Readers as Place-Makers: The Experience of Place in the Literacy Life-Worlds of Middle Childhood

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Readers as place-makers: the experience of place in the literacy life-worlds of middle childhood

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ABSTRACT
This study explored five adults’ experiences of place within their middle childhood literacy life-worlds. Middle childhood, the stage of development in which children often acquire reading independence, is also characterized by significant increases in children’s geographic accessibility and independence. The findings propose that in the literacy life-worlds of middle childhood, readers’ experiences of place can be characterized as Repositioning (instances in which participants saw themselves differently in relation to their physical or conceptual environments), Transportation (participants’ sense of being imaginatively transported to a literary landscape where they could engage in new experiences), Nesting (the way participants manipulated their physical environment in preparation for the act of reading) and Layering (the means by which participants attempted to embody, in a very physical sense, a literary world by layering it on top of their immediate environment). These findings have significant implications for place-conscious literacy curricula, suggesting that children engage in dynamic transactions with out-of-school places as they enact their emerging identity as independent readers.

Introduction
Both socioculturally and biologically influenced, children are actively engaged in place-making from the time they are born: a process of constructing functional, cultural and personal meaning of the physical and conceptual landscapes that are part of their lived experiences (Chawla 1992; Tuan 2002; Vanclay 2008). These places are multi-dimensional and can be conceptualized perceptually, sociologically, ideologically, politically, and/or ecologically (Gruenewald 2003). Working from these assumptions, a child’s role as ‘place-maker’ saturates all other aspects of identity development. The relationship between reader identity and place identity is a critical line of inquiry for place-conscious and environmental educators whose work is often undervalued by policies that emphasize achievement in isolated math and literacy skills. Rather than cursorily integrating place-conscious pedagogies and environmental values
into standardized literacy curricula, research aimed at better understanding the complex relationships between reader identity and place identity in both theory and practice can inform a more meaningful and holistic approach to place-based literacy instruction.

**Recent research**
Bai et al. (2010) challenge the rhetoric prevalent in environmental education that implies transactions between book and reader are directly and obviously mediated by content, concluding that this relationship is much more complex than is generally implied through practice. In previous work, I have built on this assumption to argue that high-quality imaginative literature, while often abandoned for more directly didactic environmental texts, reorients young readers to their immediate environment in developmentally appropriate ways and should be an important component of place-based curricula in the early grades (author), a conclusion also reached by Freestone and O’Toole (2016).

Recent research in the fields of children’s literature, literacy education and new literacies have acknowledged the need to explore children’s broader landscapes of practice to better understand the dynamic relationships between young readers, book and environment. This body of scholarship primarily positions children as meaning makers who do not just consume place knowledge through cognitive processes, but are awakened to the sensitivities of place through aesthetic readings that are felt and experienced (Carroll 2011; Dewan 2010; Dobrin and Kidd 2004; Egoff 1988; Esrock 1994; Norton 1999; Pierce 1994; Ryan 2001; Slater 2015). Others have looked at the permeable boundaries between real and fictional landscapes from the perspective of the budding independent reader (Bhadury 2013; Blackford 2004; Jones 1996; Magnusson 2012; Meek 2003; Nelson 2006; Wilkie-STIBBS 2005). These fields have also approached the topic of place by looking at the politics of literacy within specific place contexts, concluding that reading identity is influenced by social structures, and with critical awareness, can also alter social structures (Kendall 2008; Leander and Sheehy 2011; Nichols, Nixon, and Rowsell 2011; Robison 2011).

**Conceptual framework**

**Studying literacy life-worlds**
Drawing from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and Rosenblatt’s reader-response theory (1994), Robison (2011) argues that studying literacy practices through a phenomenological lens can help construct a more comprehensive view of literacy (2). This broader view of literacy, one that goes beyond cognitive ways of knowing, extends the study of children’s responses to literature beyond traditionally conceived ‘literacy events’ into the child’s literacy life-world (Kendall 2008). The literacy life-world includes the acts of reading or literary affinity (such as referencing a story or using a certain style of speaking or writing that is
reminiscent of literary prose or fiction) that one takes for granted as one does them’ (Robison 2011, 2). While these scholars do not necessarily advocate for place-conscious pedagogies, their work expands the line of inquiry proposed by Bai, Elza, Kovacs, and Romanycia to include the dynamic ways being a child reader in a readerly landscape develops particular sensibilities that support and promote a love of place, as well as the transactional nature of children’s reader identity and their identity as place-makers.

