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Trell, E.M.; van Hoven, B.

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# Making sense of place: exploring creative and (inter)active research methods with young people

ELEN-MAARJA TRELL AND BETTINA VAN HOVEN



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This paper explores the added value of the 'new' creative and (inter)active research methods in geographical research. Using examples from our research project with young people in Cedar (Vancouver Island, Canada) we analyze the contributions and limitations of walks, mental mapping, photography and video when compared to only interviewing. Given our engagement with everyday places and a participatory research approach, we explicitly focus on and evaluate the research methods for their qualities in revealing different aspects of place, and for their success in involving young people with various interests and abilities actively in the whole research process. The findings suggest that, in addition to revealing diverse aspects of everyday places and practices on different levels of detail, the 'new' research methods motivate and enable different individuals to participate and share their experiences. Furthermore, combining the 'new' methods or combining them with interviews has an added value as such a mix is able to paint a detailed picture of daily places, colored by the way different individuals see, hear, smell, use or experience them.

Keywords: Canada, visual/(inter)active/creative research methods, children/youth geographies, participatory research, place experiences, everyday life

*Elen-Maarja Trell & Bettina van Hoven, Department of Cultural Geography, Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, P.O. Box 800 9700AV Groningen, The Netherlands. E-mails: e.m.trell@rug.nl, b.van.hoven@rug.nl.*

## Making sense of place

'Place' is defined in geographic research as "space which people have made meaningful" (Cresswell 2004: 7). There are various ways in which people 'make places', for example, by naming them, or modifying some elements in the environment to suit their needs (Cresswell 2004). Perhaps more importantly, places are (re)produced through people's imaginations, memories, emotions and feelings, both positive and negative, and by using different senses (Relph 1976; Thrift 2009). Thrift discusses place experiences during a walk in the countryside as compared to a walk in the city. He illustrates how places are constructed through different senses and people's bodies:

"Think, for example, of a country walk and place consists of not only eyes surveying prospect but also push and pull of hill and down dale, the sounds of birds and wind in the trees [...] Or think

of a walk in the city and place consists not just of eye making contact with other people or advertising signs or buildings, but also the sound of traffic noise and conversation [...] the smell of exhaust fumes and cooking food" (Thrift 2009: 92).

Such impressions can construct place as welcoming and pleasant or hostile and aggressive. Koskela and Pain (2000) show the latter to be the case in a study on women's experience in the city where fear was a guiding principle (see also Semi 2004). The examples illustrate that, whereas places can be known through one's vision and imagination the "more direct modes of experience" such as taste, smell and touch<sup>1</sup> play a similarly important role (Tuan 1975: 151; Thrift 2008, 2009). Until recently, much geographic research on meanings of place has given priority to the so-called representational aspects and indirect ways of knowing a place (Tuan 1975; Laurier & Philo 2006; Thrift 2008). Little attention was paid to, for example,

people's experiences of place outside the visual or communication of place outside the interview context. However, with the revival of ideas by Merleau-Ponty (1945; 1995), Bourdieu (1990) and de Certeau (2002), among others, (human) geographers have increasingly focused on everyday places and place experiences (see Eyles 1989; Felski 2000; de Certeau 2002 for a discussion of the importance of 'everyday') and the 'non-representational' aspects of place (Lorimer 2005; Thrift 2008). Laurier and Philo (2006; 2007; see also Laurier 2008), for example, have devoted a series of works to explore everyday encounters in a café and Wylie (2005) explores the relationship between landscape and self through thoughts, sensations and encounters he experiences during a walk along the South West Coast Path (see also McCormack 2003).

Thrift (2008) argues that, when given a chance to use our various senses we start to *notice* the "event-ness of the world" and the *small details* that make up the everyday lives and place experience of our research participants (Thrift 2008: 12). When producing knowledge about place (experiences) in a 'standard' interview setting, respondents are asked to recall memories and imaginations of places without visual, audible, olfactory or tactile stimuli. As a result, some small details, or 'layers' of place (experience) may be lost to the production of knowledge. Sometimes, it is necessary to see, hear, smell or feel a place in order to make sense of it and to communicate it to outsiders, "sensitivity cannot be shared the way thoughts can", as Tuan (1975: 152) argues. Therefore, geographers have begun to explore 'new' research methods (e.g. walks, photography, videography, that take a respondent 'into the field' and in so doing complement (or replace) the interview (see Panelli et al. 2002; Hörschelmann & Schäfer 2005; Carpiano 2009).

An interesting example is the research by Cele (2006) who used walks, drawing and photography (in addition to interviewing) for exploring daily places of children. Enabling children to create objects (place representation) in an artistic and imaginary way (e.g. drawing), and to interact with each other, the researcher, and place itself (e.g. when walking or taking photos), provided possibilities for communicating a range of, what Cele (2006) calls, 'concrete' and 'abstract' aspects of place.<sup>2</sup> Concrete aspects of places include the appearance of a place, the physical characteristics and objects present, but also the ways in which

individuals use places and objects. A sound or a smell are concrete aspects of place. Abstract aspects refer to the inner processes place evokes in individuals (Cele 2006). They refer to dreams and imaginations people attach to places, memories connected to places, how places make people feel (Cele 2006). Abstract aspects of place are often connected to the social dimension of place i.e. other people, friends, relations. In addition to revealing a range of aspects and experiences about place, by using these methods Cele (2006) engaged children more actively in the research process.

