

## **The Place of Outdoor Play in a School Community: A Case Study of Recess Values**

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### **Abstract**

*Children's outdoor play in school may forge meaningful, lasting environmental and community connections, yet it has rarely been explored as a component of place-based education. This article describes an ethnographic case study of recess play values in a small, independent school for dyslexic children that offers multiple choices for recess play, including traditional playground equipment and a wooded area. Ecological psychology provided the theoretical framework to describe the values observed over several years of children's recess play, as well as those expressed in interviews with parents, teachers, administrators and alumni. Results suggest that the strong preference for "woods play" areas during the elementary grades is linked to the diversity of affordances ("action possibilities") present, as well as the opportunity to participate in a dynamic, creative children's culture. The dual use of the woods for teaching and play further enhanced students' sense of connection with and competence in selected play settings.*

**Keywords:** outdoor play, school recess, fort play, natural playgrounds, dyslexia

*This experience of the good life in childhood, with the development of competence and adaptability, is the best preparation we know for meeting the demands of later schooling and of a world of rapid change and complexity. Specific training is obsolete before it is mastered, but intellectual curiosity, skill in learning, and creative flexibility in the face of new problems are dependable resources with which to meet whatever the future may hold of challenge and opportunity.*

From

the Jemicy School Philosophy (1972)

### **What Comes through the Door**

When I was preparing many years ago to begin teaching science full time at my school, I met with the departing teacher, who had promised to go over my future responsibilities with me. Though I had taught many different subjects in elementary classrooms for ten years, I had no formal background in science and was somewhat nervous about this transition. "Well, what do you want to know?" she asked, as my gaze wandered around a room filled with all manner of animals, plants, and artifacts. I replied that I had hoped to see the curriculum from which I would work and, obligingly, she dug through her files and pulled out a rudimentary scope and sequence. I noted with some relief that I had at least basic knowledge of the concepts and primary areas of instruction listed. "But," she added, "you may not be needing that for very long." She nodded toward the glass doors opening onto a grassy field, which dipped down to a stand of thick woods. "You'll be teaching whatever comes through that door."

The meaning of this statement quickly became apparent as I learned to conduct spontaneous lessons on ring-necked snakes, Osage oranges, box turtles, and the hundreds of other local animal and plant species, rocks and human artifacts that children brought in from the steep hillside and streambed where they spent their recesses. We spent much of our class time outdoors as well, discovering the natural contexts of these captivating aspects of the local ecosystem, returning to the classroom with new knowledge grounded in direct experience. Having spent my own rural childhood doing these very things, I relished the process of re-learning an outdoor environment through children's eyes.

The treasures provided by our school grounds created the cornerstone of my nascent place-based science curriculum. The deeper meanings of "teach whatever comes through the door" revealed themselves more gradually as I discovered other important learning dimensions of the place that is our school community. The children who enter my classroom spend only a fraction of their day in this and other classroom spaces. What they bring with them are not only the portable items that intrigued them enough to collect, but a host of outdoor experiences that imbue this place with their own and collective values and meanings. Through my door come young people who are learning to view the world as potential opportunity for action and interaction, with competence grounded in firsthand encounters at school.

### **Researching the Place of Outdoor Play in School**

Over my years as a science and environmental educator, I became intrigued by the significance of the interstices in the school day between formal classroom

instruction, and specifically by the meanings and values that children held regarding outdoor play at school. The ways in which children encounter environmental elements through free play at recess time, and how these experiences contribute to a developing and lasting sense of place, are matters that have received less attention than they deserve as vital components of environmental and place-based instruction. This may be attributed to the simple fact that most schools do not provide opportunities for children to explore or learn from natural landscapes, in either formal or informal ways (Rivkin 1995). Schools often lack the physical landscape to provide such opportunities, or do not recognize them as important to the school's mission or curriculum (Tranter and Malone 2004). Some reviews and studies of children's outdoor play have focused on the important, often overlooked connection of play to environmental or social learning (Lester and Maudsley 2006; Tovey 2007; Powell 2007) and refer specifically to the development of a sense of place through imaginative play (Blizard and Schuster 2004; Derr 2006). Research focusing on children's values in relation to their school play environments is much less common (tending instead to consider adult perspectives), and it is this gap that the study presented here seeks to address.

This paper provides a perspective on the role of play in place-based education through describing ethnographic doctoral research conducted from 2006-2009 on children's play preferences and activities at the Jemicy School, the small independent school where I teach in a suburban area outside Baltimore, Maryland. Jemicy began in the early 1970s as a summer camp for dyslexic students, and its success led to the creation of a small independent school which now serves children in grades 1-12 with language-based learning differences. Recently cited by local media as "best school for non-traditional learners" (*Baltimore Magazine* 2010, 104), Jemicy's lower and middle school campus functions as a natural laboratory for empirical examination of learning through diverse play choices. It offers both standard playground equipment and spaces to children ages 6 to 14, as well as the option of spending free time playing on a densely wooded two-acre hillside bounded by a small stream (Figures 1 and 2). Practices such as fort building, trading of goods, and independent exploration have characterized Jemicy recesses since the school's inception. These same recess spaces, along with the woods, stream, and fields beyond the recess boundaries, are utilized for more formal instruction as well, in science, art, literature, physical education and other classes.

