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School as Narrated Places: Children's Narratives of School Enjoyment

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This article considers school as a place narrated by students. The goal is to understand students' experiences of their school as a place through the 'sense of place.' The empirical data was collected at a small village school in northern Finland during one week of ethnographic observation, which involved interviewing students, collecting students' writings, and observing teaching. Using content analysis and narrative analysis, three types of narratives were analyzed: One, *narratives of relations in place* describe students' experience of their school as a familiar, safe, peaceful place. Two, *narratives of action in place* emphasize that sense of place is based on places of common action and belonging, for example, in the schoolyard, in the school's surroundings and environment, on school trips, and during school festivities. Three, *narratives of self in place* give insights into friendships at a small school. A small school enables close, long-lasting friendships, strengthening the sense of place. Students who switch schools may have difficulties adjusting to tight groups of students; those difficulties may produce feelings of being an outsider. This article also aims to introduce the significance of place in discussions concerning school politics and didactics. An evaluation of the significance of school as a place from the children's point of view is suggested as a new perspective for discussions and decision-making regarding school closures. This new perspective should focus on how schools as places support children's growth and development and how an understanding of schools as places can be used to increase children's enjoyment of school.

Key words: *narrative inquiry, place, place-based education, sense of place, small school*

Introduction

This article will show how place is narrated in school education. Teachers and students are related to place, and teaching occurs in time and place. Place is understood in this study as a concrete and experienced environment intertwined with our identity (Relph, 1976; 2008). A school is not just a building, a mere physical space, but is intertwined with our experiences of growth. Space is a more abstract concept than place; space has area and volume. Places have spaces between them. Naming is one way space can be given meaning and become place (Cresswell, 2004). Experiences of places are a part of our identity and help us answer the question, 'Who am I?' (Relph, 1976). A small village school was chosen as the 'specific place' of this study and the students of that school as its narrators. We use a 'sense of

place,' the concept articulated by place philosopher Edward Relph (1976; 2008), to gain an understanding of the experiences students have of places. In investigating 'place' and 'sense of place,' we base our understanding on humanist geography that considers phenomena from the perspective of individuals' experiences. The objects of this research are the meanings that individuals assign to places, meanings revealed to the researchers of this article through the subjective experiences, values, feelings, memories, and hopes of the research participants. The research objects can be understood by interpreting the meanings in question (Haarni, Karvinen, Koskela and Tyni, 1997: 10). We understand place as part of the world of an individual's experience, as a space affiliated with meanings. To expand on place, we discuss ideas of place presented in particular by J. E. Malpas (1999), Doris Massey (1995; 2003), and Yi-Fu Tuan (1975; 1991). Children's living and physical environments are explored through the work of Finnish architect Anja Allas (1981) and environmental psychologist Liisa Horelli (1992; 1995).

We agreed with the participants to mask identifiable facts in this report. Thus, the school is named 'Riverside School,' which is not its actual name, and the names of the students, teachers, and places have been replaced with code names. The study's main empirical data consists of the students' writings (n=23; 13 boys and 10 girls), group interviews with students (n=4), and one week of teaching observation, all of which were conducted at a primary school—'Riverside School'—in a small village in northern Finland. Methodologically, this study is committed to a narrative ethnographic approach, meaning that when stories are collected, a researcher should have an understanding of the place in which those stories are told (Pink, 2009). The data was analyzed through content analysis and narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008).

Riverside School is one of seven hundred and twenty-two small elementary schools in Finland.¹ A small school is defined here as a school with fewer than fifty students. A small Finnish school is typically a village primary school (grades 1 to 6) located in a rural area and typically has two or three teachers who teach different grades in the same classroom, a practice referred to as 'multi-grade' or 'multi-age' teaching. A specific feature of small village school pedagogy is 'place-based education,' meaning that the place and its particular characteristics are incorporated into the school's curriculum (Cameron, 2008:297; Gruenewald and Smith, 2008). Riverside School is lively, with, in 2010, forty-seven students, three teachers teaching different grades in their classes, two school assistants, and a cook. This article considers in particular the significance of place in school education from a student's point of view.

Research into village schools in Finland has been meagre, and most was conducted more than a decade ago. Esko Kalaoja and Eira Korpinen are the most notable researchers in the field. Kalaoja has studied the pedagogy of small schools and the relationship between schools and local communities (Kalaoja and Pietarinen, 2009). Korpinen (2007; 2010) has conducted studies on the atmosphere and well-being of small schools and has discussed parents' relationships to village schools. A few dissertations in the 2000s examined the pedagogy of small schools (Karlberg-Granlund, 2009; Kilpeläinen, 2010; Peltonen, 2002). In those studies, data was collected mostly from interviews with teachers. Student-centered learning and teaching processes; flexible teaching; a family-like, secure atmosphere; the ease of innovative change; and co-operation between students have been lauded as advantages of small schools (Kalaoja and Pietarinen, 2009; Korpinen, 2010). More knowledge should be obtained on the significance of small village schools in the lives of students and teachers, and in the teaching, learning, and growth of multi-grade classes in

¹ The situation in 2010, when the empirical data was collected for this research. In the following two years, sixty-six small elementary schools were closed; thus, in 2012, there were six hundred and sixty small elementary schools in Finland. Reference: Statistics of Finland. Statistics of Education. See also Autti and Hyry-Beihammer (2009).

small village schools. In this article, we consider a small school from the perspectives of children and place. Our research question is, 'How is place in school education narrated by students?'

