

**Play as Place:
A Safe Space for Young Children to Learn about the World**

**Elena Nitecki
Mi-Hyun Chung**

Mercy College, Dobbs Ferry, New York

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical discussion frames play as a “place” consistent with the tenets of place-based education. We adopt a broad definition of place-based education to include both the environment around the child and the place within the child, their “world of play.” We will apply theories of place-based education to demonstrate that play is indeed a place - a safe space where children learn about the world and about themselves. We discuss the challenges that the field of early childhood faces in the era of accountability and argue that play, like places in our natural environment, should be nurtured and protected.

Keywords: Early childhood education, place-based education, play

The world is a big, unknown and sometimes scary place for young children. They need a safe place, a space where they can be comfortable learning about their surroundings. That place is the child’s world of play. When considering the nature of this “safe place,” a non-threatening, comfortable environment in which a child is free to learn, it is useful to apply the principles of place-based education. This paper will discuss the importance of play in a child’s development, how the ideas of place-based education support the notion of play as a place, and how the child’s world of play must be protected.

Play in Early Childhood Education

Play, a critical component of a young child’s development, has well-known benefits that span all aspects of development – cognitive, physical, social, and emotional (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012; Elkind, 2008; Marjanovic-Umek & Lesnik-Musek, 2001; Miller & Almon, 2009; Paley, 2004; Piaget 1952, 1962; Smilansky, 1968; Vygotsky, 1978). “Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well-being of individuals and communities” (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005). Play has a unique role in learning and provides an opportunity for children to resist pre-determined goals and ends, learn to tolerate uncertainty, and welcome diversity. Play is holistic and provides children an appreciation of freedom and creativity, often fortified by the process of inquiry and alternative logic. Play is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. Learning at this age almost always emerges from a place of play. When children play, they are engaged in discovery about the natural, real world, which is the foundation for learning in early childhood.

Not only does play have developmental benefits, but it allows children to explore and demystify some of the scary and unknown aspects of world. Through play, a child balances the unknown in the real physical world with the safety of their imaginative world. How often have we seen children play with scary ideas, like villains, danger, and even violence? Play is a safe way to explore and come to terms with their greatest fears. Piaget describes “assimilation” as the process by which the child transforms the world to meet his or her personal needs (Piaget, 1962). The child

identifies and transforms their imaginative world of play to meet their need for security and balance reality with imagination. For example, preschoolers will often find everyday objects to meet their need for play and face scary ideas. A stick becomes a sword to fight the villain. The tree becomes a brick wall to hide behind. Negotiating these roles and scary situations teach social skills and resilience, which are critical later in childhood and adulthood. These numerous benefits of play, which have lifelong effects, must be protected. We will apply theories of place-based education to demonstrate that play is indeed a place - a safe place - where children learn about the world and about themselves.

Considering the “places” of young children: Places around and within a child

The principles of place-based education align remarkably well with the foundations of early childhood education. Place-based education is an umbrella term for many closely related fields of education: environmental education, experiential education, pedagogy of place, community-based education, and education for sustainability (Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000). The foundations of place-based education include Sobel’s work (1993, 1994) studying children’s process of building a self-identity through special places, essentially linking the child’s environment to social and emotional development. Theories of place-based education (Gruenewald 2003; Smith & Williams 1999; Sobel, 1994; Theobald 1997; Theobald & Curtiss 1999; Thomashaw 1995; Woodhouse & Knapp 2000) are rooted in the natural, built and human world and value the environment, which young children are eager to discover. Place-based education is connected to a variety of approaches that emphasize the central role of specific places or communities on a child’s education (Gruenewald 2003; Jennings, Swidler & Koliba, 2005; Smith & Williams 1999; Sobel 1993, 1994; Theobald 1997; Theobald & Curtiss 1999; Thomashaw 1995; Woodhouse & Knapp 2000). All of these models and variations of place-based education share one common idea: The place in which learning occurs is important and should be nurtured, protected, and built upon.

Places around the child

Let us examine the particular attributes of the “place” of a young child. There are two places to consider: the physical and social world *around* the child and the imaginative, developmental world *within* the child. The external physical and social world shapes the child’s experiences – and ultimately, their learning. Vygotsky (1978) describes a constructivist learning environment in which the diversity of individual experiences shape the child’s cognitive processes. Interactions with others and the environment result in scaffolding and unique cognitive development. Piaget (1952) concurs that a child’s learning is impacted by experiences and contact with the outside world. Play has a unique role in learning, resulting in refining schema and cognitive processes over time (Piaget, 1952). Experiences with nature provide unique opportunities for the child to explore their environment, learn about it, and care about it. Thomashaw (1995) wrote about the goal of achieving “ecological identity” through the examination of basic questions such as: “What do I know about the place where I live? Where do things come from? How do I connect to the earth?” (p. xvii). These questions focus curriculum and instruction on understanding and appreciating students’ immediate surroundings, including the outdoor environment and nature. Certainly for young children between the ages of 0 and 6, there is a curiosity and questioning about their surroundings, which can be easily explored through the child’s natural desire to play.

