Place and Identity for Children in Classrooms and Schools

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In reviewing the work of scholars who have "rediscovered" the importance of *place* in a wide range of disciplines, Casey (1997) notes that place is not viewed as having a fixed or single meaning, essence or structure. Instead, these scholars ask how place is "*at work*, part of something ongoing and dynamic, ingredient *in something else* [emphasis in original]" (Casey, 1997, p. 286). Thus, to use place as a central idea in research is to use it in a question rather than as a specific claim about its nature or role.

In this paper I discuss one possible way of using *place* in a question about how students create and re-create their identities in classrooms and schools. I understand this project as one of asking how the classroom as a place is at work, ingredient in, or part of the on-going dynamic of students' constructions of their identities. To expand or elaborate this general question, I draw ideas from the work of Eyles (1989), Ashcroft (2001), and a number of cultural geographers as will be presented in the first section of this paper.

My interest in questions about place and identity was peaked by literature in cultural geography. Adams, Hoelscher, and Till (2001, p. xxi) explain that "place and place-identity are increasingly seen as significant media through which people construct an identity." They observe that, since Tuan's (1977) landmark book, *Space and place: The perspective of experience*, cultural geographers have been prompted to ask: What is the meaning of place? And how is human identity structured through place? Tuan's assertions about the experience of home and homeland

also directed attention to the idea that individual and collective identities are bound to place at multiple scales. Influenced by social theories from cultural materialism, feminism, poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonial theory, critical humanist geographers have been trying to "unearth the many ways that place impinges on identities surrounding race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality" (Adams et al, 2001, p. xix).

Globalization has affected both interest in the concept of place and the way places are experienced. Brey (1998), Casey (1997), Crang (1998), Hay (1992), and others have explained how the processes and effects of globalization first contributed to a devaluing of the concept of place—in deference to the more universal and ubiquitous concepts of space and time—and then more recently to a resurgence of appreciation of the importance of place. During the Age of Exploration, natives were often deplacialized. World wars and forced migrations also contributed to scenes of displacement and undermined any secure sense of place. Electronic media shrank distance and worked to blend places and spaces together more interdependently—the global village. Global flows of investment, population, goods, and pollution challenge the stability of places (Harvey, 1993). As places have become commodified through globalization, awareness of their importance has increased (Adams et al, 2001).

Increased mobility, migration, and urbanization, together with an efficiency orientation in planning built environments have contributed to the condition Relph (1976) calls "placelessness." Even the particularity of place— identity, character, nuance, and history—can be masked in the architectural and commercial uniformity of many cities. Hay (1992) observes that patterns of urban design give more attention to security and commuting and less to the feeling of neighbourhood or the creation of significant places. As an example of renewed interest in the importance of place and knowledge about place-making, the *Project for Public Spaces* (http://www.pps.org/) provides reports on efforts to make successful places that support social life in urban environments. Interest in place also arises from concern about the changing nature of childhood as a function of "changing cityscapes, patterns and styles of habitation, and everyday lives" (Monaghan, 2000, p. A21).

Scholars who study children's geographies, are aware that global processes have local consequences for children's' lives. "'Local' cultures— how children organize their day—are bound up with 'global' processes" (Holloway & Valentine, 2000, p. 11). Aitken (1994, p. 3), a cultural geographer dedicated to studying the social and physical conditions in which children live, recognizes that children can be "the ultimate victims of the political, social, and economic forces which contrive the geography of the built environment." In spite of children's own agency and competence in creating

culture, forces beyond their control can shape their lives (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). As the forces of globalization, modernity, and late capitalism have eroded the place-based nature of communities, children can find themselves with less richness and stability of community life. Even within schools, students may experience a diminishing emphasis on the conditions needed to create community. Schools have responded to globalization, 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).

Crang (1998) and many other cultural geographers argue that if relationships to places are undermined, then so too are communities and people's identities. Place is a source of security, meaning, belonging, and identity and these are typically facilitated by meaningful relationships made possible by bonds to place (Tuan, 1977). "The lived connection binds people and places together. It enables people to define themselves and to share experiences with others and form themselves into communities" (Crang, 1998, p. 103). Given the significance of increased mobility, migration, and patterns of urban design for the place-based communities available to many children, I believe it is important to consider whether classrooms and schools are places that support community and positive identities for students.