This study also discusses the implications of the case study for the issue of school closures, as small schools are under threat of closure in Finland and in many other European countries. Riverside School is not currently under the threat of closure, but discussions continue in the municipality about moving grades 5 and 6 to a bigger central school. Between 1991 and 2010, the number of small Finnish primary schools decreased by sixty-five percent.² In addition to economic considerations, bigger schools are justified by social and didactic factors. Children may have more social contacts and friendships in a bigger school and may develop better social skills in bigger groups. Moreover, the opportunities for teaching and learning may be more diverse than in small village schools (Kalaoja and Pietarinen, 2009; Knauf, 2010). However, no deep discussion of values has occurred when schools are closed. The significance of place to children has also been ignored; discussion has not contemplated the significance of a school for children or considered children's experiences of changing a school and place.

Experienced and narrated place

Fundamental questions of human essence include 'Who am I?', 'Where do I come from?', and 'Where am I going?' Education and educators should provide elements to consider these questions, all of which are presented in places: 'we live in places, relate to others in them, die in them,' as philosopher Edward Casey (1997: ix) states, arguing that the meaning of places is the very foundation of our being. Place can be seen as a condition of existence itself. Understanding the structure and possibility of experience is inseparable from place (Malpas, 1999).

Our active environment reflects not only a person's practical and technological ability but also our cultural and societal needs, hopes, and points of interest. The environment dictates our actions in a visible way through, for example, the quality of climate and soil; however, many subtle, multidimensional levels exist in our relationship with the environment. We give places meanings and build emotional bonds; places influence our actions (Malpas, 1999). A person's relationship with a place is complex and so obvious that the relationship is often unconsidered. Places live with us and frequently become prominent only when something unusual occurs. A person's identity and idea of self are built nonetheless in relation to his or her relationship to a place and to acting in that place, whether we acknowledge it or not (Malpas, 1999). From place is built our experiential, meaningful relationship with the surrounding world (Relph, 1996).

An emotional bond with a place and the thoughts and emotions associated with a place spring from every part of a person's life, from everyday life and experiences. Places are full of meanings and feelings. The connection between a place and a person becomes apparent in identity: Through identity, we define ourselves, and a strong meaning given to a place may become a central part of a person's identity. Identity is built on lived experiences and on subjective feelings related to everyday knowledge, but at the same time, those experiences and feelings are anchored to wider networks of social relationship. Accompanying all this are the past and the social, economic, and cultural present. Identity is not the result of purely subjective experience and meaning, because social, cultural, and economic circumstances affect individual meanings and feelings (Rose, 1995). According to Massey (1995), places are open in nature. Residents are heterogeneous in many respects, and different groups'

² Reference: Statistics of Finland. Statistics of Education. See also Autti and Hyry-Beihammer (2009).

ideas of place and its identity can differ significantly. A 'pure' locality is rare because wider national and international phenomena and events influence people's lives (Massey, 1995). The strongest place-related experiences are associated with places in which a person has grown up and spent his or her childhood. Malpas (1999) in particular sees the places of one's childhood as defining the later image of oneself and one's sense of identity. Often, recalling childhood places is associated with nostalgia and with admiration of their characteristics. When an adult remembers past places from his or her childhood, that recollection is always at the same time a strong self-reflection.

A school and its immediate environment are—after places of residence—among the most significant places to children and young people, and are places in which children and young people spend most of their time. Horelli (1992) writes that a child's environment is formed from places that are required for everyday activities, from places that are interesting for play and from the routes that connect those places. The 'nodes' in such a network may include home, school, a shop, a park, and a library. A node point can also be an exciting place in a forest or on a beach. Founder of cognitive psychology James J. Gibson has propounded 'affordances': A person does not first sense and then build observations from his or her perceptions; rather, he or she sees the meanings and possibilities of his or her environment directly. From that environment are collected materials of a type that suit the observer's activities and intentions. An environment is observed as 'affordances' according to how objects and situations are available for use, which is the applicability of those objects and situations to the self and to the activity of a particular moment (Aura, Horelli and Korpela 1997).

In our study, we examine children's experiences of place as narrated by the children themselves. We are interested in how school, an important environment for children, becomes significant in their narratives and in the types of meaning and possibility children see in their place of schooling. Our research methodology is anchored in a narrative research approach (Riessman, 2008). We understand that, in an act of narration, children interpret their experiences and make them significant (Clandinin and Murphy, 2009), and 'arrange' the places in which they have experiences (Malpas 1999). The use of stories in a study of experiences can be justified by the argument that our stories are reflections of our lives; in narrating, we interpret the life we have lived through the present and the future (Chase, 2003; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). The act of telling always occurs about a certain place, constructed around somewhere that has been lived in and experienced, and in telling about ourselves, we also tell about a place. Our narratives are not just personal stories; rather, they are always narrated in a particular cultural, social, and historical context. They can be understood as 'larger narratives' (Baddeley and Singer, 2007). However, in this study, the children's stories of place are for the most part related to the present, to those children's experiences of everyday life; these stories are stories in which the children in question do not try to understand themselves through past experience. In the manner of Michael Bamberg and Aleksandra Georgakopoulou (2008), we contend that everyday situations and expressions also build our understanding of ourselves. Children's everyday stories may be called 'small stories' that contain narratives of events occurring at the time, future or hypothetical events, or shared events; those stories may also contain references to previous discussions, making the stories short-term narrative orientations to the world (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008: 381–382). In 'small stories,' we nonetheless recognize the possibility of reflecting 'large narratives' and, therefore, consider studying the small stories in their cultural, social, and historical contexts as important.

