Creating Children's Spaces, Children Co-Creating Place

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In this article, we respond to Fleer's (2003) challenge for the need to continue to critically examine the discourses, the codes of practice, the theoretical perspectives and conceptual lenses of early childhood and "question what we have inherited, the histories that we re-enact with each generation of early childhood teachers, and to deconstruct the 'taken-for-granted' practices that plague our field" (p. 65). Although we are drawing on Fleer's scholarly writing from more than 10 years ago, this special issue of the journal suggests that critical examination is ongoing and remains important at the forefront of our work in the early childhood field. Our focus is the environment, the space for play in early childhood education. Rather than add to the numerous definitions of play, this article aims to offer place as a conceptual lens through which to consider the early play environment, and exemplifies alternative possibilities when researching and/or teaching and learning with children, their families, and the community.

Key words: *place; play; environment; early childhood*

Scholars from many disciplines, including history, cultural geography, sociology, philosophy, and environmental studies, have noticed the importance of using place as a useful conceptual lens in understanding human experience. We begin with an overview of the space and place concepts. A childhood narrative then highlights the dimensions of the meaning of place, as well as the notion of place as a significant medium through which human identity is created (Green, 2006; Green, Noone, & Nolan, 2013). Gallagher (1992) writes, "understanding is not an abstract mental act; it is a linguistic event. Language has a central role to play in understanding the world" (p. 5). Using place as a guiding concept, source of questions, and interpretive lens, it becomes more challenging to evaluate and plan early play environments with criteria drawn from traditional classroom models embedded in the discourse, practice, and theoretical perspectives of environment, the taken-for-granted discourse by which early childhood educators conceptualize the space for learning. An analysis of the first narrative explicates the way in which we draw on place as a conceptual lens. A second narrative exemplifies how place, as a lens, enables a perspective past the four walls, the environmental print, the resources and the positioning of tables and chairs to the experiences and meanings of the pedagogic situation, "a lived situation pregnantly alive in the presence of people" (Aoki, 1991, p. 7). The concluding section invites consideration for further interpretive work and place creation.

Space Which Has Meaning: Place

In contrast with the abstract physicality of space, place is the result of experiences "from the inside, the resonance of a specific location that is known and familiar" (Lippard, 1997, p. 7). Place is lived, constructed, interpreted, conceived, or imagined through habitual human activity (Brey, 1998), through the ways in which people inhabit space (Ashcroft, 2001), and through coming to know it better through lived experiences (Tuan, 1977).

Most importantly, place is about meaning. Relph (1976) expresses the idea that a given physical locality becomes place when human consciousness creates and attaches meaning to it. Similarly, humanistic geographers, such as Tuan (1977), and environmental psychologists, such as Heft (1988), explain that as one gradually experiences a space, certain meanings are attributed to it and certain values are endowed on it. Helfenbein (2006) also states that the transformation from space to place results from humans investing meaning in the space they spend time in. He writes, "space, constructed through discursive, interpretive, lived, and imagined practices, becomes place" (p. 112).Williams (1995) also argues that meanings are not just situated or distributed in space but in fact define and create place.

Place is continually and dynamically formed from, and out of, the process of spending time in it. People and a place dynamically define and transform each other over time (Williams, 1995). For example, Basso (1996) and Gruenewald (2003) insist that as much as we are part of places, places are also a part of us.

In asking "How does where we are help make us who we are, and how does who we are help make where we are?" Helfenbein (2006) resonates with Ashcroft's (2001) and Gruenewald's (2003) premise that place is the woven web of language, memory, and cultural practice, a discourse in process bound up with the culture and identity of its inhabitants. Similarly, Relph (1993) states that "a place is above all a territory of meanings. These meanings are created both by what one receives from and by what one gives to a particular environmental context" (p. 36). Lippard (1997), too, expresses that "our personal relationships to history and place form us, as individuals and groups, and in reciprocal ways we form them" (p. 9).