I am drawn to the project of engaging the concept of place in researching students' experience because of its potential for supporting holistic and context-sensitive inquiry. Highlighting aspects of place that shape students' experience can serve to remind educators of their opportunities and responsibilities in the social construction of classrooms and schools as places. Eyles (1989, p. 104) argues that if researchers study people's experience without critically interpreting the place of that experience, they can risk emphasizing individual agency and may fail to "discern the 'structures of society', the societal contexts of everyday life, which may significantly shape and constrain our experiences." Holloway and Valentine (2000) similarly recommend that researchers in the new social studies of childhood seek to learn children's experience and perspectives but also undertake their own analyses of wider social structures—including global processes—shaping children's lives.

My interest in this paper is to consider how the concept of place can be useful in inquiry about how classrooms can support positive identities for students. In the first section, I discuss general understandings about place from cultural geographers' perspectives, children's place attachment, and key ideas from Eyles (1989) and Ashcroft (2000). In the second section I reflect on my own teaching experience to take up the question of how

place is at work in the on-going dynamic of students' constructions of their identities in classrooms. To do so, I discuss my own planning for teaching as planning for place-making. In the third section I offer a set of wonderings about employing such ideas and questions to consider students' constructions of identities in K–12 classrooms.

The concept of place

Drawing upon common elements in many definitions of place, Brey (1998, p. 240) suggests that place can be understood 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]." So in-school places can be the whole school, a classroom, or even the particular chair that students have to use when they are having a "time-out." *Space* becomes place when it is invested with meaning by those who spend time in it (Geertz, 1973, cited in Helfenbein, In press). Further, Relph (1993, p. 36) explains 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." As a consequence, "the *placeness* [emphasis in original] of a place is a subjective or intersubjective creation and therefore is only apparent to the individual or group members who create it" (Smith, Light & Roberts, 1998). As teachers, when we think about what students give to and receive from the classroom, it would make sense to consider their social and psychological needs.

Place—understood not as merely a location in physical space, but as a human conception and habitual site of human activity—and its placeness—understood as a subjective or intersubjective creation—are dynamic and changing. Place evolves, and "like a discourse in process" (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 155), is "a result of habitation, a consequence of the ways in which people inhabit space" (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 156). Ashcroft (2001, p. 156) also emphasizes that the on-going formation of a place—the way in which it is inhabited—is "intimately bound up with the culture and identity of its inhabitants." Thus, the classroom as a place isn't just the walls and furniture, but rather the whole experience that results from the way people inhabit it, and how they inhabit it is influenced by identities they have already created in other places.

The identity of a place itself also contributes to its meaning for inhabitants. In part, a place develops its significance or identity through stories about what has happened there. Topography is humanized with history and, says Glassie (1982, p. 665, in Smith et al., 1998, p. 4), "history is intrinsic to the idea of place." For example, if a school has a strong reputation for certain kinds of accomplishments—in the arts, academics, or athletics—the school as a place already holds particular significance for

new in-coming students. Additionally, as Brey (1998) explains, the identity of a place is largely defined by the "goods" it contains or its proximity to other places with goods or amenities for supporting desirable human activities and experiences. Indoor shopping malls typically have appealing place identities for junior high students in these ways.

The significance of place

Philosophers recognize that place "fundamentally structures human experience. It is deeply human to make places and to think in terms of places" (Smith et al, 1998, p. 6). Tuan (1992) argues that the forces of modernity have created the need for place as an analeptic for individuality and the world's indifference. Hay (1992, p. 101) explains that bonds to place enable meaningful relationships and strong social networks to develop. Becoming an "insider" in a place allows feelings of security and status to arise. Over time, a person becomes part of a place as "the culture creates a norm while the place creates a habitat" (Hay, 1988, p. 163).