Collecting and analyzing school stories

The data used in this article was collected over one week of school visits to Riverside School in October 2010. Over the course of that week, one of the authors observed teaching in

three multi-grade classrooms, interviewed students, and collected their written compositions. The students were interviewed in five groups: a group interview with three Grade 1 students aged seven, a group interview with six Grade 2 students aged eight, a group interview with six Grade 3 students aged nine, a group interview with five Grade 5 students aged eleven, and a group interview with six Grade 6 students aged twelve. At the end of the week, compositions written by students in grades 4 to 6 were collected.

The researcher had visited the school the previous spring, and the school's principal had introduced her as 'a visiting doctor researcher'; therefore, the students were already familiar with her. When collecting ethnographic data at the school, the researcher did not take on the role of an objective observer or an outsider, but rather participated in the school's daily events and even worked as a teaching assistant when needed. The research was an ongoing process in which the researcher interacted with the participants, a practice that is meaningful in constructing stories (Craig and Huber, 2007). We have assured the participants that we aim to maintain their anonymity in every way possible; the children were asked to take a letter home to their parents in which the research was described and consent was requested for their children to participate in the study. The letter stated that the aim of the research is to study learning and teaching in small schools, and that protecting the participants is the basic ethical principle of this research (Josselson, 2007).

The student interviews were conducted in four different group interviews in separate rooms at the school. The researcher sat at a round table with the students and placed a microphone in the middle of the table. Sometimes the microphone was placed near a student who spoke quietly. At the beginning of the interview, the students were preoccupied with the recording, but they seemed to forget about it once the interviews began. When starting, the researcher told the children about her interest in small schools and in the teaching and learning that occur at such schools, and that she would like to know what they, the students of this school, think about their school. Next, children were asked to discuss their school in response to the question, 'What is your school like?' The interviews proceeded like a regular discussion between the students and the researcher; the students also talked with each other by continuing with a theme or commenting on a previous speaker's point.

Twenty-three compositions by students aged ten, eleven, and twelve in grades 4, 5, and 6 were collected during one lesson lasting forty-five minutes, in which the teacher, Matti, offered the researcher time to work with the students. The teacher was not present during the lesson, offering the researcher free working space. He asked rhetorically, "You will cope on your own?" The students were not asked for their permission for this writing task, and from this point of view, the situation was similar to an usual lesson. At the beginning of the lesson, the researcher asked the children to write about their school and to choose their titles freely. However, some themes were suggested to help with their writing process, themes such as 'our school,' 'my school,' 'a usual school day,' 'the nicest school day,' 'an exciting school day,' 'my favorite school memory,' or 'on a school trip.' In addition, the students and researcher looked at photos of the Riverside School building and schoolyard, school trips, and a camping trip. Some of the photos can be found on the school's webpage, and others were taken by the researcher during her visits to the school. The students used all the suggested themes in their writing. Before writing, a student asked if he was allowed to write about his dullest school day. After a few minutes of deliberation, the researcher determined that she could not collect only happy stories and encourage the students to declare optimistic views of the school, so the students were also allowed to describe dull school days. The compositions were rather short, between approximately fifty and a hundred words. The longest submission was one hundred and thirty-four words, and the shortest was simply seven words praising the school; specifically, 'My school is good, the best, and gorgeous.' One story, 'Two Different Schools,' by a Grade 4 girl aged ten, was exceptional;

in it, the girl described her experience of switching from a bigger city school to the small Riverside School.

The first phase of data analysis involved transcribing the compositions and interviews. Next, a content analysis was performed to examine what the students said about their school. Their narratives were *descriptions* of the school and school days in the present tense and *retrospective descriptions* of school trips, bazaar days, and one-day workshops, which included a great deal of action and verbal descriptions. An essential element of the narratives was that they were mostly located outside the formal learning environment, during breaks, on school trips, and in the school's immediate surroundings. In the narratives, the children constructed their *social forms* and related to others. The next phase of analysis was a narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), which began with the researcher reading the data holistically, to differentiate narratives and to arrive at larger themes. Finally, to focus on the main research question, 'how place in school education is narrated by students,' the narratives were divided into the following three categories: one, *narratives of relations in place* (interpreting the children's world as related to other people and the world), two, *narratives of action in place* (interpreting the children's physical world), and three, *narratives of self in place* (interpreting the children's inner world and the relation to the self). The length of the narratives analyzed varied from short sentences to an entire piece of writing that might be defined under one category. Most narratives fell under the first category and the fewest under the third category.

The categories were inspired in part by M. A. K. Halliday's idea of three main processes of language, including *material*, *relational*, and *spiritual* processes (Halliday, 1994; Hyvärinen, 2010). Material processes are related to activity in the active world and to changes in that world. In relational processes, things are classified and set in relation to each other. Spiritual processes are processes of thought or observation, or are affective (Halliday, 1994; Hyvärinen, 2010). We can take as the background for Halliday's model the idea that a phase requires participants, and that processes of a particular type require participants of a particular type. The issue is not only linguistic differentiations; in the processes, our individual and culturally bound ways of arranging the world, action, and people are visible (Hyvärinen, 2010). Thus, the model is also suitable for research in the social sciences and suitable in this study for examining children's experiences of place—not just for the field of linguistics. We understand the 'main' processes of language as applicable to the following world relations as defined by Malpas (1999): the relation to the physical environment or *objective* relation, the relation to the social environment or *intersubjective* relation, and the self-relation or *subjective* relation of the person experiencing a thing. We understand that Halliday's material processes of language reflect the objective relation to the world, Halliday's relational processes the intersubjective relation, and Halliday's spiritual processes the subjective relation to the world. Relation to a place includes structural parts from these three world relations, which are tied inseparably to each other (Malpas, 1999).