**Place-making in middle childhood**

Often times, the centrality of place in everyday lived experiences is taken for granted. However, children’s embodied engagement with the environment, as well as engagement with place through narrative or some form of education (Findlay 2008), develops a *sense of place*, the perception or awareness of living in a distinctive place (Ryden 1993). Having autonomy and proprietorship over spaces in the home are an important part of children’s psychosocial development in early childhood, such as a toy corner or bedroom (Chawla 1992; Green 2013). As children enter middle childhood, caregivers often grant them greater independent geographic accessibility that extends beyond the home into the neighborhood (Chawla 1992; Hart 1979; Sobel 2008).

During these periods of exploration, children are often observed as constructors of special places, such as carving out personal nooks behind furniture in early childhood (Green 2013) or building forts and bush houses in middle childhood (Sobel 1993). Adults often interpret these place-making experiences in childhood as having a significant impact on adult identity and perspective and are memories they fondly return to on a regular basis (Chawla 1990; Cobb 1977; Goodenough 2003; Sobel 1993).

**Reader identity in middle childhood**

By the time children receive formal reading instruction, they have already begun to develop their own identity as readers. Reading experiences, such as being read aloud to by loved ones and having opportunities to explore books independently (Doake 1985; Holdaway 1982; Meek 1988; Owocki and Goodman 2002), lead to the formation of a child’s positive expectations for books as aesthetic and social objects.

As children become more independent readers in middle childhood, those who consider themselves to be ‘ardent readers’ outside of school often develop a separate reading identity to assume in formal literacy settings in order to ‘succeed’ (Alvermann and Xu 2003). Out-of-school reading experiences look much different than reading done in school. Even when teachers use imaginative literature in elementary classrooms, it is often to promote a prescriptive instructional message,
theme, or skill rather than as a way to nurture children’s social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing (Greene 1978; Lewis 2015; Nodelman and Reimer 2003).

By contrast, in home and community contexts, as well as the informal spaces in school settings, read-ing identity is shaped by the cultures in which a child participates and identifies with, the accessibility and autonomy afforded by their material landscapes and the interests sparked by their lived experiences. From a phenomenological perspective, reading identity often fluidly traverses literary landscapes and fictional ones and is experienced through many different modes of understanding (Esrock 1994; Ryan 2001). Children’s self-awareness and reflectivity as readers often involves the process of the reading experience, as well as the physical and social contexts in which this engagement occurs (Bhadury 2013; Clark 2010; Curtis and Carter 2003; Grenby 2011; Magnusson 2012; Nelson 2006).

The influences of childhood reading experiences

Beyond the implied assumption in the traditions of literary theory that books influence individual and collective identity, a number of projects have specifically documented the perceived influence of childhood reading experiences on identity development (Cassidy 2008; Cohen and MacKeith 1991; Goodenough 2006; McCabe 2014; Tatar 2009). Interviewing hundreds of participants over a decade, Tatar (2009) inquired into whether or not children’s books can ‘change us.’ She concluded that like the traveler who returns from a trip with an artifact to memorialize the experience, readers return from their reading with ‘words and images that resonate in mysterious ways with real-life experiences,’ (205) creating opportunities for a shift in the way readers see themselves and interact in the world (90).

Method

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore five adult participants’ experiences of place within their childhood literacy life-worlds. By using purposeful sampling (Patton 2001) to select participants who believe their childhood reader identity has significantly influenced their sense of place, this project aimed to describe and interpret the transactions between reading experiences and developing place identity in middle childhood (approximately ages six to thirteen) and the meaning these experiences can hold in adulthood. Middle childhood, the stage of development in which we often acquire reading independence, such as the ability to read by oneself and to select reading material, is also characterized by significant increases in children’s geographic accessibility and independence (Sobel 2008). This study was guided by the central research question: In what ways have participants’ childhood reading experiences functioned as pedagogical landscapes of place-consciousness?
Interviews

Interviews served as the primary method of data collection for this project and the three-interview series model of phenomenological interviewing guided this approach (Seidman 2013). Each participant was interviewed for approximately one hour on three separate occasions. In the first interview (focused life history), the participant was asked to share his or her ‘place biography:’ a biography told through the narration of the places that have held some significance in his or her life. The goal of the second interview was for participants to narrate their history as child readers, focusing on favorite texts, reading experiences in various contexts (such as home, school and community) and memories that represent significant touchstone events. Final interviews focused on reflecting on the meaning of these childhood transactions between development as place-makers and newly independent readers. Visual and artifactual data were also collected during interviews. A number of ethnographic and arts-based research methods were used in the interview process, such as mapping (Cormack, Green, and Reid 2008; Powell 2010). Participants were also invited to share any personal artifacts they felt were significant to include and to create an arts-based prompt response for the final reflective interview, which allowed me to better understand participants’ experiences in ways that are not possible through verbal communication alone. Participants shared artifacts, such as books, photographs, and other childhood ephemera.