**Figure 1. Fort building**



**Figure 2. Woods store**



To understand how outdoor free play fit within this small school community, I developed research questions for succeeding levels of inquiry. From an empirical standpoint, I asked, "What values are associated with outdoor play at the Jemicy School?" This required gathering evidence of the recess values at Jemicy School and was answered primarily through the ethnographic methods of observation and interviews with members of the Jemicy School community. A second level of inquiry

occurred with the interpretation of collected data and centered on the nature of the relationship existing between children and their school play environment: "What is the association of these values to the child-environment relationship that occurs during and as a result of outdoor play at school?" The final level of inquiry addressed how the values associated with outdoor play in school could affect the sustainability of recess practices. It extended the findings of this study to implications for the future of outdoor play in school culture and elsewhere, and offered recommendations for continued research.

To specifically address the role of recess play in place-based education, the research presented here is framed using the following categories:

- defining place (theoretical perspectives of ecological psychology)
- describing place (using ethnographic case study methodology)
- experiencing place (presenting results through portraiture).

### **Defining Place: Viewing Recess Play through Theories of Ecological Psychology**

This study took the approach that "place" and its associated values exist within an ecological structure of nested systems. This structure begins with individual perception of what the environment offers (Gibson 1979) and extends through the social entity known as a behavior setting (Barker 1968), into the larger realm of local and distant cultural influences (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Using this theoretical framework, I define place in perceptual and relational terms as: *a multi-dimensional, ecological structure in which the members of a community perceive action possibilities present in the environment and act upon them according to the values and meanings associated with these potentials*. The bodies of theory that constitute this framework share the belief that human behavior can only be adequately described if it is regarded as situated in and attentive to the specific environmental context in which it occurs.

### **Affordances: Relating Place to Play**

James Gibson's theory of affordances views human action as primarily related to perception of what the physical environment can provide (Gibson 1979). An affordance can be thought of as an "action possibility" for an individual in relation to the environment, dependent on that individual's capabilities. Children's play behaviors are a particularly graphic enactment of the theory of affordances. Climbing, collecting, hiding, and running all clearly require attention to and action upon environmental elements such as slopes, rocks, trees, and surfaces by an individual who perceives and is able to make use of them. The theory of affordances implies a direct and personally significant relationship between child and environment based on his or her perception of what is available to be acted upon in a particular setting.

The word "value" as used in connection with affordances refers specifically to the perceived utility of an affordance (Reed 1996). For instance, a child perceives the structure of the climber, noting information such as the height of the steps, the steepness of the slide, or the number of children already on the swinging bridge.

This information provides *meaning* to the child about this particular set of affordances, but *value* is attached when the child determines whether she can reach the height of the steps (are they climb-able?), considers her descent (is the slide slide-able?) and assesses her peer group (are they join-able?). These values demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between a child and her environment, as each information-seeking encounter with an element requires direct spatial judgment and physical adjustment to a given set of circumstances.

To illustrate these ideas, I will introduce a boy named Alex, who exemplifies an 8 year old who plays daily in the Jemicy woods. He spends his time there along the stream, where he builds small dams and constructs elaborate water “filtration” systems with lengths of bamboo and artifacts such as metal pipes that he has found in the woods (Figure 3). The water and substrate in the stream, the dam-building materials, and the steep slope that Alex runs down each day are all affordances, or action opportunities that Alex perceives and values as they relate to his own abilities. A different child would apply a different set of values to these environmental elements, depending on his or her particular capabilities.

### Figure 3. Building a dam



During outdoor play in school, actions such as these rarely occur in social isolation. Children learn a great deal through the meaningful actions of others, or “the field of promoted action” (Reed 1996). This might include behaviors that are specifically intended to instruct, as when I show children how to identify poison ivy or an edible plant in the woods, or it might mean one child observing the actions of another (smashing open rocks, for instance, or navigating a tricky part of the playground climber). While certain types of physical play may be considered “movement for its

own sake" (Reed 1996, 93), serving no definable function for an organism, a great deal of cognitive development is served by children's attention to "unfilled meanings." By recognizing the symbolic or social meaning of another's action, and seeking to fill that meaning with their own actions, children engage in what we often call symbolic or imaginary play. Having the opportunity to develop such meanings through the context of outdoor play meets the definition of a "field of free action," (Reed 1996) or that which is chosen autonomously. Such free action is critical for the healthy development of a society whose members have evolved to perceive and engage directly with opportunities in the environment surrounding them.

This conception of social interaction includes a "field of constrained action" as well: activity that is restricted by a number of factors, such as parents' perception of danger or a society's disapproval of children ranging freely (Kyttä 2006). In demonstrating that differing degrees of child mobility in relation to different numbers of actualized affordances yield distinctly different levels of "child-friendliness," Kyttä suggested an ideal model, referred to as "Bullerby." This is a place of rich affordances where children are able to move about and explore freely, and mirrors the "experience of the good life" model envisioned in Jemicy School's philosophy.

### **Behavior Settings: The Social Context of Play**

Behavior settings, as conceived by Roger Barker (1968), arise from the collective activity of a group, in relation to specific environmental features. In addition to being created by social activity, they constrain and structure the actions of participants (Heft 2001, 260). Each of Jemicy School's play settings contains a specific, bounded, identifiable place along with the participants who establish and maintain its social dynamic over time. Understanding how a particular behavior setting works begins by asking the question, "What goes on here?" (Barker 1968) and using meticulous observational data to construct a sense of the whole. Affordances are part of every behavior setting, and behavior settings create circumstances in which affordances can be actualized. Socio-cultural practices, particularly those involving object use and built or other structural features, can best be understood as interacting functions of these two entities.

