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A Sense of Autonomy in Young Children's Special Places

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Early childhood is a significant time when children begin to develop their place identity. As they discover their environment, young children claim special places in which to construct their own experiences. In exploring ways to connect children with place, particularly nature, caregivers need to consider children's place perspectives in the various settings of their lives. This research explored the question: how do young children experience special places in the home environment? Qualitative data were collected during two phases. The first consisted of book discussions and representational activities with 51 children at school. The second included special place tours and informal interviews with 12 children and parents in their homes. Analysis revealed four activities representing children's place experiences: playing, hiding, resting, and exploring. Children's descriptions and observed behaviors were categorized and quantified to demonstrate their range of place use. Through self-initiated activities, children gained a sense of spatial autonomy and control of their environment. This is important to the development of their place identity and environmental competency in using the environment to meet social and personal goals. Additionally, through adult supported exploration, children gained an appreciation for the natural world. Early childhood educators should consider the balance between child-initiated and adult guided experiences with place particularly by designing open-ended spaces and activities that allow children to gain a sense of control.

Young children develop unique relationships with places in all the various settings of their lives. Whether at school, at home, in private, or social settings, young children begin to distinguish places based on the feelings and/or experiences they associate with them. Early

childhood is a significant time when more stable aspects of children's place identities are developed, that is their thoughts, feelings and beliefs about the physical environment (Chawla, 1992; Proshansky & Fabian, 1987). Subsequently, exposing young children to natural environments is essential in promoting a sense of wonder and affection towards nature. Indeed, some argue that a strong relationship with place results in a high degree of stewardship or care for built and natural environments (Wilson, 2008). As early childhood caregivers aim to foster experiences to connect children with place, it is important to consider young children's perspectives, particularly the way in which they experience places.

In this paper, I present findings on children's *experiences* of special places. These experiences were extracted from a larger dissertation study on the nature of young children's special places within the home environment. While the larger study also revealed children's special place locations, the aim of this paper is to hone in on children's place experiences in order to reveal more about their interactions with certain places. The research question addressed in this paper is: How do children between the ages of 3-5 experience their special places in the home environment?

Theoretical Framework

The study was shaped around honoring children's perspectives and viewing them as active agents who create their own experiences and place in the world (Corsaro, 2005). The intent of this paper is to recognize the importance of children's participatory rights and learning about what's important to them (United Nations, 1989, 2005). As the field of early childhood environmental education grows, caregivers must remain cognizant of what matters to children expressed through their interactions with the physical and social environment.

In order to understand the significance of place(s) in children's lives, this study highlights the "physical-world socialization of the child" (Proshansky & Fabian, 1987, p. 22). Specifically, research was grounded in theories of place identity and attachment in considering not only how physical settings affect the growth and development of children, but also how children, as they grow and develop, shape, influence, and become attached to the physical environment.

Proshansky and Fabian (1987) define place identity as a substructure of self-identity, which includes "cognitions about the physical environment that also serve to define who the person is… represented as thoughts, memories, beliefs, values, and meanings relating to all the important settings of the person's daily life…Place-identity cognitions monitor the person's behavior and experience in the physical world" (pp. 22-23).

Place attachment, an aspect of place identity, is defined as the positive bond and emotional attachment that a person develops towards a place (Chawla, 1992; Low & Altman, 1992). Place attachment is an integrating concept that involves not only affect and emotions, but also knowledge and beliefs, and behaviors and actions towards place (Proshansky & Fabian, 1987; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Place identity and attachments may fluctuate and change over time; however, early childhood is a significant period when more stable aspects of place identity are developed (Chawla, 1992; Proshansky & Fabian, 1987).

The formation or maintenance of children's place attachments may be influenced by one or a combination of any of the three aspects of human-place relationships, including: (1) psychological, (2) sociocultural, and (3) environmental (Low & Altman, 1992; Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Psychological aspects include the affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses that a person may have towards a place (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Sociocultural aspects refer to how social norms, culture, and ideologies influence human-place relationships (Low & Altman, 1992). Environmental aspects assume that certain environments create certain people-place relationships (Low & Altman, 1992).

This study primarily focused on the psychological aspects of children's experiences of place, through studying their special place activities. However, findings were also considered within the environmental and sociocultural aspects of the research setting. Specifically, this study was positioned in the U.S. Rocky Mountain west, in an environment typically known for its cold windy winters. During this research, harsh weather conditions limited access to the outdoor environment, which may have also influenced the places and experiences that children shared. Also, the children in this study, for the most part, came from middle-class privileged families and had access to places and objects reflective of the dominant westernized American culture. Therefore, findings may not be generalizable to children from other geographical settings, cultures, and socio-economic classes.

