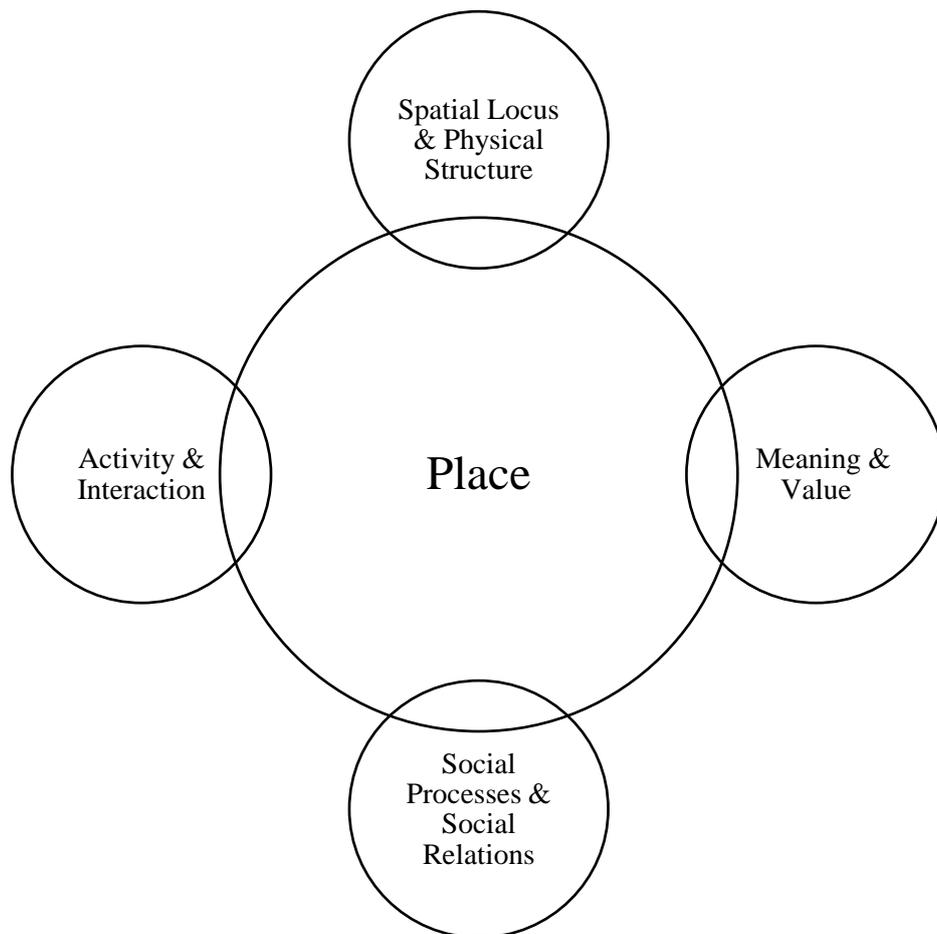


Figure 1: Model for understanding the concept of place

2.4 Place in the context of didactics

The previous conceptualizations of place from the perspective of Sociology reveal a pervading pattern implying that the understanding of places needs to be sought with regard to the social contexts within which they are embedded. Social processes as well as social, political and economical relations appear to be constituent entities of place. Acknowledging place as being provisional of the content of learning within outdoor teaching and learning interventions opens the way to integrating social concerns into place-based educational practices. The following paragraphs outline a number of educational approaches which contend that place can become medium of learning that is linked to social participation and social justice.

In his influential work “Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education”, Gruenewald advocates for a pedagogical approach to place, arguing that place theory lacks an educational orientation. Emphasizing the role of education and culture as mediators of place experience, he supports that schooling regulates our geographical experience, leading to “our lack of awareness, lack of connection and our lack of appreciation for places” (Gruenewald, 2003b:625). According to Gruenewald, it is essential that the spatial context of education is expanded beyond the simulations and abstractness of classroom learning -as part of the school curriculum- in order to include the study of places from the perspective of social justice and ecological sustainability (Gruenewald, 2003a:9). Such an approach makes the narrow focus of current schooling on student achievement problematic and supports the need to “assess places in which we live in relation to the kind of education that we provide and the pedagogical impact of places in and outside school” (Gruenewald, 2003b:644).

In a similar fashion, Woodhouse and Knapp (2000) underline the educational possibilities of place by advocating for place-based, multidisciplinary learning linked to areas of study such as ecology, sociology, geography and politics. According to their approach, learning is pursued through participatory action and is based on curricula which aim to meet broader objectives linked to ecological and cultural sustainability. Therefore, Woodhouse and Knapp maintain that the key aspect of their perspective is to encourage democratic participation, in order to prepare people to

contribute towards sustaining the ecological and cultural integrity of local communities.

Sobel (2004) also articulates the significance of learning which is rooted in place. He touches upon issues of ecology, sustainable development and encourages participation in the democratic process. By introducing his notion of Place-Based Education, Sobel stresses the importance learning based of “hands-on, real-world experiences” as he contends that such an educational approach “increases academic achievement, helps children develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students’ appreciation for the world and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active contributing citizens”(Sobel, 2004:7). In this sense, Place-Based Education focuses its interest on teaching about both natural and built environments -an approach that represents the fundamental principles of environmental education - instead of dealing with issues of natural catastrophe (Sobel, 2004:8-9).

2.5 Conclusion

The above survey of literature illustrates a variety of place conceptualizations that are of particular interest to the present study. First, a clear explanation of the position held by place within the context of outdoor learning and teaching was provided by discussing the key features of Outdoor Education theory. Furthermore, a theoretical framework was developed by outlining a variety of approaches which aim to obtain an understanding of place by determining the concept’s unique qualities. In this sense, activity and interaction within spatial context coupled with physical structure of places as well as meaning and value that social actors invest in them were underlined as being significant constituents comprising their identity. Additionally, the proposed theoretical framework emphasized the importance of social processes for the understanding of place, by acknowledging social, economic, political and cultural relations as key components of place’s identity. Finally, the literature discussing place in the context of education was considered. In consistence with the previous articulations of the concept, it was argued that place experience is determined by institutionalized schooling which constrains the nature of interaction between individuals engaged in learning and the physical environment. Therefore, the need

was expressed to integrate curricula focusing on multidisciplinary, place-responsive education linked to sustainability, participatory action and social justice.

Chapter 3: Method and Implementation

3.1 Overview

The overarching issue that this research aims to address is one concerning the emergence of meaning associated with place, as held by teachers who practice outdoor learning and teaching in Swedish primary schools. The central research question can be formulated as follows: “how do the social worlds of Swedish primary school teachers who practice outdoor learning and teaching influence the meanings they associate with place?”

The previously proposed framework for understanding the concept of place emphasized meaning as being one of the key aspects of its identity. Furthermore, social and interactional processes and social relations were argued to be significant components of place. Studying the social origin of place meanings implies that the focus of this enquiry should be put on the interrelation between the social contexts in which places are embedded and the meanings that individuals ascribe to them. Such an approach though can be supplemented by a consideration of the interactional processes that places encompass and their physical structure. The need is therefore expressed for introducing a theoretical framework that outlines the process of meaning construction with regard to all the components of place that comprise its identity.