Data analysis and interpretation

Guided by the study’s conceptual framework and research questions, the data was analyzed using phenomenological methods of ‘explication,’ a form of thematic analysis described by Groenewald (2004). This form of analysis allowed me to analyze interviews and participant-generated artifacts for emerging meanings and interpretations of the phenomena addressed in the data rather than establishing pre-defined codes. While aiming to describe the phenomenon I was exploring, this method also allowed me to look closely at the meaning these experiences held for participants, both individually and across cases.

Limitations of the study

Broadly speaking, some of the limitations of this study are inherent in the methodology. While one of the major goals of phenomenological inquiry is to describe the essence of a phenomenon through the perspective of participants, it will never be possible to perfectly understand another person’s consciousness (Giorgi and Giorgi 2008). Seidman (2013) was referencing the challenges of phenomenological inquiry when he noted, ‘Lived experience is what we experience as it happens, but we can only get at what we experience after it happens through a reconstruction of that experience’ (18). To work against this challenge, especially considering participants’ narratives were retrospective, it was important that I conduct a thorough literature review to get a sense of the existing
scholarship on similar phenomena: literature that employs a wide range of methods. This also made triangulation an essential part of the data collection and analysis process.

Another limitation of this study arises from the recruitment of adult participants rather than child participants. There are particular generational gaps that must be reconciled when implications of this study are considered. First, the high-stakes testing culture that now shapes public school curricula was either nonexistent or at its genesis at the time participants were going through elementary school. Secondly, the nature of text has evolved and changed tremendously in the last twenty years both in schools and in children’s lives outside of school. The ready accessibility of an ever-increasing number of digital texts redefines reading landscapes in contemporary childhood, as well as children’s experiences of place (Gustafson 2014). Future research should be conducted to address these gaps.

Findings

Four themes emerged from my analysis of interview data: Repositioning, Transportation, Nesting and Layering. Each of these themes represents a particular type of reader-place transaction that can be thought about in terms of a child’s disposition and intentionality (his or her actions toward achieving a particular goal or desire), cognizance (the degree to which the child is aware of the goal), and context (the foregrounding and backgrounding of the various dimensions of the place(s) in which the child is situated).

Collectively, these themes characterize the nature of participants’ engagement with ‘place’ within their everyday lived experiences as increasingly independent readers and place-makers. It is evident from participants’ accounts of these experiences that the relationships between these types of inter-actions are fluid and dynamic. Place experiences overlap with one another and are not isolated to one instance of time and location; they can occur over extended periods of time off and on and often involve movement from one ‘place’ to another, including the movement between inner and outer worlds.

Repositioning

One type of place experience described by participants was a conceptual repositioning of themselves within the unique social and cultural dimensions of the inner and outer places they dwelled; instances in which they saw themselves differently in relation to their environment. Repositioning, as opposed to the term positioning, connotes some level of intention or awareness that a change in position has occurred (e.g. ‘I was there, but now I am here’ or ‘I thought of myself like that, but now I think of myself like this’).
There were instances of repositioning within participants’ reading landscapes in which books functioned as artifacts or memorials of lived experiences, as well as instances in which books functioned as intellectual objects. Encountering new ideas and ways of being through reading was one way children engaged with place through repositioning. Violet describes the impact of her ‘New York books’ on her developing place identity:

I loved New York when I was growing up … You know, it being so different from anything like New York and so that was just like a far off, amazing land to me. And also Iowa at that time, it’s not so much anymore, but Iowa was really homogeneous. It was not diverse at all … I grew up as a Jew in Iowa, and the town I lived in was like 95% Catholic … The whole time that I was growing up in Iowa that was what I was fantasizing about. Reading Harriet the Spy, reading other Louise Fitzhugh books, too … Even like picture books … I mean like, The House on East 88th Street by Bernard Waber. You know what I mean? But, basically, any series that was set in New York. Eloise … obsessed with it … (Violet, Interview One Transcript)

This conceptual repositioning was also expressed in the form of resistance to reading, often in formal school settings.