Literature Review

Numerous studies have focused on children's places, informing various disciplines, including: education, psychology, landscape architecture, geography, and environmental studies. Beginning with Hart's (1979) seminal study on *Children's Experience of Place,* a long line of research has focused on understanding children's place perspectives, with a particular interest in special places. Special places can be defined as spaces that children lay claim to or call their own. Chawla (1992) explained that childhood place studies are important, "because they contribute to the present quality of a child's life, or because they leave enduring effects after childhood is over" (p. 73).

Through recognizing how my own childhood special place experience influenced my passion for environmental education, I became interested in studying children's early place

experiences. In reviewing the literature, there appeared to be a gap in special place studies with young children. Childhood places have been investigated through adult memories (Chawla, 1992), middle childhood outdoor environments (Hart, 1979; Kylin, 2003; Moore, 1986; Sobel, 1992), and early childhood school and daycare settings (Dowdell, Gray, Maloney, 2011; Fjørtoft, 2001; Lowry, 1993; Maxwell, Michell, & Evans, 2008; Skånfors, Löfdahl, & Hägglund, 2009). However, prior to this research, no study had explored young children's special place experiences in the home environment. A brief review of the literature is included, delineating two main ways in which children experience place: through play and gaining a sense of privacy.

Places of Play

Play, in its simplest form, consists of child-initiated pleasurable activities. Smilansky and Shefta (1990) defined three types of play: functional, constructive, and symbolic. Functional play, also referred to as motor or practice play, is characterized by repetitive movements performed to gain mastery of a skill. In constructive play, children use problem-solving skills to construct or create something. Symbolic play, also referred to as pretend or dramatic play, occurs when children use their imagination or role-playing to transform themselves or objects. Additionally, exploration is a type of play described as "a sort of fingering over the environment in sensory terms, a questioning of the power of materials as a preliminary to the creation of a higher organization of meaning" (Cobb, 1977; p. 48). Through play children develop a sense of place-identity (Hart, 1987; Proshansky & Fabian, 1987).

Children experience places through play and exploration. Open-ended places provide potential for children to claim ownership of their environments (Titman, 1994). Some suggest that natural spaces stimulate a higher degree of fantasy (Dowdell, Gray, Maloney, 2011) and motor play (Fjørtoft, 2001) than traditional outdoor playgrounds and indoor settings. Furthermore, the varied terrain, vegetation, and living elements in natural spaces provide stimulus for discovery and exploration (Dowdell, Gray, Maloney, 2011; Moore, 1986; Waters & Maynard, 2010). While loose parts (i.e. sticks, leaves, and grass) lead children to engage in imaginative and constructive play (Hart, 1979; Kylin, 2003; Moore, 1986; Sobel, 1992).

Outdoor studies reveal children construct their own places out of loose parts (Hart, 1979; Kylin, 2003; Maxwell et al., 2008; Sobel, 1992). Constructed places allow children to control and manipulate their environment and provide a space separate from adults (Sobel, 1992). Older children (ages 7-11) tend to build places further from home and focus on the construction and design of the structure. Whereas, younger children (ages 5-7), chose locations closer to home and are less likely to modify the structure's physical elements; instead, modifications are made through imaginative and dramatic play (Hart, 1979; Kylin, 2003; Sobel, 1992).

Studies of children's place activities have been limited, for the most part, to outdoor experiences (Hart, 1979; Kylin, 2003; Sobel, 1992) and school environments (Maxwell et al., 2008). Little, if any, research has explored children's place activities in and around the home. As Hart (1979) argued, when young children begin to walk, there is a natural urge to make a place of their own. Therefore, it is important to explore children's experiences of places in all the contexts of their lives, in both outdoor and indoor locations (L. Chawla, personal communication, February 19, 2009).

Spatial Autonomy and Privacy

Children achieve spatial autonomy and a sense of privacy through gaining control over particular spaces (Proshansky & Fabian, 1987, p. 27). A child's growing independence is demonstrated through the manipulation of physical objects and spaces, providing a child with a sense of individuality (Proshansky & Fabian, 1987). Privacy is essential to psychological development, in that it enhances children's personal dignity and self-esteem (Laufer & Wolfe, 1977), individual autonomy and self-identity (Proshansky & Fabian, 1987), and future ability to achieve a sense of personal space (McKinney, 1998).