In addition to the 'main' processes, a language contains boundary processes: behavioral processes, verbal processes, and existential processes. Boundary processes often have two characteristics of the main process. Behavioral processes have characteristics of spiritual and material processes and are used to describe the appearance of inner states externally and physically, for example, with the expressions to watch, to stare, to cry, or to laugh. Verbal processes lie between the 'spiritual' and 'relational' processes and are used to describe symbolic relationships, which are a person's internal activity expressed through language, for example, with the expressions to think, to state, and to tell (Halliday, 1994: 138–142; Heikkinen and Virtanen, 2005: 6). In verbal processes, other people are linked in one's expressions as part of one's own experience and story (Hyvärinen, 2010). Existential processes are similar to relational processes; in an existential process, a new entity is presented that is assumed to be previously unknown. An existential process involves an assumption about the object of an interaction; existential processes are suitable mainly for

analyzing interviews and understanding how an interviewee regards an interviewer (Halliday, 1994; Hyvärinen, 2010). Of the data in this study, the authors analyzed only one existential process.

Of the transcribed data, the authors analyzed the 'main' and 'boundary' processes. Following that analysis, the boundary processes were linked to the main processes that best corresponded. Thus, there were interrelationships between the categories. A single narrative could have features of one or more categories (see for instance Katri's composition in the section "Knowing everybody by name"). Finally, each entire composition or parts of a composition or parts of an interview were named according to the narrative category that best described it or them. The length of the stories varied from a few sentences to an essay-length narrative. For example, a student's composition might describe a particular activity written with material processes from beginning to end. Most of the compositions were stories about activity of place; 'I' narratives accounted for the fewest experiences. Data from the student interviews was also analyzed by using the three categories. The observation data is used in this study as completing data to explain the findings based on the data from the students' compositions and interviews.

We next use the narrative categories to present the results, and interpret the results from the perspective of a sense of place and place-based education. When referring to group interviews with students in different grades, we use the phrase 'group interview' and following it, the interviewee's grade: Grade 1 (students aged seven), Grade 2 (students aged eight), Grade 3 (students aged nine), Grade 4 (students aged ten), and Grade 5 (students aged eleven). Observations by the researcher are referred to with the term 'field notes.' The children's compositions are referred to by the writer's pseudonym and grade and age.

Narratives of relations in place

The village school as a cosy, appropriately sized place

When asked at the beginning of the group interviews to describe Riverside School in response to the question, 'What is your school like?', students described the school as 'colorful' (group interview, Grade 1, student aged seven), 'nice, small, cheerful' (group interview, grades 2 and 3, students aged eight and nine), 'the best place in the world' (group interview, Grade 5, student aged eleven), and in terms of 'having mates' (group interview, Grade 6, student aged twelve). The descriptions also answered the researcher's other question, namely, 'Why do you find your school so nice?' The children considered the smallness of school purely as an advantage, because a small school 'isn't too crowded; somebody isn't lost all the time' (group interview, Grade 6, student aged twelve). In every group interview, the smallness and peacefulness of the school were emphasized. The students also defined the school as a place where they are not bullied (group interviews, grades 1 and 2, students aged seven and eight).

The following narrative by a boy in Grade 4 contains a description of the schoolyard and people at the school. The writer first presents the school staff and then 'names' the schoolyard by identifying different buildings, places for playing, and field marks. Finally, the schoolyard in the story is filled with all the students. The narrative is written mostly using relational processes, until, at the schoolyard, in line six, a short narrative of action begins:

In our school, there are three teachers, two school helpers, and one cook. Matti teaches grades four, five, and six, Heli grades two, three, and four, and Mirja teaches preschoolers. In our schoolyard, there is a mountain that is actually a small hill, and

there is of course the school and the sports hall. In the schoolyard, the pupils have built many snow huts. In the schoolyard, there are also swings, slides, and climbing frames. There's quite a bustle when forty-two pupils are playing during breaks. We have played 'konkka' [a hiding game], 'capture the flag,' and many other games.

(Composition, Sami, aged eleven, Grade 4)

In Sami's story, the schoolyard is a central place in which to play and participate in activities with other children. The igloos were controlled by their builders, and others could visit the igloos only with the builders' permission. Different groups of children gathered at different points of activity in the yard; for example, the primary school students' favorite place was an area with three swings, a slide, and a climbing frame. 'Capture the flag' was a game all the students played. According to Mirja, one of the teachers, it was played mainly when some difficult issue concerning everyone had been resolved and the situation had calmed down (field notes). Ruth Wilson (1997: 192) argues that the significance of a schoolyard as a central place—a 'city square'—for students has not been considered seriously. Wilson contends that a schoolyard can at its best be a unique place of learning for children, a place that offers possibilities for experiencing a natural environment, for active investigation, and for quiet and isolation, and that encourages a child to participate in activities in which he or she can achieve change, can act as an agent. A child's estimation of the attractiveness of a place seems based on the question, 'What can you do here?' whereas an adult asks, 'What does this look like?' (Wilson, 1997: 192). An adult's experiences of place are bound to his or her earlier memories of a place; to a child, what is important is the activity in a place, the everyday quality of a place. A child plays and learns all the time when using an environment. The relationship between a child and the environment functions on various levels: A child wants to know something about his or her environment, wants to feel something about it, or wants to do something in relation to it. Each level changes continuously through experience, and learning affects all levels (Allas, 1981: 66).