Cele's (2006) research fits into broader, participatory, approach taken by many youth and children's geographers in order to engage young people more actively in creating knowledge about what their world is like. Whereas the necessity and benefits of engaging young people in research has been established (Best 2007), in practice, it is often a challenge to get preoccupied and busy young people interested and involved in a research project. Creative and interactive research techniques, such as drawings and mental maps (Matthews 1984a; 1984b; Young & Barrett 2001), photo- or video projects (Hörschelmann & Schäfer 2005; Panelli et al. 2002), diary keeping (Latham 2003; Punch 2002), soft-GIS (Kytä 2008) and forms of participatory diagramming (Kesby 2000; Pain & Francis 2003) have been adopted as means by which it is more appealing for young people to get involved in a research project.

The above examples illustrate that several 'new', methods have been used by both, geographers interested in place experiences (e.g. Wylie 2005; Carpiano 2009) and geographers interested in engaging young people in research (e.g. Hörschelmann & Schäfer 2005; Cele 2006). Whereas it seems to be acknowledged that interviews are not always sufficient for revealing different layers of place nor for empowering youth, not much is known about what the exact qualities of the 'new' methods for achieving these goals are when compared to only interviewing. In this paper our aim is to fill this gap by comparing the relative contributions, limitations and different insights that can be generated with walks, mental mapping, video and photography when compared to interviewing. In order to compare the methods we will use data gathered with young people during a research project conducted in Cedar (Vancouver Island, Canada) which focused on their everyday places and place experiences. In addition, by adopting a

participatory research approach, we focused on engaging young people with *different* interests and abilities as active participants in the whole research process. Considering this research focus and approach, we compare and evaluate each method in terms of (1) its qualities for revealing the *multiple aspects* and *meanings* of daily places and (2) possibilities it provides for involving young people in research.

In the sections that follow, after briefly introducing the research approach we will give an overview of the characteristics of interviews, walks, mental mapping, video and photography. We then use examples from our research practice to illustrate the added value (and shortcomings) and compare the 'new' research methods to interviewing.

## Research approach

### Research location and group

Our research project was carried out in the village of Cedar, on Vancouver Island (British Columbia, Canada) (see figure 1). The project (on location) lasted 9 months. It involved four students/research-assistants from Cedar Community Secondary School, three male and one female. At the time of finishing the project the students were 17 years old. None of them represented an ethnic minority.

The project was introduced to the students through in-class presentations by the researchers.

In order to participate, students were required to obtain consent from their parents. The consent forms contained info about the aim and procedure of the project based on initial ideas by the researchers. No new consent was sought once the students had shaped the project to their own wishes (see also Heath et al. 2009 for more information about the use of informed consent in youth research). The participants then received basic training in (video) interviewing. Guided by the researchers, the students were actively involved in preparation and data collection phases of the project e.g. they were brainstorming about research questions and possible respondents, planning, preparing, carrying out and filming interviews etc.

### Participatory research: generating knowledge with young people

In a participatory research project, at least in its ideal form, the knowledge, priorities and perspectives of the participants "are not only acknowledged but form the basis for research and planning" (Cornwall & Jewkes 1995: 1667). Researcher and research participants can be seen as research partners all of whom actively contribute to the project. Research participants contribute their "subject expertise" and the researcher his or her "academic and methodological expertise" (Heath et al. 2009: 74). Participatory research should therefore enable researchers to focus on reflection and action *with* and *by* research participants rather than *on* them (Cornwall & Jewkes 1995, our emphasis). Participatory research in combination with various creative and interactive methods has found appreciation in youth research as means by which to give young people more control over the entire research project. In the research by Cele (2006) discussed above, walks enabled children to take on a more active role. In addition, photography enabled children to take initiative and have more control over the research project because the researcher was entirely absent from the moment of data generation (Cele 2006). Other researchers (Kellett et al. 2004; Kellett 2005; Valentine 2001) have found that using a combination of creative and interactive methods encourage and enable young people to develop and practice new skills (i.e. communication, writing and organization skills and critical thinking) that support and improve their self-esteem.

