The Significance of Place
in the Curriculum
of Children's Everyday Lives

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In the Western tradition, *place* is a concept that has most often been subordinated to *space* and *time* — concepts related to ubiquity and infinity that have been more useful to the universalistic aspirations of colonization (Casey, 1997). The processes of globalization have both contributed to placelessness — the loss of place, the destruction of places, the commodification of place, the economic and technological blending of places, and the production of places that look remarkably similar to each other — and at the same time increased awareness of the importance of place (Adams, Hoelscher, & Till, 2001; Casey, 1997). Place can be defined most straightforwardly as "*an area or space that is a habitual site of human activity and/ or is conceived of in this way by communities or individuals* [emphasis in original]" (Brey, 1998, p. 240). For a number of years, studies of places focused on their economic efficiency. More recently, attention has shifted to questions about social justice with an emphasis on the experienced actualities of place (Smith, Light & Roberts, 1998). Critical humanist geographers' interpretations of place have also been concerned with how human creativity is hemmed in by large-scale social, political and economic structures (Adams et al., 2001).

I have often witnessed how the places of children's everyday lives have limited their opportunities for nurturance, growth, and learning. In Toronto, when teachers I worked with completed narrative inquiries with some of their students (Ellis, 1998), I recall children who answered all 26 interview questions with stories that were set in only two locations — their small home apartments and the school. They didn't get to go anywhere else. Even the hallways in their apartment buildings were not safe. In some instances, the child's father was in prison. In Edmonton, Rowley (1996) studied the physical activity of grade five students and found that some were confined to their homes after school and played only computer games until parents returned from work because play in the neighbourhood was not considered safe. As a third example, dropping in at a friend's home before she returned from work, I found

her eight-year-old son alone with only his dog and television for comfort after an upsetting day at school. This was a daily routine. There were no children his age living in the neighbourhood. The child's father had lost his job in the corporate downsizing and was out of the country doing contract work. The family had also downsized their house by moving into an older neighbourhood inhabited mainly by empty nesters. With all of these changes and losses, the child often had "an upsetting day" at his new school.

In my work I wish to encourage more educational researchers to clarify the ways children's daily lives are affected by global processes manifested in local places and by the severing of the economy from social realities. My hope is that explicit attention to the relationship between the places of children's lives and the quality of their lives can inspire more responsible civic action in planning healthy environments for children. In this paper I maintain that making questions about "the place of children's everyday lives" more central in research with children and youth can also contribute to improved social justice for children. Furthermore, classrooms and schools can be understood and researched as places intended to support young people's growth and well being.

This paper endeavors to present a somewhat elaborate argument. It requires an appreciation of "everyday life" as a curriculum that succeeds or fails to support many forms of development, growth, learning and identity for children and youth. It requires an understanding of the way place — its resources of all kinds — enables or inhibits everyday life experiences needed by children. And it requires an appreciation of the multifaceted needs children have for adequate human development. The paper is divided into four sections. In the first section, I try to offer a sense of the lived meaning of place. This section draws upon "place stories"[1] from students in my graduate course on Children and Place to introduce some of cultural geography's ideas about place in a contextualized way. In the second section I review a theoretical framework for understanding everyday life as curriculum and for appreciating the significance of place in everyday life. In the third section I present a discussion of experiences children need and the implications for examining the places of their everyday lives. I am suggesting that an awareness of children's needs/rights should serve an interpretive framework for evaluating the places of their everyday lives. In the final section I discuss some examples of practices in schools that are responsive to students' needs of place. I maintain that school itself should be a good place in terms of students' needs for nurturance and growth. I am also suggesting that research on the places of students' lives outside of school should inform the curricula offered within schools.

The Lived Meaning of Place

Although the concept of place inspires complicated and variegated discussions, Casey (1997) has argued that it is not incoherent, fundamentally flawed,

easily reducible to some other term, or trivial in its consequences. People are implaced beings and place fundamentally structures human experience (Smith, Light & Roberts, 1998). As they go about their daily lives they learn patterns of interaction and behaviour that become taken for granted (Crang, 1998). Place is the anchor for community and continuity, particularly for children whose mobility and access to psychological communities is more limited. Although place has a long-held association with community and stability, it is increasingly recognized as dynamic and fluid (Adams et al., 2001) and as open and porous networks of social relations (Massey, 1994). It is into this chaotic reality of everyday life in a place that researchers must dive to discover and "consider the relevance of all of its constituting elements, in their infinite relationships and consequences" (Alves & de Oliveira, 2002, p. 57).

