

‘L’-bláttíðni: Læknisfræðileg og félagsleg

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teachers use the outdoor environment in children's learning, though it likely varies between schools as well as between teachers at each school. In Iceland, however, there are signs that compulsory school teachers are using the outdoor environment in the school curriculum more than they did before. In Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland, 70% of compulsory schools report that they practise outdoor education on a regular basis (Óladóttir 2008).

This study was done in connection with a year-long research and development project

curriculum. By this, place-based education addresses one of Dewey's central concerns that schools should not be isolated from the community around them but rather use it both as physical and social learning environment and participate in it (Smith 2013). Greenwood (2013, 93) argues that place-conscious education can contribute to environmental education 'that is culturally responsive, and committed to care for land and people, locally and globally'.

As this study is done in a project about ESD, the theoretical background for ESD has influenced the study, especially ESD's focus on children's participation and decision-making regarding their local environment based on their own experience and knowledge. It is seen as important to encourage children to act on their decisions in favour of the well-beings of themselves and others (Breiting 2008). These theories are built on children's right to be heard on issues that affect them (United Nations 1989, 2005) and to be recognised as competent participants in society (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Einarsdóttir 2012). Some scholars stress the importance of empowering children so they can see themselves

It is interesting to note that often the outdoor environment, or schoolyard, most accessible in the compulsory school is not seen as part of the teaching environment. Thus only one out of five Swedish compulsory school principals regarded the schoolyard as a teaching resource and instead mostly saw it as a place for children's play and social interactions (Björklid 2005). Other studies show that teachers in Swedish compulsory schools (Magnorn and Helldén 2006; Szczepanski and Dahlgren 2011), as well as secondary school teachers, (Fägerstam 2013) stressed the importance of children's

outdoor education. They state that a more pluralistic approach in environmental education in later years has created a danger that people's relation to nature will be neglected in environmental education and, later, in SE.

Research

In a literature review of research on outdoor learning, Rickinson et al. (2004) indicate 'blank spots' in our knowledge of how teachers see the outdoor classroom and what aims are important to seek. In this article we explore the views of 25 Icelandic teachers on the role of the outdoor environment in children's learning. This study also contributes to our knowledge of how teachers connect the use of the outdoor environment to ESD as the participants in the study had experience in using the outdoors in children's learning and had also participated in a project about ESD.

The study will explore how teachers with experience in outdoor education and who participated in an ESD project view the role of the outdoor environment in children's learning.

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Participants

The sample in the study is a purposive sample (Lichtman 2010) drawn from eight schools participating in a research and development project intended to study and promote ESD, called ActionESD (Educational action for sustainable development) (see e.g. Jóhannesson et al. 2011). As these teachers had experience in using the outdoor environment in their teaching, and were involved in a project on SE, which focuses, among other things, on attitudes and actions towards the environment, they were likely to connect ESD to the use of the outdoors. Both experiences mean that these teachers are likely to be 'information-rich' sample (Gall, Borg, and Gall 1996, 218) knowledgeable about the role of the outdoor environment in children's learning. Altogether, 25 teachers, compulsory school principals, and preschool directors from four compulsory schools and four preschools were interviewed in the spring of 2009 after a year-long cooperation in the ActionESD project.

From each school participating in the project, the principal or the director was selected for this study, along with a project contact person with the ActionESD group, and one or two other teachers participating in the project (see also Pálsdóttir and Macdonald 2010). Four compulsory school principals (P), Baldur, Rafn, Ingibjörg, and Kona, and four preschool directors (D), Alda, Freyja, Hildur, and Sara, were interviewed. Eight compulsory school teachers (CT), Birna, Björk, Ingunn, Inga, Klara, Katla, Rakel, and Ragna, as well as nine preschool teachers (PT), Alma, Anna, Fanny, Frigg, Hekla, Hulda, Sif, Sjöfn, and Sunna, were interviewed individually, except for one preschool where an interview with four was conducted. All names are pseudonyms. We refer to the whole group as teachers, interviewees, or participants.