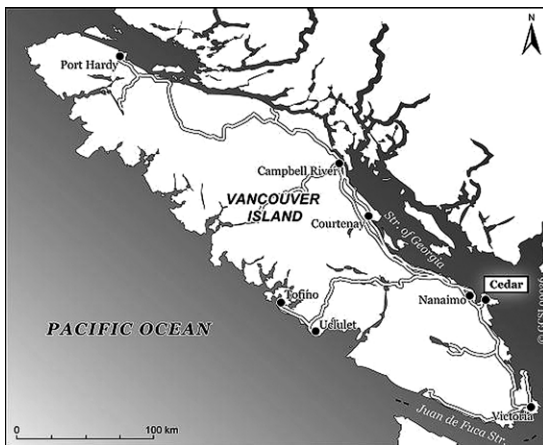


Fig. 1. Research location (Cedar marked with a rectangle)

With regards to (1) our aim of revealing different layers of place experience and (2) our group of youth respondents in Cedar, a participatory approach and using a mix of creative and interactive methods seemed like a suitable fit. In practice, we introduced the methods to our research participants and involved them in selecting the methods to express themselves. By using a variety of methods we provided an opportunity for young people with *different* interests and abilities to take part in the project since, as Heath et al. (2009: 87) observed, “some young people are simply better at telling stories than others, better able to articulate their views”, Table 1 gives an overview of the methods used, possibilities they offer for youth to approach the research in a creative and active manner and interact with each other, and the potential of each method for facilitating youth-place interaction .

## Research methods

In order to illustrate the aspects of place that the ‘new’ visual and creative research methods reveal and compare their benefits (and limitations) to interviewing, in the sections below we will first provide an overview of some basic characteristics of interviewing followed by walks, mental mapping, video and photography. Secondly, using a specific location (Cedar Community Secondary School) from the research project in Cedar as an example, we will contrast and compare interviews to the ‘new’ methods.

### “There’s not really much to say...”<sup>3</sup>: exploring place by using interviews

Data collection using interviews continues to be one of the most widely used approaches in social

research practice (Heath et al. 2009). Interviews, in their most common form, are “verbal interchanges where one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information from another person” (Dunn 2000: 51). In order to carry out an interview it is necessary to have “some form of direct access to the person being interviewed” (Dunn 2000: 51). Such real time contact is usually achieved by face-to-face meetings. With the increasing technological possibilities, new creative ways to access people have been explored, for example, interviews that are conducted via telephone or online, often via a chat program like MSN Messenger. Interviews have many benefits, such as allowing researchers to understand how meanings differ between people, exploring topics more in-depth, giving respondents an opportunity to intervene, raise additional issues and so on. Relatively recently, the interview process has gone through many creative transformations. Using images or activities to stimulate discussion, elicit information but also minimize power imbalance between the interviewer and the respondents has found its appreciation within youth research practice (see for instance Heath et al. 2009). However, when exploring place-related information in geographical research, interviews also impose restrictions. Importantly, interviews often do not take place ‘on location’ i.e. during an interview a respondent has no direct contact with the place or objects s/he is talking about (but see Anderson 2004; Hitchings and Jones 2004 for exceptions). The information revealed is based only on one’s mental image of the place, or one’s memories. It is challenging then to capture small nuances, multi-sensual dimensions and embodied practices of people’s place experiences using only the interview method. Tuan (1975) and recently Thrift (2008) insist that those nuances make up a substantial part of what place means to people and how place influences them.

Table 1. Research methods and their interactive and creative qualities (after Cele 2006)

Method	Creativity	Interaction: youth – researcher	Interaction: youth – place	Interaction: youth – youth
Interviews		*		
Walks		*	*	*
Mental mapping	*	*		*
Individual video/photography	*		*	
Video & walk	*	*	*	*

## Walks

"[W]e have felt [the] walks to be three-way-conversations, with interviewee, interviewer and locality engaged in an exchange of ideas; place has been under discussion but, more than this, and crucially, under foot and all around, and as such much more of an active, present participant in the conversation, able to prompt and interject" (Hall et al. 2006: 3).

Hall et al. (2006) imply that when walking and experiencing places in an embodied way, a different type of knowledge can be obtained than using methods that are used only indoors. A type of knowledge, that is "taken for granted by the participants, but is often crucial, as it reveals how places function for people" (Cele 2006: 128; see also Kusenbach 2003). Walks allow a researcher to capture interaction between youth and place as it happens. The knowledge gathered in this context is closely tied to the physical experiences of place.

As a research technique, walks in general include a combination of "conversation, unstructured observations and experiences" (Cele 2006: 149). Cele (2006) calls walking (with children) a performance-based research method where being active and on the move, while constantly seeing, hearing, feeling and smelling the place, triggers conversations and reflections that would probably not occur otherwise. Conversation is also one of the central parts of the walks.<sup>4</sup> Walks allow the respondent to "be in charge" – the researcher is the one "going along" (Carpiano 2009: 263) and can be bracketed outside the data generation process or observe it (van Hoven & Meijering forthcoming). The above-mentioned characteristics of the walk enable researchers to study in detail how place matters to people, and how people use and are influenced by places. Walks have been used, for example, in studies exploring the relationship between children and urban environment (see Raittila 2006) or the role of places for people's well-being (see Carpiano 2009). In order to make the walk tangible and recall it later voice recorder, photo or video camera are often used by researchers (see Cele 2006).