As an assignment in a graduate course on Children and Place, I have asked students to write about their experience of a particular place. This is intended to be a topoanalysis — an inquiry exploring the creation of one's personal and cultural identity through place. Most of the course participants choose to write a story about a childhood place. As the course proceeds, students express surprise that so many of these stories make us cry. The emotional power of the stories is understandable, however, given that significant places are frequently bound up with significant others and given that childhood relationships, or their absence, can scar or strengthen us for the rest of our lives. As Wasserman, Womersley, and Gottlieb (1997, p. 201) and others have recognized, "place attachment reflects a history of human interaction." The child's vulnerability — need for a safe place, need for stimulation, and need for others — speaks to us poignantly through these place stories.

Initially, students in the course wonder how writing about place relates to writing about relationships with people. That is, is one writing about a place or is one writing about a relationship or set of relationships? For example, Sherry Poirier, a student in the course, wrote about "Aunt Rachel's Place." As the oldest sibling carrying heavy responsibilities in her own busy family home, she found great relief and delight in spending occasional weekends at Aunt Rachel's. It was quiet there. She had generous one-on-one time with her aunt, special treats, a relatively exotic natural environment to explore, and the thrill of hanging out and doing recreational activities with older teenaged cousins. Every aspect of her time at Aunt Rachel's was "a big deal." She always returned home feeling restored. It took Sherry 3570 words to describe how her life at Aunt Rachel's place contrasted with her everyday life at home. Sherry and her aunt have an on-going special relationship, but it was a relationship that was built through a shared attachment to a place — a place that was Aunt Rachel's. Attachments or bonds to place are important in that place enables people to share experiences with others and to form themselves into communities with continuity over time (Crang, 1998). Children, like the disabled and the elderly, can find themselves to be particularly rooted in place (Matthews & Limb, 1999).

Cultural geographers — those who study how societies use and are shaped by spaces and places — recognize that "experience of place can range in scale from part

of a room to an entire continent" (Relph, 1976, p. 141). As objects of inquiry, places are usually large ones, called "locales", which are sites of social life and the operation of collectives. These can be at the scale of buildings or cities. For her place story, Jil Koller wrote about "The Kitchen Table." She explained that her favourite childhood memories took place around that table. It took her the better part of 3499 words to describe the daily, weekly, and seasonal family rituals that were lived at that table. The story was a revealing window into an idyllic family life. The story, and the significance of that kitchen table for Jil, also illustrate the notion that the *placeness* of a place is a subjective or inter-subjective creation and is only apparent to the individuals or group members who create it (Smith, Light & Roberts, 1998).

Experiences of place reflect both human agency and the available physical and social resources or constraints. Guming Zhao wrote about her favourite childhood place — the place where she lived during the last 6 years of her mother's life. Guming's mother died when Guming was 12. The circumstances of their lives were difficult because the Chinese Revolution was in progress. Guming's father, like many school teachers, was identified as an anti-revolutionary and incarcerated in a hard labour camp. Guming's mother had tuberculosis and others were afraid to have contact with the family. Although Guming experienced considerable marginalization, the social acceptance she did enjoy was largely facilitated by the care and wisdom in her mother's efforts and practices. When social disappointments were inevitable, Guming's mother was unfailing in giving her children a safe place to pour out their troubles. With the reliable comfort of their mother's listening ear and the modest but adequate network of social support that was cultivated through care and thoughtfulness, Guming was able to experience her home as a happy childhood place. Hay (1992, p. 100) has argued that "even the most limited relationships aid in the development of being-in-place, and thus the feeling of belonging and security." Guming said that before she wrote her place story, she experienced her mother as "memory fragments." In writing the place story she concluded that she came to see how her mother had in fact "created a place where her children could live with dignity."

Children's appreciation of their access to natural environments is a recurring theme in many of the place stories. From a number of the stories, our classes have heard about nature being prized as a source of sensorial engagement, as flexible material for imaginative play, as a space for autonomy and adventure, and as a source of healing and restoration when social relationships within or outside of the family are disappointing and troubling. These themes are consistent with earlier research on children's place attachment (Chawla, 1992; Hart, 1979; Porteous, 1990). Some of the students wonder whether we romanticize children's access to natural environments and whether children in urban or suburban settings are deprived in any significant way. This question belongs with other questions about the changing nature of childhood as a function of "changing cityscapes, patterns and styles of

habitation, and everyday lives" (Monaghan, 2000, p. A21). I return to this question in the section on children's needs of place.

This section has briefly introduced ideas about place as a subjective or inter-subjective creation, as reflecting a history of human interaction, as enabling people to share experiences with others and form relationships, as resulting from human agency within the constraints of physical and social resources, and as affording adventure or comfort. I have presented a larger number of themes within place literature from cultural geography elsewhere (Ellis, 2002).

Everyday Life as Curriculum

To begin a discussion of everyday life as a curriculum, and the importance of place in that curriculum, I wish to sketch the everyday life of one little girl with the pseudonym, Amy. Amy was the focus of a nine-month ethnographic study conducted by Li (2003). Amy, a two and a half-year-old girl, with two younger siblings, lived in her parents' restaurant-home in a lower socio-economic neighbourhood in Saskatoon. She was in the restaurant from 8 AM to 9 PM daily. There were no trips to the park, library or zoo. Amy never played with other children except for children of customers. Regular customers taught her numbers, letters and environmental print using playing cards and Coke cans.

