



Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet  
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Faculty of Landscape Architecture, Horticulture  
and Crop Production Science

# **School grounds: Children's perspectives on qualities, use and social support**

Skolgårdar: Barns perspektiv på kvaliteter, användning  
och socialt stöd

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well-being

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Skolgårdar: Barns perspektiv på kvaliteter, användning och socialt stöd

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## FOREWORD

Denna studie är ett examensarbete inom mastersprogrammet Outdoor Environments for Health and Well-being, vid Sveriges Lantbruksuniversitet (SLU) i Alnarp. Studien utförs som det avslutande momentet i utbildningen. Inriktningen på programmet är miljöpsykologi och fokus är samspelet mellan utemiljön och människan. Jag fascineras av miljöpsykologi och mitt stora intresse är utemiljöers påverkan för människors hälsa och välbefinnande, framförallt är jag intresserad av utemiljöer för barn. Under masterutbildningen har jag inriktat mig på barn som målgrupp och därför blev denna studie om mellanstadiebarns perspektiv på skolgårdar en vidare fördjupning på området.

Jag vill tacka de barn som deltagit i min studie för att ni ställde upp och delade med er av ert perspektiv. Tack även till all personal på skolorna för all er hjälp. Jag vill även tacka min handledare i examensarbetet, Märith Jansson för allt stöd och handledning under hela arbetets gång!

Lund, 2018

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## SAMMANFATTNING

Skolgården är en plats där barn tillbringar mycket tid under alla skolår, och är därmed en central plats för många barn i deras vardag. Skolgården är även en viktig plats som påverkar flera dimensioner av barns hälsa, eftersom den byggda miljön kan underlätta eller begränsa barns aktivitet. Hälsovinster av en grön skolgård är fysisk aktivitet, eftersom lek utomhus tenderar att öka den, men även social och mental hälsa på grund av gemenskap och kreativ lek, vilket minskar stressnivåer och kan ge ett ökat självförtroende.

Idag blir skolor större och expanderar för att få plats för fler elever. Därför är det viktigt att skolgården utformas på ett sätt som ger hög kvalitet för att stödja och främja barns hälsa och utveckling. På skolgården behöver ytan vara tillräckligt stor för utrymme för lek, men också platser för dialog, avskildhet och återhämtning. Barnens perspektiv behövs för att samla kunskap om vad barn värderar på skolgårdar. Denna studie har fokuserat på barns perspektiv på skolgårdar och hur de använder olika platser för olika syften. Metoder för studien är enkät, barnteckningar och promenadintervjuer, som genomförts på två olika skolor med olika miljöegenskaper. Deltagarna är barn i årskurs fyra och årskurs sex. Resultaten visar att viktiga aktiviteter för barn på skolgården är olika typer av bollspel, fysiska aktiviteter och socialisering. Ställen som är socialt stödjande för barn kan vara hela skolgården, beroende på aktivitet och syfte. Den omedelbara miljön utanför klassrummet är viktig och behöver vara inbjudande och innehålla möjligheter till olika typer av aktiviteter. Trygga platser på skolgården är platser som inkluderar vegetation och där barnet kan välja att umgås med andra eller att vara för sig själv. Otrygga platser på skolgården är platser som är avskilda, och där det inte finns så många andra barn eller vuxna.

## ABSTRACT

School grounds are places where children spend a lot of time during all of their school years, and therefore central for many children's everyday life. School grounds are an important part of the school settings that affect several dimensions of children's health, since the built environment can facilitate or constrain physical activity. Health benefits from school grounds include physical activity for children. Play outdoors tends to increase the physical activity. Also, their social health benefits due to the cooperative and creative play and improvement in mental health. This reduces stress levels and enhances self-confidence.

Today schools are getting bigger and expand to receive more children. Therefore it is important for school grounds to have a high quality, to support and promote children's health and development. At school grounds there needs to be space for play, but also spaces for dialogue, privacy, peace and sensations. Children's perspectives are needed in order to gather knowledge about what children value at school grounds. This study has focused on children's perspectives in their school ground and how they use different spaces for different purposes. Methods for the study are questionnaire, children's drawings and child-led walks, conducted in two different school grounds with different environmental qualities. The participants are children in grade four and six. The results shows that important activities for children in school grounds are different kinds of ballgames, physical activities and socializing. Places that are socially supportive for children could be the whole school ground, depending on which activity or purpose. The immediate environment outside the classroom is important and should be inviting and contain opportunities for different kinds of activities. Places perceived as safe in school grounds are places that include vegetation and where the child can choose to socialize or withdraw from others. Places perceived as unsafe in school grounds are places that are enclosed, or separated and bare, where there are not so many other children or adults.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Children's access to outdoor environments

This master thesis concerns school grounds and their social functions from children's perspectives. It focuses on the places and qualities that children see as supportive or non-supportive for their use of the school ground.

Research (Faber Taylor & Kuo, 2006) shows that children's access to nature is quickly decreasing and the constant development of urban environments is leaving less nature for children to access. Children today also have limited independent mobility due to urban development, risks with traffic and parent's fear of crime against children. Furthermore, children's leisure time is often filled with activities which leave less time for them to explore and play outdoors. Another issue that competes with time spent outdoors is all the reasons for children today to stay indoors, including videogames and internet (Faber Taylor & Kuo, 2006). All of this is causing children to be more sedentary which increases the risk for health-related problems such as overweight and obesity in early childhood (Fjortoft, 2001).

With densifying urban environments, increased traffic and a stressful society for many adults, many children are being driven to school and activities, and numerous children only spend time at home, in school and at leisure activities. Children's life conditions are affected by how built environments are planned and managed, and by how they can influence their own development. With the densification of the urban environment there is now a great challenge in setting aside and keeping sufficient space for children's needs. Outdoor and natural environments create opportunities for children to play and run naturally with slopes, stones, trees and open space challenging children's motor skills and physical activity (Fjortoft, 2001).

High quality outdoor spaces for play are known to be important for children's development (Grahn et al., 1997). As adults perceive landscape forms, children interpret functions of the environment and qualities and possibilities offered for activity. A high quality outdoor environment for children contains many positive affordances (Gibson, 1979). Affordances include meaningful action possibilities that the child perceive in the environment (Lerstrup & Konijnendijk van den Bosch, 2017).

Children need the environment to be spacious, green and varied (Mårtensson, 2013) and environments that contain a lot of trees, shrubbery, open areas and play structures have shown several positive effects on children's health (Chawla, 2015), such as improved sleep at night, lower cortisol levels, weight control, increase of concentration capacity and fewer sick days for both children and the staff at school (Chawla, 2015; Dymont, 2005).

## 1.2. The value of school grounds

School grounds are places where children spend a lot of time during all of their schoolyears, and therefore central for many children's everyday lives, especially for younger children. School grounds are an important part of the school settings that affect several dimensions of children's health, since the built environment can facilitate or constrain physical activity (Bell & Dymont, 2008). Play outdoors tends to increase the physical activity (Faskunger, 2009). Research on health benefits from school ground greening improvement in physical activity for students of all abilities, and social health due to the cooperative and creative play that natural places afford.

Beside from the physical health benefits there were also improvement in mental health, which reduced stress levels and enhanced self-confidence (Faskunger, 2009).

Having direct access from school buildings to an own school ground increase a more active and imaginative play, than those children who have to go to a nearby park (Nordström, 2014). Play is important for children's development throughout childhood, it is enjoyable and self rewarding. Play in the everyday life of children develop both their physique and train their social skills, and also provide the opportunity for mental stimulation and increased wellbeing (Faskunger, 2009). It is through play that children develop their imagination, creativity and the opportunity to express and process emotions and thoughts. Green areas in school grounds provide for social inclusion. With a lot of vegetation in a spacious and varied environment a dynamic occurs when play easier change between speedy and calm place bound games. Play in a green environment has a tendency to be more open and flexible. This facilitates the interaction between children of different ages, genders and abilities (Dyment & Bell 2009). A varied environment with a lot of nature provides for play with a character of flux where the landscape plays with children and children play with the landscape (Mårtensson, 2004).

There are specifically three important qualities in outdoor environments for children. The first one is large spaces, second is a lot of vegetation, with trees, bushes and hilly terrain. Third, is that open spaces and vegetation are blended with the play equipment and not separated in the environment (Mårtensson, 2013). For older children's outdoor stay it is important with attractive meeting points that create a sense of belonging, especially places that are close to class rooms where there is both a view, movements and protection (Dyment, Bell & Lucas, 2009). Older children also want more physical challenges, social hangout places and aesthetic beauty, with a combination of green elements and built structures (Jansson, Gunnarsson, Mårtensson & Andersson, 2014; Mårtensson, Jansson, Johansson, Raustorp, Kylin & Boldemann, 2014). The vegetation promotes social and playful socializing under safe and relaxed terms (Dyment, Bell & Lucas, 2009).

The design of environments for children should encourage children's curiosity, because when children get curious they start to explore, and through exploration both cognitive and physical development is stimulated. Children explore and exercise when playing. Through play, they develop motor skills, emotional, social and cognitive skills. An exploratory environment can also contribute to the child's identity, which means that the child learns about itself. The perceived safety is also important here. When the child can identify oneself with an environment, the environment can arouse curiosity and meaningfulness. Children use the outdoor environment to play, but also for recreation and socializing with other children. Games like hide and seek, jumping rope, hanging, climbing, building or cycling are activities that children do to explore the environment and learn about it. When children find a game enjoyable, the play contributes to joy and creativity (Björklid, 2005). Differences in play behavior for children of different ages and genders are documented (Baines & Blatchford, 2011). Usually younger children tend to do more locomotor play and imagine play, and also explore their physical environment. Whereas older children tend more to play games and socialize. Regarding differences in play behavior for boys and girls, girls socialize more and boys are generally more active than girls (ibid.). To understand the role of design characteristics for physical play in school grounds, a start is to define different play behaviors for different ages and genders (Escalante, Garcia-Hermoso, Backx & Saavedra, 2014).



When children are playing outdoors, they need to both be able to have contact with adults and perceive safety by adults, but they also need places where they can withdraw and not feel observed by adults. Therefore it is important that there are places where children can hide, for example in shrubbery. This detachment creates a room where the child makes the rules and can decide in and put frames on games (Kylin, 2005).

School grounds are not only important for children's play, but also for teaching and learning. Outdoor environments can create meaning to children's school work. It also promotes social skills, entrepreneurship and knowledge about sustainable development (Szcepaniski, Dahlgren, Sjölander & Strid, 2007). If teaching is located outdoors in the school ground, the environment needs to be designed for it to be possible. It could be cultivation, water facilities or environments for animals and plants, which is better taught outdoors and creates a connection between theory and practice. Also, language, art and sports and health are suitable to teach outdoors. Outdoor teaching also contributes to fresh air and increase of physical activity (Szcepaniski, Dahlgren, Sjölander & Strid, 2007).