Tuan (1997) suggests that *place* is security and *space* is freedom and that we are attached to the one and long for the other. Geographers recognize that the stability of a community may reflect embraced traditions or disguise oppression by dominant regimes (Hay, 1998). Sometimes people have to leave strong places to escape drudgery or to have the opportunity to be someone else. If classrooms are to be good places, one might expect that they would provide security, nurturance, meaningful relationships, and opportunities for positive identities while including space for students' creative self-development.

Sense of place

Cultural geographers have used the term, "sense of place," to refer to a personal connection with place, built up over years of residence and involvement in the community. Hay (1988, p. 160) notes:

> One's "place" is the familiar region of habitual routine, where one feels comfortable and secure doing functional, repetitive tasks. Intimate local knowledge of the place is maintained through regular travels, while human contacts are renewed through family, community, leisure, and work involvements.

The dynamics of achieving a sense of place support the establishment of both a sense of self and a sense of community. Hay (1988, p. 163) explains.

> 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. Through years of residence, a sense of place provides a centre of continuity. From a strong center, where one feels at home as an insider and a member of a community, a person can face the unknowns of the larger world beyond…. Developing a sense of place aids in this process of community and self-identification.

Over time students may develop a greater sense of place in a classroom or school. 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. As teachers who want students' classroom experience to be positive, we may wish to consider whether the classroom as a place—the whole experience of being there—affords social affiliation and belonging, creative self-development, and positive identities. The following sub-section provides further discussion about the characteristics of children's favourite places.

Children's place attachment

The notion of "children's place attachment" arose from scholars' interest in children's experience of place. To conceptualize childhood place attachments, Chawla (1992) brought together a discussion of four diverse literatures: psychoanalytic theory; environmental autobiography; behaviour mapping; and favorite place analyses. She concluded that place provides children with three types of satisfaction: *security, social affiliation,* and *creative expression* and *exploration*. She noted that place supports the development of self-identity both by affording opportunities for young people to try out predefined roles in conventional settings and by offering unprogrammed space. Chawla (1992, p. 69) emphasized the importance of the availability of undefined space for children and youth at all ages:

> 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 practise independence; and for public hangouts and private refuges where adolescents can test new social relationships and ideas.

More recently, in Langhout's (2003) review of children and place research, she reported consistent findings that *autonomy*, *social support*, and *positive feelings* are associated with children's place attachment or sense of place. Her case study of a grade 3 boy we will call "Michael" reveals his childhood appreciation of opportunities for autonomy or positive identity. Researchers learned about all of the places in the school that Michael liked

or which generated positive feelings for him. He liked going to the library because he was able to choose his own book. In the washroom he was the monitor who made sure that only so many students were in there at the same time. In the lunchroom he was a "behaviour mentor" to younger children. He liked the gym because the teacher didn't reprimand him for making teasing comments to the other team. These are simple examples of the ways a child can experience specific places within a school.

Children's appreciation of both social support and desirable space they can appropriate has also been revealed in recent international research. The *Growing Up in Cities* research (Chawla, 2002) found that young people, aged 9 to 14, in both developed and developing countries were happiest in places that afforded them access to playmates; friendly adults; environments they could manipulate; active, public spaces they could appropriate; cohesive communities with positive identities; and opportunities to feel connected to their localities. Chawla noted that the community characteristics valued by children were those that sociologists typically identify with "urban villages." The collection of studies showed that young people in cities in developed countries experienced material advantages but were more likely to feel isolated and alienated. Chawla (2002, p. 33) concluded that children "need the 'shelter' of a cohesive and friendly local culture."

A national study in Canada has also underscored the significance of place for children's wellbeing. The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) (Willms, 2002) developed a "vulnerability index" for Canada which considers a child to be vulnerable if he or she had poor outcomes on measures of cognitive or behavioural domains. Willms (2002, p. 366) reports 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. 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." In recommending such place research, Willms is expressing recognition that places are social constructions and that caring for children's wellbeing entails taking responsibility for the places of their everyday lives. In the next sub-section I discuss a framework or set of ideas that may be useful in analyses of classrooms and schools as places.