Participants described a cultural awareness of books as a source of knowledge and power in middle childhood. Participants engaged in this discourse in the instances in which they highlighted the physical size, volume or physical proximity of books in relation to themselves. Sam describes his intrigue with the large encyclopedic volumes shelved in his childhood living room:

I can’t tell you how frequently, but quite often I would take a volume out and just start reading. Just cause the many different topics I enjoyed, too. You picked out the letter M, whatever was under M, you know. But, often times we had then, where a lot of other students did not have them at home. And often times, the teacher [would ask that we bring] the World Book in on that particular topic or whatever it might have been. So, we did that … (Sam, Interview Two Transcript)

Participants also described seeing books as artifacts that served as a source of identity reinforcement and proprietorship. The collections of books in their environment memorialized prior transportive reading experiences, rooted them in a broader reading culture, and reinforced their familial and cultural identities. Showing me the inside covers of a number of his books from childhood, Cliff discusses how his mother documented when and from whom he received each book in his childhood collection. He also received books as gifts for special holidays, such as his ‘Adoption Day’ and ‘Airplane Day,’ the day he arrived in the United States from Korea after being adopted. He adds,

I do remember Chinese Eyes. I remember that’s one of those ones that Mom got us when we were younger and she was trying to tell us about our heritage. So, at least we knew where we came from. (Cliff, Interview Two Transcript)
Finally, participants engaged in a repositioning in relation to the physical environment in the sense that locations or landmarks within their everyday lived experiences took on new meaning when considered within their literacy life-world. Some of these landmarks were unique to the participants’ reading landscapes and were not included in participants’ place biography. Other landmarks overlapped with participants’ broader landscape of lived experiences, but were foregrounded in particular reading experiences. In some cases, adults were instrumental in bringing particular aspects of the physical environment into the foreground of participants’ literacy life-worlds.

**Transportation**

Participants expressed that their desire to read often came from their desire to be imaginatively trans-ported to a place that was different from their own, a literary landscape where they could engage in new experiences. While this was most often discussed in terms of fiction, both picture books and chapter books, nonfiction and biographies satisfied participants’ desire for transportation as well. Sam recalls that the biographies he read as a child about the American frontiersmen constructed very specific imagery of the American West that he still draws on in his adult reading (Sam, Interview Three Transcript). Most often, the transportation occurred while participants were reading. In other ways, the experience of existing in a fictional landscape preceded or lingered beyond the act of reading through the child’s fantasies. When participants felt as if they had been transported to another place during the process of engaging with a text, they were left with memories of experiencing events in those literary landscapes in a similar way that they could remember experiences in ‘real places.’ As adults, participants were still able to recount scenes from their favorite childhood books with vivid imagery and sensory detail of the fictional landscape in which the scenes occurred. Violet describes one of her favorite scenes from one of her favorite childhood books:

> But this is the one where they go into New York and they go to the basement of Macy’s … [It] was like this gourmet food place and they go and Mr. Pignati loves gourmet food and so it’s this really vivid scene where they go and they’re picking all these different types of products off the shelves. Things that like the two high schoolers have never tried before, and he buys all of it for them and they go back to his house … (Violet, Interview Two Transcript)

**Nesting**

Within their reading landscapes, participants often went through a process of nesting, in which they manipulated their physical environment in preparation for the act of reading. Participants often reorganized their existing environment to suit their needs or would create new ‘places’ within their places in which to read.
This reorganization was sometimes unobservable and would happen in the children’s imagination, such as Maddie imagining herself reading in her daybed as Meg Murray from L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time*. Virginia describes her favorite place to go and read in the Catholic School she attended as a child:

> It was called The Upper Room … I remember all the Pentecostal flames on the thing and you would go up and the nuns were like, ‘You can go up there and have that space.’ And I loved The Upper Room, because it was just what it sounded like. It was a treehouse kind of thing where you walked up and it was above the school … It was this little slopsey dormered room … You would pass by the stairs for it … It was right next to the bookstore and I remember that. Like, ‘What are those stairs?’ I wanted to see where the stairs led. There could be something … Narnia could be there. (Virginia, *Interview One Transcript*)