Open space is also important in environments for children, where children under safe circumstances can explore and seek for excitement. Children can for example perceive a feeling of "scary-funny" (Sandseter 2010), when they are seeking for excitement in their play. It could be physical risks they take but also the social dynamics between children and adults. When children do this they get the chance to try out and define their limits. Therefore the environment should provide the opportunity to explore heights, experience high speed (run, swing, and bicycling), limits for danger, carve and cut, fight and have the opportunity to withdraw and be alone. To provide for all of these different activities requires spacious areas (Kylin, 2004).

### 1.3. School grounds as social environments

School grounds are an important environment for social learning and development (Evans, 1995). The design of school grounds and the culture at the schools, influence the social behaviors and relationships (Titman, 1994). Here the outdoor environment can function as a bridge between children so that they can bond with each other. Outdoors children can find common interests and play together (Wood & Giles-Corti, 2008). Titman (1994) revealed in a study how school grounds in themselves function as a "hidden curriculum" and with a "mass communication". Titman described that the design of a school ground expresses societal norms and objectives, guiding children's outdoor activities at school. This describes how the physical environment effects our behavior. Outdoor environments can encourage particular forms of physical activity and limit others, depending on the design features, school rules and social dynamics (ibid.).

Nature has a calming effect on humans and in nature demands and possible anxiety can decrease (Ulrich, 1984). Children need time and peace to digest impressions. Today children's physical space and time for recovery and reflection decreases. Spending time outdoors in nature, in greenery with a lot of play opportunities, stimulates children and provide for a calming effect (Söderström, Boldemann, Sahlin, Mårtensson, Raustorp & Blennow, 2013). By creating a more diverse environment with green school grounds that better respond with children's needs and interests, the school grounds can play an important role in enhancing social health. In this way green school grounds promote social inclusion, equality and foster cooperation and

communication among children, but also between children and adults (Dyment, 2005). Outdoors in green settings, play tends to be more complex and diverse, with constructive and symbolic play (Samborski, 2010), also play behaviors tend to be less gendered (Änggård, 2011). This is also showed in a study of play behaviors in a school in Malmö, (Jansson, Gunnarsson, Mårtensson & Andersson, 2014), which was greened. The play behavior was first studied before the greening, and then again after the school ground had been greened.

In another study (Barbour, 1999), play behaviors at two school grounds were compared. One provided primarily opportunities for physical play, that the other provided for a diversity of play opportunities. At the school where there only was opportunity for physical play, social hierarchies were established, and children with low physical capability or desires were often socially excluded. At the other, school with a diversity of play opportunities, children with less desire or capability for physical activity could still engage in play that fitted their needs and abilities better (ibid.).

To generalize conventional school grounds, they often provide a limited range of play opportunities that suit certain individuals. For example with manicured grass or large open areas, flat, expanses of turf and asphalt, offers play opportunities for large groups, and facilitate supervision and promote competitive and rule-bound games. This promotes physical activity (Dyment & Bell, 2007), but these spaces satisfy only some children, and not those who want to play in smaller groups and to be able to withdraw or who prefer different kinds of games, like more open-ended or creative play (Dyment, 2005). School grounds must satisfy children's desires for natural, dynamic, complex and stimulating play environments (Moore & Wong, 1997; Fjortoft, 2004).

Since the design of school grounds often is not varied and only provided with large open spaces mostly used for ball games, many children get bored in their school ground which could result in frustration and aggression (Evans, 2001). This frustration and aggression could be directed against other students in unhealthy behaviors such as bullying, violence and vandalism (Baker & Mednich, 1990). Schools often deal with this with increased surveillance and control on school grounds. Also, including management strategies, increasing the number of teachers on duty, implementing stricter rules and anti-bullying policies, in some cases even reducing or limiting recess (Evans, 1997).

Studies on play behavior in green school grounds (Bell & Dyment, 2008), which provided alternatives for different activities, showed that children engaged in less organized play and instead more uncategorized "free play". Active play, creative play, pretend play, exploratory play, constructive play and social play were observed (ibid.). Children who have had their school ground greened tended to become more peaceful, harmonious and socially inclusive. School ground greening provides a process and place where people can meet, make friends and build a sense of community and purpose (Dyment, 2005).

#### 1.4. Place attachment in school grounds

It is important for children to perceive place attachment to the school ground for them wanting to spend time there. Perceiving place attachment is also perceiving sense of place, which is expressing emotional bonds to spaces and places, and describes our view about the relationship between the place and the identity. To what extent the place contains personal ideas, values,

feelings and goals, the place makes sense to the individual (Twigger-Ross, Bonaiuto & Breakwell, 2003). Sense of place is a conscious force of creation and conservation of places through words, actions and the construction of artefacts. It is how a place makes sense to one person and matches the identity. It is both an expression of the identity but also an attempt to retrieve a bond with place (Giuliani, 2003).

A part of the theory about place attachment is divided into social and physical. Social refers to social arena and social symbol, which a place represent for the individual. Attached individuals also experience a heightened perceived safety. The behavioral bond is expressed by maintaining proximity to places that supply the necessities such as food, water, shelter and other resources. There are also the cognitive bonds, which are the knowledge and familiarity of how these resources may be extracted or used within the place. Individuals maintain proximity to their place because it offers protection and perceived safety, which increases confidence and allows exploration (Scanell & Gifford, 2010). Attachments to places we have as adults are often a development from childhood. If we have developed attachment to a specific place or a specific kind of outdoor environment during childhood, we often bring that attachment with us as adults. Perhaps we remember certain parts of our childhood memories clearly and they become important to us because children are better in making use of their senses than adults, making adults less sensuously attached to place and develop their sense of place through memories of the place over time (Bartos, 2013).

Place attachment is important for children's development and the development of identity (Jack, 2010), where the social dimension often is an important part in the development of place attachment (Kyle, Mowen & Tarrant 2004). Places can have an essential meaning for people's identity with memories, feelings and meaning associated with places. This attachment to places can create perceived safety and belonging. If not attached to places that can create a feeling of rootlessness (Jack, 2010).

High quality school grounds can function as a health promotor if the children enjoy and use the school grounds. Perceived sense of coherence at a school ground is also important regarding experience of place attachment, which is the decisive factor of how much time one will and likes to spend in a specific place. Antonovsky (1987) viewed health as a resource and found that health and illness are not two different sides of a coin, but rather two ends on a continuum from total health to total absence of health. Antonovsky (1987) meant that one can promote increased health by enhancing salutary factors, rather than by decreasing risk factors. He called this generalized resistance resources to cope with stressors. To cope with stress, people need to develop a sense of coherence about their own ability to combat stressors, which will help them to increase their health. The use of salutogenesis, which means health factors, is a focus on what strengthens health and is a theory for health promotion (Antonovsky, 1996).

## 1.5. Problem description

A great problem in our society today, is that not enough space is planned or set aside for children's play and development needs. Today schools are getting bigger and expand to receive more children (Boverket, 2015). Therefore it is important for school grounds to have a high quality, to support and promote children's health and development. At school grounds there needs to be space for play, sport, wild activities, but also spaces for dialogue, privacy, pace and sensations. There are demands from the Swedish planning and building act (SFS 2010:900) regarding free space and school grounds should be large enough for play outdoors, but there is no clear definition of size. A clarification of the planning and building act was made in 2015 (BFS, 2015: 1 FRI) which says that school grounds should be large enough to offer varied terrain and vegetation. Also, children up to grade six should have access to the school ground directly from the building. The Swedish board of housing building and planning recommends school grounds to have 30 square meters/student. These are only recommendations and leave the decision up to every municipality, which creates demands on increased knowledge in early planning state, construction and maintenance, to create high quality school grounds that support children's health and development (Boverket, 2015).

The lack of nature for children and the decrease in children's free outdoor play make the school grounds particularly important places to preserve space for and prioritize vegetation, also to support children's development and health. In order to ensure the qualities of school grounds in the future there is a need to gather knowledge about environments for children. To know what children value and what activities they want to be able to do, children need to be addressed.

## 1.6. Aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to study children's perspectives on what they value at their school ground, regarding qualities of school grounds, important activities and places that support them socially. The aim will be approached by investigating two cases with different school grounds. The following research questions are used:

- What activities are important for children in the school ground?
- What places in the school ground support children socially?
- In what places in the school ground do children feel safe or unsafe?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Theoretical framework

#### 2.1.1. Children's perspectives

To take an interest in children's perspectives means to perceive children as experts of their own environments and to be free from the preconceived opinions of what should be and could be important for the child (Kylin, 2003). Children's perspectives could promote the result for future development of environments for children and public spaces (Million, 2017). Affordances and qualities of an environment are depending on the child's individual perception of the environment (Clark & Uzzell, 2006) and children are experts on their own everyday lives. Therefore, children's perspectives are needed in order to gather knowledge about what children value at school grounds. In previous studies (Mårtensson, Jansson, Johansson, Raustorp, Kylin & Boldemann, 2014) regarding environments for children, observations, behavior mapping and tracking children's physical activity in school grounds are common methods, which give information about how children use their outdoor environment.

This study will focus on children's perspectives in their school ground and how they use different spaces there for different purposes.

### 2.2. Case study

This study builds upon a multiple case study conducted at two schools. Case study methodology is suitable because the aim with the study is to describe a reality and relationship between people and places (Denscombe, 2009). The aim is not to describe every student's relationship to places in their school ground, but to describe a sample of a population. In this study there are four classes in fourth and sixth grade participating, which is a selection of the larger population of fourth and sixth grade students (Ejvegård, 2009).

This case study includes a combination of methods: a questionnaire, children's drawings and child-led walks, combined for method triangulation. This combination of mixed methods gives a rich material and is especially useful when doing research on children's perspectives on outdoor environments (Cele, 2006). The decision to conduct the study at two school grounds that differ a lot was made to see if there are any differences or similarities in what children value regardless of what their school ground looks like and offers at the time.

### 2.3. Selection of school grounds and criteria

Two schools were purposefully selected for the study. They were selected based on principles of maximum variation (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The two school grounds are similar in amount of students attending to the school, in grades, including grade four and six, and also having school grounds of about the same size. Another criteria was to find one school ground having more vegetation and variation in the environment than the other, giving many or different opportunities for play.

When choosing school grounds for the case study, maps were used to get an overview of schools within the same area. The amount of classes and students were considered in order to get two

comparable schools. A few schools were then selected for a study visit. The study visits were made when the schools were closed. During the visits the quality of the school grounds were considered, regarding variation in the environment and amount of vegetation. Several school grounds were visited in order to find two that matched the criteria. When two school grounds were found that were similar in amount of grades and students, and who had different school ground qualities, the two schools principals were contacted by email where they were informed about the study and asked for the schools participation.

The two chosen school grounds are located in two different municipalities within the same area in southern Sweden, both in small villages outside a larger city. Both school grounds are located within areas with similar (rather high) socioeconomic status, about the same size of the school with similar amounts of students and with the same grades.

The informants are children of two different classes from each of two different schools, one fourth grade and one sixth grade class from each school. The children are in the ages of 9-12 years. In this age group, children are often able to communicate their perspectives and have interest in their local environment (Jansson, Sundevall & Wales, 2016) and have therefore often been included in environmental studies (Cele, 2005).

