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Heli Villanen, heli.villanen@ltu.se

Department of Arts, Communication and Education, Luleå University of Technology

Eva Alerby, Eva.Alerby@ltu.se

Department of Arts, Communication and Education, Luleå University of Technology

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The sense of place – voices from a schoolyard

Heli Villanen, Department of Arts, Communication and Education, Luleå University of Technology
heli.villanen@ltu.se

Eva Alerby, Professor, Department of Arts, Communication and Education, Education, Language, and Teaching, Luleå University of Technology Eva.Alerby@ltu.se

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In what way does the place, in the form of a schoolyard, influence students and teachers in school? Is it possible to understand and describe the relationship between the activities and the place? In this paper we explore some aspects of the schoolyard as a place from a phenomenological life-world approach. The aim of this paper is to elucidate and develop greater understanding of the significance of the schoolyard. The following research questions have guided the study: (i) how can the relationship between humans and the place be understood and described? (ii) how is a schoolyard experienced by children? We will highlight and discuss these questions by exploring previous research from a general perspective concerning the relationship between a human and places, but also with a special focus on children's relationship with places. We will also explore children's own experiences. Altogether, 28 children in grade 6 reflected, both in writing and verbally, on their experiences of the schoolyard. Furthermore, we will discuss how place-based education can use children's experiences of the schoolyard as an anchor for pedagogical work. The paper should be viewed as a theoretical contribution to the field of educational research, but with the theory exemplified by, and connected to, children's experiences. According to the analysis of the children's written and verbal responses, three themes emerged: (i) The schoolyard as a place for learning, (ii) The schoolyard as a facilitator for social relations and (iii) Beyond the boundaries – desire for freedom. The place acquires its significance when people experience it. Consequently, there is a mutual interplay between human beings and places. One consequence of taking the life-world as a point of departure is that a place must be understood as a *lived place* – it is neither purely mental nor purely material, but actual experienced reality in all its complexity.

Monday morning – an ordinary day in an ordinary school is about to start. Some children come to the school by the school bus or bike, and some are walking. The children are running through the schoolyard to get to the first lesson on time. A broken basketball and some hockey sticks are lying beside the wall of the school. The schoolyard is empty during the lesson until the first break begins. During the break, the children and some of the teachers, use the schoolyard for different activities. They are all involved in different kinds of social, emotional and, to some extent, learning activities. They are playing, running, talking, thinking, feeling, reading, writing and dreaming. This mix of activities and modes influences many different things and is, in turn, influenced by many things.

The above paradigm case, illustrates the ordinary activities that take place in a schoolyard¹ in a small city in the northern part of Sweden. A 'paradigm case' is an illustration of a

¹ Schoolyard vs schoolground: We use the word schoolyard through our paper, although in some countries it is more common to use schoolground to describe the park, playground and other outdoor area belonging to school.

situation that could happen, but is not taken from field notes or other direct observations of a specific occasion. A paradigm case is a narrative account created by combining our collected experiences written in a way that illuminates the issue discussed in the paper. (Alerby & Hörnqvist, 2003). What then do we know about schoolyards and the activities taking place there?

According to Kuisma (2001), knowledge is located at the intersection of social and environmental knowledge, which in a way is tacit. One sort of tacit environmental knowledge is the traditional ways in which people use the environment, a schoolyard for example, following, among other things, seasonal rhythms. Children's play and games embody traditions that are connected to seasonal variation and traditions, and in schoolyards in northern Sweden, winter activities include, for example, building snow caves, skiing, snowball fights and sliding with snow-racers. It follows, therefore, that in order to understand a schoolyard, and how it might influence the individuals using it and the activities taking place there, we need a theory that can take into account the many intertwined qualities and dimensions of the place. In this paper, we draw attention to the ways in which children make sense of the outdoor school space, always conscious that their encounters are embodied.