In some cases, the children engaged in a seeking process to find a pre-existing place to read that would provide the environmental conditions they needed. The process of seeking is imaginative in the sense that participants had to look at the everyday, taken-for-granted places in their environment as potential places to read. Sam sometimes went to the spot in his yard where the grass was especially soft and lush and an overgrown bush provided adequate shade to read his comic books. (Sam, *Interview Two Transcript*) Virginia would read under her grandmother’s dining room table where she could be alone, but the ticking of a favorite cuckoo clock could still be heard. (Virginia, *Interview One Transcript*)

Sometimes participants’ preparation to read was ritualistic and would span over hours or days. Violet says she would ‘troll’ the stacks in the children’s section at her local library before choosing a book to check out. (Violet, *Interview One Transcript*) Virginia’s mother would frequently drive her twenty-five minutes to the public library where she would check out stacks of books and pile them up in the order she wanted to read them. She would often save the synopsis on the back of the book, the acknowledgements and the information about the author to read after she finished the book. (Violet, *Interview Two Transcript*) Maddie would visit the book shelves at her local library in a particular order. (Maddie, *Interview Two Transcript*). Selling the rural newspaper, *Grit*, around his neighborhood provided Sam with regular new reading material on his topics of interest and he would faithfully ‘clip’ many of these articles and store them in labeled shoeboxes under his bed to reread. (Sam, *Interview Two Transcript*)

**Layering**

Another type of place experience within participants’ literacy life-worlds was *layering*, in which participants attempted to embody, in a very physical sense, a literary world by layering it on top of their immediate environment. Whereas transportation was the primarily cognitive process of a child entering into a fictional landscape, usually during the act of reading a text, layering involves a child’s employment of various senses in an attempt to bring the inner world of a book outward. Transportation is the process of *going there*, while layering is the
process of bringing ‘there’ here.

Participants engaged in the process of layering through imaginative play and through transactions with physical artifacts in their environment. Because Maddie’s sister was five years her senior, she had a number of hand-me-down books to read at home that her sister no longer wanted. One of those books, *The Boxcar Children* by Gertrude Chandler Warner, was the inspiration for imaginative play, a phenomenon that occurred often. When she was around nine or ten years old, Maddie took everything out of her bedroom closet and pretended it was a boxcar. She propped open the sliding wooden doors to vent the smoke from the cooking pot she had hung from the clothing rod (a small plastic Easter basket). Maddie went on to describe the impact of L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* on the way she saw her bedroom:

I remember when I first read *A Wrinkle in Time*, the main character Meg Murry, her bedroom was up in the attic. I had my own room at this house. And the first bed that I had at this house was a daybed. It was a white metal frame. And in the book, her bed, it talks about brass … The brass rails on the headboard or something like that. And so I remember pretending that my daybed … that my room was an attic room and that I was in the same type of place she was reading. And then I would look out to my backyard and pretend that the Star Watching Rock would be out in my backyard … (Maddie, *Interview Two Transcript*)

Because she did not have any siblings, Virginia was often the only child in the house when she would visit her grandmother and her grandmother’s sisters who also lived there. To ‘get away from all of the old people’ (Virginia, *Interview One Transcript*) she would lie under the table in the dining room and color or read. She describes a special clock in the space that she always thought might somehow be connected to Narnia,

So, I would be under the table and we have … There was a cuckoo clock in the dining room and it would always … Like this gently ticking sound and I loved that. It was just, it was really peaceful and I was totally convinced that … You know in the *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* when they have the picture of the Dawn Treader and then the ship comes to life? Like, they go in through the picture? I was totally convinced that cuckoo clock was gonna like … Yeah, it never happened! [laughs] (Virginia, *Interview One Transcript*)

The layering of fictional worlds over the immediate physical environment can also be arts-based or aesthetic. Describing the books her parents kept alongside their Grolier Encyclopedias, Virginia adds:

There was this anthology of poetry. And I remember reading that and I was just amazed at the rhythms when you would read. Especially Tennyson. And then I would read that out loud and walk around to the beat as I was reading it. (Virginia, *Interview Two Transcript*)
An engagement with place through layering can also take the form of physical relocation. Sam connected his interest in visiting historical places to his love of historical fiction and nonfiction. He shared:

My mother’s one sister lived near Antietam. So, we actually went there and that was before they commercialized it the way it is now. I mean, people had these little, like a fruit stand type thing, on their properties around Antietam, selling things that they had dug up themselves … Most of the time I tried to find, whether they be pamphlets or something from the gift shop type thing, something that I could take back home and read more about it. It wasn’t just buying the metal cannon or something. It was something to take back with me. (Sam, Interview Two Transcript)