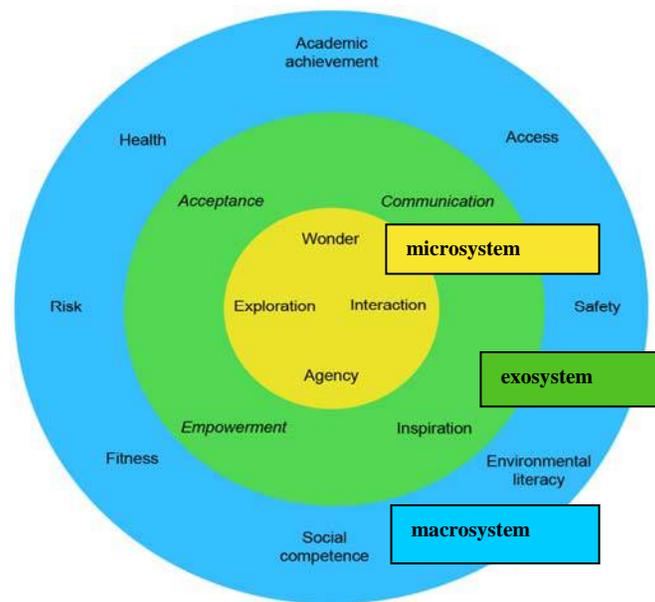
As much as Alex personally enjoys the direct manipulation and sensory stimulation of the elements that he perceives as affordances, they are significant to him socially as part of the peer culture existing in this specific place: his chosen recess behavior setting of the woods. Jemicy offers another, different behavior setting for play as well: the playground, field, and basketball court just up the hill (Figure 4). However, like the majority of his peers, Alex has shown a strong preference for the woods setting since he arrived at Jemicy as a 6 year old. Here, he not only engages in his favorite stream-related activities, but also participates in the trading of goods, the construction of forts and the foraging for materials that constitute some of this behavior setting's standard practices.

**Figure 4. Playground**



**Nested Systems: Dimensions of Outdoor Play**

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed a model of nested systems to describe human development within a multi-dimensional context. As I have adapted it to a school context, Alex’s play behavior in the woods (the “microsystem”) exists within the larger systems of a supportive school community consisting of other students, teachers, and administrators and the influence of his parents (“mesosystem” and “exosystem”). The values and related actions of those inhabiting these system levels may promote or constrain Alex’s activity in his play setting. For example, Alex’s family permits independent exploration and risk-taking on their farm; at school, however, Alex’s activity is constrained by school safety policies. Likewise, the larger cultural sphere surrounding the school (the “macrosystem”) brings more global influences to bear on Alex’s actions through the media to which he is exposed, what he learns in class, and from interactions that extend beyond his home. In the model in Figure 5, the primary value themes derived from my data are depicted within these levels.

**Figure 5. Values in nested systems**

"Why do you need to filter the water?" I ask Alex as he works on his inventions by the stream. "Because it goes to the Chesapeake Bay and we don't want to let dirt go there," he replies. Other children invoke similar extended reasoning for their actions during recess: a boy theorizes that his quartzite "cleaning crystals" help to reduce the silt (or "muck") downstream; a girl who discovers a cardinal's nest in the bush where she has made her fort sets up a protective barrier of branches so that other children won't disturb it; another girl discovers a dead salamander and holds an impromptu inquest, theorizing that it may have died from loneliness, and announcing that no salamanders should be disturbed in the stream for the rest of the fall. Such ideas derive from value systems well beyond those that are typically assumed to determine play behavior.

### **Describing Place through Ethnographic Case Study**

The overarching story of recess at Jemicy School evolved into a quilt pieced from a set of portraits, each comprising a different aspect of the identified case, such as descriptions of behavior settings, vignettes of children's recess play, and the recollections of alumni. These pieces were joined by their common focus on conceptions of value and bounded by research parameters which maintained a tight focus on specific people, places, and processes.

If the case study presented here was the creation of a quilt composed of many pieces of social interaction, then ethnography was the process of carefully describing the qualities of those pieces and how they fit together. In essence, ethnography provided the answer to Barker's question, "What goes on here?" by using "detailed accounts of the concrete experience of life within a particular culture and of the beliefs and social rules that are used as resources within it" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, 10).

These accounts were based on data collected through methods originally designed to gain entry into the unfamiliar, yet ethnography also notably requires long, intensive exposure to a culture in order to gain the deepest possible understanding of it. Such an approach was ideal for this study, as I investigated the activity of a culture in which I had participated as a teacher-observer for over 20 years, yet now regarded with a new observational lens. Fine and Sandstrom (1988) emphasized that while such long-term interaction might imply deep understanding, the assumption of knowing our children well reflects a certain ethnocentrism, which may be aggravated by not perceiving it as a problem. An "adultcentric" view of the world necessarily limits us in ways that we must acknowledge and directly confront if we are to profess any valid understanding of our subjects (Goode 1986).

One way of addressing the inherent limitation of being an adult outsider with one's own set of environmental values is to regard children as co-researchers. Children's role in research has most often been as an object of study by adults. However, there is significant and increasing scholarship to support an approach that views children as vital agents in the research process. This is a matter of both acknowledging children's rights and increasing the insights that research involving children hopes to achieve. "Recognizing children as subjects rather than objects of research entails accepting that children can speak 'in their own right' and report valid views and experiences" (Christensen and James 2000, 243). Regarding children as experts on their own play activities was the rationale for the reflective interviews that I conducted with them, but this expertise was also valuable in an earlier stage of collecting observational data. As Kellett (2005, 3) notes, "Children ask different questions, have different priorities and concerns and see the world through different eyes." Because this study aimed to discover children's meanings in their play activity, Jemicy students joined me as co-researchers in this endeavor through relating recess-related stories informally, and by videotaping their peers at play.