Aiming to address this concern, the study adopts a social constructionist orientation grounded in symbolic interactionism in order to understand the meanings the respondents associate with the settings that encompass their teaching practices. Symbolic interactionism assumes that meaning is derived from shared interaction and is ascribed by individuals to their situations (Charmaz, 1990:1161). From this perspective, place is conceptualized as the spatial context encompassing symbolic interaction between cultural groups through which meanings emerge and are ascribed to objects constituting its physical structure, and even place itself (Milligan, 1998:1-2). However, in order to avoid an “overly rationalized view of the individual” that this assumption can result in (Charmaz, 1990:1161) the study adopts a social constructionist orientation, as it provides “open-ended and flexible means of studying

both fluid interactive processes and more stable social structures” (Charmaz, 1990:1162). This approach suggests that reality is derived and sustained by social interaction between individuals and groups of individuals (Berger & Luckman, 1966). As Berger and Luckman state persuasively:

...reality of everyday life maintains itself by being embodied in routines, which is the essence of institutionalization. Beyond this, however, the reality of everyday life is ongoingly reaffirmed in the individual’s interaction with others (p. 149).

A social constructionist framework grounded in symbolic interactionism corresponds to the focus of this study, in the sense that it allows a consideration of meaning as founded in social relations but being constructed in place (Agnew & Duncan, 1989:136). On this account, the research applies a grounded theory approach to the study of place meaning developed from qualitative, semi-structured interviews with primary school teachers, so as to interpret these meanings regarding the social worlds within which they evolve.

3.2 Research design

Having presented the research problem and orientation of the study, this section focuses on the research design and the application of methodological tools. The employed research methods are outlined and explained in order to attain comprehensibility for the data and arguments.

3.2.1 Participants

The participants selected for this study were five primary school teachers representing four different rural schools in Östergötland, Sweden. The sample consists of two teachers with a specialization in Natural Sciences and Technology, one teacher with a specialization in Language, one leisure time teacher and one Crafts and Technology teacher. The respondents represent all primary school levels from grade one to grade six. The gender distribution is two women and three men. Participant selection was conducted through a purposive, criterion sampling process (Bryman, 2012:419). In

this regard, primary schools which practice outdoor learning and teaching were identified and contact was made with the school administrators who were requested to propose teachers able and willing to participate in the research.

The selection criteria required that all participants devoted some of their weekly teaching hours to teaching outdoors. The purposive sampling conducted in this case was underpinned by the grounded theory assertion that samples must be representative of the phenomena under investigation (Corbin & Strauss, 1990:8). Though relatively small, the sample corresponds to the purpose of the research. Given the short period of time in which the study was conducted, a small sample size allowed the collection of more firm data and a more in-depth analysis (Bryman, 2012:426). Furthermore, the appropriateness of the sample is underpinned by its homogeneity and the narrow scope of the investigation (Bryman, 2012:426). Finally, the purposive sampling implies that the aim of the thesis is not to generalize findings to a larger population (Bryman, 2012:418) but to explore and interpret a particular instance of the phenomenon. This direction followed by the study is also compatible with the size of the selected sample.

3.2.2 Respondents' school context

All four schools represented by the participants of this study demonstrated significant similarities in terms of the physical and socio-economic contexts in which they were embedded. The fact that all schools were located in the same region and rather close to each other, resulted in similar socio-demographic characteristics of their populations. Additionally, the natural environments surrounding the schools presented a degree of homogeneity for the reasons previously mentioned. The basic features of the schools' physical contexts were: a maintained area surrounding the school building, a small accessible forest nearby and finally a source of water in a close distance (either a lake or a canal).

3.2.3 Data collection

Individual qualitative, semi-structured interviews with the teachers constituted the primary source of data. This was to ensure that the emerging data would integrate the

interviewees' perspectives on the studied topic (Bryman, 2012:470) as well as information about how issues and events are framed and understood on their behalf (Bryman, 2012:471). Additionally, the use of semi-structured interviews is consistent with the clear focus of the study (Bryman, 2012:474) on the exploration of place meanings regarding the social worlds that influence their construction. The interviews were audio-taped and directly transcribed after their completion. Language constraints made it impossible to carry out the interviews in the participants' first language (Swedish). In order to transcend this limitation, the participant recruitment process emphasized the fact that interviewing would be conducted in English, therefore aiming to encourage those who felt more confident in the language to take part in the study. Initially a pilot interview was conducted, in order to test the congruence of the featured questions and to gain experience for better interview performance and thus richer data (Bryman, 2012:474). The duration of the interviews was approximately forty minutes and most of them (four out five) were conducted within the school setting.

As previously stated, this thesis implements a grounded theory approach, though data collection was not treated as an ongoing process but only took place once. Since the purpose of the study is exploratory and it does not aim to generate theory, the tools of theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation (Bryman, 2012:568) were considered excessive in relation to the overall research aim.

Apart from the conduction of interviews, participants were also presented with three photos of three different outdoor settings. The first photo depicted a natural outdoor setting next to a lake, the second a maintained outdoor setting in the surrounding area of a school and the last, an urban setting. Participants were asked to reflect on which of the three settings they considered as having the most or least educational potential. The use of photo elicitation was considered significant in this study as it contributed to the grounding of the interview questions and enabled the interviewees to relate to the research topic more easily (Bryman, 2012:480).

3.2.4 Analytic procedures

As previously mentioned, the research framework applied to this study is an approach to grounded theory. The insufficient exploration of this angle of enquiry by the existing literature favors the application of grounded theory strategies, as they are suitable for areas where little research has been conducted (Robson, 2007:226). Additionally, a grounded theory approach aims to integrate broader conditions that affect the phenomena under study into the analytical process (Corbin & Strauss, 1990:11). Therefore, the methodological implications align with the focus of the study, as one that aims to explore the social construction of meaning ascribed to learning and teaching environments by teachers, regarding the social worlds that they encounter.

The procedures followed during the analysis stage were influenced by the theoretical underpinnings of the social constructionist version of grounded theory (Charmaz, 1990) and the Corbin & Strauss approach to grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

The social constructionist approach to grounded theory as introduced by Charmaz (Charmaz, 1990:1161-1162) counteracts the inductive nature of the method (Robson, 2007:226) and its premise of unprejudiced treatment of collected data (Robson, 2007:226). Discussing the form of interaction between the researcher and the data, Charmaz favors a pre-commitment to substantive interests and assumptions on the researchers' behalf. Her social constructionist approach acknowledges the impact of the researchers' philosophical stance, school of thought, methodological strategies as well as personal values and experiences on the research question, process and later analysis. What is also stressed in her approach is the importance of the researcher to have a "firm grounding in sociological concepts without being wedded to them" that will provide "the conceptual roots for categories to grow" (Charmaz, 1990:1165).