Discussion

*The place-conscious pedagogy of reading landscapes*

An underlying assumption of the conceptual framework of this study is that all lived experiences are rooted in place, but as Chawla (1992) concludes, children ‘need to be brought from rootedness to a sense of place through education, which creates enough separation between the self and its surroundings to allow conscious appreciation’ (83). The goal of place-based education is to facilitate these kinds of interactions between children and their local places, so that children are not just acting as place-makers, but that they are also, to some degree, self-aware. The findings of this study suggest a number of ways that the nature of children’s reading experiences, significantly shaped by their active place-making, bring the unique characteristics of place into the foreground of reader perception in middle childhood, evoke a sense of place, and nurture conscious appreciation of both inner and outer worlds; serving as an effective pedagogical landscape of place-consciousness.

The four themes that emerged from data analysis – Repositioning, Transportation, Nesting and Layering – emphasize the way child readers come to know and appreciate their environment through multiple ‘ways of knowing,’ not just cognitive ones (Noddings 1992). Here, it is especially important to consider, perhaps, the most obvious way that reading experiences function as pedagogical landscapes of place-consciousness is by encountering new ideas through reading books by way of *repositioning*. Most of the scholarship regarding children’s literature in place-based classrooms has been grounded in this premise (Bigger and Webb 2010; Heard and McDonough 2009; Murphey 2002; Wells and Zeece 2007). However, the findings of this study give us new ways to think about this notion from a phenomenological perspective that considers children’s intersecting roles as readers and place-makers.
As newly independent readers in middle childhood, the participants in this study often carved out their reading landscape by seeking texts that allow them to engage in new experiences that differed from their everyday lives. Through aesthetic transactions with books, often books that were self-selected and read at the child’s leisure, children encountered new ideas that prompted them to conceptually reposition themselves within the unique dimensions of their inner and outer worlds and begin to see themselves differently in relation to their environment. Blackford’s (2004) work in literacy research has demonstrated how the process of entering a fictional world through reading (transportation) requires child readers to reflect on their world ‘outside of the book’ for comparison. Polkinghorne (1988) highlighted the unique affordances of literary forms of narrative to prompt children to consider their conceptual positioning within a place, writing, ‘… the stability of the written word makes it a separate form of communication, something beyond mere record of the spoken word. Written literature functions as a communication not of presence but of distance’ (74).

Reflecting the importance of imaginative play in middle childhood, this desire to encounter new ideas through books and to be transported to fantastical literary landscapes reinforces the work of Bai et al. (2010) who challenge the notion that transactions between book and reader are mediated by content in very direct ways. As Carroll (2011) concludes, fictional landscapes contain most of the same ‘textures’ of real places, such as ‘geographical, cultural, and socio-political concerns’(1). Therefore, books that are explicitly place-conscious have the potential to reorient child readers toward their local landscapes, but so can other books with which they aesthetically engage.

Studying children’s literacy life-worlds in middle childhood, rather than what might be tradition- ally considered ‘isolated literacy events,’ extends the possible pedagogical landscape beyond cognitive transactions with books and into the wider range of children’s lived experiences as readers and place-makers. Often in middle childhood, participants’ aesthetic engagement with books inspired and scaffolded narrative forms of imaginative play that foregrounded their role as place-makers; a method of layering. Unt (2010) concludes that an aesthetic experience of place accompanies imaginative play as children’s bodies move about in a space and make use of artifacts of their environment. She posits that these ‘games’ of imaginative play have a residual impact on the way children see that place and assign meaning to it after the play has ended. While imaginative play is not unique to children’s reading
landscapes, participants in this study posited that play inspired by the books they loved as children was often intended to recapture the affect they experienced while reading, in many cases, a feeling of ‘firstness,’ (Meek 2003) and further perpetuated their desire to read.

**The rootedness of reader history**

Participants’ ‘touchstone memories’ in their histories as readers, those that they saw as formative moments or ones they reflect on often in adulthood, included many different kinds of memories. Unt (2010) describes the way children’s dynamic engagement with place through play fluidly and continuously foregrounds and backgrounds various aspects of the physical environment in which they are situated. This concept was illustrated in participants’ narration of important memories in their histories as readers. Depending on the meaning the experiences held for them, they elected to include or leave out descriptions of the physical context in which the memories occurred to varying degrees.