Most of the compulsory teachers taught young children (six to nine years of age), but some also taught at a middle (10–12 years of age) or at secondary school level (13–15 years of age), for example, science teachers. Participants from the preschools were qualified preschool teachers, one being an art teacher and one a preschool student teacher. In addition, there was one preschool practitioner with no teacher education. The participating pre- and compulsory school teachers were 29–63-years old; they had a working experience of 5–32 years with an average of a little over 18 years. The average management experience of principals and directors was about seven and a half years.

go out because of bad weather. They mentioned going outside the playground once or twice a week in the summertime. Most of the teachers of both school levels referred to the outdoor

(PT) also maintained that the five-year-olds knew more about their hometown than their parents because of regular field trips conducted with the children.

Included in this theme are teachers' ideas of how the outdoor environment supports children's play and learning in multiple ways. This is mostly about how teachers see the importance of experiencing the outdoor environment, both natural and man-made, can offer children for their play and learning.

Children's health, well-being, and courage

This cluster of themes includes how the teachers saw the role of the outdoor environment in furthering children's physical movements and well-being, as well as developing their ability to tackle risks and build up courage.

Both preschool and compulsory school teachers pointed out the importance of children's outdoor play to release extra energy. As Ingunn (CT) pointed out, after spending a whole morning outside with the children, that they were 'happy and tired ... and then they maybe sit and work on mathematics without a sound ... for two hours'. Many teachers of both school levels also mention physical movement and 'being out in the fresh air'. Some compulsory school teachers expressed concerns about children's lack of exercise and resulting weight gain. Many participants referred to the role of the school in encouraging children's physical exercise in the outdoors. Björk (CT) found such activity to be benefits of outdoor education since it was important for children's health. She said that this was something that teachers 'in the compulsory school have to begin to think about'.

The compulsory school teachers discussed the fact that taking the children outdoors is a way to create diversity in teaching and thus stimulate the children's interests; they saw this as a good way to meet the needs of children who find it difficult to sit for a long time and be in the classroom', as Ragna (CT) phrased it. Klara (CT) said:

I experienced it with a group of boys that were problematic inside. Outside they were not the same children. They just needed to have something to do ... fetching firewood, putting it on the fire and watching it. They need other things than the girls.

The compulsory school teachers also referred to the outdoors as a place for teaching children to 'be a good group' and solve problems among the children, or as Ingibjörg (P) said, 'There are often some conflicts in the school grounds that need solving.' In this way, the outdoors was seen as a learning place for good communication among the children and contributing to their well-being.

The teachers were not specifically asked about risks and dangers, but they were asked what could limit their use of the outdoors. Only one preschool director mentioned related risks, a topic which may have seemed particularly relevant in his case since this director was in charge of a school with regular field trips on the agenda. A few compulsory school teachers addressed risks in general, but did not see this aspect as limiting the use of the outdoors, though Klara (CT) mentioned it specifically as something that must be taken into consideration when going bene(ng)6

avoid the dangers ... '. The teachers also noted that children wanted to challenge themselves and try out new things 'such as climbing on big rocks' or on the top of the play houses in the playground. Hekla (PT) argued that in society there is a trend to overprotect children, but she explained that 'there is a difference between protecting [the children by] wrapping them in cotton or ...

if you are going to teach children to participate in society you have to take them outside, especially outside the playground.

This theme comprises teachers' ideas of how the outdoor environment offers opportunities to participate in society. Children get to know the environment and therefore they are knowledgeable about it and can come up with ideas which may result in environmental changes. This can further their action competence.

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This study investigates 25 Icelandic teachers' views about the role of the outdoors in children's learning. All teachers had used the outdoor environment in their teaching, and they valued the positive educational potential more than the possible risks that could be

in preschool (Björklid 2005; Moser and Marinsen 2010; Szczepanski and Dahlgren 2011).

The finding of this study regarding how the teachers viewed the possible risks of children having accidents in the outdoor environment was interesting. They seemed to think about this as something they had to take into consideration but did not see it as a hindrance. These Icelandic teachers valued the educational potential of the challenges the outdoors offered children to build up courage more than they feared the possible dangers of taking children outside. This is in step with findings from Norway (Sandseter 2012

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