## 2.4. Cases

### 2.4.1. School 1

School 1 is newly built, started in 2016, and has grade 0 to 6. There are 324 students attending the school. The school ground is about 7 208 square meters, which gives 22 square meters for each student. The school ground has a lot of open spaces, it is flat, but does not contain so much vegetation, and the existing vegetation is recently planted and still small. There are a lot of opportunities for ball games in the school ground, for example basketball, bandy ball and king out. There are also several places at the school ground with climbing frames and there are two “bird nest-swings” (swing with room for several children).

### 2.4.2. School 2

School 2 was built in the 1970s. The school has grade 0 to 6 and there are 298 students attending the school. The school ground is 12 000 square meters. This gives 40 square meters for each student. The school ground has a lot of vegetation, with large trees and bushes. There is a small forest with an obstacle course made of old trees. There is variation in the topography in the school ground and there are opportunities for different activities. For example, football, basketball, bandy ball, king out, swings, slides and a “bird nest-swing”.

## 2.5. Questionnaire

To collect children’s perspectives on what they value at their school grounds a questionnaire (see appendix 3) was constructed for the children to answer. A questionnaire has its advantages with the researcher not being able to affect the participants in their answers, many answers can be collected, the participants can calmly answer the questions and every participant gets the same questions (Ejvegård, 2009).

The questionnaire included open questions about how the children perceive their school ground, what they usually do there and what they like and do not like about their school ground. The questionnaire also included a map over the school grounds where the children were asked to mark out places connected to their written answers. For example places where they do their favourite activity, places they feel safe/unsafe, places they like and dislike, places where they feel like they can withdraw and be undisturbed. They were also asked to mark out possible places where they know that anyone has been exposed to bullying.

In the end of the questionnaire the children were asked to make a drawing of their ideal school ground. It could be a part of a school ground or a whole school ground. They could draw something that exists or something that they wish for their school ground. The method of children's drawings gives information about what children think is important, what they draw will present something that has a value for them and drawing is a method for children to communicate their experiences of places (Cele, 2006). The drawings can provide insight into children's perspectives on important qualities of school grounds. Interpretation of children's drawings and analysis of common elements is a method used by Koppitz (1984), who used children's drawings to look at emotional indicators in children.

The questionnaire was not tested before the study. It was valuated and improved after the supervisor of the study had looked at it. At all the questionnaire occasions in class, some oral information about me, my study and instructions for the questionnaire were presented. Me and a teacher from the school were present during the whole time for the questionnaire to answer the children's questions and to help them. The time to answer the questionnaire was 30 minutes.

Every student of each class participated during the questionnaire, but for those students who did not have their parent's consent or did not want to participate, the answers were left out and are not part of the result.

## 2.6. Child-led walks

As a complement to the questionnaire, child-led walks were used as a method in this study. A child-led walk is an outdoor walking interview with a small group of children. This is a useful method in studies of children's perspectives on environments (Cele, 2005). The child-led walks gave additional information of how children perceive their school ground and places used for different purposes. The walks can facilitate the children's description of the school grounds.

An interview guide (see appendix 4) was constructed before the interviews, including open questions asking the children to describe their school ground and show places they like or dislike, what they like to do in their school ground, where they hang out with their friends, places they visit when they want to withdraw, or where they feel safe or unsafe.

There were four child-led walks made at each school, each walk made in groups of two-four children, boys and girls separately. Before each interview the purpose of the interview was presented, including audio-recording and photos to be taken of the school ground. The children lead the walks, and I was unconditionally following them and letting them show me places they wanted to show. Since I had visited the school grounds before I knew what they were like, but I did not let that affect the walks. The child-led walks were semi-structured and the interview guide was used as a basis with questions to cover, giving space for the child to lead the interview and for me to ask follow up questions (Denscombe, 2009).

During the child-led walks there were photos taken to describe and show places the participants picked out. The walks were audio-recorded with a mobile phone, to avoid having to make notes and to totally focus on the interviews. After each walk, notes were also taken of the essential parts from the interviews.

In every class the study was made in the same order. First the questionnaire was conducted, and afterwards the child-led walks, both after each other. The participants in the child-led walks were in some classes decided before the study started, by the children and teachers of each grade. In some classes the participants were chosen just before the child-led walks, also by the children and their teacher.

## 2.7. Ethical considerations

Before the study started the principles of ethics were considered. These principles include to respect the participant's rights and dignity, to avoid that the participants suffer or get harmed by participating, and to respect the participant's integrity (Denscombe, 2009).

### 2.7.1. Informed consent

The participants and their parents were sent an information letter (See appendix 1) about the study. The letter included a presentation of me and my education, aim and methods of the study. There was also information about the participation being confidential, and that no personal information was to be collected and the names of the schools decoded. They were also given information about participation being completely voluntarily and the possibility for the children to drop out from the study at any time if they wish (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). They were also informed that the completed study will be uploaded on SLUs database for students' theses. First, the schools' principals were contacted with an information letter for the school to participate, then the class teachers were contacted and they got the same information letter as the principals. The class teachers were then given the letter and a consent form addressed to the children's parents to sign (See appendix 2). Since the study is made with children under the age of 15 there needs to be a consent from their parents if they want their children to participate (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017).

The teachers then collected the consents from each student, and the teachers handed them to me. When all the consents were collected the study started.

## 2.8. Analysis

The results from both schools were analysed separately. The results from the questionnaire were compiled and are presented based on all questionnaires. The children's drawings were interpreted concerning what elements they represented. In some drawings the children had written explanatory texts. The most common elements were thematised and then categorised (Ejlertsson, 2005), and are presented with examples of drawings under each category.



The notes from the child-led walks were also condensed and themes were formed to represent a general perspective from all of the child-led walks (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The audio-recordings from the interviews were listened through and used to support the notes and to analyse the results. Photos from the walks are presented to describe places the participants showed. The results from all of the methods were then compiled for each school. Then, a comparison was made between the schools and similarities and differences discussed.

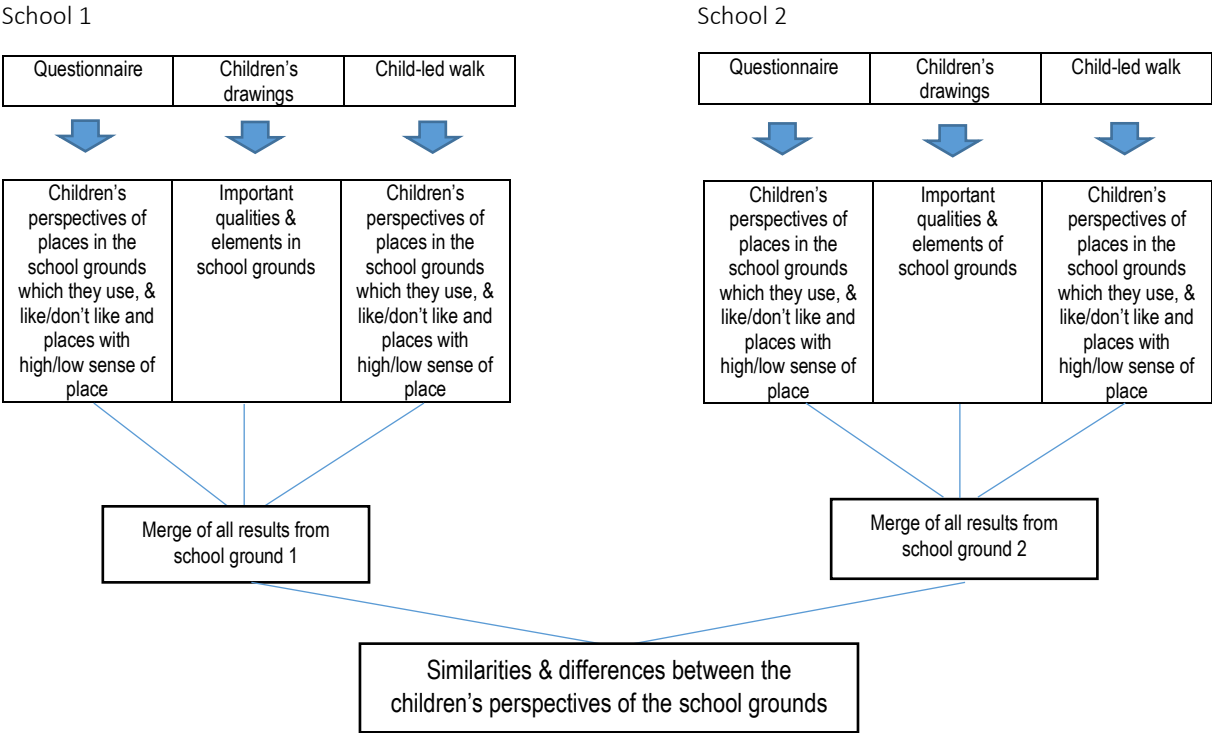


Figure 1. Description of the triangulation of each method and its outcome.

The same procedure was made on school 1 and school 2, with a questionnaire, children’s drawings and child-led walks. The outcomes from each method are then merged. Last, a comparison of the results from each school was made between the two schools.

### 3. Results

Here are the results of the study. First the results from each grade at each school are presented, based on data from the three used methods. This is followed by a short summary from both grades at each school.

#### 3.1. School 1

Pictures from the school ground



Figure 2. Aerial photo from eniro (eniro.se). In the middle of the photo is School 1. The school is located in a residential area with surrounding fields. Since this photo was taken more houses have been built next to the school. In front of the school there is a car road leading to the residential area. There are also football fields just outside the school ground, which belongs to the local football club.



Figure 3. To the left: The front side of the school ground, outside the classrooms, with a king out court, benches and a “birds nest-swing”.  
To the right: Outside the classrooms is a climbing frame.



Figure 4. To the left: Another climbing frame and to the right in the picture is the multi-sports field, where one can play football, bandy ball and basketball.  
To the right: A basketball court with grass surface, but at this time there was only mud.



Figure 5. Two bandy ball courts and a basketball court framed by a low rink.



Figure 6. To the left: Behind the school building.  
To the right: Behind the school building with an obstacle course.



Figure 7. Behind the school ground there is a circle with a low wall framing it. On the sides there are also benches next to the school building.

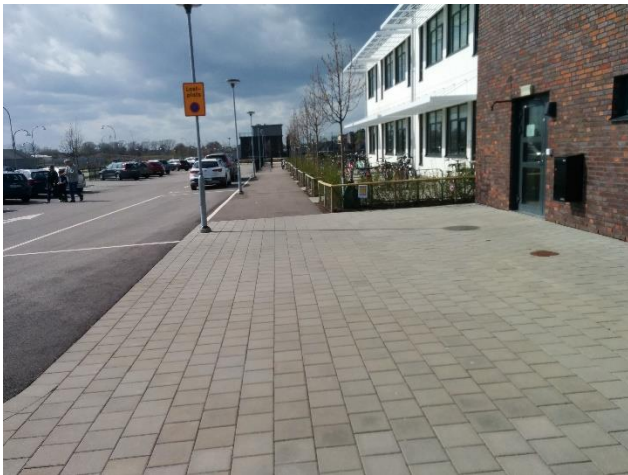


Figure 8. To the left: The front side of the school ground, with parking for bikes next to the school building. There is also car parking.  
To the right: In front of the school, there are benches, parking for bikes and car parking.

