

## Here, there and everywhere: A place-based approach to nurturing children's identity and autonomy in play

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In this article, I discuss how as children we are shaped not just by the people who surround us, but also by the places and spaces in which we play. When discussing space and place in this article, I am referring to place as physical ground whereas space is a more abstract concept and could be something that is constructed. In geographical discourses, both space and place are considered "relational, socially co-produced, and dynamic" (Koops & Galic, 2017, p. 19). Spaces, in and around the child, actively contribute to children's learning, providing children with new opportunities to engage in imaginary play. The role of spaces, imagined or real; inherited or self-constructed will be explored and links to children's identity and autonomy will be discussed. The discussion is intended to support teachers to consider how a more nuanced understanding of space and place might impact on curriculum and pedagogical decisions within an early childhood context. I have used the two terms of space and place interchangeably to highlight the sometimes invisible boundaries between them.

As a child I asked my parents every evening after school "can I please go down to play?". When I was given permission to go and play by my parents, I would traipse down the stairs to a courtyard surrounding the building. This courtyard doubled as a parking lot for the 18 families who also lived in the six-storey building. Present in the courtyard was an ever-increasing litter of pariah dogs that had made the grounds their home. I would play with other children from the same building - cricket and other group games in the courtyard. As I got older though, I chose to play in spaces that were not restricted to the outdoors, but instead were constructed, both physically as well as in my imagination.

Claimed and created places offer children opportunities to make sense of their world through play where they create their own rules (Green, 2013). In an early childhood context, one may often find children engaged in hours of play in the family corner or outdoors, but following a role-play theme rather than physical play. Consider as a teacher, the spaces and places that you see children in early childhood centres play in everyday. Do you intentionally see these places as being integral to the child and their development? What might you learn about children, based on where they play and how they manipulate the environment around them?

### **Play: A place for young children to develop holistically**

Strong-Wilson and Ellis (2007) believe that individuals first view and manipulate the environment in creative ways as children. This is supported by Piaget (1932) and Vygotsky (1978) who suggest that children learn through active exploration and manipulation of their environments. This sentiment is also reflected in *Te Whāriki He Whāriki Mātauranga mō ngā Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum* (Te Whāriki) (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2017) which attributes learning to "responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things" (p. 21). Thus, the idea of play being a created place around a child has contributed to a growing need to further understand children and their spaces in order to support their development (Nitecki & Chung, 2016).

Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014a) consider that one's identity is constituted by sociocultural factors inclusive of social institutions and cultural artefacts and practices. This idea stems from Vygotsky (1978) who believed that the external physical and social world shapes children's understanding of the world (Berk, 2013; Nitecki & Chung, 2016). The way in which children make use of the environment to develop their emergent schemas was the object of Piaget's inquiry

(Nitecki & Chung, 2016). Schemas are biologically driven urges that influence children's play as well as how they make sense of the world around them. An urge directly linked to space is 'enveloping' manifested in the way children cover or enclose items in play (Fitzgerald, 2013). Enclosing is yet another urge linked to space and this is often seen when children get into boxes, or perhaps build houses for toys or themselves. Wilson (as cited in Green, 2013) states that place is not particularly defined by geography but also includes opportunities that are available to create meaning within a place. This makes up the imaginative and developmental world within the child. Doesn't play provide just those opportunities? Consider how a tent built with existing couches and blankets becomes a castle or how a door leading to the basement below the house could become an elf abode.

### **Place identity and place attachment**

The physical and social world around the child has an impact upon their self-identity. In terms of the physical world, in the Reggio Emilia approach, the environment is often referred to as being the third teacher, indicating the significance of the environment in children's learning and development. Strong-Wilson and Ellis (2007) suggest that young children engage reciprocally with the environment which shapes the children's growth and development. As children grow and develop, they manipulate and engage with the physical environment in more complex ways (Green, 2013). Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014a) believe that the child's experiences and knowledge of the home environment informs their identity, contributing to a sense of place identity and attachment.

Place identity is an important element within one's self-identity and includes a "pot-pourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas, and related feelings about specific physical settings, as well as types of settings" (Proshanksy, Fabian & Kaminoff, 1983, p. 60). Place attachment includes the affiliation that binds a person to a place (Green, 2013). This includes knowledge, beliefs and behaviours and actions towards place. Children tend to associate positive and negative feelings to a place and this may be influenced by preconceived ideas about the place or how significant others engage with it. For instance, as a child I often looked forward to spending my term holidays at my grandparents' homes. Although the primary place of attachment for children aged under five is the home, the early childhood context is increasingly becoming the secondary one, given the number of children in early childhood education services (Jack, 2010; Green & Turner, 2017). Both place identity and attachment are established in the early years but could change as children grow older and have wider and more complex experiences in life (Green, 2013).

### **Special or secret spaces and how they foster identity and autonomy**

The places which contribute to a child's identity and attachment patterns more often than not include special or secret spaces created by the children themselves. These spaces offer young children a sense of agency and power as well as a sense of autonomy and privacy (Green, 2013; Sturm, 2008). Further, children achieve a sense of belonging through claiming these special places for themselves. This sense of security empowers them with a base to revisit their working theories and further engage with them at a deeper level (MoE, 2017).