Rachel Sebba and Arza Churchman (1986) state that the educational potential of a schoolyard is also increased by its safety. This is true of Riverside School. It is closed off from general traffic and within walking distance from home for many students. During school days, teachers supervise the schoolyard; students do not need to worry about being bullied there. A safe schoolyard strengthens a child's feeling of basic safety, which, according to Sebba and Churchman (1986: 71), allows a child to concentrate on playing, studying, or thinking, and encourages a child to act spontaneously.

Studies investigating the characteristics of a 'good' play environment have emphasized elements of nature as well as the usability of a schoolyard and the possibilities offered by it. The diversity of a play environment has been observed to affect children's behavior. Games are more active and sociable; the role of imaginary games also increases. Social activity and cooperation between children of different sexes and ages increase in particular if a play environment is close to nature (Kyttä, 1995).

Knowing everybody by name

The students considered it important to know each other individually, by name. One reason given for the niceness apparent at Riverside School was that '[at the school] everybody knows everybody by name' (group interview, Grade 6). The students relate to each other and to the school staff and villagers. A significant part of the schoolwork includes festivities and bazaars that attract parents and the villagers, festivities that connect the children to the rest of the village. These relationships and events are described in the following composition by a girl, Katri, aged twelve, in Grade 6. In lines one to two, she uses relational processes

and introduces the school, activities at the school, and the villagers who come to watch the Christmas play. In the final part of the composition, Katri switches to material processes when describing winter activities at the school:

Our School

At our school, everyone knows everyone. We have many school trips, and everything is nice. At Christmas time, we have a Christmas play where the whole village is invited to watch our performance. On Shrove Tuesday, we usually go sledding with the school. During winter, we ski a lot for sport lessons. We have a ski trail on the fields. We also have skiing competitions every winter and track meets during the springtime. We also skate in the winter. We have nice teachers and a lot to do during breaks.

(Composition, Katri, aged twelve, Grade 6)

In one incident, during a lesson for grades 4, 5, and 6, villagers were invited 'into the class room.' During the lesson, a student saw someone walking in the street and called to the other students, 'Look, who's walking over there?' Another student commented, 'Oh, it's Raili. Let's wave to her.' All the children ran to the window and waved to Raili. Raili waved back (field notes).

Tuan (1991: 690) writes that places are cold without people, and that people's presence, feelings, and communication make places warm and lively—or the opposite, unpleasant. At Riverside School, knowing people at school by name, and the familiarity of villagers such as Raili, or visitors to a bazaar, is a relevant part of a school's family-like, warm atmosphere. Tuan (1991) adds that places may appear similar, but that their meanings can be very different for those who live or work there. The quality of social communication may be a decisive factor in such differences; how a word is used and with what tone of voice appears to affect the feeling of place.

Katri's description and the lesson 'incident' describe the meanings of an environment, which are distributed collectively. Meanings that are shared and regarded as positive add to a feeling of participation in and belonging to a place. A feeling of participation is a sense of a place and locality, and does not have exact physical boundaries. A sense of place is more than one person's sense of a particular place; the feeling is also social. All places are interpreted from a particular social position and through a particular social objective (Rose, 1995). Katri's story communicates bodily participation and activity as part of a social process. Processes of this type strengthen a sense of place and construct a place's meaning. Joint ski trips or village parties also add to identification with a place, because they enable participation, influence, and activity through events (Tuan, 1991).

School as a boring place

Contrasting the stories of school comfort are the stories of four students in which they describe boredom at school or of a school day. Common to those stories is that they are written nearly entirely in the passive form. Two stories suggest that a 'school-less' school would be a fun school. Fourth-grader Risto, aged ten, suggests that 'a school would be fun where every day was a holiday, and the school wouldn't even have been built, and you'd be allowed to have snow wars.' Fifth-grader Timo, aged eleven, first compares boring school days to fun school days and to the initial years at school, which he considers pleasant, and then suggests at the end of his composition that a fun school day would involve swimming

and relaxing in the Canary Islands. At this point, the passive is replaced with an active 'I' and then the 'we' form:

My most boring days at school were every day except class trips and grades one and two. Grades three, four, and five were all torture; you always had to be doing something and read for tests; if I could decide for myself I'd have rather even been at home and washed dishes. And you still have to suffer, still have to learn something, and if you ask me it'd be good if I could arrange a fun school day. We'd go to the Canary Islands to relax and swim.

(Composition, Timo, aged eleven, Grade 5)

Sixth-grader Olli describes boring physical education (P.E.) lessons as 'lacking proper games.' He wants the same activities during physical education lessons as after school, when he plays ice hockey at an ice rink:

It's boring in P.E. when you just play around all the time and never play a proper game. We should play football for instance or floorball and not beanbag games. Ice hockey is fun because it's fun to sometimes be in goal and sometimes playing. Now that there's ice on the ice rink, you can start playing there in the evenings and it'd be nice if we'd play there during school as well. Skating is fun during winter. Floorball is fun when you can whack the ball at full speed at the goal, and it's fun to be in goal.

(Composition, Olli, aged twelve, Grade 6)

A challenging question for a researcher is, 'What do these "boredom stories" say about school as a place?' They can be interpreted as narratives suggesting that stories of another type could be told about a school (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008). Risto's suggestion about a snow war challenges a ban on snow wars at Riverside School and other schools. A snow war is a traditional children's game, a relevant part of the children's winter environment. Sixth-grader Olli's missing 'proper' games might be interpreted as a need for more activity and physical culture. Physical education lessons and the mobility and fierceness of games in a small village school may be limited by the participation of smaller students and the small number of friends in the same older age group. 'Boredom stories' might be approached by comparing them to the children's home environment. Many students at a village school come from a home environment in which they are used to working with their hands, doing physical work, and solving practical problems. The principles of the action of a tractor motor may be more familiar to them than basic English words. Schools should answer how the students' experience, unexpressed in those students' narratives, might be attached more fixedly to school teaching.