Hart (1979) found that elementary-age children have a particular need for quiet places and places to hide. Early childhood studies also reveal that young children are attracted to places of secrecy or that lend themselves to the purposes of exclusive and/or selective play (Lowry, 1993; Skånfors et al., 2009). Lowry (1993) found that when two privacy structures were added to a preschool classroom, children used these structures to gain a sense of privacy or to play exclusively with peers. Skånfors et al. (2009) identified two withdrawal strategies in preschool children, including: "making oneself inaccessible" and "creating and protecting shared hidden spaces" (p. 105). In order to become inaccessible, the children read books, acted distant, and hid. Children created and protected shared hidden spaces in order to play exclusively with others.

The literature reveals young children's desire for spatial autonomy. However, for the most part, early childhood studies have been limited to the preschool environment, a setting subject to specific rules and regulations. This research sought to expand understanding of young children's place experiences through studying places identified within the home setting, an environment that tends to be less structured. Studying children's place experiences in their home can help inform a wide spectrum of adults (early childhood teachers, environmental educators, and parents) as they consider ways to engage children with place.

Methodology

The research embraced an "interpretive qualitative study" in which the "researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon, the meaning is mediated through the researcher as an instrument, the strategy is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive" (Merriam, 2002, p. 6). Specifically, my interest in young children's special places resulted from experiences teaching kindergarten, early childhood environmental education, and observing my own children develop certain behaviors and preferences for places. Because early place connections play a crucial role in children's development (Chawla, 1992), I wanted to learn more about how young children experience these places in the home environment. In an interpretive study, particularly one involving children, it is essential to recognize the power imbalances between the adult researcher and children participants and to remain conscious of biases and/or subjectivities. Hence, throughout the study, continuous efforts were made to set aside my own understandings and experiences of special places, in order to view place experiences through the eyes of young children.

This paper includes data collected during both the pilot and formal stages of a dissertation project. Similar methods were used during both inquiries. Five interactive methods were utilized during two sequential phases in settings relevant to the children's everyday lives (Green, 2012). The first phase of the research was initiated at school, consisted of book discussions and representational descriptions, and included 51 three-to-five-year-old children (24 girls and 27 boys). The second phase was conducted in children's homes, consisted of child-led special place tours and informal conversations with 12 children and their parents. Children selected for the second phase were particularly interested in special places and actively engaged in conversations during the first phase. Selection was also based on parents' responsiveness and willingness to allow the researcher to visit their homes. Participants included six girls (Hope, Sarah, Tesa, Fern, Lisa, Emily) and six boys (Logan, Bradon, Nathan, Caleb, John, Robert). Two pairs were siblings: Caleb and Sarah, Fern and Lisa.[1] Informed consent was obtained from participating parents and children.

Phase One at School

Phase one began at school with a puppet show to gain the children's interest and help establish a positive relationship with them. A conversation with the puppet was used to describe the purpose of the study and the research activities. Children were invited to participate in the study and ask questions.

In the first phase of data collection, a book, written specifically for the study, was read to the children in order to prompt conversations about special places. The book included

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[1] Pseudonyms were used to identify children who participated in home visits.

eleven examples of indoor and outdoor places and featured boys and girls from diverse backgrounds and home settings. (Although some of the places depicted may be biased towards a Rocky Mountain landscape with illustrations including mountains and pines in the background). The places selected for the book were based on personal observations, as well as ideas generated from parents, grandparents, and early childhood educators. The book was piloted and found to be an effective tool *for initiating conversations with children about their special places. Children* drew on their own lived experiences to reflect on the pictures they encountered *in* the book (Torr, 2007). They negotiated their *own meaning of special places rather than mimicking the places in the book.*

Book discussions were collected and video-recorded over a two-week period in the classrooms with small and large groups of children. Several children participated in the discussions multiple times. Children were encouraged to interject their own thoughts during the story rather than withholding comments until the end. They were asked about their special place locations and activities. The extent of these informal discussions varied among participants. In other words, more or less details were shared about their place experiences depending on the nature of conversations and the dispositions of the children.

After the book discussions were completed, children were invited to create representations of their special places. They were provided with materials to draw, paint, mold with play dough, and/or build with blocks. Several children chose to represent their special places in multiple forms. As Isenberg and Jalongo (2001) point out, "art is a symbol system that can be used to generate meaning" (p. 106). After each child had created his or her representation, they were asked to describe it. Because children's artistic abilities varied significantly, the contents of the representations were not analyzed. Instead, only their oral descriptions were used as data for the study. The representations, however, provided an artistic visual of their experiences.

Phase Two: Home Visits

The second phase of the study consisted of home visits, including: child-led special place tours and informal conversations with children and parents. Data was collected as video recordings and added more qualitative depth to the study, allowing for detailed descriptions and interpersonal responses from the children in their natural settings.