A number of scholars have worked to clarify the dimensions or attributes of places that distinguish the ways in which they are experienced. I discuss some of these here to illustrate the variety of analytic tools and insights that have been developed. Fournier (1991), for example, identified three categories of attributes for places: tangibility, commonality, and emotionality. Canter (1977), as another example, recommends that any characterization of place refer to physical attributes, activities, and conceptions—the three dimensions of place he believes are responsible for meanings and associations. Stokols and Shumaker (1981, as cited in Williams, 1995) suggest that the meanings associated with a place are related to content, structure (e.g., complexity or diversity), clarity and consistency. To explain how some places work well or do not, Seamon (1979) uses the following six criteria as analytic tools: attraction, diversity, comfortableness, distinctiveness, invitation, and attachment.

Perhaps some of the most intriguing aspects of place has to do with emotional or symbolic meanings and associations. Fournier's (1991 term *tangibility*, for example, refers to the extent to which "meaning is primarily objective, tangible, and verifiable through the senses or whether it is primarily subjective, interpreted through experience and dependent on associations" (p. 738). As Williams (1995) notes, Gibson's (1950, as cited in Williams, 1995) description of a continuum of meaning from concrete to abstract is similar to Fournier's ideas about tangibility. Concrete meanings refer to functionality, that is, the manner in which an object or place is used. "By contrast," Williams (1995) writes, "abstract meanings tend to be symbolic. The symbolic meanings carried by some object or place may be assigned to it by a culture, social group or an individual" (p. 10). Giddens's (1991) sociological perspective, for example, assigns more prominence to symbolic meanings, such as describing place

as "home" or as a site of companionship. These meanings are structured socially or are learned interpretations of objects, events, or places (Williams, 1995). The sociocultural perspective values built or natural environments, not only for instrumental intentions, but also as places that people become attracted to and even attached to because they hold emotional, symbolic, and spiritual meaning (Williams, 1995). Reviews by Ellis (2002, 2003, 2004) also underscore that place is a source of security, comfort, stability, nurturance, belonging, meaning, and identity.

Tuan (1974, as cited in Williams, 1995) believes that the emotionality dimension of place varies in intensity, from instantaneous sensory pleasure to enduring and deeply rooted attachment. Similar to Fournier's emotional characteristic, such as feelings and moods associated with experience of a place, Gussow (1971, as cited in Relph, 1976) describes the emotional or affective bonds which transform a space to a place as "the process of experiencing deeply. A place is the piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feelings" (pp. 141–142). Williams (1995) considers emotionality to be "an indication of the depth or extent of meaning with symbolic and spiritual meanings often associated with high levels of attachment to an object or place" (p. 11).

While Tuan (1974), Gussow (1971), and Williams (1995) discuss the depth of emotional attachment, Hay (1988) draws attention to the amount of time spent in a place as contributing to a "sense of place." Hay explains that a personal connection results from both the duration of residence and community involvement:

> The collage of memories and meanings perceived over time forms a gestalt, a whole that represents one's life in a place. A sense of place helps to order that whole, giving one a locus, a place from which to feel the Earth and be connected to it. (p. 163)

Rivlin (1990), too, asserts that the bonds that develop between people and places take time and contribute to a sense of stability, caring, and concern for a setting. Derr (2002) defines sense of place as "a relationship to place, a dialectical way of thinking of and experiencing a biophysical and cultural place" (p. 125). Lippard (1997) reports that the last twenty years have seen much written about sense of place, which she defines as "a virtual immersion that depends on lived experience and a topographical intimacy that is rare today both in ordinary life and in traditional educational fields" (p. 33).

Sense of place or place attachment may or may not be held at a conscious level of awareness (Hay, 1988). Studies by Fried (1963) and Stokols and Shumaker (1981) have demonstrated that when people are forced to leave familiar residential places, they can experience grief reactions. Along with the phenomenological approach to place, these relocation studies have contributed to an understanding of place attachment. Basso (1996) observes that it is not until people are separated from significant places that awareness of sense of place may assert itself in pressing and powerful ways.