Boredom stories also challenge the researcher ethics of this study. One can retrospectively consider if the boredom stories reflect unwillingness to participate in this part of the study, an unwillingness to write narratives. Glenda MacNaughton and Kylie Smith (2005) write about respecting children's privacy and that children have as much right to refuse research participation as do adults. It is important to consider if the children have willingly agreed to participate. In our study, this question remains open, but we assume that the parents discussed the matter with their children when answering the consent letter.

Narratives of action in place

The school and its surroundings as a place of action

Riverside School is beside fields and between a village road and a river that flows through the village and the entire district. About half of the students are driven to school by car; the other half walks or rides a bike. In the winter, some students ski to school. Allas (1981) states that active movement and participation are the most important element of learning about an environment. According to Allas (1981), the cognitive maps of children walking to school are more precise and detailed than the cognitive maps of children driven to school by car. Acquaintanceship with an environment has meaning: Understanding of an environment is built slowly, and its content becomes more diverse and precise in degrees.

The pupils in Grade 2 (aged eight) reminisced about a trip in their first year of school to the nearby forest, where they studied swamps. Skiing in the nearby fields and across the river was also mentioned as an important school activity in the students' compositions and interviews. One ski trip was particularly extraordinary. It was arranged during 'night school' (the children spent the night at the school). The pupils skied across the river to a nearby hut where they gathered around a fire to bake and roast 'stick buns' and sausages (group interviews, grades 2 and 3, students aged eight and nine).

Children's habitats expand gradually with age, but significant differences exist between districts in the scope of an area of movement. A country environment often offers children wider freedom of movement and scope for activities than cities and conurbations. A natural environment offers a child important possibilities for freedom, adventure, aesthetic experience, and the opportunity to withdraw into one's own space (Aura, Horelli and Korpela, 1997). Wilson (1997) suggests that an environment of this type promotes a child's sense of place and develops a child's self-knowledge. Riverside School and its surroundings are an important place of activity, a place in which students move, play, and build huts together. From a child's viewpoint, a diverse environment is above all functionally versatile. A child's immediate environment should be sufficiently diverse and contain many possibilities for interpretation, so that the possibility of change exists and an environment is not 'played out' all at once (Allas 1981: 102).

In addition, during winter, the children skate on the skating rink in the schoolyard. Fifth- and sixth-grade boys in particular found skating was one of the 'best' activities at school, and many went to the skating rink after the school day ended. According to Horelli (1992), exercise and control of one's body affect a child's self-esteem. In addition to exercise, a social dimension is emphasized at a skating rink. Games are also important from the perspective of friendships. A skating rink is an open area in a schoolyard, an area in which children—and adults—can become rejuvenated and maintain social relationships after school (Sebba and Churchman, 1986).

Doing things together

The students participated in many activities together at Riverside School. The students' compositions describe the most significant and 'best' schooldays as those when students at the school acted together; these include class trips, a sleepover at school, a camping trip, school bazaars, and Christmas parties, and the days on which the bazaars and parties were held. In the following example, a student describes her favorite school memory, a camping trip for the entire school population combined with a visit to an amusement park:

My Favorite School Memory

We left in the morning from the school by bus. We went towards Bear Island and stayed overnight there. It was nice that you could sleep beside your friend. We also played nice games; all the school pupils played, and when we took our flashlights, it was nice in the darkness. The following morning was busy because you had to make the bed and shake out pillows and carpets—that was a job. After that, we went to breakfast. Then we went to the bus, and we saw many things during our trip. But then came the best bit: we went to Poverpark [an amusement park] where there were really good rides—one ride was the best. After that began the trip home, and that was the best day ever.

(Composition, Liisa, aged ten, Grade 4)

Games in the dark during the camping trip on 'Bear Island' and at the amusement park provided Liisa with memorable moments. Common games and exciting moments experienced with schoolmates increased cohesion, as did the camping trip, which was experienced with the entire school population. School as a place moved beyond the schoolyard to shared camping trip and amusement park experiences that strengthen a sense of place for school, 'our school' (Relph, 2008).

The following composition by Saara—another fourth-grader—about the school's bazaar day is a colorful story, written with 'material' processes, about how the students were active together for the entire bazaar. The products for the sale had been prepared for months during art lessons and handicraft lessons as well as during particular 'workshop' days (field notes). By the middle of the composition, the doors of the sale hall are open, and parents and village residents 'flood' in. At the end of the story, the returns from the sale are evaluated in relation to the costs of the entire school's ski trip:

Bazaar Day

It was the morning of the sale. The Riverside School children did not go to school at half eight in the normal manner; rather, they slept late. They had to go to their school at three or five to prepare for the sale. First, we ate food that Maija, the cook, had made. When everyone had eaten, we began to bring the things to sell into the hall where the sale was held. Everything was ready by seven. There was homemade crafts, candles, woodwork, sweets, popcorn, coffee, juice, buns, and that sort of thing for sale. Students were divided into groups, and each group had its own table. The students' task was to sell things from their own table. When the doors opened at seven, people started to flood into the hall. The items sold well. You could also buy baked stuff made by students' parents. The wheel of fortune was fun. The rest of the things were raffled off. Maija the cook had brought her children's old clothes to the sale. Videos commemorating the school's one hundred year anniversary were also sold. Old music books were also for sale. When the sale finally ended, there was already money for the skiing trip.