The home visits began with a special places tour. The children served as tour guides and were encouraged to show and talk about all the places they considered special. Tours lasted between ten and forty minutes, concluding when children decided. During tours, children were asked about their place feelings and activities. Most were excited to have someone visit who was interested in learning more about what was important to them.

Care was taken to ensure children's comfort during visits; shy children often preferred the accompaniment of a parent and/or sibling.

Parental conversations were included in this study because parents, generally speaking, can provide information regarding the nature of children's day-to-day activities. While the special place tours provided an opportunity to see children's places firsthand, they seldom provided opportunities to view children in their authentic engagement with place. Additionally, it is often difficult for young children to articulate their feelings and behaviors (Piaget, 1936/1952). Therefore, parental interviews were included to provide further insight into the children's experiences. However, parental insights were indicated as such in the findings and were not used to provide voice for the children.

Observational field notes were taken during all phases of the research. These notes consisted of contextual clues, incidents that stood out, and connections between data. Additionally, data collection activities were video recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis

Data underwent three cycles of qualitative analysis, utilizing reliability measures throughout the process. Specifically, inter-rater reliability measures included consultation and guidance from early childhood education experts during data interpretation. Additionally, data triangulation measures included analysis and reading of the various transcripts multiple times in order to compare similarities and possible differences in categories and themes that emerged.

During initial data analysis, data was tracked as it was collected to identify emerging patterns and pose questions for follow-up (Grbich, 2007). Once all the data were collected, holistic coding was utilized in order "to grasp basic themes or issues in the data by absorbing them as a whole" (Dey, 1993, p. 104).

During the second cycle of analysis, taxonomic coding was used in order to categorize the types of special place activities mentioned by the children (i.e. play, hiding, sedentary use, exploration, and other) (Grbich, 2007; Saldaña, 2009). Categories of the children's special place activities were gleaned from past childhood place literature and the pilot study findings. First, children's responses in the first phase were structured and quantified in order to reveal the wide range of their special place use. (Please refer to Table 1). Next, data from both phases were combined in order to more fully describe the children's experiences with each special place activity. These activities appear in the findings section of this paper.

Lastly, axial coding was used to specify themes in which characterize the holistic nature of children's special place experiences (Saldaña, 2009). Specifically, all the various transcripts were read multiple times in order to locate and combine the findings that supported particular themes. Combined data were then used to draft a description of each theme in order to "explain more fully" children's place experiences (Cohen & Manion, 2000, p. 254). Lastly, through the process of writing and reading the data multiple times, themes were further refined and interpreted through the childhood place literature. These themes are presented in the discussion section of this paper.

Findings

From playing, hiding, exploring, and resting, findings reveal that young children do not have one particular type of special place; rather, they have many kinds of places that serve different purposes in their lives. For the most part, the children referred to special places that held a positive meaning in their lives, indicating they preferred places that were fun or simply because they liked them. Table 1 includes the activities mentioned by children during the first phase; all activities mentioned are displayed in order to show the range of place use. Play was the most prevalent activity. Activities were classified as play when the children specifically used the word. Children frequently associated special places with hiding, alluding to the secretive nature of their spaces. Indoor places were preferred for sedentary purposes, such as reading books, snuggling, and sleeping. Exploratory activities, such as climbing and looking for diamonds and rubies were primarily associated with outdoor places, alluding to children's natural inclination to discover their environment. Place uses that could not be categorized elsewhere such as eating and buying new toys fell under the *other* domain. In the following sections, findings from all phases of the study are described, including both indoor and outdoor activities, in order to provide richer detail of children's special place experiences.

Places to Play

Children largely interacted with their special places through play. Play activities fell into three distinct categories: functional, constructive, and symbolic as described in the literature (Smilansky and Shefta, 1990).

Functional play. Riding bikes, jumping on trampolines, and swinging on gymnastic rings are some of the functional play activities mentioned or demonstrated by children.

Emily showed me her gymnastic rings mounted on the top of her bunk bed. "This is fun," she said while flexing her body in different shapes and forms. Through practice, Emily appeared to gain confidence in her gymnastic ability.

Table 1
Special Place Activities Mentioned by 51 Children During the First Phase.