One kind of memory participants described was memories of reading with someone else (i.e. Sam with his friends, Maddie with her teacher, Cliff with his grandmother, Virginia with her mother). In these memories, the physical environmental context in which these interpersonal reading experiences occurred were barely mentioned at all. Instead, interactions with people who were key figures in their childhood reading landscape were foregrounded. From a phenomenological perspective of place, these memories emphasize participants’ perceived position within the social and cultural systems that characterize their place (Gruenewald 2003).

Participants also recalled instances in which they found a special book through their own means or a book was given to them as a gift. In these memories, sometimes books are foregrounded as artifacts of place that carry personal, interpersonal and cultural meanings (Grenby 2011; Lerer 2012; Pahl and Rowsell 2010; Reid-Walsh 2013) and can be known by readers in a perceptual, embodied way (Wason- Ellam 2010). Participants have preserved some of the books that were important artifacts of their childhood and in some cases, have set out to acquire copies of books they loved as children, but no longer own. In this way, books function as a tangible memento or souvenir of past reading experiences in place (Tatar 2009).

In other instances, these kinds of memories foreground the characteristics of the physical location in which the book was found or the reader’s engagement with place in the process of acquiring the book, such as Sam’s memories of surveying the racks of comic books at the local five and dime store and Violet’s memories of ‘trolling’ the library stacks. Rather than emphasizing the artifact, these memories highlight the child-readers’ evolving autonomy as readers and place-makers and the meaning they are making of landmarks in their reading landscapes through the movement of their bodies. This reflects the orientation toward exploration and discovery that is often characteristic of place-makers in middle childhood (Hart 1979; Sobel 2008).
Most often, participants recalled memorable scenes from their favorite childhood books as touchstone memories in their history as a reader. The idea of imagined experiences in childhood constituting vivid and tangible adult memories is a powerful one. To some degree, this notion has been considered by scholars working in immersion theory and the affective, sensorial nature of reading experiences that transport readers (Esrock 1994; Ryan 2001). Some of participants’ memories of the fictional landscapes they engaged with during aesthetic reading (such as Maddie’s memory of being in Meg Murry’s attic bedroom) blurred with instances in which participants’ layered this remembered visual imagery onto their physical environment through instances of imaginative play or artifactual prompting. These memories foregrounded the child-place interaction and emphasized the role of story in reinforcing children’s personal investment in their immediate environment (Unt 2010).

**Readers’ special places**

In regard to the relationship between childhood reader identity and special childhood places, the findings of this study build upon the existing scholarship of children’s special places. The increase in geographic accessibility and autonomy that children often experience in middle childhood can promote a disposition of exploration that children express through the identification or creation of secretive places, such as forts or bush houses (Hart 1979; Sobel 2008). Within these places, children can exercise control over the environment and their activities therein, which, like imaginative play, can play an important role in psychological development (Chawla 1992).

As children, the participants in this study had a number of ‘special places’ in middle childhood, such as playhouses and closets, where they could exercise control over a space. Sometimes, by conceiving of a place differently or reorganizing it spatially, these special places would suit participants’ needs as a context for reading. Virginia’s special place underneath her grandmother’s dining room table and Maddie’s reconceptualization of her bedroom as Meg Murry’s attic bedroom were examples of this. Some of the participants indicated that sometimes the physical environment in which they chose to read shared some narrative thread of intertextuality with the kind of book they were preparing to read. An example of this is Virginia’s desired proximity to the cuckoo clock in her grandmother’s dining room as she read her fantasy novels. To her, the clock represented the possibility of entering a portal to another world and validated, in a very tangible way, the legitimacy of the books she was reading under the table (Wilkie-Stibbs 2005). On rare occasions, a reader’s awareness of this intertextuality occurs by chance rather than orchestration, such as when Virginia found reading in The Upper Room to be enchanting.
Other times, in preparation for engagement with a special book, participants found or created different special places that were specifically intended to facilitate particular kinds of reading experiences. Maddie would cover her bed with a blanket to insulate herself from the outside world. Sam would go to the spot in his yard where the grass was extra lush. The distinct embodied and imaginative properties of reading experiences required the reader/place-makers to consider the affordances and limitations of particular spaces as contexts for reading (Grenby 2011; Leander and Sheehy 2011).

**Formal and informal pedagogical places**

Handler Spitz (2006) points out the artificiality of the conceptual boundaries we often impose on young children’s perceptions of experience. She writes,

Children’s wishes, dreams, and fantasies feed into their immediate sensory perceptions, and their aesthetic lives in turn shape the contours of their fantasies. This interdependence is so pronounced in early childhood because during those brief years the aggressively occupying armies of compartmentalization have not yet fully colonized our mental landscape.