What was your secret space? A treehouse perhaps? Huddled up on your bed under the covers? Interestingly, secret spaces are geographically and culturally influenced too. For instance, I grew up in Mumbai, an over-crowded, urban city in India. As mentioned earlier, there was a single space available used for a range of activities such as play. I had to claim spaces within this larger area or look for alternative ones such as within my home. However, our two-bedroom apartment was shared by my parents, three other siblings and for some time, a live-in maid. This made the quest for adopting secret, special places more challenging and over time, the same apartment and same spaces were manipulated differently by my siblings; each of us trying to claim niches within the apartment for our own. In a way, these spaces became our areas to attain solitude and privacy, both instrumental for nurturing one's dignity and self-esteem, autonomy and self-identity (Green, 2013; Sturm, 2008). Some of the secret spaces within early childhood

settings could be influenced by structural aspects such as cabinets, angled walls, or niches. These may be typically manipulated as hideaways as well as to suit other forms of play such as functional, constructive and symbolic play. This helps to nurture children's autonomy, which further develops as children are empowered to:

1. Claim and construct their own places
2. Create their own rules
3. Engage in creativity and imagination (Green, 2013)

### **Claiming and constructing one's own space**

Children tend to carefully select the places they want to play in. For me, it was the little constructed unit in our bedroom called the *dressing room*. Sometimes, children may claim places that are not specifically intended for typical play. For instance, in the bathroom (the abstract images on the tiles on my bathroom wall would keep me engaged for hours on end). Other times, it could be familiar places such as the beds. These spaces allow children to engage in imaginary play and hone core executive function skills such as self-control, working memory, cognitive flexibility, creative thinking as well as higher-order skills such as problem solving (Diamond, 2014; Russell, 2015). These spaces contribute towards the emotional attachment that children develop to the place, leading to place identity (Green, 2013).

### **Create their own rules**

When children engage in these special places, they are in the position of creating and practising their own ideas (MoE, 2017) and rules. For instance, "keep out of my room" for younger siblings or creating impossible passwords that secretly change all the time, thus limiting access to their special place. In my claimed space in the *dressing room*, it was only I and my dolls who were allowed. My brother would be involved in house-related games provided that he was the 'dad' or 'hunter' who went away in the morning and only got back late in the evening! This idea further lends to a concept proposed by Lenz Taguchi (as cited in Whyte & Naughton, 2014). who believed that smooth spaces offer individuals opportunities to engage in creative ways or new lines of flight. In this instance stretching boundaries around rules associated with the spaces we played in.

### **Engage in creativity and imagination**

Special places inspire symbolic and constructive play through make-believe. This in turn, supports children as they deepen their expertise in specific interests and become confident in manipulating these interests (MoE, 2017). For instance, consider how children use outdoor play equipment such as the swings to perhaps pretend they are climbing up to the summit of a mountain. Or curl themselves up within a tunnel on the outdoor slide structure to be caterpillars within a cocoon. This involves a crucial yet complex executive function, known as cognitive flexibility which is nurtured through make-believe play opportunities (Diamond, 2014).

In the process of claiming and constructing their own places, creating their own rules and engaging in creativity and imagination, children build their funds of identity which teachers can draw on to nurture the children's autonomy. The concept of funds of identity stems from funds of knowledge which essentially acknowledges that children come to the early childhood centre with a wealth of knowledge and information from their home (Chesworth, 2016; Esteban-Guitart, 2014a). According to Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014a, 2014b), funds of identity involves an active use of these funds of knowledge and children's play spaces provide for an expression of one's funds of identity. For instance, children may create settings specific to their own homes or cultural backgrounds. A baby's cot in the family play corner may be created by hanging shawls and sheets to represent one that the child may be used to seeing at home or cook meals specific to their own culture (Esteban-Guitart, 2014a) or the place may be situated using their geographical funds of identity, say on a farm or a marae. Having the freedom to include their own artefacts within their play empowers children to make decisions and engage in meaningful play.

### Implications for early childhood teachers

Article 31 in *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* emphasises a universal right for children to play freely. An important aspect of our role as an early childhood teacher is to advocate for children's right to play. As teachers, we not only have an ethical obligation to promote play but we must also consider the spaces in which children play and how we might best utilise those spaces for children's learning.

- Early childhood teachers need to consider ways to engage children with place (Green, 2013). Are children invited to be involved in the creation of learning spaces and places within the centre? (Green & Turner, 2017). How might teachers set up provocations that empower children to responsively and reciprocally interact with the space around them and within them?
- Consider children's spaces both in their home environment as well as within the early childhood environment. Acknowledge that spaces may be interpreted differently culturally and geographically too. Uphold children's unique identities in the spaces you create for them in the centre. This is important as we embrace diversity in cultures and backgrounds within the realms of the centre. Teachers could make a conscious effort to seek children's funds of knowledge and identity in their play and draw from them within sociocultural assessment practices.
- Encourage exploration and creation of secret spaces within the parameters of the centre within boundaries established with the children (Canning, 2007). Are there spaces for children to have their privacy, adult-free authority, and private talk? (Green & Turner, 2017).
- Enable children to develop secure place attachments by allowing children to define their own places. The structural design of the room or centre needs to allow room for children to have control over a range of spaces. Strong-Wilson and Ellis (2007) urge teachers to genuinely reflect on whether the environment are children's spaces (one that children create or claim for themselves) or places for children (that which has been created for the children by the adults). There will be a balance between these and a conscious effort to grant children the autonomy and approval to create their own spaces will be beneficial to nurture creative expression, exploration, and imaginative play (Green & Turner, 2017).

To conclude, spaces that surround children may offer renewed opportunities for identity shift when the children are allowed autonomy to explore and develop new interests (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a). As early childhood teachers, we need to celebrate our tamariki's identity by ensuring that they have diverse means of being agentic in the spaces around them.

*He taonga te mokopuna, kia whangaia, kia tipu, kia rea  
A child is a treasure, to be nurtured, to grow, to flourish  
(Ministry of Education, 2017, p.2)*

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