### 3.1.1. Fourth grade

For the questionnaire there were 12 children participating (N=12), six boys and six girls. Most of them think their school ground is okay. There are more boys than girls who do not like their school ground, and none of the boys liked their school ground (see figures 9 and 10).

Participants in the child-led walks were two boys and two girls, and the walks were made with boys and girls separately.

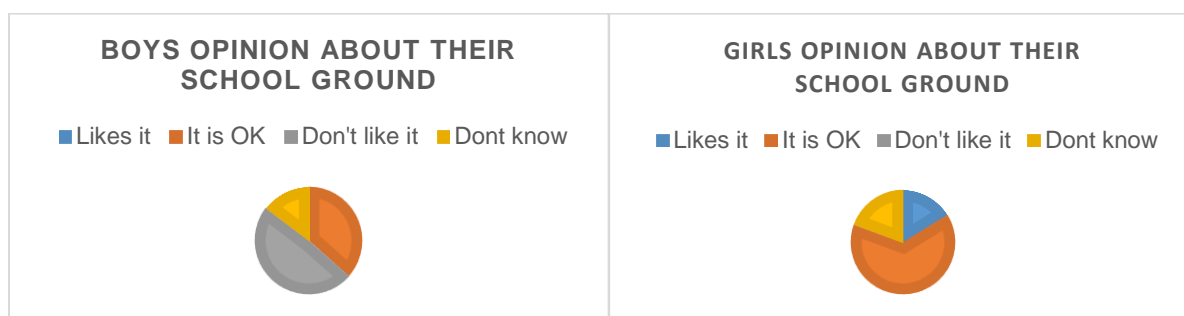


Figure 9.

What the fourth grade boys at school 1 think about their school ground.

Figure 10.

What the fourth grade girls at school 1 think about their school ground.

- **What activities are important for children in the school ground?**

Common activities in the school ground for the fourth graders include different ball games and physical activities like football, king out, climbing on climbing frames and swinging. There are no differences between boys and girls regarding what activities they say they do. Both boys and girls brought up walking and talking to friends as a common activity in the school ground. They also play tag as a common game which the children are playing both with and without a ball, in the whole school ground.

The children said they like to be in the different places for ballgames in the school ground, but they experience that it is crowded and they sometimes are being rejected from there by boys who shoot hard balls or by older children at the school. They like using the bikes at the school ground but they said they are often occupied by other children. They said that there is a ten minutes rule where there is a bike switch after ten minutes.

- **What places in the school ground support children socially?**

For the boys the climbing frame was mostly used when with friends. One climbing frame is placed outside the classrooms and one is placed in the middle of the school ground. The girls used several different places, for example outside the classroom, where they use benches, swings, play king out, but also like the boys answered, the climbing frames. The girls use the whole school ground for walking around or bicycling and talking to friends.

Places for withdrawal when wanting to be alone are similar for boys and girls: behind the school building where there are not so many other children and teachers, and there are benches.

In the walks it emerged that the children perceive their school ground to be very open and few places to be without everyone seeing them all the time. Instead they want less open spaces where they can be without everyone in the school ground seeing them. They also said they miss their old school ground which had more vegetation like large trees, bushes and hills and where they had more varied options of activities. They perceive their current school ground they to be predetermined in what to do, like climb in the climbing frame or play ballgames at the ballgame courts.

- **In what places in the school ground do children feel safe or unsafe?**

Most of the children feel safe over the whole school ground. Behind the school building, the backside was mentioned to be a safe place but also an unsafe place. It is perceived as unsafe because there are no teachers there to follow what happens there, and there are not so many other children. Another place perceived as unsafe is the car and bike parking lot because there are cars and bikes coming in a high speed.

The children did not know any place where there had been someone exposed for bullying, but they said behind the school building is a place where fights could occur without any adults seeing them.

#### Ideal school ground

When the children's drawings were studied there were some recurring patterns in them which led to dividing them into four categories. The categories are *ballgames*, *physical activity*, *social activity* and *environmental elements*. Under the category ballgames is for example football fields or basketball courts. The fourth graders at school 1 did not draw anything under this category, but only in the other three categories. The second category is physical activity, which in this grade included skateboard parks, climbing frames, swings, slides and trampolines. The third category is social activity, and the children had drawn a scene, a place for playing music and a play house. The fourth category is environmental elements which included trees, grass, hills, water and a tree house.

Drawings from grade four



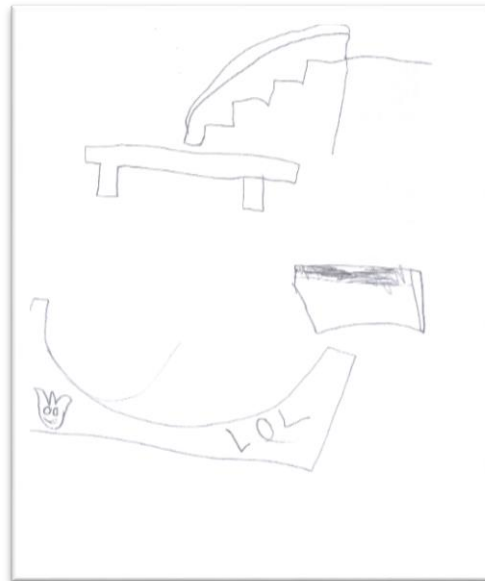
School 1, grade 4, girl. Category: *Physical activity & Environmental elements*



School 1, grade 4, girl. Category: *Physical activity & Environmental elements*



School 1, grade 4, girl. Category: *Physical activity & Social activity*



School 1, grade 4, boy. Category: *Physical activity*

Figure 11. Four drawings from the fourth graders, of their ideal school ground. The drawings are chosen to represent the four categories described above. In the drawings there are swings, slides, a trampoline, skateboard parks, a bike, trees and bushes, a treehouse, a speaker with music and a scene.



### 3.1.2. Sixth grade

For the questionnaire there were 18 children participating (N=18), ten boys and eight girls. As diagram 3 and 4 underneath show, most of the children in grade six think their school ground is okay. There are more boys than girls who do not like their school ground, and there is no boy or girl who likes their school ground.

Participants in the child-led walks were two boys and three girls, and the walks were made with boys and girls separately.

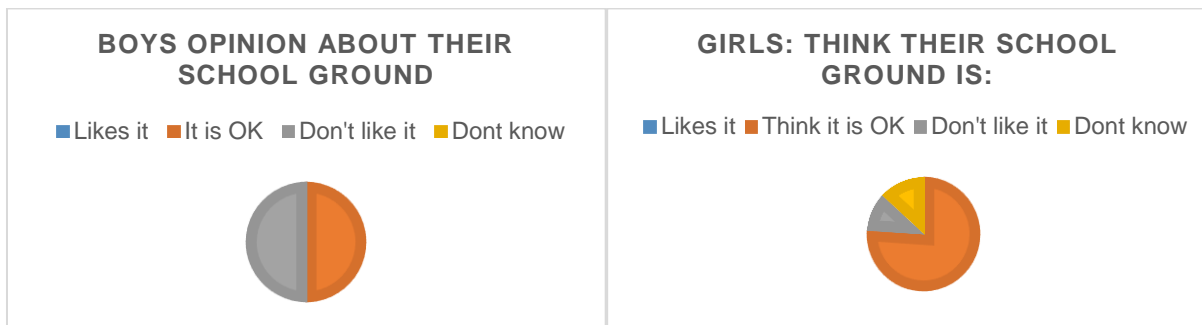


Figure 12.  
What the sixth grade boys at school 1 think about their school ground.

Figure 13.  
What the sixth grade girls at school 1 think about their school ground.

- **What activities are important for children in the school ground?**

Important activities in the school ground for the sixth graders include different ball games and physical activities like football, climbing at climbing frames and swinging. There are no differences between boys and girls regarding what activities the children do. For both boys and girls walking or sitting down talking to friends is a common activity in the school ground.

Based on the interviews the children want more advanced climbing frames, adjusted to their age, and swings that do not break. The current climbing frames they feel are for younger children. The children also like the bikes in the school ground, but they are not so often allowed to use them because they are occupied by younger children and teachers say that the bikes are for the younger children at the school.

- **What places in the school ground support children socially?**

Boys and girls mentioned the whole school ground to be used when they are with friends. For example when talking to friends or using places for ballgames, also the climbing frames, benches or the backside of the school ground.

The sixth graders don't perceive the school ground to be age adjusted to them, but instead for smaller children. They feel like there is not so much for them to do and that they are being rejected from places where the younger children are, for example the climbing frame. They are

being rejected from places both by younger children and by teachers telling them that they scare the younger children and that they could go outside the school ground instead.

A dissatisfaction over the school ground was pronounced by the sixth graders about the school ground being age adjusted for younger children, and they feel like they are not allowed to claim space in the school ground because of that.

They like their school ground and that it is newly built and everything being new, but they would like more free space, more trees and bushes and swings. They would also like space only for the older children in the school ground, and calm places that are not so crowded with other children.

- **In what places in the school ground do children feel safe or unsafe?**

Most of the children feel safe over the whole school ground, for example in the front of the school building because there are a lot of children and teachers there. Places the children perceive as unsafe is the car and bike parking lot, because there are cars and bikes coming in a high speed.

The children did not know any place where there had been someone exposed to bullying.

#### Ideal school ground

The drawings are divided into the same categories as for the fourth graders. The categories are *ballgames, physical activity, social activity and environmental elements*. Under the ballgames category drawings included different kinds of ballgame courts. Under the second category, physical activity, the drawings included different kinds of climbing frames, places for parkour, swings, climbing walls, trampolines, swimming pools, places for dancing and slides. Under the third category, social activity, seating places were drawn. Under the fourth category environmental elements included trees, bushes, hills, grass lawns, parks, outdoor study places, and also sand, grass and stone surfaces.

## Drawings from grade six



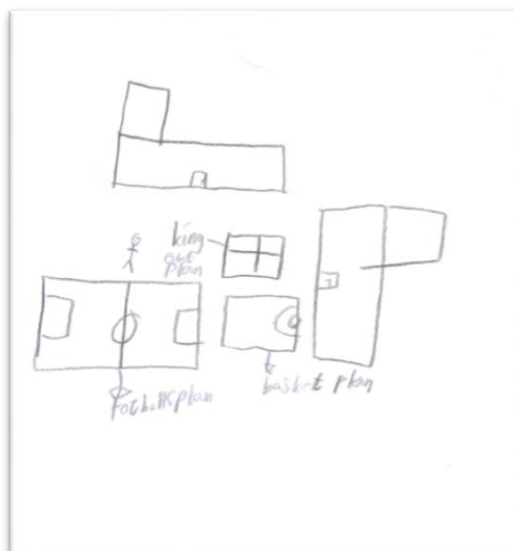
School 1, grade 6, girl. Category: *Ballgames & Environmental elements*



School 1, grade 6 girl. Category: *Physical activity & Environmental elements*



School 1, grade 6, boy. Category: *Ballgames, Physical activity & Environmental elements*



School 1, grade 6, boy. *Ballgames*

Figure 13. Four drawings from the sixth graders ideal school ground. The drawings are chosen and presented from the four categories described above. In the drawings there are ballgame courts, swings, a slide, a climbing frame, a trampoline, and trees and bushes.