(4)

The findings of this study suggest that by middle childhood, the ‘armies of compartmentalization’ are beginning to creep into children’s awareness of space politics. While Violet, Maddie, Cliff and Virginia all acknowledged the consistency of their reader identity at home and in the informal spaces of school (their interactions outside the constraints of formal literacy curricula), they all also experienced disruptions in their reading landscape as they moved physically between these two contexts.

Within participants’ informal home and community pedagogical spaces, their engagement in their reading landscapes were unbound by time and narrowly defined modes of learning. In these contexts, their reader identity was constructed through extended periods of unstructured time, engagement with artifacts of place, the ability to physically move their body and meaningful interactions with other readers. The rootedness of their reader histories in the many textures of their immediate physical environment also reinforced reader identity and scaffolded the expansion of their reading landscapes.

By contrast, the formal structures of school reading curriculum felt like a foreign landscape to these readers. Maddie’s school reading experiences have left her with a distaste for reading in any space that remotely resembles a traditional classroom. In order to protect their reading landscapes, participants constructed conceptual boundaries between placeless ‘school reading’ and ‘real’ rooted reading, and had to negotiate when they could engage their reader identity within the liminal spaces of the school building (Kendall 2008; Leander and Sheehy 2011; Nichols, Nixon, and Rowsell 2011).
Conclusion

The meaningful experience of place within the reading landscapes of middle childhood, by way of *repositioning, transportation, nesting* and *layering*, have been recounted by the participants of this study as primarily occurring outside the context of school. It was a primary aim of this study to be able to describe and interpret this phenomenon, so that place-conscious curricula could be more responsive to the nature of these experiences, and therefore, design reading instruction that nurtures children’s sense of place, and at the same time, promote an authentic desire to read and to be a reader. The findings of this study extend the ideas that have previously been put forth by scholars in various fields, as well as provide new insights with curricular implications.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that an elementary place-conscious literacy curricula should validate and promote aesthetic engagement with a wide variety of literary genres, especially works of imaginative literature. Including imaginative literature in a place-based classroom nurtures the desire for exploration and alterity that characterize much of children’s place-making activities in middle childhood. Activities already well established in literature-based classrooms, such as book clubs, guided reading groups and unstructured reading time could be integrated into the kind of project-based instructional design that we often see in place-based classrooms. The work of Burke and Cutter-Mackenzie (2010), Heard and McDonough (2009), Payne (2010) and Sobel (2008) present a number of imaginative projects that could integrate an immersion in local place with an immersion in imaginative literature.

This project found that as self-motivated, independent readers, children conceive of ‘reading experiences’ much more broadly than isolated reading events. Their reading landscapes are marked by places that carry specific meaning in regard to their reader identity, social and cultural relationships that govern interest and accessibility, reading rituals steeped in the unique textures of their immediate environment and so on. Rather than narrowly conceiving of children’s identity as readers and place-makers by the texts they read and observable isolated reading events in the classroom, a place-conscious literacy curriculum should support a *culture* of readers as place-makers, where children’s histories as readers are honored in instructional design and the unique textures of their reading landscapes are seen as valid pedagogical landscapes of place-consciousness beyond the school building. Instead of pushing ‘school reading’ outward into children’s lived experiences, we should be bringing the rootedness of ‘real reading’ into our classroom practices.

Finally, place-conscious elementary reading classrooms must also acknowledge the role the body plays in children’s reading landscapes. The findings of this study highlight that participants’ memorable experiences of place within their reading landscapes in middle childhood often included a literal search for or construction of a special place to read a particular text (*nesting*), the movement of the body in *layering* textual landscapes onto their immediate physical environment and the manipulation of artifacts as intertextual objects,
souvenirs of reading experiences or access points to fictional landscapes. Pahl and Rowsell (2010) have written extensively about the use of artifacts in place-conscious classrooms and Payne’s (2010) work considering reading in ‘nature’s classroom’ is a good place to start in thinking about extending the geographic accessibility of in-school reading time. Scholarship in the area of child-centered school and classroom design also has a lot to offer in thinking about how we might integrate children’s nesting practices into our classroom space (Clark 2010; Curtis and Carter 2003; Edwards, Gandini, and Forman 2012; Hille 2011; O’Donnell Wicklund, Peterson, and Bruce Mau 2010; Tarr 2004).

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**Notes on contributor**

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