Place, everyday life, and identity

A number of conceptual tools, criteria or questions have been used in analyses of places for a variety of interpretive or planning purposes. Critical humanist geographers, for example, "examine how signs, symbols, gestures, utterances, and local knowledge convey cultural meanings and create places" (Adams et al, 2001, p. xvi). As another example, the *Project for Public Spaces* (http://www.pps.org/) employs a number of principles in retrofitting problematic parks, plazas, shopping strips, and streets. Some of these are: a mix of uses and users; accessibility; being welcoming; being comfortable; supporting sociability; interesting activities; capability for temporary vendors, furniture or events; amenities; and triangulating—situating elements near each other so that the use of each is encouraged by the presence of the others. Related ideas are used by Seamon (1979) who, drawing upon Jacobs' (1961) work, uses the concept of "place ballet" to describe the bodily regularity of the coming together of people's time-space routines in space. He explains that places that support place ballet typically have six qualities: attraction, diversity, comfortableness, invitation, distinctiveness, and attachment.

As an interpretive framework for considering the relationships among place, everyday life, and identity, this subsection considers ideas from Eyles (1989) and Ashcroft (2001). Eyles first discusses the significance of everyday life for identity and then argues that place should be understood as the source of social structures that enable or constrain the everyday lives people are able to shape for themselves. In the excerpt below, Eyles (1989, pp. 103–104) explains identity as being constructed through actions in everyday life.

> Everyday life is, therefore, a taken-for-granted reality which provides the unquestioned background of meaning for the individual. It is a social construction which becomes a structure itself. Thus through our actions in everyday life we build, maintain and reconstruct the very definitions, roles and motivations that shape our actions. … We both create and are created by society and these processes are played out within the context of everyday life.
>
> Everyday life is, therefore, the *plausible social context* and *believable personal world* [emphasis in original] within which we reside. From it we derive a sense of self, of identity, as living a real and meaningful biography.

For emphasis, I have created Figure 1 to visually depict Eyles' ideas about *identities*— the commonsense ideas, values, roles, and motivations that shape our ways of seeing and acting in the world—being built, maintained and reconstructed through *actions in everyday life*. Although the visual depiction appears linear and finite, this three-part, linear visual needs to be understood as a segment in a spiral, given that identities shape further actions through which identities are re-created and so on.

FIGURE 1. Everyday Life
and Identity (Eyles, 1989)
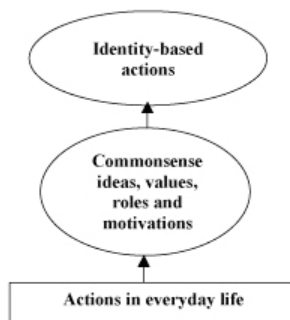
Everyday life entails all of our routines and interactions in our sites of daily activity. Eyles explains that the kinds of *everyday lives* people can shape for themselves in a place are limited or enabled by *social structures* such as rules and resources and the relationships available with individuals, institutions or ideas. In any particular place one can have some kinds of everyday life experiences and not others. I have created a visual depiction of these ideas in Figure 2 for ease of reference in the remainder of this paper. The arrows in the figure are bi-directional to reflect Eyles' point that everyday life itself becomes a containing structure for the conduct of life in a place. It is also conceivable that some forms of everyday life could generate additional resources within a place. In the next section of this paper I will discuss the potential for everyday life to contribute to the relationships and community that can be developed in a class. Although not visually included in Figure 2, Ashcroft's (2001) idea about the significance of people's identities for how they inhabit a space is an important addition to Eyles' ideas.