### 3.1.3. Summary of both grades at school 1

Based on the questionnaire no one in school 1 said they like their school ground and more boys than girls did not like it. Why no one said they like their school ground did not appear during the result, but in the child-led walks the children said the biggest issue at their school ground is the lack of space and the school ground to be crowded.

Children in both grades said that places often are taken by other children. The fourth graders said it to be taken by older children and the sixth graders said it to be occupied by younger children. The school ground is, by children in both grades, perceived as crowded with children and that places often are taken. The children perceive the school ground to be very open and that they could always be observed by others, which they don't like. Behind the school building is less crowded, but they do not like that side so much because there is not so much to do there and there are not so many other children or any teachers there.

Both grade four and six do the same activities at the school ground, like different ballgames, playing tag or walking around talking to friends. Figure 14 show, with data from the questionnaire, the spread among the different activities in the school ground 1. These are also in much the activities that the children said they want to do at their school ground, based on information from the drawings.

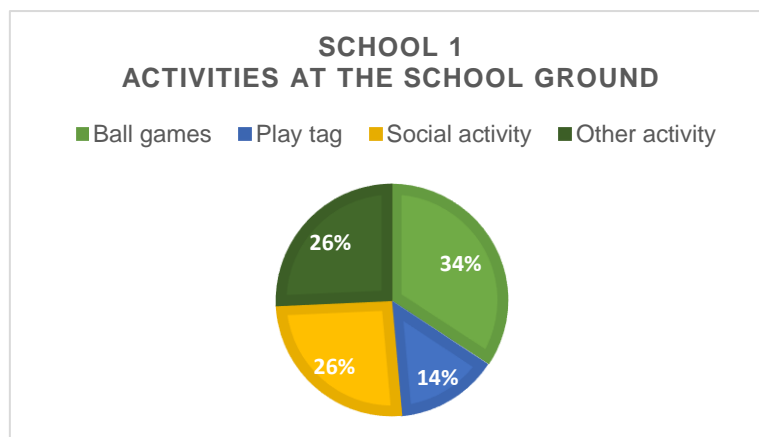


Figure 14. Based on data from the questionnaire the most common activities for both grade four and six in the school ground at school 1 are ballgames like football or king out. Play tag is a game which the children are playing both with and without a ball and in the whole school ground. Social activities include talking to friends, sitting down or walking around. Other activities are for example to swing.

Places used for these activities are different ballgame courts, and the whole school ground which is used for playing tag or social activities, like talking to friends. The ballgame courts are more used by the fourth graders than the sixth graders. The sixth graders said they usually go outside the school ground for ballgames, or play tag in the whole school ground.

The backside of the school ground is used for withdrawal, both by the fourth and sixth graders, but the fourth graders also perceive it as unsafe because there are no teachers there. Both grade four and six perceive the whole school ground to be safe beside from the car and bike parking lot, because cars and bikes are coming in a high speed.

The children in both grade four and six expressed that they wish for more trees and bushes in the school ground to play in. This is also clear in the drawings, where there are several drawings with a lot of vegetation.

### 3.2. School 2

#### Pictures from the school ground



Figure 15. Aerial photo from eniro (eniro.se). School 2 is located in a residential area. Closest to the school there is no car traffic, only bicycle paths. To the right is the football field. In the upper right corner of the school building is the fourth and sixth graders classrooms. Underneath the school building, there are a lot of trees is the "forest". This side is also the side the smaller children at the school use.



Figure 16. Outside the classrooms are king out courts, basketball basket, benches and swings with sand underneath.



Figure 17. Picture to the left: The right corner of the school building with the sixth graders classrooms on the right side and the smaller children's classrooms on the left side. This is where "the forest" starts. Here is a cemented drain where water can be gathered. In the picture is also a rocking board and a ball plank.

Picture to the right: With the school building in the back here is "the forest". In the picture is "the birds nest swing" among the trees. In the foreground is also a basketball court and a king out court.



Figure 18. In "the forest", wooden horses and an obstacle course.



Figure 19. Another obstacle course in “the forest” with tires, old trees and climbing nets.



Figure 20. In “the forest” there were several dens.





Figure 21. To the left: The large stone outside the school dining where the children like to sit. To the right: Outside the PE building with the stair leading to the entrance.



Figure 22. The football field.

### 3.2.1. Fourth grade

For the questionnaire there were 18 children participating (N=18), eleven boys and seven girls. As diagram 23 and 24 underneath show, most of the children in grade four think their school ground is okay. There was no one who doesn't like their school ground, and there is equally many boys and girls who like their school ground.

Participants in the child-led walks were three boys and four girls, and the walks were made with boys and girls separately.

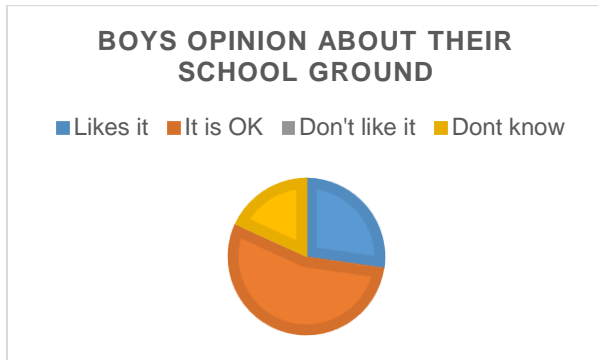


Figure 23.  
What the fourth grade boys at school 2 think about their school ground.

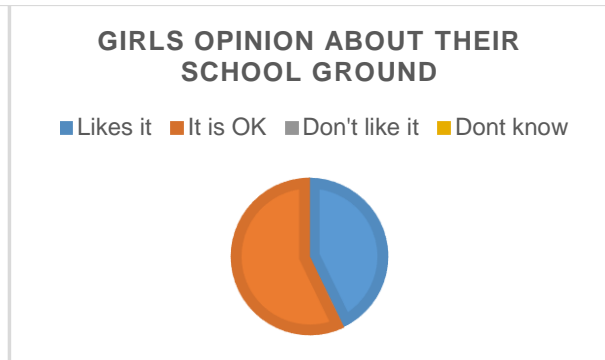


Figure 24.  
What the fourth grade girls at school 2 think about their school ground.

- **What activities are important for children in the school ground?**

Important activities in the school ground for the fourth graders, both boys and girls, include playing with friends doing different activities like playing tag, running, swinging, talking to friends, playing football and other ballgames. Other activities that the girls brought up were jumping rope, dancing, reading, playing with their mobile phones and the weekly picture quiz at the school ground. The picture quiz includes five pictures, which together form a word. The quiz could be done alone or several children together and the winner is announced every week and awarded with a price.

The children expressed that they want more physical challenge in the school ground. For example an outdoor gym, obstacle courses, trampolines and swimming pools. There used to be large tires in the forest which they used to climb and swing on and they think it is a shame those were removed. There are several table tennis tables, but they don't use them so much because they are broken and it is hard to play because there are often sand or small stones on the tables.

What the children like the most in their school ground is that they feel safe and know the environment well because they have attended the school since they were six years old.

- **What places in the school ground support children socially?**

In the questionnaire, both boys and girls answered that they often are in the whole school ground. Outside the classroom is a place where they usually are when with friends, where there are swings, king out courts and a basketball court. Through the interviews the children said they

usually are outside the classroom because they feel like it is their side of the school ground. The girls also said it is because they have to stay close to their classroom to be able to hear the bell ringing when it is time to go inside. If they are at the other side of the school ground they have to keep track of time by themselves.

The boys run a lot over the whole school ground when they are playing tag. They are also at the football field playing football or tag. Another place both boys and girls mentioned was outside the school dining where they usually are when with friends. Where they wait for lunchtime, play with their mobile phones or sit on a large stone. The large stone outside the school dining was pointed out as a place when wanting to be alone. The “forest” is also a place used by both boys and girls for withdrawal.

The children like the “forest” at the school ground, with all the trees giving lots of building materials like sticks, which they used when they were younger to build dens. In the forest there is an obstacle course which they like. The girls used to play horse in the forest when they were younger. But they don’t play there so much any longer, now they feel like that side of the school ground is mostly for the younger children. They are allowed to be there, but they also feel like the place is crowded with the smaller children and when they are there the smaller children often follow them and ask a lot of questions, which they don’t like.

When they are in the forest, they usually run by quickly when they are playing tag.

Based on information from the interviews both boys and girls like to stay outdoors. They like to run and move around and afterwards feel like they have better concentration during the lessons. The children seemed to like their school ground and to be able to do the activities they want to.

- **In what places in the school ground do children feel safe or unsafe?**

The children feel safe over the whole school ground and particularly outside their classroom. A place perceived as unsafe is outside the PE building. The reason is that there is a lack of lightning and where the entrance to the PE building is, there is a wall around which shuts out the surrounding lights. There is also a narrow stair leading to the gymnastics entrance which often is slippery and full of leafs. There are no differences between places where the boys and girls feel safe or unsafe.

The children did not know any place where there had been someone exposed for bullying, but they said that the football field is a place where fights often occur, fights about who is going to have the field or what teams they are playing. At the football field there are usually no teachers, according to the children, to follow what happens.

### **Ideal school ground**

The drawings are divided into the same categories, as the drawings from school 1. The categories are *ballgames*, *physical activity*, *social activity* and *environmental elements*. Under the ballgames category from the fourth graders drawings included various kinds of ballgame courts. Under the second category physical activity, the drawings included different kinds of climbing frames, swings, obstacle courses, trampolines, trampoline parks, swimming pools and slides. Under the third category, social activity, seating places and game houses were drawn.



### 3.2.2. Sixth grade

For the questionnaire there were 19 children participating (N=19), ten boys and nine girls. As diagram 26 and 27 underneath show, most of the children in grade six think their school ground is okay. There are both boys and girls who don't like their school ground, more boys than girls. There is no boy and only one girl who like their school ground.

Participants in the child-led walks were three boys and three girls, and the walks were made with boys and girls separately.