Special Place Activities	Number Mentioned
Play	45
Cars, dolls, babies, trucks, toys, Wii, games, dress-up, monsters, color, puzzles, throwing snowballs, riding bikes, throwing Frisbees, running, jumping on trampoline, swinging, sliding, tea parties, building houses and castles,	
Hiding	20
Hiding from parents, siblings, friends, and other visitors or objects	
Sedentary Use	20
Reading books, sleeping, napping, watching T.V./ movies, snuggling, curling-up, sleeping with kitty and stuffed animals under blankets, laying and looking at stars	
Exploratory activities	12
Climbing rocks, finding rocks, adventures, packing things, collecting chicken eggs, digging holes, planting flowers, catching crawdads, camping, looking for diamonds and rubies	
Other (Eating)	9
Picnics, music and snacks, helping mommy, making a mess, talking to daddy, warming up by the heater, buying toys, taking clothes down	
Total:	106 activities

Likewise, Sara exercised motor skills in many of her special places. She tumbled across her brother's bed, rolled over blankets on the floor, and maneuvered behind the dresser and into small places between furniture. Outside, Sara and her brother, Caleb, showed me the swing on their porch. Similarly, Fern and Lisa pointed to the swings in their neighbor's yard.

Children selected both indoor and outdoor places to practice motor skills. While outdoor spaces typically allowed for larger motor movements, specifically designed indoor spaces, such as Emily's gymnastic rings, were also significant in strengthening particular skills.
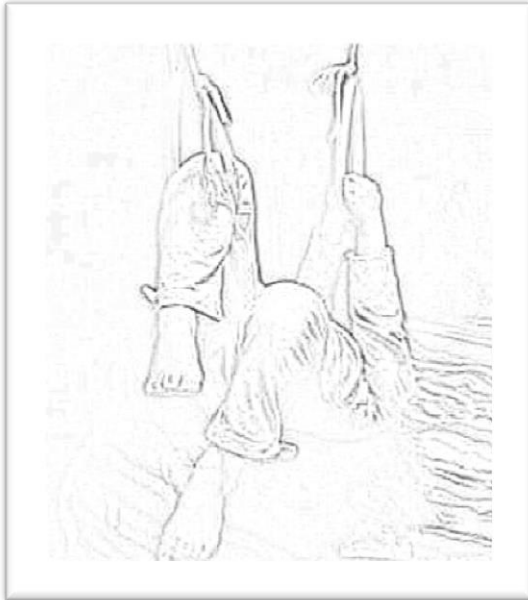
Figure 1. Emily practicing her gymnastics

Constructive play. Children constructed their own special places and used objects to create certain social environments. Constructing places appeared to be a both a social activity and a mechanism for gaining privacy.

During the home visits, seven children shared that they liked to build structures out of blankets. Emily described constructing a tent with "blankets on chairs." She explained that she went in the tent, "all by myself, and with my friends, sometimes." Lisa and Fern's mother described how the children liked to build blanket structures in their living room. Often they used the structure to devise imaginary settings (e.g. the ocean) and act out situations. Caleb and Sara also frequently built a "blanket bed" on the floor, where they played make believe with dolls and stuffed animals.

Nathan identified a bush house near his front porch. After his parents helped clear out some of the excess branches and shrubs, the structure of the bush allowed him and his friends to climb inside and "hide out." The children used rocks and other "loose parts" to construct furniture inside their exclusive social environment.

At school, Tesa described building a structure out of books, "I put a little covering thing on my tent made out of books. I had a little door thing so no one could sneak inside. I had a little fire pit, so the fire could block my tent, so no one could get through it."

Tesa stated two strategies for keeping others out, her "little door thing" and a "fire pit." Although it is not likely that she constructed a fire pit, her statement suggests that she gained a sense of control of her environment in the devising of imaginary elements.

Symbolic play. Children's symbolic play in their special places frequently overlapped with constructive activities.

Emily participated in symbolic play, "playing babies," and "having tea parties," under a table and behind her couch. Emily showed me her special place behind a couch where she had two tiny chairs and a little round table with a small purple tray, a pink teapot, and two tiny mugs. She described how she used this space to host tea parties for her friends and dolls. Emily also talked about her activities behind the couch on several occasions at school. Figure 2 includes Emily's painting of her special place.

Figure 2. Emily's painting her special place behind a couch.

Tesa described her imaginary activities in her closet. "Sometimes I turn some stuff into magic, sometimes I play with magic, sometimes I play witch, and sometimes I play with people."

After leading his father and I up the hill behind his apartment complex, Nathan described how he constructed bombs and concocted magic potions to "thwart off the enemy" out of the old rusted metal parts littered among the rocks and sand of the barren landscape.

Additionally, both Nathan and Hope enjoyed playing "pretend" campout. Hope tucked behind a living room chair and Nathan escaped in his closet with a stuffed animal, blanket, and flashlight.