Li's documentation and analysis of the social and physical world of this restaurant-home illustrate the notion of everyday life as a curriculum shaping the behaviour and identity of a child. Eyles (1989) has discussed the importance of everyday life in the development of identity and the need to critically interpret the place of everyday life. The following provides a synopsis of his explication and argument.

Everyday life entails all of our routines and interactions in our homes, families, workplaces, leisure pursuits, and localities. As a taken-for-granted reality, everyday life "provides the unquestioned background of meaning for the individual" (Eyles, 1989, p. 103). It is through our actions in everyday life that we build, maintain, and reconstruct the commonsense ideas, values, roles, and motivations that shape our actions. Thus people are not simply passive recipients of the ideology of the hegemony of consumer capitalism. Instead, they "actively create and creatively transform themselves, and these constructions and reconstructions are located firmly in an experience of everyday life" (Eyles 1989, p. 108). These ideas are not incongruent with the enabling theses of contemporary ethnographic and cultural studies theory as summarized by Denzin (1997, p. 236), drawing on the work of Morris (1990): "Everyday people are not cultural dopes but active constructors of meaning; everyday patterns of action cannot be reduced to the mirrors of cultural or economic production; and everyday life is about dreams, hopes, fears, and desire and consists of a 'multiplicity of fragmented and contradictory discourses'" (p. 22).

Understanding the development of worldviews and identities in this way

underscores the importance of place in everyday life. Although people do shape their everyday lives and create their own identities, they do not do so with materials entirely of their own choosing. Both societal structures—rules and resources— and social interactions with others can be understood as constraints that operate in and on everyday life. Social structures and available relationships — with other individuals, institutions, ideas — are materials or goods afforded by place. If researchers study people's experience without critically interpreting the context of everyday life, they can risk emphasizing individual agency and control without discerning or calling into question the constraints upon experience or recognizing the opportunities that support experience. Thus studies of the experience of everyday life should include critical interpretations of the place of everyday life. The interpretive frameworks used to investigate place ought to provide informed evaluations of social life.

In educational research and curriculum theorizing it has been generally recognized that the significance of gender, ethnicity and family can be hidden by the apparent homogenization of everyday life. The same cannot be said for the recognition of the significance of *place* in everyday life. Work needs to be done to more clearly discern the many ways that place impinges on identities surrounding race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Studies of everyday life have been produced through ethnographic research such as Li's but their purposes typically do not include a critical examination of place and its significance. For example, Li's research questions were concerned with the nature of Amy's home literacy environment and her socialization and initiation into literacy. She carefully identified the various routines in Amy's social interactions with restaurant customers and her parents. Li's concern was with how classrooms can better support literacy and she discusses the implications for classroom teaching when children such as Amy come to school. I would hope that more studies of students' everyday lives could inform policy and practice in schools in this way. I would also hope that such research could draw attention to and, when needed, raise questions about the places available to children and youth. If we recognize the significance of place in the curriculum of children's everyday lives, it behooves us to evaluate the places available to the young. Classrooms and schools can also be examined as places intended to support children's optimal development.

The findings of a large-scale study about "vulnerable children" in Canada also support the idea that attention must be given to the opportunities and constraints afforded by place as opposed to focussing on the apparent risk factors of individual family circumstances. The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) measured and analysed a wide range of children's developmental outcomes for the first time in Canada. This research developed a "vulnerability index" for Canada, which considers a child to be vulnerable if he or she had poor outcomes in either the cognitive or behavioural domains (Willms, 2002). The study found that the majority of vulnerable children are not living in poor families. Instead, vulnerability was found to be associated with the child's environment.

> The primary message of this research is that the nature of children's environments within the family, and in their schools, neighbourhoods, and communities, has a very strong effect on children's cognitive and behavioural development and on the prevalence of childhood vulnerability. (Willms, 2002, p. 366)

Although the study's findings suggest that some communities are more successful than others in reducing childhood vulnerability, the researchers acknowledge that "we do not understand very much about what makes a successful community" (Willms, 2002, p. 375). Willms (2002, p. 375) recommends action-oriented research studies and "a program of research aimed at better understanding what family-friendly schools, family-friendly workplaces, and family-friendly neighborhoods might look like, and how they can be achieved."

It would be useful for research to examine the ways in which localities serve to extend or constrain families' capabilities to support their children's everyday life experiences. Such research should begin with an appreciation of the kinds of experiences that support children's growth. Children's needs should be understood as rights[2] and, as James, Jenks and Prout (1998) have argued, children should be understood as social actors who are human beings rather than "human becomings."