Childhood Narrative of Place 1

I was a little girl growing up in a close-knit neighbourhood. From my perspective as a child, each family was the same, and all the children belonged together in this neighbourhood as friends. I realize now, from an adult's perspective, that our families were different. Some fathers were labourers or construction workers; one father was a doctor, one a pharmacist; some of our mothers worked, while most mothers stayed at home and worked. There was a reason why our friends next door didn't receive presents at Christmas or chocolate at Easter. We asked why, received our answer, and went on with our childhoods and friendships together. There was a reason why the mother and father of one family spoke with a thick accent. We asked why, received our answer, and went on with our childhoods and friendships together. There was a reason why one dad moved out of his house. We asked why, received our answer, and went on with our childhoods and friendships together. Nothing was a big deal. Perhaps it should have been, but it wasn't. Boys

and girls played together … my gender didn't mean I could only play with dolls or do craft work. On reflection, I was a tomboy at times and a real girl's girl at others. I didn't think of it that way, though…I was happy being me.

I was a girl who loved meeting her best friend each afternoon to find a quiet place to share our different school experiences: friendships, boys, teachers. My best friend attended a different primary school than I did, and the excitement of catching up after school was sometimes too much to bear. A small valley separated us, with four houses in between. Some days we would call out to each other over this small valley: "Would you like to come over and play?" Some days when our voices could not be heard, we would call each other on the telephone: "Hello, I was wondering if you would like to come over and play." Of course we would like, but it seemed our way to ask anyway. I wonder why we didn't make a certain time and place to meet? Perhaps we were dependent on our mothers' plans once we were collected from school.

I was a girl who worked with her older brothers and friends to build a cubby house in the bush land surrounding our home. We made use of tree logs and a lot of dedication from our older siblings for our project. The cubby house was finished, but it seemed a small group of us preferred to continue to meet for our secret club meetings underneath the shelter of the trampoline of one of my neighbours. I'm not sure exactly about the purpose of the meetings, but I remember taking attendance and having to ask my mum to sign a letter saying that I would be missing out on one of the meetings!

We had undefined spaces to live our childhoods in, as long as we were home by dark. Were my parents ever worried? I presume so, but the only advice we received was to "be careful," "stay together," "stay off the road," and "don't talk to strangers." The only time I felt in danger was when a bushfire swept through parts of the bush land surrounding our homes. My home was my friends' home; my friends' homes were my home. I knocked to enter, but once I was inside I felt right at home. It was common to eat meals in different homes and have sleepovers every weekend.

In our neighbourhood, we had unstructured time to play unsupervised and in our own way. I went to jazz ballet on Friday afternoon and netball on Saturday morning. This left just over 25 hours a week for walking, talking, playing in our family's boat parked in the garage, board games, jumping on the trampoline, doing homework, playing basketball and cricket, making crafts, and being silly.

I was a child who did not have one difficulty in school. I loved school, schoolwork, teachers, and my school friends. However, I loved my neighbourhood more. I always felt excited at the end of the school day to be going home to my neighbourhood, where I remember learning to ride my bike. It was such a magical moment making it to the end of our long driveway without the feel of my brother's hand on the seat underneath keeping me balanced and upright. A feeling of pure joy and excitement … a sense of freedom. I now wouldn't need to wait for my brothers to arrive home from school to help me ride. I certainly didn't need training wheels anymore. I was so proud of myself, of my accomplishments. Of course, I had many mishaps perfecting my skills, but I had overcome the biggest challenge—that first solo ride!

My neighbourhood was a place where I also learned that work could be difficult and time consuming. Where I learned that some friendships last forever and some last for as long as they are needed. Where I learned that confidence in a friend could encourage you to do a back flip off the side of the pool. Where I learned to write for meaningful purposes—to write a menu for the restaurant we created for our parents—and to read books to find out how we were going to keep the silkworms alive. Where I learned north from south, east from west when we became lost on a bush walk. I learned the power of friendship when a childhood trouble was overwhelming me and the feeling of peace when fights would be resolved between friends. Thinking back, the only time there were arguments was when one of the neighbourhood kids brought friends from their primary school over to stay. Many of us went to different primary

schools because many families moved to the neighbourhood when the children were already settled in another school. Could this strong sense of place and identity as insiders have been at the root of our disgruntlements?