FIGURE 2. Structural Formations
of Place (Eyles, 1989)
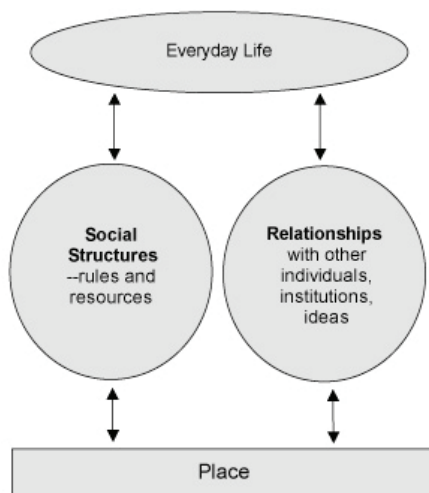
In the discussions offered by Eyles, place is treated as the source of structural formations, which by constraining everyday life, limit the identities that can be created there. Ashcroft (2001), on the other hand, as discussed earlier in the sub-section, "The concept of place," highlights the idea that everyday life— the ways in which people inhabit a space—*is* place. I see both understandings of place as useful in considerations of how the classroom as a place is at work in students' constructions of identity.

Eyles acknowledges the deep and symbolic significance of places. He also recognizes that people can create meaningful places and identities in what humanistic geographers have called "non-places"—for example, sprawling suburbs or specially created tourist environments. He suggests that understanding place as a significant material condition for shaping everyday life is of most import for the poor, or those who have fewer choices about where they live. Given that most children have no choice but to be at school, it may be important to consider the "classroom as a place" as a significant material condition shaping their everyday lives.

In this section I have related a number of ideas about conceptions of place, the significance of place, children and place, and some interpretive frameworks for analyses of place. In the following section, I draw from these ideas to discuss planning for my teaching in graduate courses as planning for place-making.

Planning for teaching as planning for place-making

I've taught a number of courses in a favourite classroom on campus. With each course, when I "go to my classroom" I experience myself as going to a distinctly different place than I went to in the course before. In part, this is because a place becomes a place through history, through the building up of stories about what has happened there. The place I go to when I go to class also keeps evolving—becoming itself—over the duration of the term.

Place also depends on who is there. When the people change, the place changes. As every teacher knows, the absence of one key student can change the place that the classroom is that day. And as I change from year to year, this also affects the place my class can be. Even more importantly, however, the students who enroll in a class, and the identities they have already constructed elsewhere, will have the greatest impact on my role as the teacher and my responsibilities for place-making.

Key structures of the class

As the teacher, I have responsibility for most of the resources, rules, routines, and activities that will constrain the everyday lives students will be able to shape for themselves in my class. As noted in Figure 2, the relationships students have in the class can also be understood as a structure constraining

everyday life. The relationships students develop will both result from and contribute to everyday life. The relationships are important as these will support or fail to support community and positive identities for students. I start early, a year in advance, to ensure that I can have a room with furniture that facilitates sitting comfortably in small groups. If the course is a new one, I will not rest until I find appropriate course readings that lend themselves to being used in interesting ways in class. Without such resources, everyday life in the class could be drudgery. Course readings also have the potential to facilitate students' relationships with key ideas or scholars.

If the course is a repeated one, I continue to search for alternate readings that may appeal to students with diverse educational, professional, cultural, and geographical backgrounds. Resources should be relevant to students' biographies while inviting them into new ways of thinking about activities central to the purpose of the course. It becomes more challenging to find such resources when increased mobility and migration bring together students with more diverse biographies, including international students. What is also difficult are the pressures of institutional structures to make final plans for course readings in advance of opportunities to learn about the biographies of students who will be in the class. If resources are entirely disconnected from students' motivations, roles, values and ways of seeing and acting in the world, their responses to activities with them may be limited.

Once I find promising resources for a course I can focus on planning the activities. Students will experience most of these as assignments or routines. The course activities are vitally important structures that shape or constrain the everyday life that evolves in the class. They can enhance or inhibit relationships among students, the development of community and cultural norms, and students' actions—all of which are important media for their re-creation of identities. These ideas are discussed further in the sub-section below.