The aim of this paper is to elucidate and develop a greater understanding of the significance of the schoolyard by exploring human relationships with the place. The paper should be viewed as a theoretical contribution to the field of educational research, but with the theory exemplified by, and connected to, children's experiences of a schoolyard. The theoretical point of departure is the phenomenology of the life-world, which is used in order to understand what a place means to humans using it or, to be more precise, to understand what a schoolyard means to the children using it.

In the following we will highlight and discuss this issue by exploring previous research from a general perspective concerning the relationship between a human and places, but also with a special focus on children's relationship with places. We will also explore children's own experiences of a schoolyard. Furthermore, we will discuss how place-based education can use children's experiences of the schoolyard as an anchor for pedagogical work. As the theoretical foundation of this paper is to be found within the phenomenology of the life-world, it is now time to illuminate further and discuss this approach.

Phenomenology of the life-world – an approach for exploring the schoolyard as a place

Husserl (1970) formulated the leading principles of phenomenology as a turning towards things themselves, and displaying humbleness towards things shown. However, *phenomenology of the life-world* is one branch of the phenomenological movement, which has been developed by philosophers of existentialism such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as a reaction against transcendental phenomenology. In the following, our attempt is to outline briefly certain significant characteristics of the life-world approach, but also to argue why we think this approach can be used fruitfully in a study of places such as schoolyards.

The life-world has its own distinguishing characteristics, and Bengtsson (1998) therefore points out that this motivates its own name. The phenomenological life-world concept is interpreted by Schutz (1980) as the everyday life-world, which we take for granted and where we live our lives. According to Schutz and Luckmann (1973), the life-world is intersubjective, but it presents itself as a subjective meaning-context.

In his examination of the life-world Merleau-Ponty (1996) identified four fundamental existential themes by which all human beings experience the world. The four life-world existentials are: *spatiality*, *embodiment*, *temporality* and *relationality*. Merleau-Ponty also

stresses that these existential themes are fundamental to all human existence, and pervade all being-in-the-world regardless of historical, cultural, contextual or social situatedness.

In this study it is not a question of using the phenomenological method *epoché*, developed by Husserl. Epoché, the phenomenological reduction, means bracketing the questions of existence. In accordance with Merleau-Ponty, we emphasise instead previous experiences and knowledge; separating body and mind, essence and existence, is not possible.

For Merleau-Ponty (1996), as humans we access the world through our bodies and the body is bound up with subjectivity. All knowledge we develop is embodied, and we can never free ourselves from this embodiment. Thus, as human we are *in* the world with all our experiences. This should, however, not be interpreted as meaning that the human body is in the world in the same way as things, such as a bike or a basketball. Instead Merleau-Ponty stresses that the body *inhabits* the world. In accordance to Merleau-Ponty (1996), a person's existence provides the prerequisites for the worldly experience, and the distinction between the concept of the body-subject and cogito is significant in that he perceived the essences of the world existentially.

Life-world ontology includes a pluralistic and integrative view of reality, and pluralism should be understood as a non-reductionist way of understanding reality. This means that it is not sufficient to limit reality to a fixed number of qualities, such as physical and mental qualities. Instead, the pluralism of the life-world means that reality is complex and thus consists of a large number of different qualities that cannot be reduced to each other. The life-world is neither an objective world in itself nor a subjective world, but something in between. This view signifies an indissoluble interdependency between human beings and the world – the world and life affect each other mutually in the sense that life is always worldly and the world is always what it is for a living being. In this way, life and world are integrated into a unity that cannot be separated (Bengtsson, 1998).

Given this, reality has to be seen more in terms of 'both and' rather than 'either or', which applies not only to life and world but also to body and mind, object and subject, outer and inner, physical and mental, sensuous and cognitive, self and other, individual and society, etc. (Alerby et al., 2002). Therefore, a schoolyard cannot merely be identified with the characteristics of geometrical space. It is first and foremost a place with a particular content, meaning and value that means different things to the different people who inhabit it. The life-world is, not only a world of material things that are spatially arranged: it is also inhabited by people who affect and are affected by the world (Bengtsson, 1994).