What Children Need from the Places of Their Everyday Lives

Children's needs for emotional support, social interaction, cognitive stimulation and learning through exploration and discovery are as important as their needs for basic physical care (Landers, 1998). This section examines some of the ways that the places of children's lives can facilitate experiences that contribute to their optimal development. Studies of children's everyday lives should include evaluation of the places of these lives.

During the critical early years, the care and stimulation a child experiences depends upon the mother's well being. Maternal depression can render a mother emotionally unresponsive to her young child and even unable to provide for his or her most basic physical needs (Landers, 1998). Although children have an openness to the world and take pleasure in the discovery of reality through play, they require emotional and physical security as a necessary backdrop for such openness (Schachtel 1959 in Chawla, 1992). Willms (2002) argues that the structural features of the community and school — features that limit the quality of life available to children — contribute to a mother's low self-esteem and lead to chronic depression. Thus it is important to learn how mothers perceive the life chances of their children in their localities. The physical environment itself should also be recognized for its role in mothers' wellbeing. Although people attempt to exert control over their lives, the physical environment can delimit the boundaries of potential action. Both the materiality and the symbolic meaning of the physical environment have power to affect people's actual behaviour as well as their understanding of themselves in their world (Rivlin & Wolfe, 1985). Current programs such as Edmonton's "Success

by 6" (http://www.unitedthisistheway.com/successby6.htm) focus on parent education and support and providing pre-school experiences to young children. Efforts to support young children should also give attention to how the mothers experience the places in which they live.

A consideration of what children do during the ages three to six also has implications for the desirable components of place. As Landers (1998) outlines, during these years they experiment with objects, are curious about activities around them, enjoy other children, imitate adult behaviour, learn through play and exploration, and strive for independence. In some localities, parents may not be able to provide their children with an adequate range of opportunities for social interaction and exploration and discovery.

Young children's need for social interaction cannot be overemphasized. Children's "development proceeds through and because of social relationships" (Landers, 1998, p. 5). "Our very selves are constructed in relation to others — individuals, institutions, ideas" (Eyles, 1989, p. 113). "It is relationships that define us and tell us who we are" (Boxill, 1993, p. 37). Thus, as Landers (1998) argues, young children's development is related to the frequency and complexity of their interactions with family, the informal community of peers and neighbours, and formalized communities such as schools or churches. Children's participation in informal and formalized communities should be a key focus in studies of their everyday lives and the places supporting these. The people that children have relationships with give meaning to their localities and support the construction of identity through place.

Children's play with peers is well understood as a vehicle for learning, social development (Dewey, 1990), and psychological healing (Landers, 1998). Access to playmates and friendly adults are critical features of place for young people in cities all over the world (Chawla, 2002). The characteristics of places for children's play warrant attention. Chawla's (1992) major review of children's place attachment literature emphasized children's appreciation of undefined space — places that were free from adult authority, not specifically planned for children, and malleable both physically and imaginatively. These spaces were typically natural environments, undeveloped waste spaces, or small leftover spaces in the home or outdoors. Children welcome the opportunity to create their own worlds and find themselves in these. In his research with children, Moore (1986) speculated that exploration of the natural environment intensifies friendships just as friendships prompt exploration of the environment. From analyses of environmental autobiographies, Chawla (1992) concluded that that if designers want to make childhood places more memorable, they need to enhance access to the outdoors, to nature, and to freedom in the environment.

Matthews and Limb (1999) have commented that adults typically make assumptions about what it means to be a child and what is needed in children's environments. The traditional playground, for example, "creates an unrewarding and sterile setting

for children's outdoor activities" (Matthews & Limb, 1999, p. 69). These sites tend to be used only by younger children who are accompanied by adults. Both play-grounds and commercial play places — contributors to childhood ghettoization — serve to isolate and contain children within public spaces or safe compounds so that adults can carry on with other activities.

Commercial play places need to be understood as forms of entertainment rather than as the kinds of places that are needed for authentic modes of creative play. In the "culture of spectacle" even food is portrayed as entertainment with amusement being substituted for nourishment (Kincheloe, 2002, p. 88). Adults are sometimes confused when children prefer the commercial spectacle to a natural play environ-ment (Kentel, 2003). Kincheloe (2002, p. 89) has discussed the postmodern obsession with entertainment, relating electronic communication technologies to the "colonization of desire/libidinal energy" and "the penetration of the most private mind spaces of the individual." Steinberg and Kincheloe (1997) have argued that the power of corporate producers of kinderculture to repress desire in the construction of child consciousness/unconsciousness and production of iden-tity can be deflected by helping children develop their abilities to critically reread the culture they are consuming.

In addition to play places, children also cherish private places such as their own room or other hideouts that can serve as a refuge or a place to where they can simply be alone. Chawla (1992, p. 76) explains that such places "form an internal center of stability and calm [that can be] invoked in times of stress and isolation." In Berg's (2003) research with 9 and 11-year-olds, children explained that their own places help them to feel better when they are sad or angry. As one child said, "If I come home and something happens and it makes me feel bad, I usually go to my room and do something I like to do. I like to draw, so I draw and it kind of makes me feel better and it kind of makes me feel like it never happened" (Berg, 2003, p. 45).