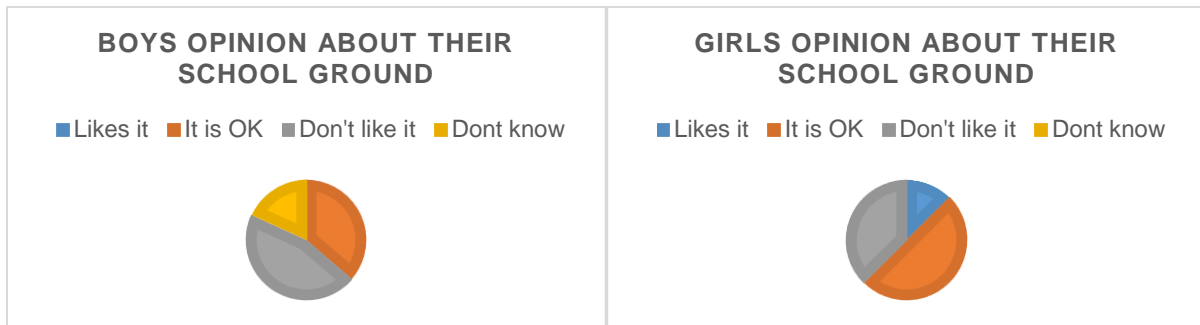


Figure 26. What the sixth grade boys at school 2 think about their school ground.

Figure 27. What the sixth grade girls at school 2 think about their school ground.

- **What activities are important for children in the school ground?**

Important activities in the school ground for the sixth graders, both boys and girls, include playing various ballgames like football or king out. The boys like to play football at the football field, but they don't like that the surface is gravel because it is easy to fall and hurt one self. Instead they would prefer artificial grass.

They also walk around and talk to friends, swing and play with their mobile phones. The children said every child has a mobile phone, which they like to play with. But there were also expressions of some being bored because of always playing with their mobile phones. There is one mobile phone free break, but no one cares to remove their phone at that break, so neither children nor teachers follow the rule. Based on the interviews there is a clear expression from the girls that their side of the school ground is boring and there is a lot more to do on the other side of the school ground. They therefore rather stay indoors. According to the interviews many children want to stay indoors during their breaks and play with their phones. They also said that sometimes it is not fun to go outside because everyone else is inside.

There are regular swings outside the children's classroom, which they like to swing on. On the other side of the school ground there is a "birds nest swing", which all the children like, but they said it is often taken, usually by younger children. There is a five minute rule, when after five minutes one has to switch who's swinging, but that rule is not working well. There is a lot of misunderstandings about the rule, and they often feel like they have to give space for younger children. The children wish for more swings. Other activities the girls do are gymnastics and imaginative play.

The children said they wish to be more inspired and challenged to perform physical activity in the school ground, for example with obstacle courses, climbing walls or climbing frames.

- **What places in the school ground support children socially?**

Based on the results from the questionnaire, places the children usually are when with friends are the whole school ground and outside the classroom, where there are king out courts and swings. More places are the football field, the “forest” in the school ground and outside the school dining. There are no differences between places boys and girls use.

Places used for withdrawal are the forest, where there usually are not so many other children, and places where there are privately separated benches, outside the classroom and outside the school ground.

The children like the side of the school ground where the smaller children are, where there are the forest, swings and slides. But they feel like it is not fun to be there because of the smaller children being there taking the swings for example.

In the school ground there is an asphalt field where one can play basketball, football or bandy, but the children said they don't use that place because it is often taken by smaller children. They also perceive the place as unsafe because of the vegetation around the field, which makes the place enclosed and they can't see neither into the field nor out from it.

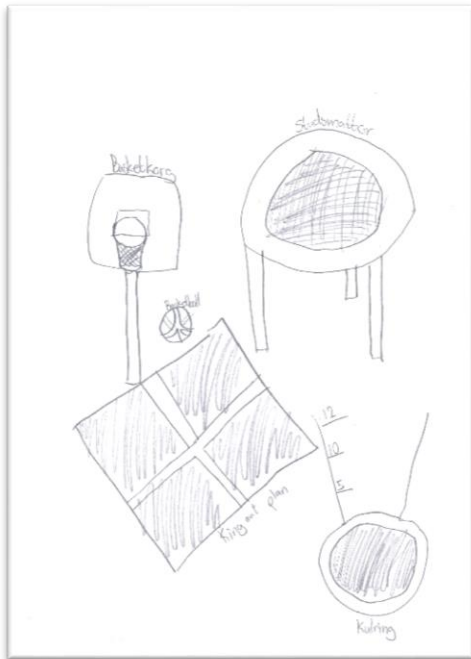
- **In what places in the school ground do children feel safe or unsafe?**

Both boys and girls feel safe over the whole school ground and particularly outside their classroom. The boys don't perceive any place in the school ground as unsafe, based on the questionnaire, but in the interviews outside the PE building was pointed out as unsafe because of the narrow and slippery stair leading into the gymnastics. Based on the questionnaire the girls perceive the king out courts and the football field as unsafe because of the risk of getting hit by balls, also because fights easily occur there. The girls mentioned the asphalt field where one can play basketball, football or bandy, also to be perceived as unsafe because of the vegetation around the field, which make it hard to see both into and out from the field.

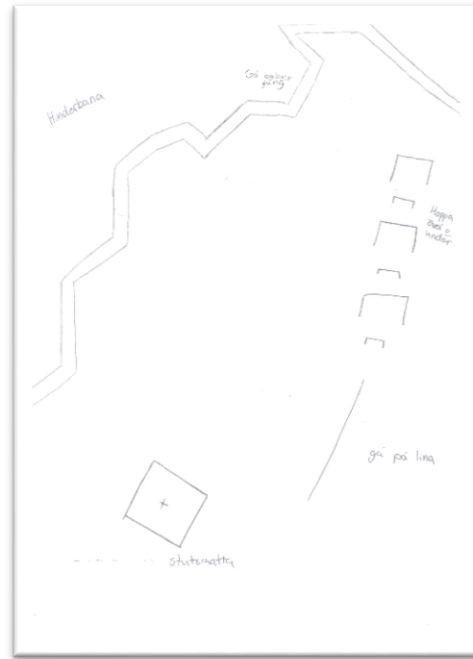
#### **Ideal school ground**

The drawings are divided into the same categories, as the drawings from grade four. The categories are *ballgames*, *physical activity*, *social activity* and *environmental elements*. Under the ballgames category from the sixth graders, drawings included different kinds of ballgame courts, like handball fields, football fields, both regular size, large size and with artificial grass, and also basketball courts and table tennis. Under the second category, physical activity, the drawings included different kinds of climbing frames, swings, obstacle courses, trampolines and swimming pools. Under the third category, social activity, seating places with roof over and game houses were drawn. Under the fourth category environmental elements included forests, trees, bushes and grass lawns.

Drawings from grade six



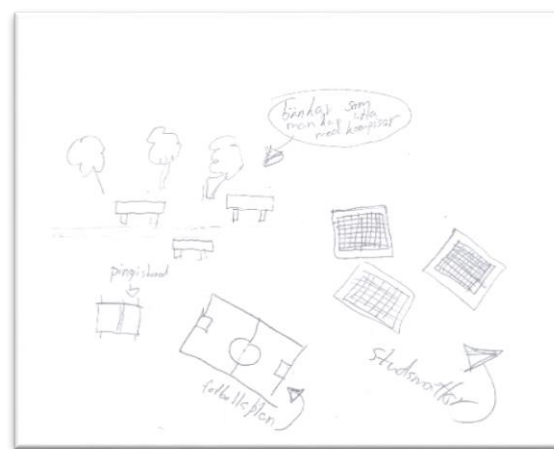
School 2, grade 6, girl. Category: *Ballgames & Physical activity*



School 2, grade 6, girl. Category: *Physical activity*



School 2, grade 6, girl. Category: *Environmental Elements*



School 2, grade 6, girl. Category: *Physical activity, Social activity & Environmental elements*

Figure 28. Here are four drawings from the sixth graders ideal school ground. The drawings are chosen to represent the four categories described above. In the drawings there are ballgame courts, trampolines, an obstacle course, benches and trees and bushes.

### 3.2.3. Summary of both grades at school 2

Based on the questionnaire most of the children in school 2 think their school ground is ok. No one in fourth grade claimed not to like their school ground and equally many boys and girls like their school ground. In grade six no one said they like their school ground, and both boys and girls said not to like their school ground, more boys than girls. Here is a difference between grade four and six in school 2. During the child-led walks the children said the biggest issue in their school ground was the lack of interesting activities for the sixth graders, and the activities provided for are often taken by younger children. This, the fourth graders also said.

Both grade four and six do about the same activities at the school ground, like different ballgames, playing tag, playing with their mobile phone or walking around talking to friends. Figure 29 show data from the questionnaire, visualising the spread among the different activities in the school ground 2. These are also in much the activities that the children said they want to do in their school ground, based on information from the drawings.

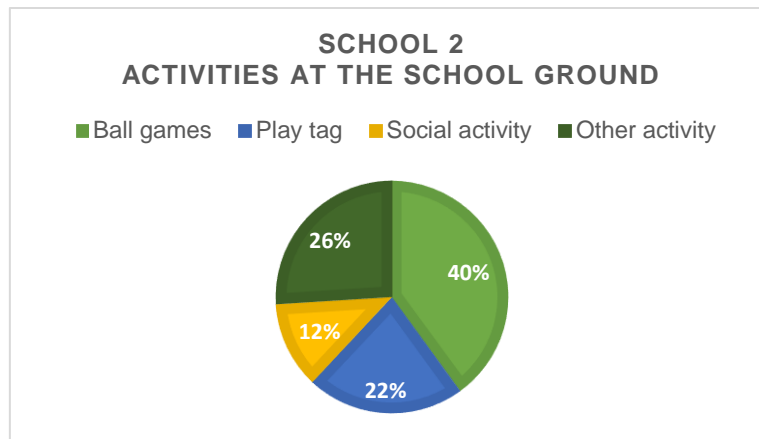


Figure 29. Based on data from the questionnaire the most common activities for both grade four and six in the school ground, at school 2 are ballgames like football or king out. Playing tag, which is a game that the children are playing in the whole school ground. Social activities are talking to friends, sitting down or walking around. Other activities are for example to swing, do gymnastics or play with mobile phone.

The place used for withdrawal by both grade four and six is the “forest”, because they could be alone there sometimes when there are not many other children outside. The sixth graders also said they go outside the school ground for withdrawal.

The forest was the place that both grades liked the most about their school ground because of all the trees. They also liked the school ground much because they feel like they know the school ground well, because they have attended the school for several years. Both grades said they would like to be more physically challenged to preform physical activity in the school ground. For example they would like obstacle courses, outdoor gym or trampolines.



## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Varied environments for varied activities

There seems not to be any large differences between school 1 and school 2 regarding what activities the children value in their school ground. Although the school grounds are different from each other, both school grounds include places for different ballgame activities, there are different equipment for physical activity, and there are benches for sitting down and socialize or rest. These are the most common activities in both school 1 and 2. No difference was found between the two grades (grade four and grade six), regarding what activities the children do in their school ground. Looking at figure 14 and 29, the spreading between different activities is rather equal. But regarding what the children think about their school ground, the fourth graders seemed more satisfied than the sixth graders. This was also found in a recent study (Jansson, Abdulah & Eriksson, 2018), where the older children seemed more dissatisfied than the younger children. The children from school 1 seemed more dissatisfied with their school ground than the children in school 2, and the school ground support their needs in varying degrees.