In accordance with the social constructionist framework of grounded theory strategies, the data collection and analysis process in this study was guided by the research interest in the concept of place. Furthermore, the analysis process was also influenced by the symbolic interactionist and social constructionist perspectives

adopted by the study, to which this grounded theory approach also adheres. A symbolic interactionist perspective urges the researcher to study closely the interactional processes which the study's participants are part of and are reflected in the data. Social constructionism assumes that interaction is embodied in institutionalized routines and therefore leads the researcher to focus on the impact of social structures on interactional patterns.

The Corbin & Strauss version of grounded theory was considered appropriate for this study, as it provides the researcher with a set of strategies that aim to integrate and uncover the broader conditions that impact the phenomenon under study. Drawing on the analytical procedures of this approach allows place meanings to be studied with regard to the social relations and social processes that were previously argued to be significant components of place's identity.

What is regarded as outcome in grounded theory can vary, as outcomes can occur in different phases of applying the method (Bryman, 2012:570). Both previously discussed versions of grounded theory emphasize the development of concepts that provide a theoretical explanation of the studied phenomena as the ultimate result of the analytical process. Given that the purpose of the thesis is not to explain theoretically but to explore and interpret the phenomenon under study, the analytical process that was followed drew on the first two stages of grounded theory data analysis, open coding and axial coding (Robson, 2007:587). The final outcome of the overall data analysis process was the formulation of hypotheses which provide an insight into the social construction of meanings of place.

The first stage of analysis constituted a process of breaking down data and interpreting the phenomena they reflected. This coding process, which involved the comparison of incidents and the labeling of resembling phenomena, led to the formation of categories and declared the properties of each category (Corbin & Strauss, 1990:12-13). The second step of analysis involved testing the formed categories and their properties against data. The aim of this process was to make connections between the categories that were elaborated during the open coding process as well as to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between categories and their properties. This was achieved through the analysis of the

conditions, context, actions and interactions that gave rise to the formulated categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990: 13).

In spite of the fact that the analytical process aims to clarify the interventions that lead to the attribution of meaning to place, the aim of this study is not to generate findings that are generalizable. The primary focus of this research is on exploring a particular instance of the phenomenon under study and therefore formulating hypotheses that can lead to its deeper understanding. In order to claim that such findings are generalizable, these hypotheses must be verified through the further collection of data, the conditions under which the described phenomena emerged must be defined and the range of situations which they concern must be determined (Corbin & Strauss, 1990:15). Such processes though go beyond the limits of this thesis. The research aim is exclusively directed toward the emergence of meanings that the study's respondents attribute to place and the guidelines followed by this study are determined by this clear focus.

3.2.5 Ethical considerations

Having now outlined the research design, it is important to discuss the ethical considerations in this thesis. The selection of the research methods employed in this study took into consideration a number of ethical issues. These related to the four principles presented by Bryman (Bryman, 2012:135-143) as well as Robson's statement about ambiguous practices in social research (Robson, 2007:82).

First, the thesis took into account the principle of avoiding "harm to participants" by guaranteeing their confidentiality. This was achieved by holding anonymous records of interviews and presenting results in a way that respondents will not be identifiable. In consistence with the former principle, the interviews were conducted within the school context in most cases, so that interviewees would not be exposed to unfamiliar settings.

Furthermore, the principle of "informed consent" was considered by fully informing participants about their degree of involvement in the research as well as its background, process and purpose. This was attained by providing the subjects with

information concerning who is conducting the research, the reason for which it is being conducted, its overall purpose and how he/she was selected. Additionally, before starting with the interview process, a reference was made to the participants' right to freely interrupt, to comment on the questions posed, and even to choose not to answer.

The former ethical reflections align with the principle of avoiding “deception”, which was also taken into account by the study. This principle relates to avoiding the practice of partially informing respondents about the nature of the enquiry and their contribution. Although deception is not rare in social research and is occasionally pursued in order to encourage natural behavior on the participants' behalf, it is not desirable and also raises issues of professional reputation among researchers (Bryman, 2012:143). As previously outlined, respondents were properly informed about the properties of the current study as well as their involvement in it and, thus, the discussed issue was addressed sufficiently.

Finally, the last ethical principle accounted for in this thesis regarded avoiding “invasion of privacy”, as such a practice is not considered acceptable for research (Bryman, 2012:143). The notion of “invasion of privacy” correlates to that of “informed consent” as they are both linked to the extent of respondents' involvement in the study. In this case, the questions asked during the interviews had been carefully examined to ensure that they did not raise confidential issues. As stressed previously, information was also provided to participants regarding their right to comment on questions and even ignore those they might have preferred not to answer.

Chapter 4: Analysis and Results

4.1 Introduction

Having thoroughly outlined the employed research methods, the following chapter focuses on reviewing the collected data and illustrating the outcomes of the study. Verbatim quotes are included to ground the presentation and the analysis process results. In this section the study's respondents are referred to as 'teacher A-E' in order to preserve anonymity.

4.2 Data Analysis

This study employed a grounded theory approach. The data analysis occurred in two stages, 'open coding' and 'axial coding'. Open coding involved the interpretation of phenomena reflected in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990:12). During this stage, events, actions and interactions were identified, compared and finally grouped into categories. For instance, if incidents, actions and interactions regarding teaching school subjects were identified in the data, these would be compared in terms of their similarities and differences, leading to the formulation of categories such as "teaching Mathematics" or "teaching Science". The categories could also comprise a number of properties such as "employing teaching/learning materials for teaching Mathematics". In several cases, the comparison of the properties of the formulated categories could result in their further development, leading to a deeper understanding of the studied incidents. Continuing with the previous example, if "employing teaching/learning materials" was also identified as a property of the "teaching Science" category as well, this could perhaps lead to the formulation of a new category labelled "employing teaching/learning materials for the instruction of Mathematics and Language". This process could also involve the comparison of a broader number of categories and their properties, thus resulting in their further development. The final outcome of this stage of analysis was the determination of categories describing meanings of place, derived from interactional processes.

Axial coding involved the refinement of the formed categories of place meanings by considering the contexts and conditions under which they emerged (Corbin & Strauss,

1990:13). At this stage the relationship between the formed categories as well as that between the categories and their properties was tested against data, in order to explore the conditions, the contexts and the actions/interactions that may have given rise to the phenomena they describe (Corbin & Strauss, 1990:13). Continuing with the “employing teaching/learning materials for the instruction of Mathematics and Language” example, after distinguishing this category, data would be scrutinized in order to gain insight into the conditions, context, actions and interactions through which the interactions described in this category emerged. This process involved the deductive formulation of hypotheses regarding the relationship between categories and between categories and their properties, which were refined and elaborated through the consideration of literature during the discussion of findings. By adopting a social constructionist perspective (Charmaz, 1990:1165), this phase of analysis attempted to examine the data by identifying answers to questions such as: ‘how do actions evolve?’, ‘How are beliefs constructed?’, ‘Of what larger process is this action part of?’ ‘Under which conditions do actions occur?’, ‘What are the consequences of beliefs and actions?’ (Charmaz, 1990:1165). This interpretive process aimed to formulate hypotheses regarding the conditions, contexts, actions and interactions within the respondents’ social worlds that impact their construction of place meaning (Charmaz, 1990:1165).