### **Field and Interview Data**

Data were derived from direct video-recorded observations of children at play over a two-year period; field notes and reflective journals; and audio-recorded interviews with children, teachers, administrators, parents and alumni. Eleven children were selected as a focal group, based on their observed preference during the study period for one of the two play behavior settings: the woods, and the playground. Nine of the children spent most of their recess time in the woods during the study interval, while the other two spent time in other locations included in the "playground" setting, such as the sport court or on other standard equipment. As one of the regular recess monitors, I collected data on a daily basis during the 17-minute afternoon recess, using the video camera with children's permission to record activity. Several children also participated in video-recording their peers at play. Approximately 50 hours of video, along with photographs and field notes, comprised the data collected directly in play settings.

To gain a better understanding of the broader social context in which children's recess play occurred, I conducted 32 interviews with study participants. Interviews of children in the focal group took place with a friend of their choosing (usually a

recess playmate). They viewed a video clip of themselves at play, and then were asked a series of open-ended questions about their play experiences both at Jemicy and, for purposes of contrast, at their previous school. The parents of focal group children also participated in either telephone or in-person interviews, responding to a set of questions about their own childhood play experiences and those of their children, both at home and at school. Interviews were conducted as well with teachers familiar with the focal group students, focusing on the social and academic context for each student's play experience. Several administrators who had long-term experience at the school, and who had also held family roles there, similarly contributed interview data, but with additional emphasis on institutional standards for academics, safety, and other considerations for student well-being. Finally, alumni representing different eras of the school's 35-year history provided a view of changing cultural norms with regard to play, as well as the influence of school practices on personal development through adulthood.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

All video and interview data were transcribed, coded, and compiled into themes, which I then interpreted and presented through the descriptive process of portraiture.

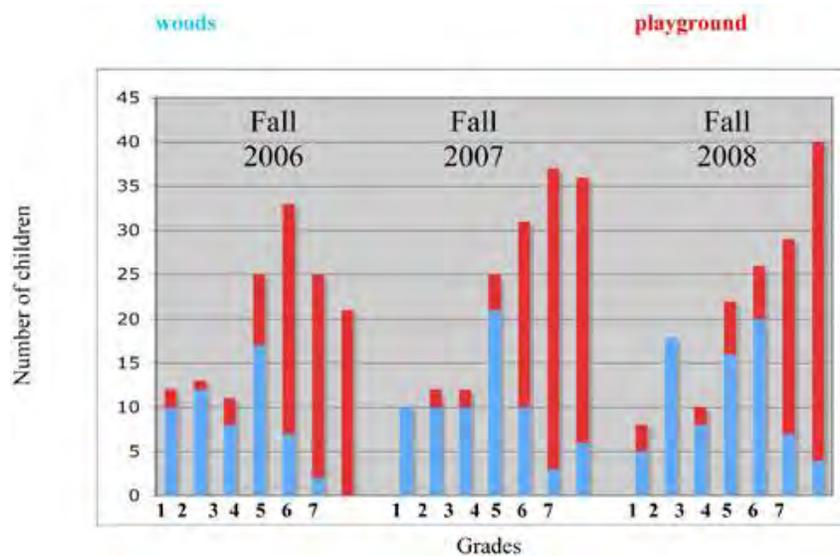
Portraiture as a research method refers to the deliberate, complex process of gaining insight into the subject being studied through the search for "goodness" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997). Education research has often employed a lens of pathology and dysfunction, rather than one which seeks to document resilience and health. Goodness, however, is not seen as an idealized concept, but regarded as a set of variables which institutions and individuals work with and through to achieve balance.

It is this similarity between Jemicy's philosophy of helping children experience "the good life in childhood" and the effort to illustrate this good life that made portraiture an ideal mode for this research. "Portraiture... is an intentionally generous and eclectic process that begins by searching for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 9). This focus on the good is far more closely aligned as well with children's perceptions, I feel, than with the typical adult perception of potential risk. Children are more likely to value a play space in terms of its positive affordances ("What are the possibilities for fun here?") while adults are vigilant about problems and focus on the negative ("What could possibly go wrong here?").

The findings of this study took the form of narrative descriptions of the experiences of study participants, with summaries comprised of value elucidations sought in the original research questions. A three-year span of data detailing children's play setting preferences also revealed a behavior pattern that mirrored a distinct trend previously noted in other research (Sobel 1993) (Figure 6). At around 11 years of age, many children gradually moved out of the woods setting and into more standard playground or field areas, where they interacted in larger peer groups. While this preference may represent an accepted developmental pattern, it is one

that can rarely be expressed in schools. The standardization of playground structures and the move toward tightly controlled play environments have all but eliminated opportunities for choice, let alone variation of play behavior in response to different settings.

**Figure 6. Play place preferences**



Not all Jemicy lower school students choose to play in the woods setting, and the standard playground equipment offers an alternative to this minority. Most students, however, (verified by alumni experience as well) spent at least two to three years engaged primarily in the woods behavior setting. In addition, for a small number of middle-school boys, the woods setting offers an alternative to the sports field and the social gathering spots of most of their peers: a place to continue hands-on, creative activities with a minimum of social pressure.