If students become confident with familiar routines, come to know and be known by their classmates, and have intimate knowledge about the course experience, then they may well establish *sense of place* in the class. As suggested by Hay (1992) and Tuan (1977), if the class is *a good place*, it will also be a source of security, belonging, meaningful relationships, and identity. Identity, as a *sense of self*, derives from sense of community, knowing the norms in the new culture, and having status in this community. Thus, if the class is to be a good place it is important that activities contribute to community, meaningful relationships among students, and positive status for all students. Students' opportunities to re-create identities—understood as *acquiring new roles, motivations, values, and ways of seeing and acting in the world*— can be supported by enjoyable and successful experiences with new activities. As noted in Figure 1, Eyles (1989) sees identities as being built, maintained, and reconstructed through actions in everyday life.

Attributes of useful student activities

In my experience, activities that work well for these multiple purposes are semi-structured, include space for self-expression or creativity, and provide for social support. I will discuss two examples.

Example 1: Group constructed visual metaphors. I provided large sheets of paper and coloured pens and asked students to work in small groups to create visual metaphors that would express the inter-relationships among a set of words/concepts/ideas that were central in the course. Each group presented their work to the whole class and received comments and questions. This visual metaphor activity—an invitation to be conceptually playful—provided the conditions for students to easily produce ideas, be humorous with each other, and validate each others' contributions. In each group, one person quickly offered up a big idea and then everyone worked together to elaborate it. In such an open-ended activity in which there can be no one right answer, students were relaxed rather than worried about doing it correctly. They had fun and enjoyed building on each other's ideas. Each group was proud of the creativity in their own work and expressed genuine interest in and admiration for the productions of other groups. Given that all metaphors break down at a certain point, there was no question about evaluating productions as entirely right or entirely wrong. The efforts to produce the visual metaphors were simply vehicles to support students' engaged and enthusiastic discussions of the relationships among the ideas. In the process, they offered each other validation and came to experience each other as comfortable, interesting and enjoyable to interact with.

Group activities that invite conceptual playfulness are valuable for warming relationships and enlivening everyday life in the class. At the very least, I try when I can, to have activities provide social support and space for self-expression, identity, and a sense of autonomy. For example, when students in a research course work in partners to practice writing open-ended interview questions, I have them choose the imaginary participant and phenomenon of interest for the interview. It would be easy to limit students' response to this activity by assigning each pair's interview topic. The discussion of Example 2, below, illustrates how self-expressive activities can support the development of relationships, community, and identity.

Example 2: Interview assignment. In a research course, students are asked to interview someone about how he or she experiences a particular activity or phenomenon. They use open-ended questions and a "pre-interview activity." As the pre-interview activity, the participant is asked to craft a diagram or drawing that visually expresses how she or he experiences the phenomenon of interest. The interview begins with a discussion of the drawing and continues with some of the prepared open-ended questions.

In class, the students present analyses to show what they learned about the participants' experience and how this informed their assumptions and questions about the phenomena of interest.

Because the activity serves as a key assignment in the course and is presented to the whole class, it is important that it work well. The structure provided helps to ensure that the interview is successful. Prior to the activity, the class has practised writing open-ended interview questions. Even if the prepared questions are not well developed, however, the use of the drawing or diagram from the pre-interview activity supports the success of the interview. Participants have a lot to say about their drawings or diagrams and, consequently, the interviewer can simply respond and join the conversation rather than awkwardly attempt to lead it.

The students typically interview a friend or family member about a topic that is of personal concern to them or that is related to their research interests. In this way the activity provides space for personal interests, self-expression, and identity. Students are always excited about what they learn and the enthusiasm in their presentations gives vitality to the class.

These presentations contribute to belongingness, meaningful relationships and sense of community in a number of ways. When the class responds to a presentation, I notice that it is first of all at the level of human interest. There are lots of questions. Classmates want to know more about the story. This genuine and concerned expression of interest supports students' experience of belongingness and feeling cared for. Presenters often tell me that classmates were eager to keep talking to them about the topic or experience at coffee break time. Sometimes it is through these self-expressive presentations that classmates learn that they have interests or experiences in common with the presenter.