Tables 1 & 2: Features of each stage of analysis

Table 1 Open coding

- Data are broken down analytically
 - Phenomena reflected in data are interpreted
 - Events/actions/interactions are compared for similarities and differences and given conceptual labels
 - Categories and their properties are determined
-

Table 2 Axial coding

- Categories and their properties are tested against data. This process aims to make connections between the formed categories and gain new insights on how they relate to their subcategories by determining the conditions, the context and the actions/interactions that gave rise to the phenomena they describe
 - Hypothetical relationships between categories are proposed deductively
-

4.3 Findings

4.3.1 Open coding

The open coding stage led to the formulation of the following nine categories of meaning associated with place. Place meaning was found to be associated with: (a) promoting students' welfare through learning activities, (b) integrating natural attributes into the instruction of school subjects, (c) using teaching/learning materials outdoors to support learning objectives, (d) conducting curriculum learning on field trips, (e) carrying out a series of activities shaped by school setting attributes and school subject learning objectives, (f) carrying out learning projects, (g) studying human impact on the natural environment through school subjects, (h) better understanding of school subjects by encountering book content outdoors and finally (i) non planned extra-curricular learning. These categories present the outcome of the first level of data analysis and are elaborated further during the axial coding stage. The following paragraphs outline the content of each category in detail.

A. Promoting students' welfare through learning activities

Analysis of teachers' interviews revealed that the promotion of students' welfare through learning activities had strongly shaped their construction of place meaning. Teacher B repeatedly described learning activities that involved intense physical movement. When discussing the reasons for teaching outdoors she commented:

The main reason for which I teach outdoors whether it is in the schoolyard or in the woods or whatever is that the students have to move a lot. Perhaps sometimes you want to use a pine (*to teach Mathematics*) so you have to go to the woods with the pine trees.

Teacher C also described carrying out similar activities. Commenting on the benefits of being outdoors with her students, she stated:

They move all the time (*in nature*), they are not sitting in their place, they get fresh air and they get to know nature; they don't always need

to play with balls outside or sit inside with a pen and paper and listen [...] It suits the students to do this outside I think.

In a similar fashion, teacher D stressed that teaching crafts is beneficial for the students' welfare. Additionally, he expressed that being outdoors should be combined with physical exercise and calming in nature. Reflecting on this topic, he commented:

During the day they (*the students*) must do something to calm down and do something to exercise their body; it must change during the day [...] when they are walking and running and building something I think it's very good for their body.

Discussing the calming effect of nature, he stated:

They can calm down. I see it when we are sitting around a fire; we can talk about very important things. And I see that it's very good for many of the children.

The interviewees' comments underline that student welfare issues are considered highly significant. The chance to unite welfare promotion with learning outcomes outdoors appears to be closely associated with the attribution of meaning to place.

B. Integrating natural attributes into the instruction of school subjects

Teacher C frequently stated the value of carrying out learning tasks that include natural attributes found within the school setting. When describing learning activities that the students enjoy, she stated:

I have one activity in the woods with cards, it's very good. There are 10 cards that they (*the students*) should pick up. On one card it might say "pick up 6 stones and put the bigger ones first and the smaller ones last" and they have to show me; and then they have a new card and there it might say "find the oldest tree in the woods" and I have these

cards in English too because those (*students*) who are 9 years old will have different directions on the cards. They love that.

Teacher C provided a clear example of integrating natural attributes into the instruction of mathematical concepts and Language. In a similar fashion, teacher A expressed that the natural attributes of a setting can facilitate the instruction of Biology and Mathematics. Commenting on the educational potentiality of a photo he stressed:

Here (*at the place in the picture*) we could pick up microorganisms in the water and try to figure out which ones they are [...] we could also use the water to learn about deciliters, liters, quantities.

These comments indicate that the potentiality of using components of the natural environment is considered for achieving learning outcomes in school subjects. The common occurrence of this perspective in the data implies a direct connection with the ascription of meaning to place.

C. Using teaching/learning materials outdoors to support learning objectives

Teachers' descriptions of outdoor educational activities revealed the use of teaching/learning materials to foster learning. Data analysis indicated that while in a natural context, teachers employed artificial teaching/learning materials in order to achieve learning outcomes. Teacher B, while describing an outdoor lesson, stated the following:

We had triangles, rectangles [...] and I had this with me outside (*a box full of plastic shapes*) and they had to learn the name of this (*a shape*), of the shapes, and then they had a paper and they were sitting and leaning against each others' back [...] (*the students had to guide each other to place various shapes on a certain place on the paper by describing them without mentioning their names*).

Discussing the learning tasks that she conducts outdoors, teacher C stated:

I have lots of cards with [...] letters and I put them out in a place and they (*the students*) will stand in different teams and they will run and pick up one card at a time and put them together; maybe just words with two or three letters, maybe nouns or verbs, something like that. And they will run and have fun and compete with each other; and then they learn Swedish for example, things like that all the time; and they think it is fun. I have lots and lots of games we play with letters and numbers and things like that all the time.

In this case the teachers' descriptions imply that place meaning is coupled with the use of teaching/learning materials which facilitate learning in subjects such as Mathematics and Language. Furthermore, in consistency with the first category, the issue of welfare was touched upon by teacher C as she described entertaining learning interventions involving corporeal exercise.

D. Conducting curriculum learning on field trips

Teacher B stated that she used to go on field trips once a month. These trips involved walking, taking means of transport and visiting various places such as a science center or churches. When asked about what learning took place during these field trips she explained:

I always go after the 'bible' (*the curriculum*). Once we had to learn about our home city [...] so then we took a walk down to where it all started in [...] with the chocolate factory, that's why [...] (*the name of the location is excluded*) exists today; and then we walked around and we took pictures. In 'bible' it is stated "you have to compare" so we took a picture of the main road and then we went to a friend of mine who has a lot of pictures and is very engaged in the history of [...] she has a lot of pictures. A hundred years ago it was just a muddy road and nothing but today you have traffic and a lot and we compared; and we did a PowerPoint with many, many things.

In this description, the interviewee underlined the importance of following curriculum instructions on every field trip and therefore demonstrated a strong influence of the curriculum on the construction of place meaning.

E. Carrying out a series of activities shaped by school setting attributes and school subject learning objectives

While reflecting on outdoor teaching, teacher E emphasized that his aim is not to carry out single outdoor lessons but to plan series of lessons on the same topic. He stressed:

When I plan a whole series of lessons I tend to think: “How can I do this best? How can I do it with the students, is it better outside or inside?” I’m not thinking of one lesson at a time; I’m planning a series of lessons. Of course it is easy for me to think “this is about Biology, it’s about studying animals or studying plants”; then it’s very natural to go outside. When I’m planning Geometry and Maths I tend to think “what can we do outside?” I’m not asking myself if it’s better to do it outside; I try to do as much as I can outside.