When I was 13 years old, this wonderful chapter of my life journey ended. Our family sold our house and moved … moved far away from my place, my childhood place, my neighbourhood growing up. I remember my last day at the house. All the furniture was removed, all my belongings packed in boxes and now travelling in the back of a removal truck to an unknown place … the next chapter in my life. Some of my friends came over because we had planned to have this wonderful game of hide and seek in all the places which were once filled with material things. We were too sad to play this game, though, so we went for a walk to all the places of our childhood and my friends helped me say goodbye, to stand in the cubby house one last time, to visit their homes one last time. We did many things that day, one last time. (Nicole Green childhood memories)

Understanding Narrative 1 Through the Lens of Place

The childhood place in Narrative 1 shares memories of everyday life in a neighbourhood. The following discussion draws on the discourse of place previously outlined to gain further insight into, and understandings about, the childhood experiences and the positive memories, associations, feelings, and meanings recalled in Narrative 1.

One way Narrative 1 can be understood through the discourse of place is by drawing on Eyles's (1989) ideas about the importance of the rules, resources, routines, and available relationships for everyday life in a place. In Narrative 1, the neighbourhood rules and resources supported everyday life activities which, in turn, served to enhance relationships. Many of the activities and learnings were made possible through relationships with others—among the children and between the adults and children. The relationships gave a sense of security and feelings of belonging, of being integrated into a community, and of having status and a positive identity. As Hay (1992) has explained, bonds to place enable relationships which are a source of meaning, security, and identity.

The "rules" and "resources" for the children in the neighbourhood in Narrative 1 provided rich space and material for the development of relationships. It was an unspoken rule that children could make themselves "at home" in each other's houses. The spoken rule of being home by dark, supplemented by other rules, such as staying together, away from strangers, and off the road, provided much latitude for play together in their free time. The resources of bush land, a trampoline, a pool, and other open areas for games and play offered space and material for many forms of active or imaginative play, as well as hangout places for private talk.

The children in Narrative 1 had many places and activities they enjoyed within and outside of their homes. These places supported the development of self-identity, both by affording opportunities for the children try out predefined roles in conventional settings and by offering unprogrammed space (Chawla, 1992). The neighbourhood place afforded security through social affiliation and opportunities for creative expression and exploration. Unstructured time and the availability of natural environments and undeveloped waste spaces were well used by the children. The children intensified their friendships and enjoyed their autonomy as they explored the bush land and engaged in many forms of active or imaginative play together.

Chawla (1992) writes that children's personalities and perspectives are shaped by the experiences they are able to have in the places available to them. Eyles (1989) explains that values, motivations, and roles are built and maintained through actions in everyday life. These aspects of identity then give direction to further actions. Ashcroft (2001) emphasizes that,

> like culture itself, place is in a continual and dynamic state of formation, a process intimately bound up with the culture and identity of its inhabitants. Above all, place is a result of habitation,

> a consequence of the ways in which people inhabit space. (p. 156)

The children in the neighbourhood in Narrative 1, through the routine activities of their everyday lives, established roles, motivations, and values related to being friends, siblings, and welcoming neighbours. Thus, the ongoing development of their identities, which shaped ways of seeing and acting in subsequent everyday life, contributed to the kind of place the neighbourhood became, or, as Ellis (2005) would say, to "the whole experience of being there" (p. 60).

The neighbourhood in Narrative 1 provided the children spaces, which were typically natural environments, undeveloped waste spaces, or small leftover spaces in the home or outdoors. Such spaces gave the children the opportunity to create their own worlds and find themselves in them. In reflecting on the creation of programs for young children, Fleer (2003) suggests,

> we have further removed children from the day-to-day world and placed them in an artificial world—one geared to their needs, where they are central, but separated from the real world. We have created an artificial world—with child-sized furniture and home equipment, materials such as thick paint brushes, blocks and puzzles, and an outdoor area with carefully designed climbing equipment for safety. (p. 66)

In the neighbourhood place, there were real dangers and consequences. All of the experiences were enabled by the nature of rules, resources, and available relationships. Through the routine activities of their everyday lives, the children established roles, motivations, and values related to being friends, siblings, and welcoming neighbours. Many of the "learnings" were aspects of the identity the children were constructing through their activities in their everyday lives.

Using all of the understandings about place presented above, the following sections will suggest the ways in which place can offer broader perspectives and alternative possibilities for researching, teaching, and learning within early childhood contexts.