Many scholars have been intrigued by the significance of nature for children. Children with access to a natural environment respond to its qualities — the appeal of its sensorial characteristics; its malleability; and its capacity for soothing. Cobb (1959 in Hart, 1979, p. 420), a psychologist, argued that during the ages of six to 11 or 12 "the natural world is experienced in some highly evocative way, producing in the child a sense of some profound continuity with natural processes and presenting overt evidence of a biological basis of intuition." Children have the ability to perceive and participate "with the whole bodily self in the forms, colors, and motions, the sights and sounds of the external world of nature and artifact" (Cobb 1959 in Hart, 1979, p. 546). Young people's capacity for such holistic engagement or "flow" experiences (Childress, 2000, p. 256) is recognizable in the appeal of activities such as hackey sack, skateboarding, BMX biking, and hip hop.

Children have an openness to the world and "play everywhere and with anything" (Ward, 1977, p. 86). In the absence of access to natural environments, children perceive, explore and play with whatever is there instead. What is there

instead often depends upon the parents' economic advantage since, as James, Jenks, and Prout (1998) note, children have been privatized in the controlled spaces of homes, schools, playgrounds and clubs. When children's self-educative explorations in undeveloped natural environments are mapped onto urban contexts, they often take the appearance of mischief or worse. Ward (1977), in his work on urban childhood, discussed play as both exploration and protest. He argued that many forms of children's play in urban environments can be understood as war with adults — a protest at not being meaningfully involved in the social life of the community. Benjamin (1974, as cited in Ward 1977), a pioneer in the concept of the adventure playground, argues that adults should share the world with children and society should be educated to accept children on a participating basis. This is in contrast to the notion that our built environments should be redesigned to accommodate children's play. It is probably not that simple, however, and young people do have realistic ideas about improvements to their environments that would enhance the quality of their lives (Malone & Hasluck, 1997; Matthews & Limb, 1999; Chawla, 2002). Similarly, caregivers of young children would have ideas about improvements to their localities that could extend their opportunities for supporting their children's development through social interaction, play, and exploration.

Chawla (1992) found that suburban life had served young children well enough but not adolescents. Adolescents enjoy adventurous environments where they can experience "safe dangers" and be stretched physically without coming to any harm (Mathews & Limb, 1999). They also like to appropriate active, public spaces although they are often squeezed out as a "polluting presence." James (1995, as cited in Matthews & Limb, 1999) saw young people's use of street corners, indoor shopping centers, and parks as cultural gateways where they could meet and carve out their own identities. These meeting places become "theatres for self-display, observation points for assessing the roles of others" (Hendry *et al*., 1993, as cited in Matthews & Limb, 1999, p. 69). James (1995, as cited in Matthews & Limb, 1999, p. 70) explained that children's belonging and identity arise from "patterns of language and behavior which define membership [in a temporal culture]" and that place, like language acts as an emblem of groupness — important for belonging and identification, setting apart, being different and special. This explanation is consistent with Lefebvre's idea that "for a group to be accepted, it has to pass a 'trial by space' — it must create and control socially recognized space" (Monaghan, 2000, p. A21).

Recent international research has found that young people, aged 9 to 14, in cities in both developed and developing countries want to feel connected to their communities. It is also important to them that their community has a positive self-image (Malone & Hasluck, 1997; Chawla, 2002). In an overview of these studies, Chawla (2002) noted that the community characteristics valued by children were those that sociologists typically identify with "urban villages." The studies also showed that young people in cities in developed countries experienced material

advantages but were more likely to feel isolated and alienated. Children "need the 'shelter' of a cohesive and friendly local culture" (Chawla, 2002, p. 33).

The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) website features case studies of projects in which teens have participated to turn places around and build community. Some of these projects result in places for use by all age groups. Some create special places for adolescents only — places for making friends and freely accessing cultural media and amenities. Some provide opportunities for physical adventure such as skateboard parks. And at least one of them provides for young people's participation in city planning. Without such initiatives, the constraints of urbanization, rational planning, and the privatization of public space can leave children and youth isolated, alienated, and marginalized.