The students' interviews and presentations also support their status in the class and their identities as researchers. The oral presentations, and the class responses that follow them, provide the opportunity for validation in front of the whole class. Because of the storied nature of the experiences researched, the students and I can easily remember the presentations and continue to refer back to them as concrete examples related to more abstract course readings—thus providing repeated validation during the remainder of the course. Sometimes students reveal talents, skills or creativity in the format of their presentations and this also brings recognition. Importantly, the interview and presentation experience enhances students' identities as researchers. Students often speak of the confidence and understanding they gain from this activity.

In a graduate course, it is often necessary for students to complete written assignments that are submitted to the instructor. In planning for place-making, I try to think of ways that even these activities can give

further support to relationships, community, and identity. If the students' papers are of medium length, I will sometimes have students read and respond orally to each other's papers in groups of three during class time. If the papers are long, we might sit in a circle and do "paper talks." In paper talks, students have 5 or 10 minutes each to talk about "what it was like to work on the paper, what they were trying to accomplish, what they gained from this work." Students can read a selected paragraph from their papers as well. Students say they find it helpful to hear their classmates' reflections in this way. They appreciate learning how others are thinking about and experiencing the course topics.

In this exploration of planning for teaching as planning for place-making, I have noted the importance of the identities of students coming into a class and discussed how a class can support students in re-creating their identities. I have tried to show that by thinking about place-making and the relationships among structures, everyday life, and identity, attention is directed to evaluating resources and activities for their potential contributions to community, relationships, and positive status for all students. If students experience the class as a good place it is a source of meaningful relationships and positive identities for them. The discussions in this section have also suggested that semi-structured activities that include space for self-expression or creativity may contribute to the development of relationships, community, and positive status for all students. In the next section I share some of my wonderings about place-making in K–12 classrooms.

Place and identity for students in K-12 classrooms

My work within classrooms, and my reading of the literature on space and place has helped me come to see that it is important to recognize that place is a social construction—the result of human agency within the limits of social and physical resources. For me as an educator, part of the value of using the word, "place," rather than the word, "context," is that it serves as an on-going reminder of my pedagogical responsibility for place-making. Admittedly, the formation of a place is "intimately bound up with the culture and identity of [all of] its inhabitants" (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 156), but at the same time, adults, and especially those in relation with children, should recognize their particular agency and responsibility for the structural formations of places inhabited by children.

I believe that to a large extent, teachers do recognize their agency and responsibility when they establish rules and routines or introduce resources that will support students' participation in learning activities. As a teacher, however, it is easy to slide into a preoccupation with academic outcomes and

to forget the fuller range of experiences that ought to be part of everyday life in a place intended to support growth, learning, and wellbeing.

Instructional activities, relationships, and identities

One way in which I witnessed elementary school classroom teachers recognizing the importance of students' sense of belonging and positive identity in classroom routines is when they give each child a turn to be the "special person of the day." Celebrating each student's birthday is another example. I wonder, however, whether more frequent use of open-ended, self-expressive student assignments—both group and individual—in regular instructional activities might further contribute to children's experience of autonomy, social support, and positive identity in the classroom. I have elaborated ideas for how to do this elsewhere (Ellis, 2005). I will provide one example here.

Example: Grade 4 Lost Pet in Alberta Stories activity. Each group of students is assigned one of the geographical regions of Alberta as the setting for a story in which a family pet gets lost and has adventures until re-united with the family. While the students are studying their assigned regions and teaching the rest of the class about the characteristics of their regions, they are also saving ideas about the implications of these characteristics for the adventures their lost pet might have. Each group produces and presents a storyboard about their pet's adventures.

As I discussed in the previous section, activities that include space for self-expression and creativity can have a number of spin-offs for relationships, community, and positive identities. Being conceptually playful in a group provides opportunities for students to be humorous, validate each other's contributions, and get to know and like each other. Open-ended activities also offer space for the expression of students' out-of-school identities—interests, values, commonsense ideas, roles, motivations, ways of seeing and acting. Consequently, students can experience validation of both their efforts with new activities and their expression of their cultural identities when their products from open-ended assignments are appreciated. Students' creative productions—especially in visual or performance formats—attract genuine interest and admiration from classmates. In discussions of semi-structured creative assignments, I have given many examples of how their use has supported community, class spirit, relationships, student engagement, and positive identities in K-12 classrooms (Ellis, 2005).