Re-Looking at Early Childhood Practices

Close to 30 years ago, Greenman (1988) challenged those who work with children in formal settings to consider the identities and aesthetic sensibilities of adults who, as children, were expected to engage in artificial worlds of plastic, bold, bright colours, and predetermined spaces and activities. In comparison, he also challenged us to consider adults who, as children, were expected to engage in natural, airy, open places reflected of and embedded in the real world: places in which, when they arrived, the children were encouraged to go their own way. Greenman suggested that, "as places and as institutions, centres and schools shape future visions of what society is and should be" (p. 44). Greenman's writing reflects a focus on the importance of children's places, as opposed to places for children.

More recently, reconceptualist scholars in the field of early childhood have also recognized the need to rethink children's formal care and education environments. Dahlberg and Moss (2005), for example, stress that "we are at a historical moment when it has become urgent to raise the question, what are the possibilities for institutions for children and young people?" (p. 2). Such scholarly work advocates a move away from deep historical roots such as "the institution as first and foremost a site for technical practice" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 2) and "as a site for the efficient processing of children by workers-as-technicians" (p. 28).

Not only do we need to look critically inward at early childhood practices, Fleer (2003) suggests that the field of

early childhood would benefit from critically looking outward and sideways to other disciplines:

> Our profession, with its own codes of practice, its own discourse and its own theoretical perspectives, has built itself into an institution that has taken on a life of its own. Anecdotal evidence suggests that our specialised field will only allow newcomers in when they have mastered the language and have understood the codes of practice. (p. 65)

Drawing on the discourses, language, theoretical perspectives, and practices of other disciplines enriches, broadens, and opens up alternative possibilities for researching, teaching, and learning with children and families in early childhood environments.

When we ask student teachers and in-service teachers specializing in early childhood higher education courses to share their responses to the term *environment* with regard to early education and care contexts, our experience has demonstrated that the majority of responses relate to the physical environment. Early childhood educators focus on the arrangement of the room and the aesthetics of the space, including colour and light. This notion that the environment is a third teacher, with teaching occurring through the strategic organization of material, furnishings, and design, has been part of early childhood programs in the Western world for the past two centuries. Early childhood predecessors have also instilled in our work the discourse of "doing" and its importance in children's learning (Fleer, 2003). Access to teacher-established learning centres or corners, such as the book area, the writing centre, or the home corner, and the availability of resources and materials are also common responses to thinking about environment and reflect this notion of "doing." While these aspects of the environment are important, place facilitates other ways for imagining early childhood programs (Fleer, 2003). Place provokes an examination of the dominance of space and time (Gruenewald, 2003). Guided by a discourse of place, planning, implementation, and reflection refocus on nurturing the positive feelings, meanings, memories, and associations with place that contribute to place attachment.

Children and Place Attachment

As a way of defining children's place attachment, Chawla (1992) suggests that

> children are attached to a place when they show happiness at being in it and regret or distress at leaving it, and when they value it not only for the satisfaction of physical needs but for its own intrinsic qualities. (p. 64)

In her broadly based 1992 review of literature related to children's place attachment—the first one ever undertaken—Chawla concluded that children's favourite places were those that afforded security, social affiliation, and opportunities for creative expression and exploration. Chawla examined prior research in four main areas: modern psychology and place attachment; remembered places; behaviour mapping; and favourite place analyses with youth and children on their preferred places. Her review 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. She wrote:

> At every age there is a need for undefined space where young people can formulate their own worlds: for free space where preschoolers can manipulate the environment and play "let's pretend" in preparation for middle childhood demands; for hideouts and play-houses indoors and out where school-age children can practice independence; and for public hangouts and private refuges where adolescents can test new social relationships and ideas. (p. 69)

Chawla also noted that children also cherish private places, such as their own room or other hideouts that can serve as a refuge or a place where they can simply be alone. Similarly, in Sobel's (1990) research with adults about their childhood memories and with children about their favourite places, he also concluded that making and having a special place gives power to children, supporting a sense of self and their belief that they can influence their own thoughts and behaviour. In a more recent review, Langhout (2003) similarly concluded that there are consistent findings from children and place research that autonomy, social support, and positive feelings are associated with children's place attachment or sense of place.