(Composition, Saara, aged ten, Grade 4)

Saara's activity, described in terms of material processes, shows a strong quality of agency (Hyvärinen, 2010). We understand 'agency' in this context as the agent's (student's) capacity and willingness to influence social participation (Goddard, 2000). Preparations for the sale were directed, but from Saara's story, we can deduce that a successful sale required independent, spontaneous, and responsible action from the students of Riverside School.

The event can be seen as increasing participation and cohesion between members of the school population, in the manner of a school trip, but mainly in relation to the village citizens. Saara mentions in her story the school's centenary party, videos of which were sold at the sale. The students participated in the preparations for the centenary party, and the emphasis of the party program was performances by the current school pupils. At the party, ex-students also commemorated their school, and the school had a photo exhibition depicting the different stages of the school (field notes). The school's sale and centenary party are examples of events and activities in which student participation strengthens the students' experience as part of a chain of generations, and increases the sense of belonging to a place and a community (Tuan, 1991).

Two narratives of self: the best friend and without friends

Only two narratives of self in the data were analyzed. The narratives in question are partly counter-narrative: One discusses a best friend, and in the other, the narrator is alone. The writers are girls in Grade 4 and are named Noora and Hilla, respectively. Noora describes her best school memory as the day she found her best friend in preschool. In an intimate 'voice,' using mental processes in her writing, Noora shares her experience of friendship and the importance of friendship. The only actors in the narrative are the writer and her friend, Silja:

My Best School Memory

A long time ago, when we came to preschool, I found my best friend Silja. Silja is my best friend; we've never fought. We do everything together, so far. We've gone through all our sorrows and joys together. Just everything. Silja's my best friend. That's my best school memory. We take care of each other.

(Composition, Noora, aged ten, Grade 4)

Hilla's story, 'Two Different Schools,' spoke to us on the first reading. In the story, Hilla describes her experiences of switching from a big municipal school to the small Riverside School. Hilla's story might be called 'a survival story' of a move from a clamorous, restless urban school to the peace of a small school. However, the ending of the story creates tension. Hilla's friends remained in the previous school, the municipal school.

Two Different Schools

It was a normal first school day, or maybe it wasn't, at the new school. Good things about this school are: it's two times smaller with ten times less pupils. And, if you really tell the truth, I'm now one thousand times more peaceful. If you look back, I was at XX school. And that was the bigger school. And you had friends there, unlike now. Well, at XX school I was wild and didn't concentrate during lessons. This school is peaceful, unlike XX school. At XX school, my friends were disturbing me; now I don't have friends, but I have peace.

(Composition, Hilla, aged ten, Grade 4)

The 'process analysis' method suited analysis of Hilla's written narrative particularly well, revealing Hilla's manner of narration. Her story demonstrates many mental processes that may indicate that the narrator has experienced difficult times (Hyvärinen, 2010). The phrase 'If you really tell the truth' in lines two to three is a linguistic process pointing to a seam in the story, and is important for that reason (Hyvärinen, 2010:). The phrase is a step toward action. The narrator first describes the problem situation, in which she is in contact with disruptive students, and then discusses her own survival space in which she feels calm but without friends. The repetitions used by the writer are effective and discuss elements the writer finds surprising (also Hyvärinen, 2010). At the beginning of the composition, in lines one to three, the repetition of the comparatives 'two times smaller,' 'ten times less pupils,' and 'one thousand times more peaceful' demonstrate the writer's yearning for a more peaceful state of mind. At the end of the story, in the last line, repetition of the current situation through negatives, with the statement 'now I don't have friends, but I have peace,' also convinces the reader of the significance of 'peace.'

In the permanent classes at a small school, close friendships can be created, as can be deduced from Noora's story. Since preschool, Noora has been in the same class as her friend Silja. A place can also become part of selfhood through a long-term, permanent human relationship of this type, which also strengthens a sense of place. We can interpret Hilla's story as a story of being on the fringe and of a feeling of being an outsider. Hilla's place of residence has changed, and the new place has not yet been made significant to her through human relationships; she has found peacefulness but has not yet found her own place in Riverside School (Relph, 1976; 2008). A small school offers long-term friendships, but it can be difficult for a student arriving from elsewhere to become part of a close-knit group.

Summary and conclusions

In this article, the authors have guided the reader to examine students' narratives about a small village school. Our article sets out to answer the question, 'How is place in school education narrated by students?' The empirical data was collected at a small village school with fewer than fifty students in northern Finland by interviewing students, observing classes, and collecting compositions in which students about their school. Three types of narratives in the data were analyzed: one, narratives of relations to a place; two, narratives of action in a place; and three, narratives of self in a place. Based on these narratives, we drew conclusions concerning the small village school as the attending children's 'multidimensional meaning centre' (Relph, 1976: 43). The narratives of relation reveal an appreciation of the smallness, familiarity, and peacefulness of the small school. The school with its schoolyard appears safe and close to nature, an experiential place that encourages common play and spontaneous activity. The narratives of action guide the reader to places outside the classroom, places such as the schoolyard, the fields surrounding the school, the local riverside, school trips, and school festivities, all of which are places for common activities and learning. The school is also a common meeting place for students' parents and other villagers. School as a place is not stable—as is true of other places—and is built in terms of social relationships (Massey, 2003). The two 'I' narratives in the data offered insights into friendships at a small school. The permanent classes of a small school enable long-term, close friendships, but for a student who has just moved to the school, it can be difficult initially to become part of a close-knit group.