This discussion about what children need from their places began with recognition of their physical, emotional, social, and cognitive needs. In the critical early years it is important for children's mothers to live in a place that supports their sense of hope and possibility for their children. Children need physical and emotional security as a supportive base for their openness to the world. The mother's capacity to provide that is linked to her own well being. Children must also have access to a world to be open to — novel objects to explore, activities to observe, frequent interaction with friendly adults in informal and formalized communities, other children to play with, space to create their own worlds in their play, private refuges, resources that enable them to learn about the world, and meaningful relationships with adults. Friendships among children or youth are an important source of identity, security, and belonging. Playmates can provide emotional support while also contributing to social and cognitive growth. Children's favourite places have been those that supported social affiliation or creative self-expression and exploration. Children's self-educative explorations require places that are physically and imaginatively malleable and the malleability of places often depends upon privacy from adult surveillance. Adolescents prefer adventurous environments for physicality and active, public spaces they can appropriate as sites for their own group solidarity. Children and youth also want to be integrated within the life of their communities. Alienation results when a cohesive and friendly local culture is absent or when their community lacks a positive self-image. Taken together, these ideas can form a basis for evaluating the places of children's everyday lives.

School Practices That Respond to Students' Needs of Place

Place can be understood as a center of nurturance, especially through meaningful relationships, while space can be understood as opportunity for growth and creativity. (Hay, 1992; Tuan, 1977). Good places are a source of belonging, identity, and security but also include space for exploration and creative self-expression. Good places for children and youth also have a positive self-image, enable them to learn about the world, and integrate them into the larger community. Because

students spend so much of their time in school, it is important to consider how classrooms and schools can be good places in these ways.

Research on students' experience in their places outside of school can also inform program planning in schools. For example, if students are for the most part disconnected from adults and the world of adult work in their localities, service learning or career mentorship programs at the school can offer welcome support. If children or youth do not have a range of supportive adults in their lives, adult-child/youth mentorship programs can be initiated (Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Fazbrizio, 2002; see also http://www.mentorship.ualberta.ca/). If the students' communities do not have positive self-images, efforts can be directed to strengthening school pride through extra support for students' participation in performing arts or athletic groups that represent the school in community performances or competitions. If young children lack access to natural environments or playmates, landscaping in school grounds can support play that is based on use of the imagination rather than competition (see Learning through Landscapes http://www.ltl.org.uk/home.html, Natural Learning Initiative http://www.naturalearning.org/ and Evergreen http://www.evergreen.ca/). These ideas are presented only as examples. What is important is to begin asking questions about the needs of students in one's own school and to identify initiatives that would be feasible and welcome.

The first requirement of the classroom as a good place is that students experience belonging. Osterman (2000, p. 324), in an extensive review of literature on students' need for belonging in the school community, noted that beliefs and practices shaping school culture "systematically prevent and preclude the development of community among students and directly contribute to students' experience of isolation, alienation, and polarization." Her review indicates that although belonging is a precondition for engagement in school learning, it is typically treated as a reward for compliance and achievement. The vignettes presented below as "Claire's story" and "Jil's story" illustrate how two teachers found ways to support belonging for all students in their classrooms. Both teachers recognized that engagement with classroom learning would be impeded unless students experienced acceptance, care and respect from their classmates. In addition to their own caring and respectful interactions with students, both teachers used a weekly, routine activity to both enhance relationships among students and support their social development.

Claire's Story

As part of her place story in our Children and Place course, Claire Desrochers included a vignette about her use of "Chère Madame" letters which students could write anonymously and place in an "Au Secours" (Help) envelope at the back of the class. At the time these letters were written, Claire taught in a grade six French immersion class. She recognized that it could be difficult for students to leave

disturbing issues of friendship at the classroom door when recess was over. At this age, she noted, "social dynamics were starting to get complicated." Claire also felt that "for every blow-up that came to [her] attention, there were many more tensions simmering just below the surface and these were often the most harmful, particularly to those children who had less voice."

Each week, or sooner if a student requested, Claire read the notes and engaged the class in discussion of the issues, related experiences, and possible solutions. Although this exercise was initially intended to help those who wrote the letters, Claire saw that "all the students were benefiting by learning to solve problems proactively together." She also noticed that students started to "look out for each other." A sense of community was created in the classroom as students felt heard, safe and secure in an environment where not only academic skills but social skills too were valued. As time went on, Claire noticed that the anonymity of the letters seemed to matter less. Students also used the letters to have the class collectively address problems or social issues they were aware of outside the class. Claire wrote that what the process taught her "was the connection between having a sense of belonging and being able to grow and learn." She felt this was particularly important for students having to take the risks involved in learning a second language. Although this activity may not have fit within the official curriculum, Claire concluded that its "socio-affective focus remained at the heart of [her] own curriculum."

Jil's Story

When Jil Koller began her first year of teaching with a grade 8 class of 13-14 year-olds in Toronto, she quickly discerned the tensions and frictions created by the students' hierarchical cliques. She told the class explicitly that she wanted that to change. She told them that she cared more about how they treated each other and less about what they learned in English or math (although of course she did care about that.) She told them she would not tolerate intentional "meanness" and that her goal for the year was for them to feel like a family. Jil felt she accomplished this but "it wasn't easy. It took a lot of modeling, one-on-one and group discussions, and love on my part. I tried to make them feel respected and loved in every activity or assignment, and it was at times exhausting" (J. Koller, personal communication, April 27, 2003).