Childhood Narrative of Place 2

Narrative 2 was told by Remy (pseudonym), a 5-year-old child in preparatory (kindergarten), at intermittent times throughout his first year of formal schooling. As this article joins the conversations in the field of early childhood education, it will support more useful ways of thinking about spaces and environments. We have intentionally avoided analyzing Narrative 2 in depth; rather, Remy's narratives are offered to educators and researchers to prompt possible responses to the list of questions following the narrative. Additionally, the narrative explicates the conceptual lens which can be considered in implementation in early play environments.

When we arrived at the prep room my mum was worried that there did not seem much for me to do there. Some tables and chairs were there, but they were pushed against the wall with a big space in the middle for us all to sit, including my mum. Miss M said hello and then said that the room was our space for the year to make friends, to create, and to explore. Miss M. assured me that outside was our space also to make friends, to create, and to explore. From then on over the next few weeks we created places to learn and play with Miss M. Miss M even organized mums and dads and the cleaners to come and talk with us about their ideas for places in our room. We had to talk about the furniture and things around the room and think whether they were safe to move and put in different places. We used the bookshelf to put the books in, keep our home stuff safe, and make a quiet area for reading and listening to stories. Some friends used the large colourful scarves to dance with, and other friends used the scarves as sails on their boat. We set up a special display with all of our family photos so we could get to know everyone's mums and dads and brothers and sisters. This was my friend Mack's idea.

We talked about keeping everyone safe. We worked out what roles and responsibilities we needed to do in the day. We all had turns at doing the different jobs. Because our space changed so much, sometimes we had to change how things were done, and we talked about this with Miss M. We had to come up with new roles and responsibilities. I felt very important when I took these jobs because I liked to keep everyone safe and happy.

We just finished a book about all of our families. We all had a turn to take it home, and Mum helped me read it and we wrote about our family. We put in a photo of our family and a photo of me playing with Spotty, my dog, because I like playing with him best. I kept the book a few nights so that I could do some stuff with my dad, who lives in a different house. When the book was finished by all the children, we all had a page and we kept it in a special place in our reading corner. We read it over and over and over again.

My friends and I discovered lots of boxes and sheets. We made cubbies with these, and we also used some chairs and tables. Miss M put up a tent with cushions and sleeping bags for us to go into. My friends and I made private plans for our plan in the cubbies and only shared these with Miss M if we needed her help.

There is a great big area at the back of our block of land that is bush scrub. There is a fence to keep us safe. The space has rocks and trees for climbing. We use fallen down branches and twigs to design race tracks, build hideouts, bridges, and forts. We have magnifying glasses to investigate the beetles, butterflies, cocoons up close and other creatures.

We collect all sorts of things and take them inside to watch closely. We saw the butterflies come out of their cocoon. We use the leaves and twigs and rocks and stuff to make things. I made a necklace with leaves for my mum. Harry found an old birds' nest and used the twigs and leaves to make one the same. I collected rocks, and our project on leaves in the autumn was led by my friend Lucy.

(On the first day of spring) Miss M shared with us that the outdoor play area needed renovating. Miss M asked us to think about places we liked to "be" in and what we would like to be "in" at school. We talked about smells, sounds, touch, things we could see and things we could taste in these places. I liked thinking about my friends and family. We thought about what we liked about those places, what we could do there, and what we would like to do in those places. We put our ideas in drawings, paintings, and construction and clay designs. Miss M recorded our voices talking about our ideas.

Our families were also asked to talk about their ideas about what we could put in the outdoor area. They had to do drawings, designs, explanations, and voice memos. Joe's mum and dad built a veggie garden in the corner. We were responsible for weeding the vegetable garden and when it was time we picked the tomatoes and beans. We made a tomato and bean salad to share with everyone for lunch. We always collected the food scraps from lunch to feed the worms in the worm farm, and we used the compost on the garden. We kept the garden watered and played with and in the water when the plants were soaked. Peter's grandpa made some benches for us to move around the yard to sit on. Susan's dad brought in his big digger and made a deep sandpit. We had more talking and added things to the space when we had new ideas.