Taking the foregoing into account, the schoolyard is a place that can be viewed from many different perspectives, perhaps the most prominent of these being its material qualities. A schoolyard consists, for example, of grass pitches, an asphalt surface, concrete, trees, wooden benches and playground equipment of varying kinds. However, a comprehensive view of the schoolyard will not be evident through only its material qualities: both functional and aesthetic qualities can also be found. In addition to these qualities, complicated questions concerning the architectural formation of outdoor places in relation to human beings can be added (Alerby, 2004). When entering a schoolyard attached to an ordinary Swedish primary school, we can fairly quickly, and without any major problems, enter the place. Through our experience we do not have to measure the opening of the gate at the schoolyard in order to establish whether it is large enough to get through. Nor do we have to control the space between some benches that are placed next to a climbing frame in order to move between them. Instead, this is done relatively automatically and unconsciously. We avoid the benches and negotiate the turn around the climbing frame without any major concerns for accessibility. Therefore, we can express that when we enter the place, in this case a schoolyard, "we dress ourselves in the schoolyard," to adopt the words of Merleau-Ponty (1996).

Human relationships with places

As we have shown above, places concern us as human beings – they form our living space, or habitat. We must therefore try to find qualities that are important for both good and bad places, but also raise a question about the relationship between humans and place. Bengtsson (1994) argues that one way to find qualities of importance for places – good as well as bad – is through an analysis of the place. Norberg-Schulz (1971, 1980, 1994) has developed a phenomenology of the place in which he describes how the place appears to humans in the form of so-called ‘moments’, such as: arrive at the place, meet the place, live and be together at the place, the agreement and the meaning of the place, and to withdraw from the public of the place.

We will explore further the sense of place in the light of previous research, and also to raise the question of how this might influence human relationships. Many researchers have explored human relationships with places from the public planning point of view, including schools and schoolyards. Werne (1997), for example, argues that the architect’s most important task is to create places that somehow respond to people – in other words, to create places that people can inhabit and with which they feel conversant. For a place to respond to humans, it must, according to Werne (1997), include considerations between conventions and intentional ethical and aesthetic positions that speak to the human and to her or his way of life. Given this, people must recognize themselves in the place, and thus feel at home. But the place must also attract and challenge the human, all in order not to bore her or him (Werne, 1997).

The sense of place as a concept was first proposed by the geographer Lynch already in 1960s according to Kudryavtsev (2012). Lynch (1984) emphasised that to understand a place completely (e.g. a schoolyard), the place has to be regarded as a social, biological and physical whole. The phenomenological approach also relies on a pluralistic and integrative view of reality: a reality that we share with other humans (Merleau-Ponty, 1996). Lynch (1984) stresses that the sense of place requires a structure. By structure, he means a sense of orientation – knowing how different parts link together. Lynch (1984) has developed an idea of orientation – a way to navigate in the place. He stresses that there is also navigation in time, which includes a deeper emotional sense of how the present moment is linked to the near or distant past and future. According to him, we are dependent on external clues to keep us temporally well oriented. School in general is a highly structural place according to place and time. Lectures, breaks, lunches and snacks have their special order and place in schools’ everyday routines. Children orientate in the place according to schedules. They know what kind of activities and play they have time for during the breaks. Additionally, there are activities in the schoolyard that children continue to pursue in the following breaks and, perhaps, following days. In other words, they have awareness and knowledge of how to orientate in the schoolyard. From a phenomenological point of departure, we could propose that human beings always are *in* the world – their life-world.

As Kudryavtsev et al. (2012) argue, most research into the sense of place has concerned adults’ place attachment. However, some studies have children’s experience of place in the focus. According to Chawla (2002), places where one can gather and places where one feels one has rights are generally valued by children. Children also value places in which they feel safe and those offering the possibility of free mobility. A schoolyard is a place for children to gather, but the question is, to what extent does it create a feeling of security and offer the possibility of free mobility?