Jil also worked towards her goal with a weekly, Friday activity called "warm fuzzies." Each Friday, Jil brought craft supplies for the class to use to make critters — some kind of cute craft. The students were encouraged to personalize these creations and they knew they were making them to give as gifts to as yet unknown classmates. Jil always made a critter too. The students enjoyed this artwork and gave their critters many distinctive features such as dreadlocks and so forth. Jil often brought craft materials that would have symbolic meaning. For example, in one craft she used buttons and the class talked about how not to "push each others buttons." Jil also

talked about how buttons hold our clothes together, and that as a class they must also try to hold together through friendship, respect, and love.

Once the critters were completed, the class formed a circle and drew names to learn who would be the recipients of their critters and "warm fuzzies." The presentations were made in a particular order. Jil always presented her critter first and modeled giving a "warm fuzzy" — a specific compliment — by saying "something great about the student": something the student was good at; something the student had done that week; or a wonderful personality trait the student had. The person who had just received a critter and "warm fuzzy" was always the next person to present his or hers. In that way, students were strengthened by expressions of appreciation they had just received prior to passing a gift and recognition to someone else. Jil said, "It was the most amazing time we spent together. We did this every Friday and my students absolutely loved it. What is more important, they began to love each other." Jil also said that "when you hear 30 tough little grade eight students, one after another, build up each other, no matter race or school social status, it was completely worth it."

Through their pedagogy, Claire and Jil both made their classrooms places "where people can find themselves through their inquiries and through their relations with one another" (Smith, 2003, p. 49). It was important that Claire and Jil were teachers who showed their students love and respect in all activities and assignments. The security they gave their students through their unconditional care and acceptance would have given them the base they needed to support their openness to each other. It was important that the "Chère Madame" letters and "warm fuzzies" activity were weekly routines. It was through the repetition of these activities, mediated by their own discourses, that the students were apprenticed into a more generous way of being with others. It is also noteworthy that these activities were developed or initiated in response to students' needs as opposed to being planned in advance as "best practices."

Pianta and Walsh (1996) have questioned the replicability of "best practices" and suggested that what should be researched are the conditions that give rise to "best practices." The two vignettes presented reveal the following conditions. Both teachers discerned the needs of the "whole child" and were willing to act upon their perceptions of students' needs. Both teachers were able to develop or choose a helpful weekly activity that was appealing and sensible to the students while being a comfortable one in terms of the teacher's own talent areas. According to teachers in my graduate courses, most teachers are not likely to feel comfortable using class time for a weekly activity in this way. The accountability pressures are intense and the current assessment protocols do not emphasize students' experience of belonging in classrooms and schools.

To be a good place, the classroom and school needs to offer not only the security and identity facilitated by meaningful relationships, but also the space and resources for creative self-expression and exploration. Research on school dropouts emphasizes the importance of both peer relationships and *engagement* in academic

and non-academic activities (Alberta Learning, 2001; Willms, 2002). Spooner (2002), in a study of creative teenage students, found that extracurricular activities can enable students to exercise their creative talents in ways not always permitted in regular school routines. He also recommends that teachers offer more choice in the types of assignments students do and that schools display more of the products resulting from creative endeavors. The vignette below illustrates how one teacher supports the extracurricular engagement of a wide range of students using a cultural theme for regular activities in her junior high school classroom at lunch hour.

Mian's Story

Mian Xie, the only Mandarin Chinese teacher in her junior high school, believes that language learning should include embodied cultural awareness (M. Xie, personal communication, April 30, 2003). In our Children and Place class she gave a slide presentation to show how she uses her classroom during lunchtime and recess for a different cultural activity each day of the week. Monday is the day for Chinese yoyo and Chinese crafts. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the room is used for the girl dancers. Mian teaches them folk dances from different Chinese ethnic groups: Han, Mongolian, Xinjing Uygur, Tibetan and Korean. The grade 8 Fan Dancers were invited to give performances at public Chinese New Year celebrations. Both boys and girls use the room for their own free style dance or shuttlecock play before the lessons start on Tuesdays and Thursdays. On Wednesdays, the room is full of students playing Chinese chess. Each game has many students who simply stand around to watch the play. On Fridays, boys and girls come to do lion dancing. Their loud drum beating attracts many watchers.

Students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, grade levels and classes come to join in all of these Chinese cultural activities. Mian permits beverages and food in the room. The colorful, ornamental piece of Chinese architecture attached to the wall above the door to her classroom welcomes everybody and announces that they are entering a special and interesting place. Inside, students' artwork and posters cover the walls. The students learn about the world through the cultural activities and some, such as the Grade 8 Fan dancers, join the larger community through their public performances. For the students, this classroom is a place where they feel at-home, have interesting and active pastimes, and can count on seeing other people they know.