Additionally, he underlined that he also considers the school settings’ attributes during the planning process. When discussing this topic, he explained:

When I plan things I have to think of where to do them, how to do them, how many students, and all kinds of things. Of course when you are having Outdoor Education you have to know the area around the school to know what it’s possible to do right there.

The above comment demonstrates the influence of the school settings’ attributes on the activities conducted outdoors and thus on the meaning which is associated with the concept of place. It should be stressed here that the school curriculum clearly shapes the planning process, as teacher E only referred to school subject instruction.

F. Carrying out learning projects

A discussion of outdoor projects was made by teacher E's interview. The respondent outlined how the school carries out a project which involves making charcoal:

We are now preparing these charcoal projects during which we are outside chopping wood; and we are divided perhaps in 3 or 4 groups, one teacher per group, and one group is in the woods chopping wood, another group is perhaps setting some traps for some insects and another group is painting and drawing things from nature. And then we go around and do different things so that every group has the chance to chop some wood and so on. That's how we work when we are outside a whole day.

Teacher E also stressed that learning disciplines and goals regarding these projects are determined by the curriculum and that the main focus of the described project is on Chemistry and History. In this context, place meaning is associated with meeting educational objectives by conducting learning projects.

G. Studying human impact on the natural environment through school subjects

The importance of teaching in human-shaped landscapes was also emphasized by teacher E. When reflecting on pictures of different learning environments he explained:

It's not only nature, of course humans live in the nature as well and if I want to be with my students outdoors and perhaps teach Technology, then I have to have some examples of what humans have built and how they build stuff; that's why I like the picture with the houses.

The respondent asserted that such landscapes have a higher educational potential when it comes to other subjects as well such as Geography and History. This perspective held by the teacher demonstrates an association of place meaning with

studying certain school subjects in the context of human presence in natural environments.

H. Better understanding of school subjects by encountering book content outdoors

Two out of the five teachers emphasized the significance of pursuing learning outcomes related to book content outdoors. While discussing the importance of outdoor teaching, teacher A stated:

When the students study biology it's good to be outside too. For instance, when talking about trees, you have to see the tree and talk about the tree, so you really can see the tree you don't just have it in the book.

In a similar sense teacher E argued:

I think that Outdoor Education gives a better understanding of how things really are. When they (*the students*) are inside they are reading books but they don't get any experience of things.

Both interviewees underlined the major contribution of first-hand experiences to book content learning when teaching in an outdoor setting. Therefore it can be stressed that the respondents associate place meaning with achieving a better understanding of book content outdoors through contextual learning experiences.

I. Non-planned extra-curricular learning

Analysis of the interview with teacher E revealed that non-planned learning that takes place during outdoor educational interventions can be considered highly significant. When reflecting on outdoor teaching he commented:

It's the things that perhaps I don't plan that lift Outdoor Education. I try to be outside as much as possible because I love that natural finding or exploration or interest from the students.

While discussing the influence of the school curriculum on outdoor activity planning, he also underlined in a meaningful manner:

The curriculum tells us what to do [...] but I also described this situation when they (*the students*) are outside and learning a lot of things that I haven't planned them to learn right then.

This notion of unexpected learning occurred frequently during the discussion. Consequently, it can lead to the assertion that non-planned spontaneous learning is closely associated with place meaning by the respondent in the context of outdoor teaching.

4.3.2 Axial coding

The analytical process followed during this stage involved the reconsideration of data in order to deepen awareness of the interrelationship between categories and their properties, as well as between categories themselves. This process resulted in the formulation of the following hypotheses regarding the social worlds that influence the meanings that teachers associate with place. The meanings attributed to place, held by the teachers taking part in the study, were hypothesized as influenced by the following factors: (a) the school curriculum, (b) their university education, (c) their personal perspective of outdoor learning/teaching, (d) the schools' funding, (e) the physical structure of the schools' surrounding environment, (f) and finally, the schools' teaching practices. In the following paragraphs, a detailed explanation of how these hypotheses were elaborated is provided. Each paragraph identifies the categories that were considered for formulating the described hypothesis.

A. School curriculum

Categories a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h

Curriculum syllabi and goals guided almost every outdoor learning method. All teachers reported that the activities conducted outdoors were linked to curriculum objectives. Even though an alternative view was expressed by teacher E, who

articulated the importance of non-planned outdoor learning, he also contended that the curriculum is considered when planning learning activities. When asked if outdoor learning projects at his school are connected to the curriculum, teacher E replied:

Yes of course, the curriculum tells us what to do and in what areas we have to do things and also a little about how to do them and the goals of teaching, what's important that the students learn; so of course it tells us what we can do or can't do, we have to think of that of course.

The consideration of curriculum guidelines in outdoor activity planning, as expressed by all respondents, clearly impacts their teaching practices. Therefore, it could be assumed that the meaning that is derived from these practices and is associated with place is influenced by the school curriculum.

B. University education

Category a: Promoting student welfare through learning activities

The previous stage of analysis revealed the association of place meaning with student welfare by teachers B and C. Furthermore, during the interviews teachers B and C both stressed that their involvement with Gymnastics has a strong impact on their outdoor teaching practices. Reflecting on why she chooses to teach outdoors, teacher B argued:

I am a Gymnastics teacher also and that is my main interest; and I read a lot about children and their need to move... when they are so small they can't sit still, they have to move a lot [...] I like it because you use the mind and the body, they go together. So I think they learn more if you do it not just sitting and writing but by using the body also.

When discussing welfare as an important component of outdoor learning, teacher C reflected:

Now I learn a lot more about it (*children's' health*) that I'm studying sports and health at the university, about the things that you have to do with your body when sitting still (*in the classroom*).

Commenting on the influence of her Physical Education studies on the activities she conducts outdoors, she added:

I think more about Sports now. Outdoor Education too of course, because when we are outside I know a lot of games (*learning activities*) where you touch each other and you know...So activities having to do with different senses.

Both teachers' assertions support the hypothesis that their involvement with Physical Education has strongly influenced the construction of place meaning on their behalf. It is thus reasonable to state that their view of place from the perspective of promoting students' welfare through learning activities is derived from the knowledge acquired while studying Sports.

Category b: Integrating natural attributes into the instruction of school subjects

Teacher C also expressed that her outdoor teaching practices have been impacted by the knowledge she acquired when taking an Outdoor Education university course. She commented:

My leisure time pedagogues' education isn't Swedish, Mathematics and English. But I have that in my education outside, I take it in. I learnt that at the University, at my course there (*Outdoor Education course*) how you can take in the subjects in your outdoor teaching. So that's what I do.

In accordance with the respondent's assertion, it can be argued that her Outdoor Education studies have shaped her outdoor teaching methods. Therefore, participating in the Outdoor Education course may have resulted in associating place meaning with the integration of natural attributes into the instruction of school subjects as well as

with the employment of teaching/learning materials to teach Language and Mathematics outdoors.