Children’s experiences and senses of place have been a specific focus, for example, for Kytta (2003), who has analysed children’s relationships with places through the concept of

affordance. Affordance challenges the idea of dichotomy between subject and object, and describes different qualities – potential and actualised – that different places have for their users, which is in line with a phenomenological life-world approach, emphasising ‘both and’ rather than ‘either or’. It is of importance to understand that the place offers different things to different people. The way of being and using the place is, according to Kytta (2003), a result of learning. She also stresses that the way children perceive affordances depends on their age and development. Children learn within a social context that affordances can be positive as well as negative. It is worth noting that children are often drawn to extend their limits. Affordances that are often appealing to children can generally be regarded as dangerous, such as playing by a stream or walking on thin ice on a lake. In addition, children in a schoolyard can sometimes choose to use the equipment in a way that was not intended, which can incur risks. Thomson (2007) found in her study that children are very innovative about adapting architectural features and pieces of equipment in the playground. She noticed that schools banned nearly all activities that children found attractive, predominantly for reasons of safety. Following the above argumentations of Kytta (2003) and Thomson (2007), children’s relationships with a place are to some extent ambivalent and complex.

Lynch (1984) stresses that the sense of place cannot be analysed, except as an interaction between the person and the place. Following him, the simplest form of ‘a sense of place’ is *identity*, which is a quality that makes it possible to distinguish one place from another. He argues that there is a sheer delight in sensing the world: the play of light, the feel and smell of the wind, touches, sounds, colours, forms. In this way a good place is accessible to all the senses, making visible the currents of the air and engaging the perceptions of its inhabitants. Lynch (1984) links place identity and personal identity – ‘I am here’ supports ‘I am’, and vice versa. Moreover, Björklid (2005) argues that the physical environment is of significance for children’s development of identity in relation to the place. She claims that school buildings are no longer compatible with the present pedagogical ideas, but rather reflect the old ideology of transferring knowledge from teacher to children. Here we can ask whether this is the case also for schoolyards. Jokela (2008) stresses that the schoolyard is like a window on school activities and, according to Alerby (2003), the schoolyard can be regarded as a significant place of a school. The children in the study by Alerby (2003) emphasised that it is during the break, when using the schoolyard, that the positive experiences of school occur.

Furthermore, studies have shown that children experience the school environment as an expression of how adults value them (see, e.g., Skantze, 1989). The same will probably hold true concerning the schoolyard, which can be seen as an expression of how children are valued by the world of adults. Here we can reflect on what values a schoolyard gives to the children using it. In addition, Thomson (2007) stresses that the schoolyard is an institutional educational space governed by adults’ perception of appropriate behaviour. She points out that a schoolyard symbolises an adult (architects, local authorities, play equipment suppliers, teachers) understanding of children and their requirements. Due to this, we can reflect on the meaning of the schoolyard for the development of individual or group identity. Gruenewald (2003) illuminates how places are social constructions filled with ideologies, and the experience of places in the end shapes cultural identities. In connection with this reasoning we can raise the question as to what kind of pedagogical ideas are reflected by a schoolyard.

One pedagogical idea might be to facilitate a place of stillness during the school day. In a study by Alerby (2004), children expressed in a clear and distinct way their need to withdraw and to be in silence during the school day. These children found their silent place in the schoolyard. This silenced place, called the Peace Area, was located in one corner of the schoolyard, and at this place no noisy activities were allowed. It was a place of stillness and peace. The children appreciated the Peace Area because it was a quiet and peaceful place where they could sit and relax and think by themselves, talk quietly to friends or read and

finish school work. It was a place to, “get away from the rush of people”, as one of the children expressed it (Alerby, 2004, p. 59).

Next we will take a closer look at how the children participating in the current study experienced their schoolyard.