### Experiencing Place: Portraits of a School Community

The following accounts exemplify the use of portraiture as a descriptive tool in this study, and provide the basis for the following discussion of play in place-based education. Student portraits were based on multiple data sources (observations, interviews with the student, parents, and teachers) and yielded a theme particular to that child's experience of outdoor play. Interviews were the basis for portraits of alumni and administrative experience.

#### A Student's Perspective: "Free to be my own self"

The following condensed portrait of Mark, the eldest of the focal group of students who chose to play in the woods during recess, includes a summary of my observations as well as an edited transcription of his own recorded recess video. Teacher reports on Mark often referred to his impulsiveness, his poor judgment of boundaries, both physical and social, and his incessant need for actively exploring and manipulating his environment. The theme "Free to be my own self"

encapsulated his sense of escaping constraints while investing himself in activities that suited his play interests. In the woods, Mark both exercised and honed his personal qualities to fit the opportunities available to him there.

When I first met Mark, an 11-year-old transfer student from an urban public school, I was initially charmed by his warmth, openness, and spontaneity. He dove headlong into his new school's social milieu but was resoundingly rejected by his peers, who claimed that his physical and verbal exuberance were invading their space. Teachers agonized over his constant activity. Teaching a class with Mark in it required constant monitoring of social chemistry, as well as acknowledgement and active, hands-on engagement of his remarkable intellect. Fortunately, after navigating rough terrain for much of the year, Mark, his classmates, and his teachers eventually arrived at a plateau of understanding and mutual respect.

For Mark, the immediate contrast between his former school and Jemicy was stark.

*There were woods, but we weren't allowed back there, because they were afraid that we were gonna get bitten by snakes, or we were gonna be attacked, or we're gonna get poison ivy, or we're gonna get pricklers.*

At Jemicy, Mark conceded, these things were still possible, but there was a difference in perception.

*That still happens down in the woods, but kids know more about that here, because we have science. At my old school, we didn't have science like we do now. Here, we talk about the woods, we talk about the animals down there, and there is more stuff than you would see in a normal school. That's why Jemicy is so special.*

I asked Mark why he chose to spend his free time in the woods. He thought for a moment, and then said that his older brother and his father were probably his greatest influences.

*[My brother] likes to go out and run and have fun, and my dad likes to build things. So that's normally what would drive me down there, where I can just be free to be my own self... just create anything I want to. I can just go down there, be wild.*

In my interview with Mark, I commented that he always seemed to be finding interesting things: insects, feathers, ceramic artifacts, and particularly unique rocks. "Oh yeah, that's me," he chuckled.

*I'm the kind of person who, if you get interested in something, you just go for it. Like, if you put this yellowish rock on the ground, I will go dig it up, put it in my hands, even though I'm aware that my clothes will get dirty. I will get it and show it to somebody.*

When I asked Mark to list his favorite things about the woods, he responded immediately.

*I would have to say the waterfalls, how you can make the dams for the other kids to help with, and the things you can find down there. You can find animals, rocks, anything. And things that you can trade. And the territory. Just the main territory that you can just have for yourself. Freedom. And independence.*

I asked if he would be returning to the woods when it reopened in the spring [the woods play setting is closed during winter months]. "Oh, I'll be the first one down there!" he laughed.

Observations of Mark in the woods over two and a half years showed a boy in constant motion. His strong personality dominated indoor situations, classroom and otherwise, but in the woods, his presence seemed more proportional to his surroundings. In his first year, he jockeyed for position among the younger children and those remaining from his fifth grade age group, never asserting his own need for territory, but stoutly defending the boundaries set by others. He joined and left several forts, either rejected or sometimes of his own accord. In his second year, he developed friendships with the two or three other boys his age who also chose to go to the woods for recess, and with this he seemed to gain some stature among the younger children. When I asked what his first activity would be when he returned to the woods after winter break, he answered, "Help the little kids with their waterfall and dam!"

Mark's work in the Jemicy stream changed over time, from an initial interest in "clearing out" to more organized construction, in which he often assumed the role of foreman. Because Mark was able to lift heavy items, he was often recruited (or volunteered) to move logs and rocks for younger children. His aptitude for finding and noticing interesting things along the stream frequently drew others' attention, but he had a penchant for telling exaggerated stories about things he claimed to have observed ("Raccoons, chipmunks, frogs—they all came running out from under that log!"). Mark developed his own theories about the origins of many of the woods phenomena: "This pipe is from a factory downtown." "I'm guessing that dam was made by beavers." "If we put all these pottery pieces together, they will make a really valuable plate." He also devised theories to help explain the barter economy in the woods. When walking with another boy out of the woods one day, discussing a trade dispute, Mark reflected, "Stores are where the money began." He paused, thinking. "Because of stores, people made up money. Because of money, people were starting to get greedy. Because of greed, people would never share." He swung his arm in a large arc. "One big circle. That's all it is."

One of the most revealing pieces of data regarding Mark's perception of the woods came from a video that he shot independently during recess one day in the fall of 2008. At the recess bell, he had wandered past me on his way to the woods, muttering about a frustrating class. When I asked Mark if he would like to videotape

recess that day, his face lit up. "Oh, that's cool," he said, when I described what I wanted him to do. He took the camera and began to narrate as he shot.