Places within the child

Another important “place” of a child is the imaginative, developmental world *within* the child. Although place-based education is grounded in ecological ideas, “place” can be conceptualized as more comprehensive, to be applicable to early development and learning that occurs *within* the child. Gruenewald (2000) synthesizes the theories of critical education and place-based education, thereby articulating a broader conception for the promise of place-based education. Gruenewald (2000) states that his “critical pedagogy of place aims to evaluate the appropriateness of our relationships to each other, and to our *socio-ecological* places” (p. 7). If we consider “socio-ecological places,” then perhaps we should consider the child’s world based on their social and internal development – a place of play and imagination – as a “place.” After all, Wilson (1997) explains that place does not refer simply to a geographic location, but also to the opportunities that are available to create meaning within a place. What better opportunity than play exists to create meaning within a place? Physical places, like a tree fort or unexplored forest path, offer tremendous

potential to be transformed into imaginary places, like the fort being transformed into a castle or the forest path changing into an expedition to an unknown, magical world. Place-based education “emerges from the particular attributes of a place” (Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000, p. 4). Both Piaget (1952) and Vygotsky (1978) value play as not only a means to learn about the surrounding environment, but also as a powerful vehicle for internal development. The powerful attributes of play as a safe place in a child’s mind cannot be ignored.

Protecting the child’s world of play

Considering our review of the importance of play and how it includes both physical and psychological spaces, we must acknowledge that child’s world of play, like the natural world, must be nurtured and protected. Children spend a significant portion of their day in school, which is currently diminishing opportunities for imagination and play. Given the rising expectations of young children for academic readiness and standards-based assessment, preschool and kindergarten programs are sacrificing play for more formalized methods of teaching, which in many cases are developmentally inappropriate (Elkind, 2008; Miller & Almon, 2009). The argument that child-initiated play must be restored to early childhood education is “dismissed and even ridiculed in some quarters. In spite of the fact that the vital importance of play has been shown in study after study, many people believe that play is a waste of time in school” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 1). Despite the benefits of play, including development of cognitive, social, language and emotional domains, imagination, problem solving, empathy, and self-control to name a few, a tension still exists between developmentally appropriate play-based methods and a standardized math and literacy-based curriculum.

This documented tension between play-based learning and a more rigorous academic approach to early childhood education is harmful to children (Elkind, 2008; Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012; Miller & Almon, 2009). David Elkind (2008) claims that the role of free play in physical and psychological well-being has been overlooked in many areas. He states: “School administrators and teachers – often backed by goal-orientated politicians and parents – broadcast the not-so-suitable message that these days, play seems superfluous, that...play is for slackers, that if kids must play, they should at least learn something while they are doing it” (Elkind 2008, p. 1). If children’s opportunities for play are restricted, there are likely to be “profound effects on their life experience in general and more specifically on their physical and mental health” (Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012). Indeed, by restricting play, adults are restricting access to the child’s critical place – the world of imagination and play.

The pressures of accountability in many schools today have resulted in more direct instruction, even in preschool and kindergarten, without respecting a child’s place of play. This “placeless” education, which includes abstract explanations and no connection to the real world, is sadly part of the standardized curricula employed by most schools today (Gruenwald, 2003). Many state standards for kindergarten and preschool, as well as some teachers’ and parents’ expectations, are in conflict with a developmentally appropriate, play-based approach. Too many preschool and kindergarten classrooms spend time on word or letter drills, recitations, chanting or reviewing letters and sounds over and over. Emphasis on narrow procedural skills results in children learning how to mimic or memorize without any meaning. Outdoor time and recess, which present infinite opportunities for imaginative play, have also been sacrificed for more direct teaching time. This approach is counterproductive and does not respect the child’s place, which should be imaginative, free thinking, experiential, and built on warm, caring connections with adults and other children.

Applying place-based education in early childhood classrooms to protect play

In this era of accountability that sometimes spawns developmentally inappropriate instruction, how can we defend play, the child’s safe and necessary place? Considering play as a “place” that must be respected and nurtured calls for an effort to preserve opportunities for play for young children. According to Ruth Wilson (1994), place-based education in early childhood includes the development of a sense of wonder; appreciation for the beauty and mystery of the natural world; opportunities to experience the joy of closeness to nature; and respect for other creatures. It also includes the development of problem-solving skills and the development of interest and

appreciation in the world around us. These goals acknowledge that learning is more than a cognitive process that can be accessed through direct instruction and that emotions play a particularly important role. These goals are remarkably similar to those of the field of Early Childhood Education, which is holistic and focuses on all aspects of social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). Examining the child's place of play through the lens of place-based education is a useful perspective that supports and prioritizes the need for play in the lives of young children, which can be achieved by rethinking curriculum, time, and space.