## Mental mapping

Mental mapping is an activity that is considered to encompass a great deal of creativity (particularly when working with young people). Although some structures and guidelines i.e. the theme of the

map, can be provided by the researcher, a respondent is relatively free in choosing the content, detail, design and layout of her/his map. The possibility to express oneself in a creative manner is one of the greatest strengths of mental mapping. Although there is no direct interaction between the objects, places, events and the respondents, (undirected) mental mapping allows for more creativity and freedom to express oneself with less influence from the researcher. Information about (the meaning of) places in mental maps is based on respondents' view of the relative importance of places in their daily lives (see also Matthews 1984a; 1984b; Young and Barrett 2001). The respondent chooses which elements to include and exclude from the map which means that the places a researcher chooses to focus on in an interview may be absent altogether. If done in a group context, the group can influence the places respondents add to their mental maps and the ways in which they talk about these places. This process can also trigger spontaneous discussion about daily places, activities, and people with whom the respondents spend time. The mental maps (such as in figure 2 below) summarize an individual's use/opinions/knowledge about her/his environment.

Mental maps provide an overview of places, objects or activities relative to each other. They can also be used to make an assessment about the relative importance of places for an individual e.g. which place is positioned in the centre (see figure 2). Whereas mental maps as such may provide enough information for a psychologist to analyze additional meanings conveyed by the use of

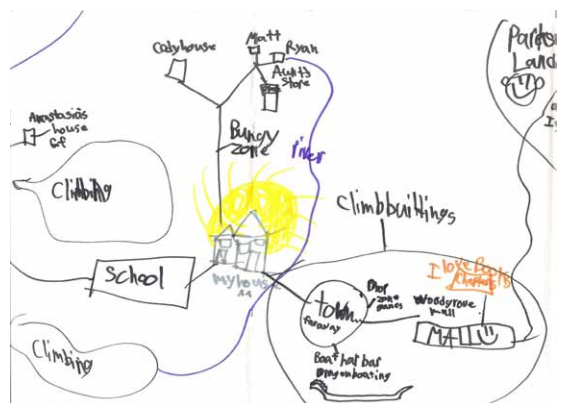


Fig. 2. Example of a mental map (by Kevin, male, 17)

shapes and colors included on each map, for geographers interested in the meanings of places additional information is necessary. Hence, explanations by the 'author' of the map are essential. The explanations are usually given in the form of a discussion in the group context and/ or with the researcher following the mental mapping session. One might argue that when using interviews or discussions to explain the maps, words become dominant and the value of the mental mapping technique is undermined. Another drawback of mental mapping is that it is a method which, similarly to interviews, is used indoors i.e. not on location the respondent is communicating. There is no direct contact between the respondents and the places they show on their maps. The respondents instead have to resort to using their recollections.

However, the mental mapping process and the resulting group dynamics themselves can be valuable outcomes and means of 'breaking the ice' between the researcher and the respondents. In addition, the mental maps can serve as basis for other research methods used, providing an anchor-point for the students as well as the researcher when exploring the local context.

### **Video/photography**

According to various authors (see Prosser 1998; Pink 2007; Edwards & Bhaumik 2008 for example), much of our knowledge about the world, and consequentially about our places, is built on the visual. Therefore, in line with the rapid developments and decreasing prices of technology, the interest in and use of visual research methods, such as video and photography, has sharply increased within a great variety of research disciplines dealing with people and places e.g. sociology, planning, geography (Pink 2007). The development of digital and computer technologies has made photography as well as video easy and relatively cheap to use.

Video and photography can be incorporated into a research process in several ways. Both can be used as a researcher-led or respondent-led technique. In case of the latter, asking respondents to film or take photos of their everyday environment can be very beneficial as it allows the researcher to get an overview of people's interaction with places without "intruding on their daily schedules or following them around" (Cele 2006: 155). Filming and/or taking photos can be an empowering experience as young people are in

charge of the process and get to represent the things they choose, when and from whichever angle they choose. The benefit of using video over photography is the possibility for the respondents to narrate their videos while filming, thus providing some form of an explanation to the images while experiencing a location first hand. In addition, in geographical research these methods can be used outdoors, therefore, similarly to walks, they enable the research participants to be inspired by direct contact with their environment.

Video and photography also have their drawbacks. Analyzing video-data is a time-consuming process. Knoblauch et al. (2006: 14–16) note:

"A few minutes of recording produce a large quantity of visual, kinesthetic, and acoustic data that must be transcribed and prepared for analysis."

Moreover, the researcher has to be well aware of the influence, relationship and weight s/he attaches to different elements (sound, images, transcript) of the video data (see Knoblauch et al. 2006 for a detailed discussion of the elements of video data). The researcher has to make a choice whether to ask respondents to explain their creation (in which case words could become dominant) or to interpret the images independently. In the context of (participatory) youth research the latter is not favored. In order to empower young people they should be included in interpreting the data/their creation.<sup>5</sup> The complex technology may be a further challenge when using video as a research method (Knoblauch et al. 2006), although this may be the case more for the researcher than the youth respondents.