"Right now, (*turning the camera back on his face as he talked*) we are walking down into the woods. And over here (*aiming toward the sport court*) is where the kids play basketball, but that isn't really important. Right now we're going deep into the woods to see the interesting facts. Right here is the rope. I'm holding this camera... and the rope. Here we go. My name's Mark (*turning the camera on himself, and then back on the rope*). I'm coming down...nice and easy...then I'm gonna go to the little J-E fort, see what they're doin' over there. Over here (*aiming at the grass to the side of the path*) we saw a little snake, but it's disappeared somehow. No one knows what happened, unless there was *mischief*, but I doubt it. Now I'm followin' the stream..."

He came upon Dylan, who showed him a piece of quartz, and told Mark that he had joined a fort just yesterday. Another boy, working nearby, challenged Dylan's membership: "Nobody said you could join." Mark interceded in a lecturing tone, reminding him of the woods recess rules, "Anybody can join any fort, so you can't *argue*." He continued down the stream and found a group of children: "Would anybody like to do a review, and tell me about their fort?" There was an enthusiastic response as, one by one, children shared information, showing him bones they had discovered, a stash of "monkey brains" (Osage oranges), and other valuables (Figure 7).

### Figure 7. Treasures



"That's our pond," said Alex, pointing to where the water pooled in the stream. "This is their friendly, friendly friend the pond," commented Mark.

"And here is their bridge that I can take. Ver-y un-stur-dy" he commented, wobbling on the row of sticks as he crossed the stream. Pointing to the woods beyond the school boundary, Alex said, "The teacher said it's OK to go over there because that's where we get our string and all the metal." "Now I'm going past the woods where I'm not supposed to go," said Mark in a guarded tone, "but the teacher says it's OK, so I'm just gonna follow him." Someone yelled from Alex's fort, "Guys, you're off the fort limits. Get back!" "Well this is off-limits for the forts," said Mark, decisively, "so now we gotta go back." When he returned to Alex's fort, Alex showed him the high water mark left by a recent flood. "This is what Mother Nature did," said Alex. Mark repeated and emphasized this comment for the camera. "The water was all the way over here... by this wheel that they hung. Now let's see what they got over here. Right now they are unclogging a waterfall that turned mucky and disgusting."

"Now I'm about to move on," said Mark. "Would you all say bye?" The kids waved and called, "Bye!" Alex ran back up to Mark. "We forgot to tell you something! Doesn't this look like a turtle?" He patted a stump they had dragged into the fort area. "See?" said Alex. "The shell's right here, and the head's right here." Mark aimed the camera at the rotted interior of the stump, murmuring, "And inside there must be a cave where bats or bugs lived..."

Mark continued on up the stream and paused by a fort where Diana had just found some pieces of ceramic tile. "Hey I remember this!" he exclaimed. "Can I see that?" He held the tile up to the camera. "There's a piece of pottery, and I used to collect these." He moved on. "It looks like this tree (*ducking under it*) naturally fell down. Look! (*bending and zooming in to inspect a hollow*). A burrow. Some animals, maybe a squirrel, probably have lived in it."

Christopher, an older boy who belonged to Mark's fort, appeared, and Mark greeted him enthusiastically. "Hey Christopher!" "Mark!" responded Christopher, slapping his hand. "Have you seen any salamanders?" asked Mark. Christopher immediately turned and headed upstream. "Hey, man!" Mark called to James, another member of his fort, gesturing for him to come along. "We're gonna get us some salamanders! Shhhh... gotta be very quiet. Salamanders are very *feisty* and *angry* at the same time." "Salamanders aren't feisty!" James argued. "Some are," replied Mark. "Aw," James retorted, "They're little tiny worms with legs! And a head!" "OK - whatever," sighed Mark. "Now we're on the dry part, and this fort is flagged...by ME! This is MY area." He knelt by the stream next to Christopher and focused the camera at the water. "Hey, hey look man, we got salamanders over here! We have a little salamander..." "Let me get him!" ordered Christopher, quickly capturing a salamander and holding it up for the camera (Figure 8). "That's a *big* salamander!" exclaimed James. "Let's see, what kind of salamander do we have here?" murmured Mark, examining it through the camera. James's younger sister joined them. "Can

I hold him?" she asked. Mark grasped the salamander and placed it in her hand. "There you go. Whoooo!" He giggled as the salamander squirmed in her hand.

The bell rang for the end of recess, and Mark began to ascend the hill. "Now we're coming out of the woods. A vast and dangerous place (*turning the camera back on his own face and grinning*) which contributes... to evil... *salamanders!* Naw, I'm just jokin with you! Let's go up. Now we're leavin, out of the woods," said Mark, turning back to get an overall shot. "As you can see, it's very steep. Which ends our tour of the woods: a beautiful place where people come and play and have fun."

### Figure 8. Salamanders



In a recess conversation with Mark two years later (on his way to the basketball court where he now spends his free time), he gestured toward the stream of younger children flowing down the hill into the woods. "I don't really play there anymore," he said, "but I still love it."