Places to Hide

The children frequently associated special places with places to hide. They mentioned hiding from siblings, parents, friends, and cousins in closets, under beds, beneath tables, inside bushes, and in cars. During home visits, all of the children demonstrated their enjoyment of hiding in their places by appointing me seeker in a game of hide and seek.

Sara and Caleb were already hiding under their kitchen table when I arrived. Quickly, Sara ran into the living room and pointed to a little corner behind the couch where she hid. Caleb opened the door to a cabinet under a staircase, tossed out all of the blankets, and crawled inside. The game continued throughout the tour, with the children revealing 18 special *hiding* places.

When asked why they like to hide, Sara explained, "Because…when friends come, we hide!" Caleb added, smiling, "Because we want to."

Sara and Caleb altered rules in order to gain access to their special places. Aware that their older brother's room and the cabinet under the stairs were forbidden, the children challenged parental guidelines by including those places on their tour.

Additionally, Sara and Caleb's hiding activities appeared to be influenced by environmental features. Specifically, the structure of their home consisted of several large built-in cabinets and the upstairs walls were angled, creating many nooks and crannies for tucking away. Rather than build their own hideouts, the children selected indoor and outdoor hiding places with elements that existed in their landscapes including under a tree and inside a plastic playhouse.

During his special place tour, John also became really involved in hiding, sneaking around from place to place and continuously checking to see if I followed his lead. He slid behind a curtain, under his brother's crib, into several closets, behind a rocking chair, and under a table. At one point, he paused in the living room, appearing as if he was making up the rules as he went.

Figure 3. Caleb hiding in his cabinet under the stairs.

"Hmmm…where can I hide?" he stated out loud to himself, before slipping into a small space between two pieces of furniture.

While on many occasions, the children hid while I was watching so as to reveal their location. At other times, they moved quickly ahead of me hiding conspicuously in places before I entered the room.

Trying to fit into small hiding places added an element of excitement. Robert attempted to show me how he fit in a special place under his bed. He positioned himself on his hands and knees, moaning as he tried to get under the low railing. Next, he stuck his feet under first and ducked down using his arms to pull himself underneath. Unsuccessful, he rolled onto his belly and looked up with uncertainty, still attempting to pull himself under the bed. He smiled, with a silly grin, before finally attempting head first, laying flat on his belly. Quietly, he stood up, giving up his quest.

Robert's mother was surprised by his behavior and choice of place. Indeed, the space under his bed was not intended for his use. Perhaps, through choosing to crawl into this space, Robert was demonstrating his need to claim a space of his own.

Figure 4. Robert trying to crawl under his bed

Lisa also enjoyed the challenge of fitting into small spaces, maneuvering her body into a small cloth dollhouse. Perhaps she had underestimated her size, or maybe she had grown since the last time she had crawled inside. Nevertheless, squeezing into the small space appeared to be fun.

Places to Rest

Reading books, sleeping, and cuddling were mainly associated with indoor special places, particular children's bedrooms and beds. Because of the personal nature of these places, they seemed to provide children with a strong sense of belonging. The children shared their beds as places where they kept their real and stuffed animals. As one child described her painting in Figure 5, "It's a big bed. I like to put my bears in there." Emily also pointed out her top bunk during her special place tour, explaining, "my kitty likes to sleep with me."

The first place Lisa went was her bed where she covered herself completely with a sheet surrounded by several small blankets, dolls, and stuffed animals. "Oh, is this your special place?" I asked. "Yes," she answered, giggling as she peeked through the sheet.
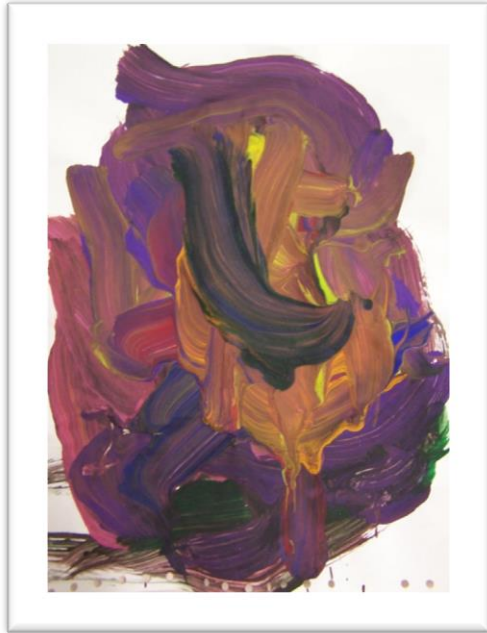
Figure 5. A girl's painting of her bed.