### **Research methods in practice**

In order to discuss the 'new' research methods and aspects of places they help to unveil in this paper, we focus on a specific location – Cedar Community Secondary School (CCSS) (see table 2). Cedar Community Secondary School (CCSS) appeared to be one of the key, shared places of the participants. It was, consequentially, a place represented by all participants by one or another research method. However, even though we mainly use information revealed about CCSS, we will also refer to other locations and experiences from our project where more appropriate i.e. where the merits or limitations of individual methods appear more clearly.

Table 2. Cedar Community Secondary School represented using different research methods





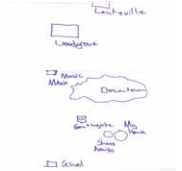



	Ryan (male, 17)	Kevin (male, 17)	Shaleeta (female, 17)	Evan (male, 17)
<b>Interviews</b>	“Well...it [Cedar school] is really my social outpost. I love it in school. It is the place that I have grown up with, I’m not sure what to do with my time when I have no school... I guess it just gives me something to do.” (researcher-led interview)	“There’s not really much to say about the environment [at Cedar school] because it’s just a normal, relaxed, easy-going environment. [...] I like pretty much everything about this school. [...] It’s a really nice comfortable place” (peer-led interview)	“When I first came here I felt really... I, I was not impressed with the school environment. But now that I’ve been here for a while it’s much better. I haven’t had too many problems here. I’ve had problems at other schools, but not here” (peer-led interview)	“The school environment at Cedar is really, really neat. Just [...] the way that the school is basically laid out is that, it really makes for easy social interaction, in just that it’s so open” (researcher-led interview)
<b>Walks: images &amp; conversation</b>		Ryan: “A bird just came out of the school! Oh yeah, we should get the birds! We have birds in our rafter. I can hear them, but I can’t see them right now, they’re up in there. There’s a bunch of... yeah, the dung [laughing] (screenshot, traces of birds on Cedar Community Secondary School) [...]		
<b>Mental Maps &amp; explanations</b>	“My school is a good place and I stay there a lot so I put down my school” 	“Anyway, I got the school right here because I like coming to school, although I don’t really do much but it’s social...” 	“And this is like...the Cedar school” 	“So, school, that’s self-explanatory” 
<b>Video / Photography</b>	Ryan’s photo & explanation:  “This is my school. It is currently the main focus of my life. All of my activities come from school in some way, even if it is making plans with my friends”	Kevin’s video & narration:  “And just like that I’m at the school. In order to get to my favorite place, up there, I have to GET up there [filming the school roof]. [...] And just like that I’m up.[...] And this, this is my favorite spot to be [the school roof]. In fact I even come up and read right there, right in the shade. I just love this place.”	Shaleeta’s photo:  Shaleeta with friends at school. No detailed explanation added.	School not represented on Evan’s video. Disposable camera not returned.

Table 2 illustrates the kind of information that the students in our project generated about CCSS when using different methods. In the sections below, information from table 2 serves as basis for

discussing different qualities of research methods. In order to eventually assess the added value and success of each method, we will consider aspects of places revealed and aspects of methods such as



creativity/interactivity for involving different individuals, as criteria.

### **“It’s a really nice comfortable place”<sup>6</sup>: Interviewing in practice**

In our project we used both structured and unstructured interviews as well as peer-led and researcher led interviews. The participants also practiced conducting individual interviews with each other. In addition, they conducted a number of peer-led interviews among their friends and classmates. Finally, the students planned, prepared, conducted and filmed (semi-structured) interviews with, for example, the manager and a security guard of the local shopping mall and the principal of their school.

Unstructured discussion/group-interview was the most frequently used form of interviewing in our project. The researcher was guiding the discussion but the conversation usually remained informal. We used group-interviews, for instance, as a support for the visual/active and creative approaches where the participants could explain the contents of their mental maps, photos and videos to the researcher. As an addition to the ‘new’ methods, interviews were beneficial because they gave young people a chance to explain their creation and include information that was forgotten or unclear to the adult researcher. In such a way, the young people obtained more control over the way in which the information they provided was interpreted. Interviews carried out in a group context also had its drawbacks. It appeared that more articulate individuals became dominant, and so did their opinions and preferences. However, the students were aware of that, were later able to reflect on their role in a group and divide roles for their own research project accordingly. The same individuals who talked much during ‘practice-interviews’ were the ones who preferred to take a role as interviewer during the peer-led interviews.

Peer-led interviews enabled the research participants to learn new skills such as preparing interview questions, playing a role of an interviewer or camera (wo)man. The information the students gathered during interviews also allowed them to reflect on their own role in society. For example, a piece of information revealed by the manager of Woodgrove mall about security guards regularly dispersing larger groups of teenagers was later often quoted and used by the students in discussions

about their encounters with adult mall visitors, exclusion and marginalization they experience while in the mall (and their motivation for transgressing the mall rules).

Focusing on the information revealed about Cedar School, during the interviews students were asked to describe their school environment. It was a concrete question which prompted everybody to talk about their school. However, the students limited themselves to strictly answering the question (see table 2). Table 2 illustrates that the discussions focused on the social and cultural dimensions of the school. Interviews revealed that the students have a similar, positive, opinion about their school. School appears as more or less equally significant for everybody. Interviews triggered associations and comparisons thus revealing different aspects of students’ character, family life and friends i.e. Shaleeta (see table 2). In addition, based on interviews, estimations could be made about different levels of attachment students feel towards their school e.g. compare Ryan and Shaleeta (table 2).