It is unlikely that most teachers feel there is time and space to offer many open-ended, self-expressive or creative assignments in their classes. With pressures for accountability and academic outcomes, many teachers have felt constrained in giving more personal attention to children's

more holistic needs in the classroom. Questions about the social support students receive from each other have not even been highly topical in research. Osterman (2000), in an extensive review of literature on students' need for belonging in the school community, observed that a large amount of research focussed on students' relationships with their teachers and very little attended to students' experience of collegiality with their classmates. Her review also indicated that although belonging is a precondition for engagement in school learning, it is typically treated as a reward for compliance and achievement. She concluded 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" (Osterman, 2000, p. 324). Similarly, research on school dropouts emphasizes the importance of both peer relationships and engagement in academic and non-academic activities (Alberta Learning, 2001; Willms, 2002).

Conclusion

The enduring cultural emphasis on competitive academic performance in K–12 classrooms is an unfortunate structural formation constraining the everyday life experiences of many students. As Chawla (1992) and others (e.g., Aitkin, 1994; Holloway & Valentine, 2000) recognize, *place* circumscribes the experiences children can have and their experiences have enduring effects on their personalities and perspectives. I wonder if it might be worthwhile to take the classroom more seriously as a formative place for students and to consider how instructional activities themselves, as everyday life experiences, can more often be sources of positive identity and social support for all children in classrooms.

Given the isolation and fragmentation that can be experienced in many modern places, and given the increased mobility and migration of globalization, classrooms and schools have the potential to be important places in children's lives. With the erosion of place-based communities and for many children, their loss of autonomous access to public spaces and outdoor spaces, schools may increasingly be important sources of security, belonging, identity, social affiliation, space for creative self-development, and opportunities to learn about the world and be connected to it. It is important to ask how we can make the lived-in space of schools richer in these ways? If, as teachers, we hope that students will experience *place attachment*, rather than only *sense of place* in our classes, then we may wish to consider how the structural formations of these places enable or constrain everyday life experiences of security, social affiliation, creative expression and exploration, and positive identities.

Summary

In this paper I have taken up the question of how place is at work in students' on-going re-constructions of their identities in classrooms. To do so I used Eyles' (1989) conception of place as the source of structural formations constraining the everyday lives people can shape for themselves. As was highlighted in Figure 2, examples of structures are rules, resources, and available relationships. Everyday life that is developed with these also becomes a structure itself. I noted that everyday life in a class could support or fail to support relationships among students. I also worked with Ashcroft's (2001) understanding of place as in fact being the everyday life that evolves from the way people inhabit a space and his acknowledgement of the significance of people's identities for how they inhabit space.

As further frameworks for analyses related to identity and place, I also drew upon cultural geographers' notions about sense of place, place attachment, and the significance of place. As depicted in Figure 1, Eyles' (1989) work underscored the role of people's actions in everyday life in their re-constructions of identity. Cultural geographers' ideas about place as a source of security, belonging, meaningful relationships, and identity were useful in supporting further consideration of how place is at work in students' creation of identities in classrooms. The notion of sense of place, in particular, suggested that a class could be a source of identity when, through the development of a sense of community, students acquire a sense of self or self-identification. If students have positive status in the community developed in a class, then the class is a source of positive identity for them.

Working with these ideas and interpretive frameworks I emphasized that instructional activities are a dominant and influential structure in classrooms as places. I highlighted their potential to contribute—or fail to contribute—to the development of community, relationships among students, and positive identity. I suggested that instructional activities that are semi-structured to support successful work but which include space for self-expression or creativity and provide social support can be particularly useful in these ways. I illustrated these ideas with examples from my own teaching in graduate courses. With regard to K-12 classrooms, I noted other researchers' findings about the isolation, alienation and disengagement students can experience in schools and suggested that further attention be given to the nature of instructional activities. Instructional activities—understood as a key structure of the classroom as a place—constrain the everyday lives students can shape for themselves and the identities they can create and re-create in schools.

Acknowledgements

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