In most schools, concerns about student safety and protection of property limit the spaces that students can appropriate. Schools typically have rules about where students can be and when. Even community members offering to supervise or instruct recreational activities at the school can find the spaces closed to them if a teacher cannot also be on hand for supervision. These structures, together with the effects of school size (Howley, Strange & Bickel, 2000) and the socioeconomic characteristics of a classroom or school (Willms, 2002) warrant attention in considerations of how schools can better support student belonging and engagement.

Students' needs for *place* — in terms of security and belonging — and for *space* for creative self-development, together with their need for opportunities to learn about the world and to participate in the larger community are suggested as worthwhile focuses for research on students' experience in schools. Research on the places of students' lives outside of school should also inform policy-making and program planning. Many teachers and school administrators act upon their knowledge of students' everyday lives in a commonsense manner within the spaces they have to maneuver or have influence. Inquiry related to school programs and policies could perhaps be more relevant and more genuinely helpful if it too took students' everyday lives as its starting point. In so doing, such inquiry ought to begin with a more multifaceted view of what children and youth need from their everyday lives and how the structures and resources of place can constrain or support such possibilities.

Conclusion

Children's places are important both for what they contribute to the quality of children's lives and the enduring effects they leave after childhood is over. Our experiences are circumscribed by our places and our personalities and perspectives are developed from the experiences we have in the places available to us (Chawla, 1992). As everyday life in cities becomes more individualistic and less communal and as children are increasingly confined to private spaces unless under adult supervision, their opportunities for nurturance and growth are increasingly diminished.

Everyday life — people's routines and interactions in homes, families, neighbourhoods, work sites, and so forth — has changed dramatically during the last 50 years. These changes have been attributed to our style of mobility and migration; emphases on consumerism and mass communications; patterns of urban design and economic development; influences of bureaucracy and the state; sensory conditioning; use of language; and even personal orientation (Hay, 1992). As a consequence of individualism, urbanism, and a focus on electronic media, people can find themselves "removed physically or emotionally from both community and nature" (Hay, 1992, p. 98). Smith (2003, p. 45), in his concern for sustainable human futures, has drawn attention to the "abandonment of the young by the adult community under a logic of self-interest." At the same time, the curricula in schools have responded to globalization processes — such as the need for individuals to have technological knowledge, and the desire for countries to move into higher levels of economic competitiveness — by increasing the emphasis on competitiveness vs child-centeredness and/or equity (Smith, 2000; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000). Thus children can find themselves with less richness and stability of community life outside of school and at the same time experience a reduced emphasis on the conditions needed to create community within school.

In place research, children mainly talk about social and psychological needs and places where they can fulfill these. In international research they expressed

satisfaction with their communities when these had "a positive self-image, friendly adults, available playmates, accessible and engaging public spaces where interesting activities could be found and places that children could claim as their own for socializing and play" (Chawla, 2002, p. 32). In the absence of such elements, they expressed high degrees of alienation. Research using measures of cognitive and behavioural development has linked poor outcomes with the nature of children's environments, not only within the family, but in their schools, neighbourhoods, and communities. Research on school dropouts has also emphasized the importance of peer relationships as well as engagement in academic and non-academic activities (Alberta Learning, 2001; Willms, 2002). If children are to thrive, it is critical to consider the experiences available to them and the way place works to enable or limit these. The social and physical conditions of children's lives are both interdependent and constrained by place. Place is the source of social structures — rules and resources — and opportunities for relationships with other individuals, institutions, and ideas (Eyles, 1989).

The significance of a place for human activity depends on the "goods" it contains and its nearness to other places. Brey (1998) writes about goods as explaining the general appeal of a place for use, habitation, or investment and as defining its "place identity." This paper has endeavored to extend such discussions to focus on the goods places contain for children in order to raise questions about social justice for children and youth. Children's opportunities for emotional support, friendships, integration within community, freedom in the environment, imaginative play, exploration, and creative self-development should be understood not only as needs but also as rights. The young, who are among the most vulnerable, the most dependent, the most in need of space and support for growth, and the most excluded from decision-making processes, can only make the best of what they have. To be genuinely helpful, any discussions of curricula for children and youth should begin with holistic inquiry into the curricula of the everyday lives they already experience and critical interpretations of the places of these lives.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] The "place stories" by Claire Desrochers, Jil Koller, Sherry Poirier, and Guming Zhao, discussed in this paper have been contributed as chapters to an in-progress collection to be titled, The Pedagogy of Place, and edited by J. Ellis.

² The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989), now ratified by all but the United States and Somalia, presents children's access to place and space as "a legitimate political right, together with their inclusion in those decision-making processes which concern local environments" (Matthews & Limb, 1999, p. 63). The CRC identifies a range of children's rights pertaining to protection, care and opportunity. Articles 12 and 31 are specifically concerned with children's right to be consulted and their rights to rest, leisure, play, and recreation.

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