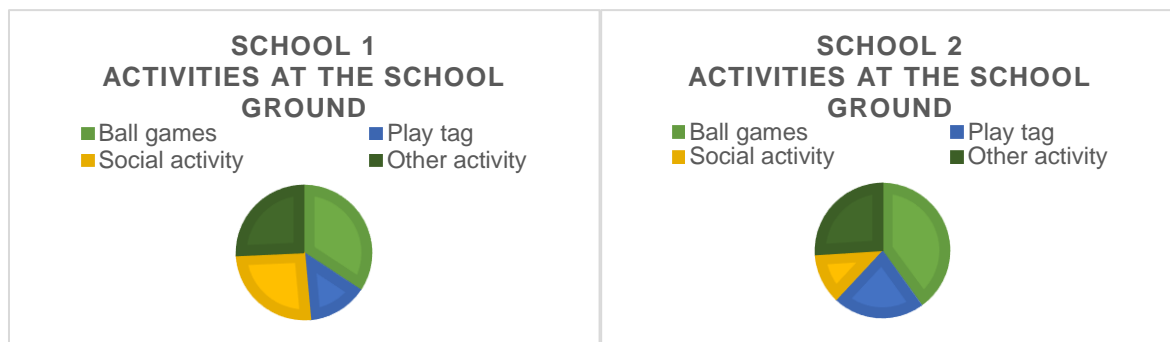


Figure 14 and 29. Here are figure 14 and 29 next to each other showing that the spreading between the different activities are similar at both school 1 and 2.

Different kinds of ballgames are common in both school grounds and equal amounts of boys and girls play ballgames in the school ground. In the study at a school in Malmö (Mårtensson, Jansson, Johansson, Raustorp, Kylin & Boldemann, 2014) ballgames were also found to be a common activity. For children to have access to different kinds of balls and ballgame fields provides easy opportunities for the children to be physically active (ibid.).

Playing tag is common at both school 1 and 2 in both grade four and six, and when the whole school ground was used. This indicates that it is important for the school ground to have sufficiently large space for the children to move around and run. This is confirmed by Kylin (2004) saying that children need spacious places in their environments. Also, open space is important in environments for children, where they can explore and seek for excitement under safe circumstances. Therefore the environment should provide opportunities to explore heights, experience high speed (run, swing, and bicycling), carve and cut, fight and have the opportunity to withdraw and be alone. To provide for all of these different activities requires spacious areas (Kylin, 2004).

Children also need the environment to be green and varied (Mårtensson, 2013). In school ground 1 there is a lack of vegetation and the children in both grades pointed out that they miss

large trees and a lot of bushes they could play and climb in. In school ground 2 there is more vegetation and the children at that school said they really appreciated “the forest” in the school ground. They liked it because it provided for a richer school ground and created a lot of play materials, such as sticks. According to Chawla (2015), environments that contain a lot of trees, shrubbery, open areas and play structures have shown several positive effects on children’s health such as improved sleep at night, lower cortisol levels, weight control, increase of concentration capacity and fewer sick days for both children and the staff at school (Chawla, 2015; Dymont, 2005).

The children in both school 1 and 2 said they wanted more physical activities to do in their school ground. Based on the interviews from school 2, there is a clear expression from the girls that their side of the school ground is boring and there is a lot more to do on the other side of the school ground. A common issue was that the existing equipment often was occupied by other children. With a high quality outdoor environment for children, the environment contains many positive affordances (Gibson, 1979), which include meaningful action possibilities that the child perceive in the environment (Lerstrup & Konijnendijk van den Bosch, 2017). The boys at school 2 used the football field a lot more than the girls, which gives the boys more places to use and is perhaps why specifically the girls expressed the lack at their side of the school ground and the environment to be boring.

In school 2 the children said they sometimes play with their mobile phones during breaks. But there was also an expression of some children being bored because of them or their friends always playing with their mobile phones, also that they rather stay indoors sometimes and play with their mobile phones since everybody else is staying indoors. In school 2 there is a mobile phone free break, but the children said that no one cares to remove their phone at that break, as children don’t follow the rule and the teachers don’t say anything. In school 1 no child mention their mobile phone, and I did not see anyone with their phone either. The children did not mention any rules about using their mobile phones during breaks. The sixth graders in school 1 talked about indoor breaks, but they did not say what they usually do then, since I was more focused on activities outdoors. After the interviews I found out that there is a mobile phone rule at the school. The children are not allowed to use their mobile phone when at school, which appears to be positive for the activities during breaks.

Perhaps the sixth graders at both schools felt like they wanted to stay indoors instead of going outdoors because they are bored outdoors or tired of places being occupied by other children. Also found in a recent study (Jansson, Abdulah & Eriksson, 2018) shows that children often choose to be indoors where the school ground is limited in size, lacking a varied and multifunctional content or where the design is not integrating elements in useful settings. Perceived sense of coherence in a school ground is also important regarding experience of place attachment, which is the decisive factor of in which specific places one likes to spend time and for how long (Twigger-Ross, Bonaiuto & Breakwell, 2003). If the six graders don’t perceive any sense of coherence in their school ground, this could explain why they are bored. For older children’s outdoor stay it is important with attractive meeting points that create a sense of belonging. This concerns especially places that are close to classrooms where there is both a view out from the classroom and movements from other children and teachers. Also, the vegetation promotes social and playful socializing on safe and relaxed terms (Dymont, Bell & Lucas, 2009).

## 4.2. Social places

Based on the results, places that support children socially seemed to be connected to the activities the children are doing, since the question that was asked was where they spend time with their friends which refers more to social activity, rather than social support. For example, many children mentioned the football field or the climbing frame as places used when with friends. This could be related to the feeling of sense of place and place attachment (Scanell & Gifford, 2010). Because to what extent the place contains personal ideas, values, feelings, goals and behavior the place makes sense to the individual. Children and adults like to spend time in places to which they feel attached (Twigger-Ross, Bonaiuto & Breakwell, 2003). To study what kinds of places that support children socially is complex. In this study only one question was asked and perhaps it would have given more information if there were more questions asked, and also observations of the children's behavior.

In school 1 no one said they like their school ground and more boys than girls did not like it. Both the fourth grade and sixth grade children of school 1 had only attended the school for 1,5 years, which is something that could affect their perceived attachment to the school ground, because place attachment is established over time. Longer time spent at the same place increases perceived place attachment (Scanell & Gifford, 2010). The children have also left their old school ground, which they liked because it was varied and they have a longer relation to the old school ground than the one they have now. In school 2 most children had attended the school since grade zero, which means they have had years to develop attachment to the school ground, and have long time memories from the school ground. What the children in school 2 like the most in their school ground is that they feel safe and know the environment well because they have attended the school since they were six years old. They also appreciated that their school ground has a "forest", which provide for a lot of activities. The vegetation the children in school 1 said they miss a lot. The children in both schools seemed very aware of the positive effect vegetation has.

Another important place in the school grounds is outside the classrooms, the immediate outdoor environment. It seemed to have an important impact for all grades at both schools, but a bit more at school 2. They often referred to their side of the school ground and the younger children's side of the school ground. They said they felt like the side with the entrance to their classroom, is their side. The girls said that they wanted to stay near their classroom to be able to easier know when the break is over and it is time to go inside. Closeness to the classroom perhaps provide for perceived safety. Staying outside the classroom, was also found in the study at a school in Malmö (Mårtensson, Jansson, Johansson, Raustorp, Kylin & Boldemann, 2014), where the area immediately outside the classroom was a well-used place. Proximity to buildings and the close contact to the outdoor environment is important in a school ground, and having direct access from the school building to an own school ground increase active and imaginative play (Dyment, Bell & Lucas, 2009; Nordström, 2014).

One difference between the two school grounds is the placement of classrooms. In school ground 1 all the grades, from year 0 to 6, have their entrance facing the same side of the school ground, which is in the middle of the school ground. While in school ground 2 grade four have their entrance on one side, and grade five and six have their entrances in another side, and grade 0-3 have their entrances facing yet another side of the school building. This physical difference in how the school ground is designed seems to be an important factor to consider. It seems to have impact in what activities the children do, and also affects the first impression when the children come in and out.

### 4.3. Perceived safety in school grounds

In school 1 children did not like that their school is open, flat and lacking vegetation. It leaves no space to withdraw and not be seen by others. According to Chawla (2015) when children are playing outdoors, they need to both be able to have contact with adults and feel safe by adults, but they also need places where they can withdraw and not feel observed by adults. Therefore it is important that there are places where children can hide, for example in shrubbery, which creates a room where the child makes the rules and can withdraw from both other children and adults (Kylin, 2005). This fits well with what the children in school 2 said regarding using the forest for withdrawal. The forest contains a lot of vegetation where one could hide, but not so far away there are adults in the school ground that easily could find the children. Where as in school ground 1 behind the school building was a place used for withdrawal because there were not so many other children there. But the same place was also previewed as unsafe because there were not so many other children and adults. This points at the complexity with environments regarding places used for different purposes. If a place is separated from where everyone else is it might be too secluded, and if everyone is in the same place no one could withdraw. The results from school 2 show how vegetation creates the environment to feel secluded or private without being separated from the rest of the school ground. The vegetation creates a lot of rooms which give space for many children to find activities at the same time, without the place being perceived as crowded.

### 4.4. The importance of school ground quality for children's health and well-being

It is important for the school ground to be age adjusted so that both younger and older children perceive the environment to be appealing, large enough and that the school ground is "theirs". In school 1 the school ground was smaller than in school 2. Children in both schools complained about places often being occupied but it seemed to be a bigger issue in school 1 where the older children were referred to going either inside the school building or outside the school ground.

It is important that children spend time outdoors for their health and development, therefore it is important that children use their school ground and like to spend time there. Otherwise the children will stay indoors instead which limits physical challenges or recovery. If the school ground is appealing to children it can really be used to support children's health and development. In the school ground children can recover from stress, use their imagination and be physically active through play.

### 4.5. Method discussion

This study's aim and research questions are complex and this thesis only gives a sample of children's perspectives on school grounds. More studies and more are needed to gather more information about children's perspectives. One possible limitation of the study is that only one person has analyzed and interpreted the data, including the drawings which were sometimes not evident to understand. To avoid personal thoughts and interpretations both methods and results are aimed to be transparent so that someone else could see all steps within the study and could lead up to the same results (Denscombe, 2000).

Concerning the questionnaire, one can never be really sure about how the children perceive the questions and that they have understood and answered the questions in the intended way. To

avoid problems with misunderstandings I went through some of the questions and explained what was meant and asked if they understood the questions. The children were also told to ask for help when completing the questionnaire if they had any questions.

There could also have been misunderstandings during the child-led walks, with me not understanding the children correctly or for me to make my own conclusions. To avoid this problem I recounted what the children had said and asked if I had understood it correctly. To avoid making own conclusions I asked the children to explain more and tell me more specifically about what they mean.