Tesa also led me to her bedroom and crawled under her covers. Along with describing how their beds were places for rest, both Lisa and Tesa showed me how they liked to hide. This may have been due to the social interactions that occurred between the children and me during the tours, which was distinctly different from their day-to-day activities.

According to his mother, Robert spent a lot of time on his bed, reading books or cuddling with stuffed animals. She had specifically designed this space for him, family photos hung on the wall next to his pillow, books were neatly arranged on his headboard, and his favorite stuffed animals were tucked in the blankets.

Although Robert appeared to like this place, it was not the first place he selected to show me. Rather he showed me this space only after he had attempted to crawl in the novel space under his bed, possibly demonstrating a preference for a space he could claim as his own.

Places to Explore

Along with small spaces for playing, hiding, and resting, children preferred wide and open natural spaces for exploration. During the first phase, children mentioned building castles in the sandbox, collecting eggs in the chicken coupe, and planting flowers in the garden.

Although these activities were associated with built places, these environments, for the most part, involved living elements and natural objects.

During her tour, Hope roamed aimlessly around her backyard, perhaps indicating her boredom with the groomed landscape near her home. Then, she wandered down the sidewalk past her home, taking charge in leading a "rabbit hunt." Her mother explained that they frequently scouted the neighborhood for rabbits and other wildlife. While Hope appeared disenchanted with her backyard setting, she bloomed with excitement during the rabbit expedition.

Similarly, Bradon spent very little time in his own backyard; he was more interested in exploring the undeveloped field behind his house. "This is where the wild asparagus grow," he explained as he climbed up the railroad tiles separating his yard from the undeveloped land. Bradon scurried through the native grass and wildflowers along a faint trail that paralleled the fence on the backside of his yard. Pointing towards a sandy incline, he scaled up, nibbled on a leafy green, and offered to share a taste.

Admittedly, I was a bit nervous when Bradon led me outside the confines of his yard. I was afraid we were venturing where he was not permitted to go. However, I was relieved when his mother joined us leaning over the fence to smell a wildflower that Bradon pointed out.

Nathan led me around his yard pointing out a woodpile, a fire pit, and two bush houses that him and his friends had recently claimed. Additionally, he led his father and I on a hike up the hill next to his apartment complex. Along with showing me the rusted metal parts which he used to construct "art sculptures, knight weapons, …and bombs that come out of the ground," Nathan pointed out the native flowers that grew in the sand between the rocks. His father had taught him to identify the flowers by name, encouraging familiarity with the landscape.

In contrast, Logan led me outdoors during his tour but stopped short inside his fenced backyard. He pointed to the swings, his sandbox, and a doghouse neutrally indicating that his play domain was limited. Then he grinned and climbed on top of the doghouse, perhaps demonstrating his pleasure in gaining some sense of control.

Logan's father expressed a different view than Logan regarding what constitutes a place as special. His father mentioned "working in the garage" and "riding his bike" as special, whereas, Logan neglected to mention either of these places or activities.

Discussion

This study explored how young children experience their special places in the home environment, particularly focusing on the psychological aspects of their place experiences (i.e. behaviors and activities). Findings suggest that children were drawn to special places that provided them with a sense of autonomy and control. Specifically, through playing, hiding, resting, and exploring, the children gained autonomy in 1) claiming and constructing their own places, 2) creating their own rules, 3) engaging in creativity and imagination, and 4) exercising environmental competency.

Claimed Places

The children selected special places that were important to them. They often chose places and activities that were seemingly different than what parents anticipated. For instance, Logan showed me how he liked to climb on top of his doghouse, whereas his father spoke about "working in the garage." These two activities contrasted. Particularly, Logan's actions may demonstrate his desire for autonomy and independence, while working in the garage with his father presumed a dependent, perhaps subordinate role.

Children also claimed places that were not intended for their use. Robert's attempt to crawl under his bed was unanticipated by his mother. This novel place offered a space for him to be creative and explore his own identity (Proshansky & Fabian, 1987).

On the other hand, children also claimed familiar and cozy places, such as beds or bedrooms. Blankets, pillows, and stuffed animals were arranged on the children's beds for snuggling; family photos hung on the walls. These items gave the children a sense of belonging, comfort, and security. The children appeared to have an emotional attachment to such places, presumably contributing to their place identity (Chawla, 1992; Proshansky & Fabian, 1987).

Creating the Rules

Young children preferred places and activities that allowed them to set their own rules. In hiding, children exercised control through choosing when, where, and from whom they wanted to hide. During my visits, the children sought out familiar and novel places, while ensuring that I followed their lead.

