

sourcing inspiration from the landscape

Learn how the landscape is used in Swedish education

Meet the author

Anders Szczepanski's research explores how the interaction between classroom and outdoor environments shapes students' learning and development. He works at Spetsa, Univalent University Holding, Mjärdevi Science Park in Linköping, Sweden (web.spetsa.se/outdoor-education).

Background

How can the landscape be used in education? This was the question I chose to study in my doctoral thesis, where I investigated different dimensions of outdoor teaching and learning among Swedish primary school teachers and professors. Qualitative interviews were carried out with sixty participants, forty-five teachers, and fifteen university professors of education.

Outdoor education in the contemporary Swedish secondary curriculum (1) paints a rather fragmented picture. The curriculum itself mentions outdoor activities and field studies in the local environment with reference to natural science subjects. In contrast, the Swedish pre-school curriculum (2) clearly highlights the importance of alternating between indoor and outdoor activities. Today, work is under way on a new updated curriculum for compulsory schooling in Sweden called Knowledge for all (3). This curriculum will advocate the use of the local environment, natural surroundings, and field studies not only in natural science subjects, but also in languages, humanities, and the arts.

Findings

Through thematic analysis, the results of my interview studies were summarized in five dimensions of outdoor teaching and learning, which correspond to the five didactical questions of 'what, where, how, when, and why'. The five dimensions are: the knowledge dimension (what), the landscape dimension (where), the body dimension (how), the time dimension (when), and the environmental dimension (why). These dimensions are derived from participants' beliefs on the core components of outdoor education. The following section gives a summarized account of these dimensions and considers how they relate to the question 'how can the landscape be used in education?'



Knowledge

Study participants believed that, when teaching and learning takes place in authentic outdoor environments, while interspersed with sessions indoors, students understand that theory and practice go hand in hand. Participants considered that facts and hands-on experiences merge to create knowledge when students, for example, get to know what circumference is by using a tape-measure around a tree. When appropriate spaces outside the classroom are not accessible, teachers claim to use other means, such as storytelling, to get as close as possible to authentic outdoor experiences. The participants in my studies noted that outdoor teaching and learning are often related to natural science subjects, but they gave examples from subjects such as languages, math's, history, sports, and the arts.



Landscape

Diversity was a word some teachers used to describe the landscape in their schools' environment. One teacher said, "a diversity of outdoor space stimulates children's imagination and helps them consolidate their knowledge", while another claimed that "with close access to nature around the school, the classroom grows". Teachers observed that children learn by making connections between what they learn and where the learning takes place. They learn to read the landscape, not only in the sense of following a map, but they get to understand the connection between what they see and what they think. The experience makes an imprint in their memory.



Body

Some participants believed that when the body meets various learning environments outdoors it has a positive effect on physical and mental wellbeing, as well as academic achievements. One teacher said, "distance becomes real when you walk 1km rather than being told that it is 1000m" - suggesting that physical engagement with the outdoors can improve academic comprehension. Another teacher said, "when students are allowed to use all their senses in an authentic context, learning becomes more meaningful and new knowledge is easier to internalise".



Environment

Several participants highlighted the importance of taking students into outdoor environments as a means of teaching abstract concepts, such as ecology and sustainability. One teacher discussed a session where students found a television set dumped in the woods, which offered teachable reflections around environmental responsibility. As another teacher put it, "if you get familiar with nature as a child, you will be more careful about the environment later in life".

Time

Time is a key issue in education, with resource allocation proving a key sticking point. Another aspect of time discussed by participants was that of seasonal changes and how they are best studied in the landscape, where life cycles can be investigated and questions answered on-site.