C. Personal perspectives of outdoor learning/teaching

Discussion with three out of five interviewees revealed that a number of their teaching practices, which led to the construction of place meaning as identified previously, were influenced by their personal viewpoint of outdoor learning/teaching.

Category a: Promoting students' welfare through learning activities

Teacher D underlined the calming significance of nature as well as that of corporeal exercise during outdoor Crafts lessons. The respondent's perspective appeared to be related to his overall view on outdoor learning/teaching. When discussing the importance of the method, he argued:

When they (*the students*) are outside and do what I'm talking about (*calming in nature*) then it's very easy to go inside and have another lesson with another teacher when they have been outside for an hour or two [...] I know they can't be out all day long; they must do other things here at school. But as I said, it is very good to be outside.

Additionally he stated:

I think that many lessons that we have in school are good to be taught inside. Reading books in English is better to do inside I think; and writing [...] I think it is good to sit on the chair and have a table...

In his reflection, teacher D articulated a close relation between his view on outdoor learning/teaching and promoting students' welfare. Thus, it could be maintained that the association of place meaning with student welfare is connected to his personal attitude towards outdoor learning/teaching.

Category g: Better understanding of school subjects by encountering book content outdoors

Reflecting on the reasons that lead him to teach outdoors, teacher A stressed the importance of encountering book content beyond the classroom. He said:

When you are sitting in the classroom and reading in a book about surface area or something [...] it is easier to take out the students and tell them to make a square area or a square meter; and it's easier to make it outside, they get air and you can put them in groups, it's a natural way. When you are looking in a book it is something you cannot understand. If you are talking about how big a football field is, let's go out and check it.

In a similar fashion, teacher E commented:

If the students are reading about geometry and meters they, of course, have to have an understanding of how long a meter is or how long 10 meters is; this understanding of how things really are, that is Outdoor Education. You can't have that indoors I think; the same understanding. Perhaps some students have to do a few things with their hands or walk a distance to understand how things work and get a perspective of things outside; that is why I love Outdoor Education.

The interpretations of the teachers seem to be critical to their decision to include outdoor teaching in their overall school practice. Hence, it could be stressed that these personal viewpoints may result in practices that associate place meaning with better understanding of school subjects in an outdoor context.

Category c: Using teaching/learning materials outdoors to support learning objectives

During the interview with teacher B, an explanation of the reasons she considers outdoor teaching in Mathematics important was provided. She argued:

In Sweden they say that "what you are doing with your body stays in your head" and I really believe that because my students when they

had the big test, the national test, they were very, very good at just Mathematics. So we had very good results. So that strengthened my belief in teaching outdoors, so I will also teach these children outdoors.

These comments by teacher B demonstrate that the perspective she holds of outdoor teaching/learning coupled with the positive feedback she has received from her students form the basis of her practices. Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that the use of teaching/learning materials which was found to be a key component of these practices is derived from her personal perspective of learning outdoors. This hypothesis implies that the association of place meaning with the use of teaching/learning materials is influenced by her personal interpretation of outdoor teaching.

Category f: Studying human impact on the natural environment through school subjects

As formerly mentioned, teacher E highlighted the importance of teaching school subject outdoors in accordance with the perspective of human presence in nature. In this regard, during the discussion of the educational potential of the three pictures, he stressed:

In the picture at the top of the page I don't see any house or any trace of humans [...] that's a lovely picture but we are also in the world and Outdoor Education isn't only about watching nature [...] You have to have the city, society as well [...] what I mean is Geography, History, Civics, these kinds of subjects; and of course you have to discuss how societies affect nature, so I like the pictures with houses.

Teacher E clearly articulated that in his perspective, outdoor learning/teaching must also include human impact on the natural environment in its area of focus. This assertion may lead to the argument of a direct link between his personal perspective of outdoor learning/teaching and his practices that lead to the construction of place meaning.

Category i: Non-planned extra-curricular learning

Teacher E also expressed his view on the importance of non-planned learning that may take place during an outdoor lesson. This stance of his appears to be related to his general attitude towards outdoor learning/teaching. He stated:

I try to do as much as I can outside [...] because I think that the benefit of Outdoor Education is the things that they (*the students*) learn that I haven't planned them to learn. So if they are outside measuring something when carrying out a task, like measuring the football field, then when they are doing the task they might suddenly find something on the ground, like "ah, an insect". That is a very good learning situation I think.

This argument of the respondent clearly demonstrates that his personal view on outdoor learning/teaching has influenced his practices, which lead to the association of place meaning with non-planned extra-curricular learning.

D. School funding

Category d: Conducting curriculum learning on field trips

As previously mentioned, teacher B commented that field trips linked to curriculum learning used to be carried out at her school once a month. During the discussion she stated that inadequate school funding is the reason these field trips stopped taking place. She stated:

We had more money then so we went to [...] and the [...] museum and we went round and looked for buses, we went by bus, train, tram and we went to the science center in [...] there you can see the latest research in science. We went to the movies, we went to church, and we walked a lot.

According to the her comments, it could be contended that the association of place meaning with curriculum learning on field trips by teacher B is related to school funding and administration.

E. Physical structure of the schools' surrounding environment

Category e: Carrying out a series of activities shaped by school setting attributes and school subject learning objectives

During the previous stage of analysis a reference was made to the importance of the school settings' attributes to planning learning tasks for teacher E. While discussing if his practices would be successful in another setting he asserted:

We have a very luxurious environment here, we have a lot of things surrounding the school so if I would work somewhere else I would have to invent some other tasks depending on the area around the school I think. But perhaps it would work as well at another school I think, you just have to choose the tasks [...] you just have to invent something depending on the environment around the school.

These comments of teacher E provide a clear account of the influence the school setting's structure exercises on the learning activities conducted outdoors. Therefore, it could be argued that the physical structure of the school setting has an impact on the construction of place meaning by the respondent.

F. Schools' teaching practices

Category f: Carrying out learning projects

Previous analysis of the interview with teacher E revealed an association of place meaning with carrying out learning projects. Comparing the teaching practices at his school to those at the other schools he had been working for, he expressed:

It depends on the environment around the school, the colleagues, tradition; we have a tradition at this school to do Outdoor Education, if

everyone does it, we have some plans, some thoughts that have already been done, you know what works and what doesn't so you can easily do this thing again. You don't have to invent everything every year.

Later on, while discussing about the projects carried out at his school he stated:

This school had already started this charcoal project when I came here so it wasn't my idea. I've done it before so I have some experience of doing it.

These assertions of the respondent, apart from verifying his argument about the impact of the school setting on learning activities, demonstrate the overall influence of the schools' practices on his personal approach to outdoor learning/teaching. Hence, it could be argued that the schools' practices exercise an influence on the teachers association of place meaning with conducting outdoor learning projects.