Furthermore, Sara and Caleb challenged and evaded parental rules in order to access their places. Although they were normally not allowed in their brother's room or in the cabinet under the stairs, during their tour they demanded that the rule be bent, therefore gaining charge. Corsaro (2005) used the term, secondary adjustments, to describe how children

evade or adjust rules in the creation of their own childhood culture. More often than not, children are positioned subordinately in society. Special places provided the children with spaces to set their own parameters and exercise control (Corsaro, 2005; Proshansky & Fabian, 1987; Sobel, 1992).

Fostering Creativity and Imagination

Through symbolic and constructive play, children devised their own situations (i.e. tea parties, magical spells, and campouts), utilizing props and loose parts to act them out. For instance, Nathan used old metal parts on the hillside to build weapons and rocks around his yard for furniture. Unlike findings from middle childhood place studies (Kylin, 2003; Sobel, 1992), none of the children built structures in outdoor settings. As previously suggested, the children in this study, for the most part, claimed places that already existed, modifying these spaces through their imagination and symbolic play (Hart, 1979; Kylin, 2003; Sobel, 1992). However, findings also suggest that children possess an inclination to construct their own structures indoors, with blankets being the primary "loose part" associated with this activity. As such, children's special places became the backdrop to inspire make-believe adventures and act out real and imaginary situations (Sobel, 1992).

Environmental Competency

Through their place activities the children developed environmental competency. *Environmental competence* is defined as the "knowledge, skill, and confidence to use the environment to carry out one's own goals and to enrich one's experience" (Hart, 1979, p. 225). Emily developed competency in practicing her skills on the gymnastic rings. Likewise, Nathan, Bradon, and Hope demonstrated knowledge and appreciation for the native flora and fauna in the landscapes near their homes.

Children also exercised environmental competency through restricting access to their special places in order to gain privacy (Laufer & Wolfe, 1977; Skånfors et al., 2009). Tesa devised elements in her book tent to prevent others from entering. Additionally, the small size of some special places prevented adult access. I had originally thought that I would be able to enter the children's special places; however, I was never invited, and the mere size of them alone prevented my entrance. Indeed, all children demonstrated some degree of environmental competency through shaping their places to serve their own needs (Proshansky & Fabian, 1987).

Conclusion and Implications

This study extends childhood place literature through exploring the special place experiences of young children in their home environments. Through learning about the

activities that children like to do in both indoor and outdoor settings, environmental educators and caregivers can gain deeper insight into what inspires and excites young children. Indeed, in a time of growing concern about children's disconnection with the natural world, findings from this study offer hope in that technology related activities, such as video games and movies, were scarcely mentioned by the children. Rather, the children in this study were actively engaged with their physical environments through playing, hiding, resting and exploring in special places.

While children's special places were distinctly their own, caregivers played a significant role in influencing children's place experiences. Positive support and guidance from a caring adult is essential in providing children with comfort and security to explore and discover their environments (Chawla, 1992; Hart, 1979; Wilson, 2008). Particularly, many parents took care in designing the children's bedrooms as personal spaces, which, in turn, seemed to influence children's feelings of belonging and self-identity. For example, parent's hung family photos on walls and provided cozy blankets, pillows, and stuffed animals that afforded children security.

Parents also encouraged children's exploration. Nathan's father accompanied Nathan on adventures up the hillside, taking part in his imaginative (knight and pirate) play schemes and teaching him to identify native flora. Hope's mother took her around the neighborhood on rabbit hunts. And Bradon's mother modeled an appreciation for nature by introducing him to the wild asparagus plants and sharing in the aroma of a flower.

A caregiver's role in children's development of secure place attachments, both indoor and outdoor, provides a backdrop for children to develop a sense of spatial autonomy and environmental competency. While John's father had introduced him to hiding, John claimed the game as his own by setting his own parameters and identifying novel spaces. Similarly, Hope, Bradon, and Nathan demonstrated confidence in leading exploratory excursions, sharing the knowledge about their environment that they had gleaned from parents. It is important, however, for caregivers to consider the balance between child-initiated and adult-initiated place activities. Particularly, caregivers should aim to provide appropriate scaffolding (supportive guidance), while at the same time allowing children to set their own parameters and define their own places.

In the same sense, caregivers should also consider the balance between structured and unstructured environments. Over structured environments, such as fenced in lawns, may interfere with children developing their own initiative and relationship with place. In particular, children's environments should be designed with a degree of openness, including rich and varied elements, loose parts, and nooks and crannies, for children to manipulate and create their own experiences. By designing spaces which allow children to claim their own place, create their own rules, exercise creativity and imagination, and allow for the

development of environmental competency, adults can better support children in fostering their place identity and a positive relationship with the natural world.

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