Schoolyard experiences

The view of reality in accordance with the life-world leads to methodological consequences. To do justice to the complexity of reality we have to develop adequate methods to grasp other kinds of qualities we may expect to find. To adopt readymade ‘methodological recipes’ is not an option. Instead, to do justice to the complexity of reality, a methodological creativity is required (Bengtsson, 1998). The question is to listen to the voices expressed by the children. Rudduck and Flutter (2004) provide three major reasons for giving voice to students; the Children’s Rights Movement, the school improvement movement and the citizenship education movement. Also Kellet (2010) stresses the **importance** of listening when young people speak, and she emphasise a child-led research. By conducting research which is child-led, a better understanding of children’s lived experiences is generated.

Methodological considerations

The methodological basis of the study consists largely of two parts: one that concerns the methods used to collect the empirical material and another that concerns the method of analysis. In an attempt to tackle the aim of the study, the children were asked to write about their significant experiences of the schoolyard. According to Dysthe (1993), writing is a much slower process than talking, which in turn gives the writer an opportunity to reflect on and consider the writing topic. Written reflections can, according to Applebee (1984), portray a person’s experience and, due to this, explicit experiences can be analysed. Writing is the highest form of symbolic thinking, emphasises Vygotsky (1978), and van Manen (1997) stresses that writing facilitates one’s own personal experiences being made more explicit. Backman et al. (2012) underline that a writer can remember, relive and reflect on their own experiences.

The writing task was done during ordinary school activities and complemented by verbal comments during a *gåtur* (evaluating walk) in the schoolyard. The children were asked to express as openly as possible their experiences of being in the schoolyard. The opening question was: *What is the best thing that happens at the schoolyard?* In the line of a phenomenological approach, we were careful not to make leading questions or try to influence in any ways on the content of the children’s experiences. If we made additional questions concerning the written or verbal expressions, it was meant to confirm that we, as researchers, had understood what a child meant.

‘Gåtur’ is a method used to evaluate buildings and residential areas together with the users (De Laval, 1998). Inspired by this method, and as a complement to the written reflections, we took a short walk (approximately 20 minutes) around the schoolyard with the children. The children then had the opportunity to express their experiences verbally and visually by pointing out specific places and to talk about them. During the walk, as well as in the written reflection, the children were encouraged to express what places they found significant in the schoolyard, and why.

Altogether, 28 children in grade 6 reflected, both in writing and verbally, on their experiences of the schoolyard. The children who participated in the study all lived within a municipality of approximately 40 000 inhabitant in the County of Norrbotten in northern Sweden. The school

was an ordinary size for a Swedish secondary school, comprising of grades 5 to 9 and one or two classes in each grade. It was situated in a suburban area, 20 km from the city centre. The study followed the Swedish ethical code of conduct (SFS, 2008), which includes provisions, for example, whereby participation in a research study is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason why. The ethical code of conduct also involves confidentiality, which means that unauthorised persons have no access to the empirical data. Information about the study was given to the children and their parents, verbally and in writing, and informed consent was obtained.

By staging an open enquiry about significant experiences of the schoolyard, we aimed to grasp a variety of experiences of different qualities of the place. We were trying to gain some insight into the possible meanings that a schoolyard may have for children. Against the background of the children's experiences, we will discuss some important qualities of a schoolyard. It is worth noting that the study was conducted in winter, which probably gives a special character to outdoor experiences. Moreover, the school building had recently been renovated, which had a bearing on the children's everyday life in school. They had temporarily been using relatively simple and outdated mobile classrooms.

During the analysis process we tried to grasp the meaning of the experiences to which the children gave form. According to the analytical process, all written experiences, as well as verbal comments, were analysed in a repeated and thorough manner, incorporating qualitative similarities and differences that finally formed patterns. These patterns were then combined in different themes, taking the common and central characteristics of the patterns as the point of departure. Consequently, it is, according to van Manen (1990), the different themes that make the *phenomenon* what it is, and the phenomenon in this case is *the sense of a schoolyard*. It is, however, important to emphasise that this process should not be regarded as being governed by certain predetermined rules. Rather, it is a question of allowing the phenomenon to appear in a non-reductionist way. The themes that gradually emerged are made up of the experiences expressed by the children.