### Administrative Perspectives

The administration at Jemicy acts as the interface between children's direct experience and the world of academic, social and cultural expectations that surrounds them. Justifying the role of play in a school designed to remediate learning differences requires belief in the necessity for free play time as a component of "the good life in childhood." "The spirit of the school, I think, is found in that free play in many ways," Alan, the assistant head of school, observed. "Getting to make choices. The choices aren't made for them. They can follow their

own hearts and desires.” For a school that is centered on providing this good life to dyslexic students, having choices in play appears especially critical. Emphasized Karen, head of the lower school:

*It's allowing our children to find what makes them happy, to experiment and find that thing that they enjoy doing, and then to allow them to do it. That involves children of all ages working together, playing together, experiencing their world together. And I think when they're in that situation, they are learning: how to deal with peers, how to deal with older and younger children, how to compromise, how to problem-solve.*

Alan noted that children having choices provides unique information to teachers. “It’s like the studies where they put a lot of toys in one room and you sit by a one-way mirror and watch to see where kids go. Well, that is the whole school, and kids gravitate to places that just attract them and interest them.” For the dyslexic child who tends to be a global thinker, Alan observed,

*Play is an opportune time for them to become adventurous with thinking. And step outside of required thinking... You get them outside the restrictions or confines of something called school, and that's when they're at their best. That's when they conceptualize. That's when they can really develop ideas and be innovative and creative.*

Karen pointed out that play supports numerous academic and social skills as well.

*You can get more educational benefit from a half hour of free play that you probably can from an additional half hour of language instruction... Children work on their expressive language skills while playing... There is a bundle of social skills that play provides for social navigation in the world. They're doing math. When they're playing in the woods, it's three acorns equal one monkey brain... It's mathematics in its best form. And it's something they created, so they're impassioned about it.*

While parents currently express noticeably more desire for explicit communication and detailed information about their children’s activities than they once did (“They used to trust us more,” explained the school nurse), administrators felt that families continued to identify Jemicy as a haven, a place of highly meaningful and positive experience for their children. The merging of play with instruction, both in and out of the classroom, made a vital contribution to the success of this program.

### **Alumni Perspectives**

Bronfenbrenner (1979) included an additional dimension to his original model of nested systems: the “chronosphere,” which contains the influences of changes over time. To address this aspect of play experience, I interviewed alumni who had attended Jemicy over the past 35 years. Their responses, in the form of memories and reflections on the significance of play in their development (and for some, in now raising their own children and sending them to Jemicy), provided a window into the pervasiveness of a sense of place over time.

I compiled alumni responses into thematic units and composed a portrait of play experience that spanned the years from Jemicy's inception as a school to the present. While cultural change over time was acknowledged in differing perspectives on risk (play activity is currently far more restricted by safety codes than it was in the 1970s), all respondents spoke of Jemicy as a kind of refuge from the world—a place where they were able *to do* things that were exceptional and ultimately transformative. "Refuge" describes the sense of relief and security from academic and social pressure to conform that students had felt in prior schools, but also the joyful and exhilarating sense of freedom to engage in playful learning. "There was a lot of learning, but we didn't know we were learning," explained Robert, describing the way that a science teacher would encourage students to build go-carts, use climbing equipment, and take spontaneous field trips in the spirit of exploring both personal capability and the qualities of the environment. "It wasn't so much a real world," observed Marcia. "It was a safe place where you could come in, you didn't have to worry about people teasing you, you didn't have to worry about being different... Everybody was on a level playing field."

The development of a sense of competence that extended beyond classroom walls was a direct result of solving concrete, authentic problems first-hand. "We had jobs," recalled Marcia. "Feed the chickens, collect the eggs." Along with the pleasures of driving go-carts and building play structures went the duties of cleaning up and maintaining machinery. There was a sense of shared responsibility that accompanied the privileges of play. Alumni spoke with pride of the skills they had acquired under the tutelage of teachers who set them to solving practical challenges. Sam said:

*It was pure hands-on... I remember building dams down at the stream and trying to figure out how to build a dam correctly to hold up enough water so that water wouldn't go over the top of the dam. Those things stick with you. You use that in the real world nowadays. It's just figuring stuff out.*

Marcia observed that while many of the activities that children once engaged in would seem dangerous now, in those days they were deemed important for developing competence. "Kids weren't as breakable as they are nowadays," she said, attributing an apparent increase in accidents to the fact that children were no longer learning the skills they needed to *not* injure themselves. Richard emphasized that it was not only these practical skills that were essential in later years, but also the self-confidence and sense of accomplishment that came with having successfully met an authentic challenge.

Alumni regarded woods play in particular as an opportunity to remove themselves from school. "Teachers stood at the top of the hill," several alumni recalled, but the thickly wooded, visually impenetrable nature of the hillside meant that children had the sense that "we were watched by teachers, but not *overly* watched by teachers. We may have been *lightly* attended, but we were never *unattended*." This arrangement gave children the sense, according to both Erica and Kristen, that they "were really able to get *away*." As Erica, an alumnae who is now a teacher,

observed, “They feel like they’re leaving school—and us—and they’re not really being watched over like hawks. They’re not surrounded by teachers and rules” (Figure 9). Alumni were left with a lasting impression of Jemicy as a refuge offering both security and freedom—a place to which many have returned as parents or teachers, or as visitors with fond memories of learning while playing.