4.4 Conclusion

The final results of the data analysis process demonstrate that the meanings ascribed to place are significantly impacted by the social worlds that the study's respondents encounter. The above findings imply that institutional social relations and actions within school settings and their wider scale (e.g. school administration and schools' teaching practices) exert important influence on the interactional processes through which meaning is attributed to outdoor landscapes, encompassing teaching and learning interventions. According to the analysis of the empirical material, meanings of place are also impacted by social processes occurring at a wider scale and held within the settings of interaction, such as the school curriculum. Finally, the physical structure of the teaching and learning landscapes as well as personal perspectives held by the study's participants also appear to exercise influence on the meanings that are ascribed to place. The research outcomes correspond to the earlier proposed framework for understanding the concept of place, according to which places comprise meanings and interpretations, social relations and actions, social processes and, finally, physical structure. These results of the study will be further discussed and elaborated on in the following chapter.

Table 3: Meanings of place, social worlds that influence place meanings, study's respondents

	School curriculum	University education	Personal perspective of outdoor learning/teaching	School funding	Physical structure of the schools' surrounding environment	Schools' teaching practices
Promoting students' welfare through learning activities	B/C/D	B/C	D			
Integrating natural attributes into the instruction of school subjects	C	C				
Using teaching/learning materials outdoors to support learning objectives	B/C	C	B			
Conducting curriculum learning on field trips	B			B		
Carrying out a series of activities shaped by school setting attributes and school subject learning objectives	E				E	
Carrying out learning projects	E					E
Studying human impact on the natural environment through school subjects	E		E			
Better understanding of school subjects by encountering book content outdoors	A/E		A/E			
Non-planned extra-curricular learning			E			

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

5.1 Introduction

While the previous chapter outlined the data that were obtained from this research, this section attempts to provide a theoretical explanation of the studied phenomenon and draw conclusions.

5.2 Discussion

The two-stage qualitative analysis of the interviews provided an analytical framework for comprehending meanings of place and developing an understanding of the processes through which they occur. The initial analytical stage outlined a variety of meanings attributed to place by the participants of the study. The second stage involved the exploration of the social worlds that exert influence on these meanings, and resulted in the formulation of several conclusions which summarize the outcomes of the interpretive work and form the basis for further theoretical explorations.

The empirical findings of the research correspond to the earlier proposed theoretical conceptualizations of place. The interplay between physical attributes, human activity and meaning ascribed to place as discussed by Relph (1976) and Canter (1977a) is evident in both the stages of analysis. The physical structure of school settings appears to determine forms of interaction, such as learning activities, which result in the construction of place meaning by the study's respondents. This model of understanding is also consistent with the basic features of 'material form' and 'investment with meaning and value' that Gieryn (2000) addresses in his definition of place. Gieryn, drawing on Bourdieu's dualist material and interpretive approach, argues that the interpretations, representations and identifications of social actors are important to the understanding of the concept (Gieryn, 2000:467). This notion of place is consistent with the assertion of this study that teachers' personal perspectives can provide a deeper understanding of the meanings they ascribe to place through interaction.

Agnew's (1987) articulation of the place concept presents a high degree of consistency with the analytical framework elaborated to explore the processes through which meaning is ascribed to place. His discussion of place as (1) 'locale', the milieu where social relationships take form and (2) 'location', the geographical area within which social interaction is held, is important to the interpretation of the meanings teachers associate with place and the influences exerted on these meanings.

Findings demonstrate a wide array of institutional social relations within school settings - which correspond to Agnew's notion of 'locale' - and lead to the emergence of place meanings but also impact them significantly. At local level, these relations take the form of interaction within the social worlds of schools. Hence, they are shaped by the physical structure of their surrounding environments. This suggested impact of physical structure on interaction and implicitly on place meaning can be explicated through Giddens' (1984) notion of 'constraint', which is described as "placing limits upon the range of options open to an actor, or plurality of actors, in a given circumstance or type of circumstance" (p.177). Giddens argues, among others, that the features of the physical environment coupled with the physical capacities of humans regulate our social lives (p.174) and therefore highlights the constraining character of the material world.

In order to acquire a complete understanding of relations held within the social contexts of schools, it is necessary to also consider the macro-order of 'location' (Agnew, 1989:2). According to Agnew (1987), approaching place through the perspective of 'location' requires a consideration of social and economic processes that occur at a wider scale and are held within the settings of interaction. The research findings highlight the function of such processes by addressing the influence that school curriculum, funding, as well as teachers' university education exercises on the meanings they attribute to place. Massey (1994) supports a similar conceptualization of place by arguing for a specification of the concept in terms of social relations that are constituted at a local or wider scale (p.154). Furthermore, she contends that our experience and interpretation of place is developed and determined by capitalism (p.147) and therefore argues for a conceptualization with regard to the social interactions encompassed by place (p.155). The consistency between Massey's approach and the present empirical findings is also demonstrated by the determination

of the impact that institutions within the teachers' social worlds exert on place meaning.

According to Giddens (1984), social relations at wider or local scale also present a form of constraint for individuals situated within them, as their pre-existence results in structural properties that limit the options available to individual actors (p.176). These social processes and relations of greater and lesser span are critical to the conceptualizations of place articulated by Agnew (1987) and Massey (1994) and, interestingly, seem to have significant impact on the place experience of the study's respondents. The framework of constraint as developed by Giddens provides a clear insight of the influence exerted by school administrative factors and teachers' university education on the meanings ascribed to place, as suggested by this study.

Institutionalized actions, such as those performed within the social worlds of schools, carry socially articulated and shared meanings (Berger & Luckman, 1966:65). Institutionalization inevitably leads actors to conform to roles which are socially defined and constitute the medium for participation in social worlds (Berger & Luckman, 1966:74). In context of this study, this assertion corresponds to an understanding of place as "having inherent yet largely implicit socially shared understandings that enable effective coactions" (Moore, 2004:298). The importance of such an interpretation lies in the fact that it provides an explanation for both the impact of school practices on individual action of teachers and the occurrence of common meanings attributed to place. In this sense, teachers comply with roles assigned to them by schools as institutions and accordingly, such roles within their institutions result in shared understanding and experience of place.

Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (1990) can also elucidate the impact that institutionalized practices exert on social actors. 'Habitus', a system of transportable dispositions which shape and constrain individuals' range of behavior, is argued to produce and be produced by collective practices corresponding to historically generated schemes. According to Bourdieu "habitus ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the 'correctness' of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms"

(Bourdieu, 1990:54). This conceptualization outlines the interrelation between experience, perception and practice and thus provides a framework for understanding how teachers' institutionalized school experiences give rise to their personal perspectives. Accordingly, such perspectives result in the application of practices on the basis of their 'correctness' which therefore determine the forms of interaction that lead to the emergence of place meanings.