Voices from a schoolyard

According to the analysis of the children's written and verbal responses, they experienced the schoolyard as: (i) *The schoolyard as a place for learning*, (ii) *The schoolyard as a facilitator for social relations* and (iii) *Beyond the boundaries – desire for freedom*. In the following we will, without any relative order of precedence, illuminate these children's experiences concerning the schoolyard. In addition, we want to stress that the themes should not be regarded as independent categories that are qualitatively separate. Rather, they have connections and links to each other, which will be described below.

The schoolyard as a place for learning

Within this theme the children emphasised the significance of learning when using the schoolyard, as the following quotes demonstrate. "The greatest thing that has happened to me at the schoolyard was when I learned to do a double-jump [skipping rope]", or "The best thing was when I ran five times around the goal and finally scored [hockey]". These reflections express experiences of learning something new, doing something for the first time, daring to do something and succeeding in it. However, the learning they emphasised is not connected to academic skills and knowledge but rather to practical skills and knowledge, such as climbing a tree or riding a skateboard. The learning situations they mention derive their significance from personal values and goals that the children have individually. The significance emerges from entering a new phase of what children can do or know. One of the children expressed this as follows: "The first time that I dipped [with a skateboard] from the ramp was the best thing that has happened at the schoolyard."

All the things these children mentioned as significant were also physical in nature, as the following quotes show. “The best thing was when I learned to climb a tree”, or “It’s fun to play ‘bandy’ [a version of hockey], build a cave and skate at the ramp”. Reaching beyond one’s own limits and attaining the goals one has set for oneself represent the core of learning experience in the schoolyard.

From the above, we can conclude that learning is promoted by a place with qualities that challenge the individual. At the same time we can see how the place offers different things to different people and, drawing on the work of Kytta (2003), we can see how affordances of a schoolyard are actualized for children. A tree is a potential affordance for many things, and may actualize for some child as a place to climb. Snow is also an affordance for many activities, such as building a cave. We would also encourage looking more deeply into the issues of setting goals for learning from the children’s perspective, and the relationship between academic and practical skills. Children chose the goals for learning by themselves and, through that process, they illuminated significant learning experiences that have happened to them in the schoolyard.

The schoolyard as a facilitator for social relations

The social dimensions of the schoolyard are important, according to the children. They expressed the importance of social relations with both peers and teachers. They expressed being with friends as one of the most significant experiences in the schoolyard. The social aspects of these experiences are highlighted in the following quotes. “When I am with my friends” and “To be with my sister and her friends in the snow or stand/sit or just hang around somewhere, both in the summer and winter.”

Given the above, the children’s most significant experiences of the schoolyard emerged from social interactions, friendship and doing things together, as the following quote illustrates. “The best thing is when we found a torn basketball and played football with it around the broken ice hockey goal.” Having fun and being creative has a social character. Taking an example such as using an old basketball for a purpose other than basketball describes spontaneous and creative activities occurring in the schoolyard among a group of children. This innovative adapting of pieces in the playground was also found in Thomson’s (2007) study. Broken or worn things may appear to and attract children in a way that is different for adults.

In northern Sweden the long winter and snow offer possibilities for social and creative outdoor play, as one child remarked: “When we built a really nice snow cave which was really deep”. Snow is an element to use, to create things – sculptures and caves – which the children like to do as a group activity. These activities were the finest shared memory from the schoolyard according to some of the children, expressed during the ‘gåtur’. The children could also point out roughly where the snow caves were located. Both Thomson (2007) and Gruenewald (2003) emphasize that places are social constructions where cultural identities are shaped. Moreover, places are closely connected with the identity (Lynch, 1984). The children expressed the significance of shared experiences. The children also emphasised the positive experience of teachers’ participation in their play, as one of the children remarked, “the best thing was when a teacher was playing with us”. However, social relations have different meanings and dimensions. There are social relationships between the children, but also between children and teachers, and these play a significant role in the schoolyard. Nevertheless, social relations in the schoolyard can also take the form of negative dimensions, such as bullying. However, our data did not reveal any negative dimensions. This was probably because the children were asked about the best things that happened in the schoolyard.