The child-led walks being made directly after the questionnaire I believe is a strength with this study, because when it was time for the walks the children were already prepared for the questions they were going to be talking about and had just wrote them down for the questionnaire. The children could then easily show and tell about places in their school ground. There was no need for introductory questions and the children were not shy or unsure of what to answer at any time.

Another approach for collecting data for this study could have been for the children to first make a drawing of their ideal school ground and then discuss the drawings together with the children. This would have given a deeper understanding about the drawings and would have reduced the risk of not being able to understand the drawings, also reduce the risk of own interpretations.

To both conduct a questionnaire and child-led walks gave a deeper understanding about the children's perspectives on their school ground. This triangulation of methods according to Cele (2006) gives a rich material and is especially useful when doing research on children's perspectives on outdoor environments. In this study the questionnaire responses gave some information and the information from the walks created a deeper understanding about the specific context in the school grounds. The walks also gave the opportunity for the children to explain more about their perspectives. An additional method in this study could have been observations. Observations would have given the opportunity to observe the children's use of their school ground, which could have been compared to the results from the interviews.

## 5. Conclusions

This study has explored children's perspectives on places and qualities that children see as supportive in their school ground. The results showed that there are no differences in what environmental qualities and activities children value. Regardless of the children's current school ground's qualities, they value the same things. Important activities for children in school grounds are different kinds of ballgames, physical activity and socializing. Places that are socially supportive for children could be the whole school ground, depending on which activity the child prefers. Also, the immediate environment outside the classroom is important, particularly if it is inviting and contains opportunities for various kinds of activities. Safe places in school grounds are places that include vegetation and where the child can choose to socialize or withdraw from others. Unsafe places in school grounds are places that are enclosed or separated, barren and where there are not so many other children or adults. Most important is that school grounds are age adjusted, inspiring and inviting for the children to use.

In further research it would have been interesting to conduct the same study method in a larger number of school grounds. It would have allowed comparison of school grounds that differ

even more than the two school grounds chosen for this study, and even comparison of children's perspectives on school grounds in different socioeconomic contexts.

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## Appendix 1 – Information letter to principals and teachers

Hej!

Jag heter Sofie Hallin och läser masterprogrammet Outdoor environments for health and well-being vid Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet (SLU) i Alnarp. Mitt examensarbete handlar om mellanstadiebarns perspektiv på skolgårdar.

Skolgården är en plats som är viktig för barns hälsa ur flera perspektiv, både fysiskt och psykiskt. Det är en plats som kan användas för återhämtning och vara en miljö för både social och fysisk utveckling. Idag vistas barn utomhus betydligt mindre än förr. För många barn är skolgården den utemiljö de vistas i mest och därför är den särskilt viktig för barns hälsa och välbefinnande. Vinsten för barn att spendera sina raster utomhus är flera, bland annat ger det bättre koncentrationsförmåga, mer fysisk aktivitet och bättre nattsömn.

Syftet med min studie är att få barnens perspektiv på vad de värdesätter på sin skolgård, vilka aktiviteter de tycker är viktiga och vilka platser som stödjer dem socialt, samt vilka platser som inte gör det. Jag planerar att genomföra studien med en klass 4 och en klass 6 på två skolor, och önskar att din skola blir en av dem. Metoden för studien är främst en enkät innehållande några frågor samt uppgift att teckna barnets ideala skolgård. Därefter genomförs promenad-intervjuer på skolgården med totalt fyra grupper om två eller tre barn (två grupper från varje klass).

Deltagandet är frivilligt för samtliga deltagare som också kommer att ges fullständig anonymitet. Inga personuppgifter samlas in. Det är bara jag som student och min handledare som kommer att ha tillgång till det insamlade materialet. Promenad-intervjuerna kommer att dokumenteras med ljudinspelning samt foto på platser (inte på barnen).

Jag önskar få kontakt med respektive klasslärare för att inleda samarbete samt lämna information och samtyckesblankett till föräldrar. När uppsatsen är klar kommer den att publiceras på SLUs databas för studentuppsatser och jag lämnar även gärna ett fysiskt exemplar av uppsatsen, så snart den blivit betygsatt. Materialet från studien kan eventuellt komma att användas i vetenskaplig publicering framöver. Om du har frågor eller tankar kring studien eller deltagandet är du välkommen att kontakta mig eller min handledare.

Vänliga hälsningar

Sofie Hallin

Lund 2018-03-05

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## Appendix 2 – Information letter and consent form to parents

Hej!

Jag heter Sofie Hallin och läser masterprogrammet Outdoor environments for health and well-being vid Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet (SLU) i Alnarp. Mitt examensarbete handlar om mellanstadiebarns perspektiv på skolgårdar. Jag genomför nu min studie på ditt barns skola och vill härmed informera om och be om samtycke till deltagande i studien.

Skolgården är en plats som är viktig för barns hälsa ur flera perspektiv, både fysiskt och psykiskt. Det är en plats som kan användas för återhämtning och vara en miljö för både social och fysisk utveckling. Idag vistas barn utomhus betydligt mindre än förr. För många barn är skolgården den utemiljö de vistas i mest och därför är den särskilt viktig för barns hälsa och välbefinnande. Vinsten för barn att spendera sina raster utomhus är flera, bland annat ger det bättre koncentrationsförmåga, mer fysisk aktivitet och bättre nattsömn.

Syftet med min studie är att få barnens perspektiv på vad de värdesätter på sin skolgård, vilka aktiviteter de tycker är viktiga och vilka platser som stödjer dem socialt, samt vilka platser som inte gör det. Jag genomför studien med en klass 4 och en klass 6 på två skolor. Metoden för studien är främst en enkät med några frågor samt uppgift att teckna barnets ideala skolgård. Därefter genomförs promenad-intervjuer på skolgården med några grupper om två till tre barn.

Deltagandet är frivilligt för samtliga deltagare som också kommer att ges fullständig anonymitet. Inga personuppgifter samlas in. Det är bara jag som student och min handledare som kommer att ha tillgång till det insamlade materialet. Promenad-intervjuerna kommer att dokumenteras med ljudinspelning samt foto på platser (inte på barnen).

Före studiens start bes samtliga berörda föräldrar om samtycke till deras barns deltagande i studien. Bifogat finns en samtyckesblankett, som efter underskrift lämnas till klassläraren.

När uppsatsen är klar kommer den att publiceras på SLUs databas för studentuppsatser och klassen kommer att få ett exemplar av uppsatsen, så snart den blivit betygsatt. Materialet kan eventuellt komma att användas i vetenskaplig publicering. Om du har övriga frågor och funderingar kring studien eller deltagandet är du välkommen att kontakta mig eller min handledare.

Vänliga hälsningar

Sofie Hallin

Lund 2018-03-12

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## Samtyckesblankett

Till berörda vårdnadshavare:

### Studentprojekt om barns perspektiv på skolgårdar

- Jag/vi är informerade om studentprojektet om barns perspektiv på skolgårdar och lämnar tillstånd till att vårt barn deltar i studien.
- Jag/vi vill inte att vårt barn deltar i studentprojektet om barns perspektiv på skolgårdar.

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Barnets namn

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Klass

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Underskrift vårdnadshavare

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Underskrift vårdnadshavare

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Ort/datum

## Appendix 3 - Questionnaire

### Min skolgård

Den här enkäten handlar om din skolgård och vad du tycker om den. Syftet är att få veta mer om skolgårdar, olika platser på dem och hur de fungerar för de elever som använder dem.

Alla som fyller i enkäten är helt anonyma. Det är också frivilligt att vara med och du kan avbryta när som helst, om ni vill det.

#### Enkät

1. Jag går i årskurs \_\_\_\_\_
2. Jag är      POJKE                       FLICKA
3. Vad tycker du om din skolgård?  
 Jag tycker om den      Jag tycker den är helt okej  
 Jag tycker *inte* om den      Vet ej
4. Vad tycker du mest om att göra på din skolgård?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Var på skolgården brukar du göra det?  
Markera med frågans nummer (5) på kartan över skolgården.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Finns det något eller någon speciell plats på din skolgård som du *inte* tycker om?  
Markera med frågans nummer (6) på kartan över skolgården.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Var på skolgården känner du dig trygg? Det kan vara flera platser.  
Markera med frågans nummer (7) på kartan över skolgården.

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8. Var på skolgården känner du dig *inte* trygg? Det kan vara flera platser.  
Markera med frågans nummer (8) på kartan över skolgården.

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9. Finns det platser på skolgården där du vet att någon har blivit utsatt för mobbning?  
Om JA, markera plats med frågans nummer (9) på kartan över skolgården

JA       NEJ

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10. Var på skolgården tar du dig när du vill vara för dig själv? Det kan vara flera platser.  
Markera med frågans nummer (10) på kartan över skolgården.

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11. Var på skolgården brukar du vara tillsammans med kompisar? Det kan vara flera platser.  
Markera med frågans nummer (11) på kartan över skolgården.

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12. Rita din ideala (bästa) skolgård.

Tack för ditt svar!

Sofie





School ground 1, a photo of a sign of an illustration of the school ground attached to the questionnaire.



School ground 2, a management plan of the school ground attached to the questionnaire.

## Appendix 4 – Interview guide child-led walks

Den här intervjun handlar om din skolgård och vad du tycker om den. Syftet är att få veta mer om skolgårdar, olika platser på dem och hur de fungerar för de elever som använder dem.

Alla som intervjuas är helt anonyma. Det är också frivilligt att vara med och du kan avbryta när som helst, om ni vill det.

Jag kommer att spela in intervjun och inspelningen kommer endast användas för mig egen del, så att jag kommer ihåg vad vi har pratat om.

1. Visa mig er skolgård och beskriv den (hur är den, vad finns på skolgården, vad kan man göra)
2. Vad tycker ni om er skolgård? Vad är det bästa med skolgården? Hur är det att vara ute?
3. Vad brukar ni göra på skolgården?
4. Visa mig platser som ni tycker om.  
-Vad gillar ni med denna platsen?
5. Visa mig platser ni inte tycker om.  
-Vad gillar ni inte med denna platsen?
6. Finns det platser på skolgården där ni känner er otrygga? Om ja, visa mig var.  
Varför upplever ni denna plats som otrygg?
7. På vilka platser på skolgården känner ni er trygga?  
Varför upplever ni denna plats som trygg?
8. Finns det platser på skolgården där ni vet att någon har blivit utsatt för mobbning, eller platser där det uppstår bråk?
9. Visa platser på skolgården ni brukar gå till när ni umgås med era kompisar.  
Vad gör ni här?
10. Visa mig platser på skolgården ni brukar gå till när ni vill vara för er själva. Varför är denna plats bra när man vill vara för sig själv?
11. Saknar ni något på skolgården eller skulle vilja ändra på något?
12. Finns det något mer ni vill visa eller berätta om er skolgård?

**13. Tack för att ni berättade och visade för mig!**