One of the disadvantages of the interviews was that the students did not talk much about what their places look like. Since our meetings were held at school they may not have felt it necessary to describe the building to the researcher. However, as appeared from the photos and videos, there were many details about the layout and the school building itself that made it a meaningful place for the students. These details, like the view from the school roof, the local scenery, a little bird or a forgotten football were too common for them to mention or to even remember. However, as appears from table 2, such small details contributed to making the school meaningful and special for many of the students.

### **“Oh yeah, we should get the birds!”<sup>7</sup>: Walking with young people**

In our research project, the students were in charge of planning the walk. The walk, which lasted roughly three hours, took us through Cedar village centre, through a forest area (which was used as a running-track for Cedar secondary gym lessons) leading to a residential area and eventually back to Cedar school. We used walks in conjunction with video. The students recorded the entire walk with a video-camera, and a photo camera was used by the researchers to capture students in interaction with their places. Conversations during the walk evolved around daily activities, interests, memo-

ries and friends and were mostly triggered by the objects encountered on the way.

Table 2 includes a still from a clip from the beginning of the walk. The quote next to it reveals the main strengths of walks; the objects that are encountered during the walk actively participate in the walk and the data generated. For example, a bird flying by prompted Ryan to film the school rafter where the birds nest and discuss the noise they make and the traces they leave (see table 2 and the quote in the subtitle above). Ryan indicates that the birds are a part of the school experience and that it was not the first time the students noticed their presence. It is quite possible that Ryan would hear the birds during class and that they affect his in-class experience (e.g. provide a welcome distraction during boring moments or prove to be annoying during exams). The possibility of being outdoors and hearing the birds thus had a direct influence on the way Ryan represented his school. He was able to reveal a new dimension of his school experiences that was not talked about in the interview. The encountered objects or situations may also trigger discussions about more abstract aspects of place. In the wider context of the walk, an interaction with a Cedar tree, for example, sparked a discussion about the history of Cedar and, eventually, its social problems. Similarly, seeing a dog inspired students to talk about local life-style which led to a discussion about places in the neighborhood they liked or disliked.

In our study, the walk facilitated interaction not only between people and places but also among people (respondents and researcher). Walks can be a good means for the researcher and respondents to get to know each other outside the formal 'classroom' context. After the walk, the students felt more at ease in the researcher's presence and were more eager to take initiatives. Hence, walks can be considered useful for balancing the unequal power-relations. The possibility of interaction between the researcher and the students during the walk allowed the researcher to compare adult and youth perspectives and revealed in detail how places were interpreted and used by young people. The researcher's reactions to young people's stories and encountered objects, however, influenced the kind of information and detail young people were willing to reveal.

Similarly to Cele's (2006) findings, in our study walks and interviews appeared to provide different, even contradictory information about young people's use and experiences of places. For exam-

ple during interviews the students claimed that they "never actually do anything in Cedar [village]" (Evan, male, 17). However, during the walks it appeared that most of their friends live in Cedar, that they often hang out at these friends' places and that some of their favorite places for solitude and recreation are in Cedar.

The disadvantages of walking were mainly of practical nature. First of all, walks can be very time-consuming. As noted above, our walk in Cedar lasted three hours. Participants may not be willing or able to give up such a big part of their day (or week) to go for a walk with a researcher. In our research project, Evan was, for example involved in planning the walk but had too many other engagements to join the group later. Secondly, when one's target group is young people (or children) there may be other restrictions involved in taking them out for a walk without the supervision of parents or teachers. Therefore, cooperation with a parent, local youth worker or teacher may be necessary. Thirdly, and specifically for research dealing with places and place experiences of a *group* of people, a disadvantage of walking can be that it is not possible to include everybody's meaningful places equally. In our project, the distances between different person's individual key places were too great to cover during an afternoon of walking (or driving). The route the students chose for the walk for practical reasons (time and accessibility) was therefore more familiar to some students than others. In addition to limitations experienced in our project, Carpiano (2009) added, for example, natural conditions (i.e. it may not be possible to conduct a walking tour with extremely cold/warm weather), time of day (i.e. the time of day that respondents are able to walk with the researcher may be the time of day that a neighborhood is un-naturally quiet or busy) or vague language respondents use that may be understandable in a concrete situation but make analyzing an audio/video recording challenging.

### **"So, school, that's self-explanatory"<sup>8</sup>: Mental mapping in practice**

In our research project, the participants were asked to make a mental map of their meaningful daily places. Instructions were given to include places that they like as well as places that they dislike. Besides that, they were free to choose whatever color, shape, size or detail they wanted the places on their map to have.