Beyond the boundaries: the desire for freedom

Within this theme the children expressed a wish to go beyond some of the boundaries that can be present in a schoolyard. As we have shown above, the schoolyard is an institutional space governed by adults' perceptions of appropriate behaviour (Thomson, 2007). Limits and rules regarding the children's activities in the schoolyard are often strictly regulated, such as staying outdoors during the breaks, but also staying within the territory of the schoolyard. During the 'gåtur', several children explained that the most significant experiences in the schoolyard were when they were allowed to play in a snowdrift beside the car park. One child expressed this as follows: "To play 'sura' [a kind of ball game] and to be allowed to play at the slope in the parking lot". The importance of being able to stretch the territorial limits, as delineated during the breaks, was highlighted in this way. Kytta (2003) has also shown how children often long to breach the limits adults set.

One way of stretching the boundaries and negotiating the rules, as expressed by some children as being the best thing in their opinion, was when they were allowed to stay indoors in winter. The following quotes illustrate this aspect. "To be allowed to go inside during the breaks" and "The best thing happened at the winter: go in!" These reflections might give an impression that the schoolyard is somewhere the children don't want to be. The boundaries of the schoolyard are constantly challenged and negotiated by both children and teachers. The children appreciated when boundaries, limits and rules were flexible, which they expressed as significant experiences of the schoolyard. However previous studies have shown how children value places where there can feel safe and exercise free mobility (e.g. Chawla, 2002). Obviously activities in the schoolyard must find a balance between these two tensions, safety and freedom. Another aspect of stretching the boundaries, according to some of the children, was the opportunity to leave the classroom or, as one of the children wrote, "the best thing happened at the schoolyard is to come out from the classroom and get fresh air". These reflections describe the schoolyard as contrary to time spent indoors, especially during renovation. According to these children, the temporary classrooms had been uncomfortable and they wished to get outside. One of the children wrote, "I like to come out of the mobile classroom". Here we find a connection to Alerby's (2004) argument according to which the schoolyard is not simply a **place** defined by its material qualities; its functional and aesthetic qualities are important. For some children the schoolyard offered a refreshing moment between classes in the barracks.

Finally, experiences of the school building intertwine with experiences of the schoolyard, and vice versa. As a conclusion, we want to stress that children constantly confront, and negotiate, different kinds of boundaries in the schoolyard. They have their preferences concerning the place and the use of it. According to our analyses, children have a desire for greater freedom to decide how they make use of the schoolyard.

Discussion – possibilities and limitations of the schoolyard

In this paper, we have discussed different aspects and qualities of the schoolyard. According to our study, but also with regard to previous studies, we wish to emphasise that the sense of the place is a result of interaction between the place and the individuals who inhabit it. As we highlighted above, it is significant that people who are present at a school and in its yard feel familiar with the place. In addition there should also be things that attract and challenge both teachers and children with the ultimate aim of promoting learning and well-being. Gruenewald (2008) claims that it is necessary to look outside of the school and classroom in order to find the actual diversity that has become so important to educational discourse. A schoolyard can be experienced as a place for learning, a facilitator for social relations and place where boundaries are negotiated.