5.3 Conclusions and implications

These findings emphasize the need for Outdoor Education researchers to put focus on the social contexts that carry out learning interventions and construct place meanings. Despite the consideration of outdoor spaces in educational literature through the lens of Sociology (e.g. Humberstone, 2000; Waite, 2013; Waite et al. 2013), little attention has been paid to teachers' perceptions and practices regarding place in relation to the social processes that give rise to them. Social landscapes are mostly taken for granted and the idea of place as a social construction is often overlooked (Gruenewald, 2003b:626). In order to develop a more conscious attitude towards social places, there is a need to bring them "into our awareness for conscious reflection and unpack their particular cultural meanings" (Gruenewald, 2003b:627). Such a process would deepen awareness of the impact that human choices exert on the social construction of place and would underline human influence over the process of place-making.

The importance of place for the didactic identity of Outdoor Education supports the argument that increasing place consciousness can result in a stronger educational potential of the method. Acknowledging that place encompasses the geographical dimension of social, political and economic relations implies that place-based learning approaches can integrate social concerns into school practices. In this sense, place can become a source for learning that addresses issues of social participation, social justice, and community development, besides exclusively constituting a learning resource for increasing academic achievement. Studying place from this perspective can also foster learning which focuses on ecological concerns, as it is made possible to address the root-causes of environmental degradation issues. Such a deeper interpretation of place would therefore allow the learning terrain to expand beyond the limits of school areas to include a variety of natural and cultural landscapes which, in the context of

the Outdoor Education, are regarded as providing both the content of learning and the opportunity for undivided learning experiences (Dahlgren & Szczepanski 1998).

In this research, an attempt has been made to emphasize the social processes underlying the construction of place meaning by teachers. Thus, it can be stressed that the contribution of this enquiry lies in drawing attention to the institutional regulation of teachers' place experiences within the social worlds of schools. The theoretical discussion of the study's findings emphasized that institutionalized relations and actions within the social worlds of schools exercise a significant impact on place-based, outdoor learning and teaching practices and can thus constrain their educational potential. According to Gruenewald, current educational discourses "seek to standardize the experience of students from diverse geographical and cultural places so that they may compete in the global economy" (Gruenewald, 2003a:7). This leads to the integration of a "placeless" curriculum into schools which results in the abstraction and simulation of classroom learning (Gruenewald, 2003a:7) and thus constrains the pedagogical options that place-based learning practices offer to teachers. Such a need for a place-responsive curriculum is supported by a growing body of literature. Woodhouse and Knapp (2000) advocate that learning "emerges from the particular attributes of place" and "connects place with self and community" (Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000:3). In a similar sense, Sobel (2004) underlines the educational potential of place which becomes the focus of learning that is rooted in the local culture, history, social problems, economics and aesthetics of the community and the environment. Furthermore, he suggests a place-based curriculum focusing on outward learning that starts from developing empathetic connections with the local and familiar, and therefore counteracts the abstract conceptualization of outdoor places mediated through environmental and conventional education (Sobel, 1996:19).

Recognizing such an interrelation between institutions and social actors in the perspective of education implies that schools can develop the connections with places that lead to their investment with meaning. This can be achieved through interpreting and broadening teachers' perceptual experience of place at school level in order to expand responsiveness to a diversity of landscapes (Gruenewald, 2003b:626). In this sense, outdoor learning and teaching practices have a lot to benefit from integrating place-based curricula into school education. Curriculum goals appeared to strongly

influence the teaching practices of the study's respondents and curriculum guidelines were found to be closely followed. Hence, it can be argued that learning that draws on the previously outlined pedagogical options of place, and therefore links educational practices with communities as social and cultural entities, is attainable once such educational guidelines have been set at curriculum planning level. Furthermore, it can be asserted that outdoor teaching and learning practices directed toward such objectives can be endorsed once introduced at teacher training level. The study's results indicated that both the theoretical and practical knowledge acquired in academic courses by the study's participants was well received and admitted into school teaching practice. Such arguments put forward the suggestion that place consciousness can be developed through institutional regulations therefore leading the natural and cultural environment to becoming both the place and the object of learning (Szczepanski et al. 2006:3). Consequently, emphasis can be put on the interrelation between education, culture and place, and finally the human impact on the construction of place can be highlighted (Gruenewald, 2003b:627).

Although this thesis makes some progress towards gaining an insight of the social processes that underlie the meanings attributed to place, much still remains to be explored. It would be of great interest if the current research could widen its empirical scope to solidify findings and achieve a deeper understanding of the topic it addresses. This could be pursued by expanding the sample and conducting multiple interviews with the study's respondents in order to test the formulated hypotheses against incoming data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990:13) as well as by carrying out a more in-depth analysis to increase the explanatory power of the findings.

What is notable with the current study is that the employment of photo elicitation techniques was very effective for addressing the concept of place and receiving firm data regarding the research focus. The strength of this method verified the opinion of Stedman et al. (2004), who argued that research on place meaning can be benefited by the use of photos as they represent both spatial and social contexts concurrently.

It is important to acknowledge at this juncture that the findings of this thesis should not be treated as applicable in other contexts, despite the fact that the analytical processes gave a clear insight of the interventions through which meanings were

ascribed to place. The primary interest of the thesis has been on the interpretation of a particular instance of the studied phenomenon. This narrow focus guided the selection and implementation of methodological tools and therefore the readers are the ones made accountable for making generalizations by determining “whether the ideas that are available are appropriate to their situation” (Eisner, 1991:212).

Finally, further research could engage with the impact of the physical environment and its culturally shared understanding on the construction of place meanings. Even though studies on the intersection of outdoor learning interventions and culture can be found in extant literature (e.g. Änggård, 2010; Waite, 2013), it is important that further research should explore the processes of constructing shared understandings of place among cultural groups regarding the social worlds that teachers are part of. Such research would not only supplement Outdoor Education literature but would also shed light on the cultural constraints and allowances that regulate teachers’ place experiences and shape their practices. Furthermore, the social processes through which such constraints and allowances are given rise and perpetuated would be identified. Consequently, the educational potential of Outdoor Education could be broadened by eliminating cultural restrictions on teaching practices and learning spaces in which they are conducted and by critically examining issues of social behavior (e.g. Humberstone, 2000, 2008; Wait et al. 2013) from the perspective of a democratic education.

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Appendix

A. Interview guide

- 1) Can you tell me how long you have been teaching for? What grade do you teach?
How many students are there in your class? How often do you go outdoors with your class?
- 2) When do you prefer to spend time outdoors with your class? Why?
How do you come to decide if a lesson is better to be taught indoors or outdoors?
- 3) What the most important areas you cover with outdoor teaching? Why?
- 4) Presentation and discussion of four pictures representing different learning environments. Teachers are asked to reflect on the environments presented and their educational potential.
- 5) I would like you to describe an outdoor lesson that you think was very successful.
Where did it take place?
Would it be equally successful if it took place somewhere else? Why?
- 6) Which particular place within your school setting do you use most for outdoor teaching? Why?
- 7) How would you describe your school setting?
What do most teachers at your school think of outdoor teaching?
- 8) How did you come to follow this method of learning? Have you participated in any Outdoor Education training program?
- 9) Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

B. Interview pictures