Curriculum

Although the curriculum of early childhood education is being shaped by many interests, there is room to provide what a child really needs. Sobel (1993) recognizes the need for "special places" in the development of children's self-identities and offers suggestions for integrating opportunities for the development of these "special places" within curriculum. These should include free time, adequate place, and engaging materials to explore ideas freely through social and imaginative play. The curriculum should encourage play, exploration, imagination, and individual pursuit of interests. Even within the constraints of prescribed curricula, teachers can find ways to integrate content in a play-based way. Teachers should allow for free play, closely observe the children, and look for themes or topics of interest. A variety of learning opportunities, many of which match what is contained in the prescribed curriculum, can then be built around these topics of interest. For example, children may be engrossed in a spider web they discovered in the corner of the playground, which develops into a game of pretending to be spiders. The teacher observes this interest in spiders and develops some learning opportunities based around their play, including observation of and discussing the spiders, reading stories with spiders, counting the spiders' legs, etc. Surely, these activities will include many of the cognitive, language and social goals included in the curriculum. Starting where the child is – in their world of play – is how teachers will gain and hold the child's interest in the curriculum.

Time

Equally important is time - a schedule with large blocks of unstructured free exploration time. This is not wasted time but an essential part of a child's growth. If the environment includes rich materials and the teacher is a source of individualized support, then this large block of unstructured free play time can be quite productive, more so than trying to get children at different developmental levels to conform to a structured whole group lesson. Teachers can observe students, work with them individually at their own pace, and seek out teachable moments, or opportunities to build common topics of interest into a larger class learning opportunity. For example, older children may notice that the spider has 8 legs, compared to insects with 6 legs. Numbers and observational differences could be the focus of a lesson with these students, while younger children may simply observe and use developing language skills to describe what they see. Using these large blocks of free play time allow for more meaningful, individually-tailored discussions and learning opportunities.

Space

Place-based education reminds us that the environment is of utmost importance, so we should consider both the indoor and outdoor configurations. The classroom arrangement should allow for social places and shared centers, such as a circle meeting rug or common working tables, as well as places for privacy, such as small reading corners or nooks. A variety of materials aligned with every aspect of development, ranging from gross motor play to fine motor development to social dramatic play to cognitive, should be displayed in an organized manner and labeled so that children feel in control of their environment. In fact, the first few weeks of school should be spent introducing the child to the new environment and all of the materials. Children should "own" their space, with their names and work displayed.

Of equal importance is the outdoor environment and time to explore nature outdoors. NAAEE (2010) views outdoor education as a critical component of early education that "should incorporate exploring woodlands, getting wet feet, climbing rocks, building with sticks, running on grass, turning over rocks, following insects, stomping in puddles, and so forth. Children are developing a relationship with the natural world" (p. 9). Nature and the outdoor environment not only provide a wealth of possibilities for imaginative play and exploration, but have the potential to lay the

foundation of a positive and caring attitude toward the environment. Positive interactions with nature are “essential to a young child’s holistic development...[and] offer tremendous opportunities to foster the child’s understanding and appreciation of the natural environment” (Wilson, 2015, p. 7). Spending time exploring the natural lessons offered by the outdoor environment through simple observation is critical. If adults would tune in to the child’s playful world, they would see that there are many opportunities to build on what the children are already doing to incorporate more advanced skills. A child fascinated with how a worm moves, two children taking turns climbing a tree, or a group of children discussing a new and strange insect – these are all learning opportunities. We should recognize and capitalize on these natural learning opportunities. As Gleave and Cole-Hamilton (2012) recognize, we are at risk for creating a world without play, “a world where play is placed at the bottom of adult agendas and the value of play in children’s lives is not fully acknowledged.” Although children will always find a way to play, adults should provide children with the opportunity, time, and space for play as part of the normal routine, if they are to get the full benefits.

Concluding Words

Place-based education reminds us to respect and build upon the child’s “place,” their world of play. We must consider the ecology of the child by looking into where the child is. We can acknowledge their mind is rapidly developing with every new experience. Their external and internal places must allow children to be playful and imaginative. Children are developing their identities, learning social patterns, and building a foundation of learning and socialization that will shape the rest of their lives. Adults should respect both the places within and around the child, in terms of allowing opportunity for play, imagination, and socialization. When adults reduce the time and place for play and display hostile attitudes towards children playing, the result is “damaging implications for children’s health and happiness” (Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012). Just as we must defend and treasure the natural environment, so too should we include play as a place that needs our protection. This broader conception of “place” – this world of play - is a natural fit with the ideals of place-based education and fosters an opportunity for early childhood teachers to celebrate and build upon the strengths of play and the uniqueness of the early childhood years. Piaget (1962) reminds adults, “If you want to be creative, stay in part a child, with the creativity and invention that characterizes children before they are deformed by adult society.” In this era of rigidity and accountability in education, we urge early childhood teachers to “stay in part a child” and be creative in teaching young children, starting with their world of play.

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Elena Nitecki is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Early Childhood and Childhood Education at Mercy College, Dobbs Ferry, NY. She can be reached at enitecki@mercy.edu.

Mi-Hyun Chung is an Associate Professor in the Department of Literacy and Multilingual Studies at Mercy College, Dobbs Ferry, NY. She can be reached at mchung@mercy.edu.