In accordance with the phenomenological life-world approach, we have emphasised the ways in which children experienced the schoolyard. However, different qualities of the

schoolyard offer different values for its users. The focus on the outdoor environment within, or beyond, the school territory can widen the perspective on pedagogical possibilities (Backman et al., 2012). It is also a question of setting a focus on children's everyday experiences that are not fragmented into different places but are more a continuum of a pluralistic reality. A schoolyard is at the same time a space between classes, but also a part of the continuum of school experience. During a school day, learning happens both during and between lessons. Therefore a schoolyard could be an important place for children's individual learning and well-being, as well as for education in general. One of the pedagogical approaches that explicitly take the surrounding environment (both physical and social) into school as a point of departure is place-based education. According to Gruenewald (2008) the attention to experience in place-based education locates its pedagogy in the broader traditions of experiential and contextual education and in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. He claims that a focus on lived experience of place puts culture in context, demonstrates the interconnection between culture and environment, and provides a locally relevant pathway for multidisciplinary inquiry and democratic participation.

Barratt and Barratt Hackling (2011) and Kudryavtsev et al. (2012) argues that place-based education in schoolyards and nature sites can enhance a connection with nature, confidence in interacting with nature and pro-environmental behavior. Moreover, Gruenewald (2003) connects a critical framework to place-based education in order to evaluate the appropriateness of our relationship with each other and with the place. Perez and Hart (1980, p. 253) stress a child-centered approach, "children – not playgrounds – should be the basis for planning". We argue that this should also apply to schoolyards. One way to involve children when it comes to planning a schoolyard, according to both design and activities, is to listen to their experiences of the place in the way we have done in the current study.

We suggest, therefore, that place-based education – education that focuses on both the social and natural aspects of the environment – takes children's experiences of the local environment (the schoolyard) as a starting point. Though place-based education focuses on real-world problem solving and community development, we would like to raise questions regarding who defines the real-world problems and issues of community development, and how. A schoolyard is one example where the children are active users of and experts on the place. The question is, however, should children have a voice in defining the design and use of a particular place (e.g., a schoolyard)? Possibilities and problems faced in the schoolyard are probably best defined together with children, and through careful listening to their experiences.

A schoolyard has material, functional and aesthetical qualities. In our study children enabled us to see the moments of place by telling or writing about their experiences. They showed us how they orient themselves within the schoolyard by seeking out situations where they can learn something new or connect with friend for example. As we explained from the outset, we have used children's experiences to exemplify the theory. In accordance to phenomenological understanding of the world every new situation may have ontological, biographical, and social aspects which by means of the actual experience motivate to new explications (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). The three themes we identified in our study arose in that specific space with those specific children. Another set of children would doubtless have experienced the space differently. And the same children may be feeling, using and encountering the space differently already now. Encounters with space are always changing, but by illuminating them as particular moments we can highlight the diversity of the children's reality.

Some concluding remarks

To conclude, we wish to emphasise that a place, in this case a schoolyard, is experienced, interpreted and used in different ways by different people. The place acquires its significance when people experience it (i.e., by looking at it, being in it and using it). Research has, however, shown that the formation of place influences us as human beings. We have therefore emphasised that as well as humans beings are influenced by the place, the place is in turn influenced by humans. Consequently, there is a mutual interplay between human beings and places. One consequence of taking the life-world as a point of departure is that a place must be understood as a *lived place* – it is neither purely mental nor purely material, but actual experienced reality in all its complexity.

It is therefore our hope that the life-world approach can become a fruitful road to conceptualise theoretically and study empirically the different dimensions of places in general and schoolyards in particular. The life-world approach gives us the means to study schoolyards as lived places, which is crucial in order to grasp all the various aspects of human relationships with places. Finally, we will end in the same way as we started – with a story of the ending of the school day written as a paradigm case:

Monday afternoon – an ordinary day in an ordinary school is about to finish. Children pass the schoolyard on their way home. Some of them gather by the bus stop, some take their bikes and some walk home. They see the snow cave made earlier that day and a broken basketball lying on the ground. A teacher comes out from the school building, picks up the ball and puts it into the rubbish bin. The day has been full of activities taking place in the schoolyard – sports and play, learning new things and being with friends. There have also been negotiations of roles and borders (e.g., where children are allowed to be and do). The question is, however, do the children feel at home in the schoolyard and how well does it speak to their way of life?

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