When reading the students' narratives, we were amazed that the narratives were situated so strongly outside classrooms. The narratives denote physical and social places in which children can be active together. The locations are important places of learning where one learns something that cannot be learned from a textbook or in a prepared lesson. During a

school trip, during common schoolyard games, and in preparations for festivities, the students learn to consider others, to help others, and to act together. During school festivities and bazaars, students may experience an affinity between themselves and villagers. The common places of action—for instance, with friends of the same age, in multi-age groups, or during a common activity with parents and villagers, encompassing different generations—may strengthen children's senses of belonging to a place and, in that manner, their personal sense of place (Relph, 2008; Kernan, 2010).

The authors also analyzed 'boredom stories' in the narratives of the children in this study; however, most narratives in this research communicate experiences of enjoyment of their place of schooling. We understand that enjoying a school reflects satisfaction with that school, satisfaction that is connected to a safe experience, a 'good' atmosphere, and the possibility to act and participate together (Haapasalo, Välimaa and Kangas, 2010). Enjoying a school is part of one's well-being at that school. In the students' narratives, co-operation between students is emphasized; it (cooperation) may also play a role in well-being (Hascher and Baillod, 2004).

We examined children's experiences of place in the context of one village school and allotted space to children's individual experiences by tethering those experiences to their theoretical connections. Based on our research, we cannot generalize that student experiences of school as a place are similar in every village school. Instead of generalizing, however, we can speak of the gamut of experiences of this particular school as place. Common to the experiences of place in this study is that they are explained more strongly in relation to other factors. Malpas's (1999) thoughts on the entirety of a place—and the construction of identity when a person is active in a place with others—support this contention. Physical environments and areas can be experienced in many different ways. A place is tied to the person residing in it, to his or her life history and selfhood, social contacts, and the physical characteristics of the environment. In that manner, a place involves all these elements; they are constructed in a place (Malpas, 1999).

A school is a significant part of a child's active environment, forming his or her everyday life and the landscape of his or her development. The physical and social quality of an environment, the play-like investigation of an environment, and the creation of significant places all influence a child or youth's ability to act, and may influence how perceptive an adult he or she becomes. A child participates actively in his or her development through action and interpretation; he or she develops his or her internal images, meanings, bodily control, and actions in a physical and social environment. The issue is also a growing ability to act—first—in the nearby environment and—gradually—in a complicated society. Therefore, the relationship between a child and an environment has a developmental dimension. Therefore, considering how the affordances of a school environment support, promote, or slow a child's development stages is useful (Horelli, 1992).

As researchers of place, we understand that it is important to visit the place in which the phenomenon being studied occurs. In this fashion, we can experience the place being studied as sensory and bodily, can get emplaced knowledge (knowing bodily, knowing in practice, and knowing in place (Pink, 2009)), and can better understand the experiences of place of the individuals being studied, constructing with those individuals the significance of the phenomenon under examination. Similarly, a school might function more strongly as an exploratory environment for a student's sense of place, helping him or her to understand and construct a relationship with a place through interaction with others.

An attachment to a place and the formation of a profound emotional bond with that place are an important human need. A person needs roots. Attachment arises from experiences and

from expectations of the future; also involved are a sense of responsibility and respect for a place, not only for the place itself, but also for its meaning to oneself and to others (Relph, 1976). The significance of place is also linked to a person's well-being. A strong locational bond strengthens the well-being and health of individuals and communities (Relph, 2008). Certain places, such as those close to nature, strengthen a child's growth, development, and well-being (Wilson, 1997). If—for example—a village school is closed and children are transported to a large school in a municipal center, those children must leave locations close to nature. A one-sided environment in terms of space, activity, and vitality hampers a child's development. Old city centers are multidimensional in terms of activities and facilities, but the disadvantages from a child's perspective include busy traffic and a shortage of places to play (Horelli, 1992). Kytä (1995: 145) states that two future school models are competing for the status of an 'ideal' school. One is a high-technology model in which students are offered a wide range of learning services; the other is a child-centered village model in which a nearby environment close to nature has an important role. At its best, a school's nearby environment can function as a 'three-dimensional school book' (Horelli, 1995: 137).

In a globalized world, we might ask, 'Is place-based education needed at all?' and 'Do we not have rather a greater need for "mobile people"?' (Massey, 2003). Every individual, nonetheless, needs to experience a sense of place, the strength of which varies from person to person. We can have a strong feeling of belonging to a place, a feeling that influences our identity, or perhaps we will form a significant relationship with our environment. We may become estranged from a place, which may be caused, for example, by an inability to experience a place fully or to acclimatize to or develop a feeling of belonging to a place (Relph, 1976). Although we must leave a place—for example—when changing our area of residence or school, a strong sense of place can be understood as a reserve of strength, as a resource of our identity. A resource of this type has been shown to be particularly important to young people when they change locations (Tuhkunen, 2002).

Through our research, we would like to emphasize the significance of place as an idea in educational-political and pedagogical discussion. We contend that, in discussions concerning the closure of small schools, it is important to ascertain how a school *as place* supports a child's learning and development, and discover the meaning and value of a school for the children attending. Research is also needed on what leaving a familiar school location and moving to a new school means to a child. Such information would also help in understanding immigrant children's experiences of a new school in an unfamiliar country. Research on school as a place might be widened to include different school environments, for example, through examining children's experiences of place at a large school center. There is also cause to consider the significance of place when building new schools; specifically, to examine how a school and a school environment might support and increase communality and comfort at that school. The narratives in our study make clear that place is a natural part of teaching and school activity at a village school, at the very least outside the classroom. In addition, the possibilities offered by place-based education should be examined, and how to include place in teaching to strengthen a child's sense of place and help that child understand and arrange his or her experiences should be investigated. In school curricula, place-based education might be a unifying curricular theme in a school's activities culture.

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