Mental maps were useful for the (adult) researcher to get an overview of the wider context of young people's lives/places. It also proved to be beneficial for making a distinction between the participants' shared and individual key places. Considering the interaction between the students and the researcher, mental maps were a good starting point for discussions about the daily places of participants in more detail. While making the mental maps, the students engaged in conversations about their daily activities and people they spend time with. The time spent on making the mental maps and the spontaneous and unstructured conversations that occurred during that time between the researcher and the students allowed both to become familiar with each other and were a good means of 'breaking the ice'.

Looking at the information revealed about CCSS in table 2, mental mapping appears to have added value in revealing locations of places in relation to each other (compare where 'school' is located on different maps, its position to other places). Furthermore, mental mapping reveals respondents' view of relative importance of places in their daily lives (see also Young and Barrett 2001). Whereas during interviews students were asked explicitly about their school and they were expected to talk about this place, in the mental mapping process they were not told which places to include. When making mental maps, all of the students individually and voluntarily chose to include Cedar School on their maps as a meaningful place.

In practice, we combined mental mapping with a discussion about the maps. As mentioned above and as appears when looking at figure 2, mental maps do not provide much additional information about details of places, their meanings or personal reasons for including specific locations on the map.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the participants were involved in interpreting the maps. Looking at table 2 it appears, however, that even the explanations from the authors of mental maps may not provide much additional information. Concerning the CCSS example, the students considered its importance "self-explanatory" and did not elaborate much on its meaning on their maps.

**"In fact I even come up and read right there, right in the shade"<sup>10</sup>: Video & photography in practice**

In our project, the emphasis was on respondent-generated images (both photos and movies). Al-

though a video-camera was always present during our group-discussions and meetings, only the students were actively using it for recording their places and (peer-led) interviews. In addition, the students received disposable cameras for their individual data collection, took turns in taking the video camera home to record and narrate their daily places and used the digital photo-camera during the walk and peer-led interviews.

Since the students narrated their videos, both abstract and concrete aspects of place were revealed. Besides the words they selected, the tone of voice of the students when talking about their place while experiencing and being present, was very expressive and an invaluable addition to the video images. A good example is Kevin who, while filming the school roof, stresses his strong positive emotions towards this place with the sound and pitch of his voice. In contrast, the written explanations on the back of photographs were more general comments in which the students described what was depicted on a photo or giving an opinion about a place.

The fact that it was possible to use video and photography outdoors provided further advantages similar to walking (see above), e.g. students were active and seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling their places. Objects/people/events took part in data generation and generated different and additional information to interview data.

Since we used video and photography in individual data collection, the participants were able to be alone and unrestricted by schedules imposed by the researcher when using these methods. A clear advantage of such choice appears from the example of Kevin in table 2. Kevin did not reveal the school roof as his special place in the in-class interview, nor did he mention it during the walk with the rest of the group. In his video, however, the school roof appears as his favorite place. Individual data collection using video was suitable in his case as it allowed him to choose the time and means by which it was comfortable for him to reveal the importance and his use of this place. One limitation of the researcher not being present during individual data collection is the fact that s/he cannot observe the interaction between people and their places or point out/ask questions about details that respondents may be too accustomed to notice or reveal.

Kevin's example in table 2 also illustrates the qualities of individual data collection using video and photography in enabling youth to communi-

cate their intimate places and comfort zones. Similar tendencies appeared from the video-data of Ryan who took the camera to one of his favorite places near a creek behind his house and Evan filmed the door of his bedroom where he hangs “everything that is special” to him.

## Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, we explored the additional value of walks, mental mapping, video and photography when making sense of place by comparing ‘new’ methods to more ‘traditional’ research method – interviewing. We furthermore discussed the limitations of each method and their suitability for involving young people more actively in whole research process. Given our engagement with everyday place experiences, we explicitly focused on and emphasized the suitability of different methods for exploring the multiple aspects and meanings of daily places for different individuals. Table 3 gives an overview of the discussed methods and the information they revealed.

Table 3 illustrates that the ‘new’ research methods have additional advantages for exploring people-place relations. The results of our study in part support Cele’s (2006) findings in that interviews reveal mostly abstract aspects of places (i.e. social and cultural aspects, opinions and memories). But more creative and interactive methods are able to include objects, events and the respondent’s whole body and senses in generating knowledge and communicating a place (table 3). In so doing, they reveal emotions triggered by direct contact with the object/place/event. Especially methods that can be used ‘in the field’ enabled research participants to communicate place by using their senses (olfactory, tactile, auditory, visual).

In the context of our project, the (individual) video data collection appeared to be the best method for gathering information about emotions connected to places and gaining a ‘feel’ for places and what they ‘sound like’. Furthermore, both video and photography, communicated the appearance of places better than any of the indoor-methods used (i.e. interviews and mental mapping). However, analyzing the visual data proved to be a challenge because of the abundance of different elements captured, especially on film and because there is little guidance in methods literature (Rose 2001 is a notable exception). Another challenge of using visual methods is the possibility of coincidental things to be overrated. For example, things that are encountered often may be overemphasized as meaningful. Therefore, video and photography can best be used in combination with interviews. A further limitation of the creative and interactive methods is the difficulty to involve larger number of respondents. Therefore, the methods offer limited possibilities to reach wider-ranging conclusions about place.