…

We have been having great fun making up a puppet play. We made the puppets at the design table using all sorts of materials and then we created a puppet theatre. We had lots of time to practice our story, and when it was ready we put it on for the whole class. Miss M invited the Year One children and teachers to come down and see our puppet play. It was my friend Sam's idea to create invitations and tickets for the other children and our families to come. We made a poster about our puppet play and put it up at the front door, and when we found out how many people were coming, we had to arrange the chairs so that everyone had a seat.

…

Yesterday was a windy day and we did lots of outside play, rough and tumble, running, chasing, tumbling, climbing, and then we rested. I heard Miss M tell my mum that then, and only then, were we ready to do our numeracy projects creating games for us to play with our elderly friends in the aged care home.

Inside our place we made space for painting. Indigenous painters came in and helped us paint our building blocks in their way. They made some books with us which we put into our library. Grandmas and grandads, our own and from the aged care home, would come in and sit with us and read stories when they had time.

…

A great memory of my first classroom was that we could go inside and outside whenever we wanted. One day I played inside all day because I had a big project going about my aeroplane. I was so excited I got it finished. When we were working on projects, Miss M helped us solve our problems when we asked her. She had some good ideas. She helped us find answers to our questions and brought some things from her home to help us.

I liked the way Miss M let us choose what we wanted to do each day even if we didn't want to do the things she had on the table. All of the stuff was easy to get and we just had to know how to put it away when we were finished with it.

We even had a table that we could go and have a snack at if we were hungry in the morning. Miss M said we did not have to wait until recess to have something to eat. I liked that because I always got hungry.

We always had lots to talk about and Miss M always listened. I loved to share about my family holidays. At group time we had sharing circles. We had three friends in the circle and we got to share our story with them. We also had the chance to record our stories on the iPads and the computer. It was fun listening to them, and I liked to hear the other kids' stories. When we felt cross with each other, Miss M would ask us if we were caring for our friend by listening to them and being respectful.

…

During our project on cameras, Miss M showed us how to take photos of what we were doing and we helped her write about it in the book. She got us to use some big words and showed us how to write them. I got to write some of the words into the book myself. I shared what I was learning and how I felt about my learning.

It was fun working with my friends on projects because we could all do different things. Harry was good at drawing the life cycle of the butterfly that we saw come out of the cocoon, and I could write the word butterfly and write the numbers when we measured how long the cocoon was with Unifix blocks. During the day we would come together and Miss M would celebrate our play and work by talking about how we worked together, and we could show which things we were good at and which things we were still learning.

I wonder what next year will be like…

Understanding Narrative 2 Through the Lens of Place

The discussion following will highlight how Narrative 2 can be understood through the conceptual lens of place.

Cultural geographers (e.g., Basso, 1996; Gussow; 1971; Hay, 1988) use the term *sense of place* to refer to an individual and personal connection with place. With a focus on place, identity, and meaningful relationships, cultural geographers ask, "What is the meaning of place, and how is human identity structured through place?" Critical humanist geographers (e.g., Helfenbein, 2006; Tuan, 1977) focus their research and scholarly work on identifying the many ways that place shapes identities, particularly in relation to race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Philosophers (e.g., Smith, Light, & Roberts, 1998) recognize that place fundamentally structures human experience, and it is deeply human to make places and to think in terms of places. Ethnographers (e.g., Nespor, 1997) discuss space, time, and intersections, raising questions about how we draw the boundaries of school, about how school fits into the lives of children, and about what we mean when we talk about educational environments.

As Remy's recollections in Narrative 2 demonstrate, children's formal learning experiences can not be well understood in isolation from the network of the other places and experiences in their everyday lives. Place guides a reorientation that, first and foremost, recognizes the intimate connections between the early childhood environment and the various social, cultural, and community contexts in which it is embedded. The boundary of the early childhood environment extends beyond the four walls of the indoor space and the outdoor fencing, into the community. There exists a reciprocal relationship between people (early childhood educators, children, families) with place. Place evolves like "a discourse in process" (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 155). This idea is consistent with Eyles's (1989) discussion about how the routines established in everyday life in a place become additional structures supporting or constraining further everyday life. Eyles notes that people create and re-create their identities through their actions in everyday life. Ashcroft states that the way in which a place evolves is bound up with the culture and identity of its inhabitants.