Concerning the involvement of different individuals, the creative and interactive methods were beneficial because they enabled young people to express themselves both individually and in a group context. In that way, it was possible for youth to generate knowledge while interacting with their places but also with their peers and the researcher. Video and photography, for example, were beneficial for young people for communicating their places without the presence/influence of the group or the researcher. Such an opportunity was useful for involving the views of students who were shy or less articulate in the group context, who were very active or whom the schedule of the researcher did not suit. However, because data collection where the researcher is not present in-

Table 3. Themes and aspects of place revealed with different research methods

Method	Themes/Aspects of places revealed
Interviews	Abstract aspects (i.e. thoughts, memories, feelings towards places)
Walks	Concrete aspects (birds, tractor, dogs, sounds, smell – appearance of place); abstract aspects (memories, activities, opinions, interaction with each other and place)
Mental maps (& discussion)	Location of places in relation to each other; relative importance of places; shared and individual key places; information about past experiences, opinions, future plans, interests and hobbies
Video & Photography	Concrete aspects (appearance, sounds, smells); written explanations behind photos revealed use of places, information about friends and favorite places; narration of video revealed emotions, personal meanings, use of place

volve a certain amount of discipline and responsibility, they may not be suitable for all individuals.

Video appeared as the most attractive method for *all* of the students. The fact that it was chosen as a technique for their individual research project (movie about Cedar School) illustrates this point. (Inter)active methods such as making the individual video or walking proved to be very successful for students such as Kevin who were highly active and knew the local environment well. It was difficult for Kevin to sit still or concentrate on one task for a long time.<sup>11</sup> For example, when asked by a teacher during photography class to take photos of significant places in Cedar school he claimed he was always on the move and never stopped long enough to have any significant places (hence there are no photos by Kevin in table 2). Filming, and the possibility to walk/climb/run outside with the video camera, enabled Kevin to be on the move and still express himself and contribute to the research project. For a creative and artistic person such as Shaleeta making (very detailed and comprehensive) mental maps appeared to be a good means to express herself.<sup>12</sup> Talkative and outgoing Evan enjoyed being the 'interviewer' during the (peer-led) interviews where he could interact with others. He often took the initiative and liked to lead interviews and discussions.

Comparing individual interviews with methods used in group context, the latter (i.e. mental mapping, walks) had added value as they created a more relaxed atmosphere where attention was not focused on one individual, everybody could be exactly as active as they wanted and choose different means to express themselves. Therefore, mixing methods and giving young people a chance to choose the method they feel most comfortable with appeared beneficial in order to involve everybody as equally as possible. The methods discussed in this paper could also be applied for involving or working with respondents from other age groups. However, in that case, different practical limitations and considerations should be taken into account (see Carpiano 2009 for an example).

In the context of the participatory approach chosen in our research project, combining the 'new' creative and interactive methods proved to be particularly successful. The 'new' methods motivated young people with different character, interests and abilities to express themselves and be involved in our project. First, the creative and interactive components of the 'new' methods provided individuals, with different skills and abili-

ties, ways to express themselves, and thus motivated them to stay involved with the project. Second, the qualities of creative and interactive methods enabled respondents to choose to work outside the group context and without the presence of the researcher. Hence, the combination of methods gave the participants more control over the research process. The outcomes of our project demonstrate that when employed in such a way the 'new' methods have added value as they have the potential to motivate respondents to include additional information about their comfort zones and personal meaningful places (where they would not go with an adult researcher or a whole group). We would emphasize, too, that the students learned new skills (i.e. how to carry out an interview or edit a movie) and gathered knowledge that was useful to them when reflecting on their daily lives (i.e. using information, concepts and terminology of the project in their everyday communication) during the project. We may conclude then that the mix of methods was successful in terms of empowering youth.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Different modes of knowing a place often overlap and co-occur. For example, a smell can be a reminder of a certain history with a place.

<sup>2</sup> See Trell and Van Hoven (2009) for more details about importance of different aspects of places for young people's attachment to place.

- <sup>3</sup> Kevin (male, 17) interview with the researcher.  
<sup>4</sup> Carpiano (2009) refers to such walks (also car or bike-rides) as 'go-along' qualitative interviews.  
<sup>5</sup> See Hörschelmann & Schäfer (2005) for a detailed discussion about issues relating to interpreting images in youth research.  
<sup>6</sup> Kevin (male, 17), peer-led interview.  
<sup>7</sup> Ryan (male, 17), filming & narrating the Cedar walk  
<sup>8</sup> Evan (male, 17), discussing mental maps.  
<sup>9</sup> Since the aim of our project was to explore student's daily meaningful places in general the resulting maps covered a very wide range of places. When focusing on one specific place and mapping it, one can assume that more concrete aspects and details will be revealed.  
<sup>10</sup> Kevin (male, 17), individual video data collection.  
<sup>11</sup> Kevin has an attention deficit disorder  
<sup>12</sup> Although creative writing would have suited her best.

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