In addition, Malaguzzi (1993) claims, in his notion of a pedagogy of relationships, that the pedagogical relationship is what makes a place a "learning place"—knowledge is co-constructed in relationship with others. Helfenbein (2006), too, states that place "must be seen possible only in its interactions" (p. 112). The notion of place guides early childhood educators to pay attention to the quality of the relationships and social interactions available to children within the learning context and the ways in which children's experiences in the learning context are similar to or different from their experiences in other places. Hence, Remy's educators understood relationships available to the children in other places of their everyday lives and ways in which these could serve as a backdrop of meaning for the children's interpretations and behaviours within the formal context of early childhood education.

Ellis (2005) distinguishes between "sense of place" and "place attachment." Writing about children's experience in classrooms, she states:

> If their experiences in these places are filled with familiar routines that build their confidence, if they know and become known by others, acquire intimate local knowledge, and learn the norms of the culture, then sense of place may be well established. However, be it positive or negative in nature, the classroom and school will acquire an emotional significance for them. (p. 60)

Ellis (2005) reiterates Hay's (1988) thesis that sense of place develops with time, but place attachment typically depends on affiliation with like-minded inhabitants. Relph (1976) explains that "our relationships with places are just as necessary, varied, and sometimes perhaps just as unpleasant, as our relationships with other people" (p. 141). Importantly, as evident in Narrative 2, the early play environment held a positive emotional significance for Remy and one can conclude that there was place attachment rather than just the establishment of sense of place.

The place literature helps us to understand Remy's recollections in Narrative 2. The following questions assist us in reflecting on the ways in which the play environment provided Remy with opportunities for self-development, social affiliation, creative expression, exploration (Chawla, 1992), social support, autonomy, positive feelings (Langhout, 2003), malleable environments, imaginative play, and unprogrammed space. The questions can also be asked of other play environments.

Who is invited to be involved in the creation of the early childhood learning spaces and places? What are the authentic ways in which children and families can be consulted? In what ways are the early childhood environments created with a community orientation in mind? What spaces are truly unprogrammed? Are there naturalistic spaces available rather than those that are highly landscaped natural outdoor spaces? How are children's identities reflected in the curriculum? What methods are used to understand holistically children's ways of knowing and being? Is there a shared understanding of rules, routines, roles, and responsibilities within the shared context? In what ways are fear, ridicule, and harassment addressed? How can unstructured time be provided for in the everyday life of a busy early childhood environment? How are creative expression, exploration, and imaginative play nurtured? Where are the spaces for privacy, adult-free authority, and private talk? What opportunities are there for sharing and listening of narratives and experiences? In what ways can autonomy and agency be honoured and promoted? In what ways are power relations between adults and children continually examined? Who are viewed and valued as teachers, as leaders, and as learners? What opportunities are provided for children to try out predefined roles or responsibilities within real-world contexts? What considerations are given to providing for positive social affiliation and peer interactions? Are educators aware of the interfaces and discontinuities between *places for children* and *children's places* as an important concept integral to the sociology of childhood (Rasmussen, 2004)? How do we come to know what children regard as their learning spaces and/or meaningful places, and what places do adults value for learning? Why do the children gravitate to certain places? Would the children's need to own space be reduced, if all the rest did not belong to the teacher (Greenman, 1988).

Concluding Thoughts

The sharing of childhood place narratives, the presentation of theoretical ideas, and the posing of questions is an invitation for educators, researchers, and scholars to consider place as a conceptual lens in their thinking about early play environments. The *place* ideas and questions in this article model the analysis required to ensure the continual investigation of our frameworks and practices to ensure that play environments are still appropriate and not just "social reproduction" (Fleer, 2003). Attending to ideas about place provides educators and researchers with a coherent structure, not only as an accommodating perspective for what is seen, heard, felt, and experienced, but also as a non-narrowing perspective facilitating holistic planning, relating, learning, interpreting, and understanding in early play environments.

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