### Figure 9. Stream investigation



## Sustaining the Place of Outdoor Play in School: Implications and Recommendations

### Cultivating Reciprocal Relationships

Recess is a practice that can mean far more to children than a few minutes spent outdoors. As a “hidden curriculum” (Powell 2007), it contributes to the ethos and identity of a school community. The descriptions presented here reveal highly personal connections to the play settings of Jemicy School that are interwoven with social and academic learning. Because this study used a descriptive, ecological framework rather than stage-based developmental theory to describe results, children are viewed in direct, active relation to the environment of which they are a part. This distinction is crucial to a reciprocal concept of place, an idea described in Jemicy’s founding philosophy, which calls attention to the necessity of firsthand experience for learning, of the hunt for meaningful information in the perception of affordances. The following passage pinpoints the particular significance of this reciprocal relationship for children in a school community:

*Just as in Aldous Huxley’s words, ‘It is no good knowing about the taste of strawberries out of a book,’ so each child needs to experience for himself the worlds of city and country, of nature and human culture. These become part of him through all his senses, through emotional and spiritual appreciation and responsible involvement in all the world about and within him, and by*

*the active processes of the ordered observation, problem solving, and critical thinking which we call intellectual functioning.*

—Jemicy School Philosophy, 1972

This sense of school as a place that can *become a part of you* through direct experience expands a concept of place that focuses on a person becoming part of an environment. It suggests that the process of learning is two-way, reciprocal, and that all these things which a school *can* provide—knowledge, experience, and the modeling of the good life—must be made available in “active” ways that embed them within and allow them to be carried beyond this particular community.

Such ideas are not new, nor are they unique to a modern idea of place-based practice; they are the foundation of any pedagogy that is truly attentive to the nature of childhood. However, outdoor free play in elementary school has seen a dramatic decline in recent years, while formal, standards-based instruction has increased (Frost 2006; Pellegrini 2005). The current state of outdoor play in many schools restricts activities to a limited, adult-sanctioned number, and views the creative, widespread use of school grounds for play as hazardous or simply irritating (Factor 2004; Thomson 2007; Stanley 2010). This adult view of outdoor spaces at school as problematic transmits readily to children, compounding the issue that they likely spend most of their time at home indoors (Tovey 2007). The experience of play, or of its restriction, imbues the experience of the place where it occurs with particularly potent meanings.

### **Place-Based Learning and School Ethos**

In a revealing study of the environmental learning opportunities afforded by school grounds, Tranter and Malone (2004) concluded that, physical environmental factors being comparable, it was a school’s ethos that actualized these opportunities on numerous levels. Some of the factors noted in their study that distinguished one school as especially conducive to environmental learning were:

- teacher involvement in and knowledge of children’s outdoor play activities
- the frequent use of the outdoors for both formal and informal lessons
- free access to outdoor features such as gardens during play times
- availability of and encouragement to manipulate elements from the woods during free play

The school featured in the Tranter and Malone study bears a strong resemblance to Jemicy, where not only the play opportunities but the integration of classroom teaching and outdoor learning appeared seamless. In a recent spring science unit on amphibians, the youngest children worked to create small pools in the woods (mimicking natural vernal pools), where they released wood frog tadpoles rescued from the swimming pool where their eggs had been laid. Once the formal teaching part of this unit was finished, children continued to visit their “ponds” in the woods during recess, to add small habitat features in and beside them, to report daily on the progress of metamorphosis.

The same close monitoring and care of living things during recess occurs frequently in the vegetable garden. Here, children study factors affecting the growth of the seeds they plant, the development of monarch caterpillars on milkweed, the preferences of earthworms and other decomposers for different soils, and the feeding behavior of goldfinches on sunflowers. Considerable foraging, weeding, digging, harvesting and observing occur here during recess without the direct supervision of adults. This interest has spread to places in the woods, where children attempt to cultivate their own small plots of flowers and vegetables during play times (Figure 10).

**Figure 10. Making a woodland garden**



The possibilities for making connections between play and place are endless. Teaching older children during class how to identify wild plants, animal tracks, or macroinvertebrates, how to find and use clay along the stream or even how to construct a water bar to stop erosion has created a surge of similar knowledge and effort among younger children during recess. Two student participants in this study referred specifically to their surprise and delight at discovering that science class at Jemicy directly involved outdoor, and especially woods experiences. Mark, as noted in his portrait, attributed the success of woods play to his belief that children at Jemicy know more due to being taught directly about natural phenomena, and are thus more prepared and competent in that environment.

Many of the affordances present in the woods play setting at Jemicy could be described as “loose parts” (Nicholson 1971), or objects in the environment that are able to be freely moved and manipulated. Such objects have been found to contribute to more diverse and creative play than fixed playground elements. However, one of the findings of this study is that children consider the loose parts of the woods—such as nuts, leaves, rocks, animals, and fruit—as fundamentally

connected to and within their place of origin. A crayfish inhabiting a pool behind a rock dam, an Osage orange or yellow buckeye fallen from a tree, a deposit of garnets near a bend in the stream: all of these have their greatest value in the eyes of children within and as part of the place where they occur (Figure 11). Their value is diminished or vanishes when they are removed from the play setting. That children view a place as parts interconnected in meaningful ways suggests a developing sense of an ecosystem, a concept that can be further supported through instruction. Their familiarity with the many parts of the woods ecosystem through exploring and foraging channels them directly into a practical understanding of biodiversity as well (Chipeniuk 1995). Both are concepts that ever fewer children of Western cultures have the opportunity to acquire through firsthand experience, and as such reveal the unparalleled opportunity to reinforce critical knowledge provided by outdoor free play in natural areas at school.

**Figure 11. Garnets**



Examining the opportunities that children have for direct experience of their school outside of the classroom, and assessing the quality of that experience, are crucial steps in understanding the place that a school community occupies in a child's life. Linking the kinds of learning that occur through child-initiated play with those that emanate from classroom teaching both validates the holistic nature of an elementary student's perspective and utilizes the meanings inherent in the broader school environment (Sobel 2008). Of particular importance is whether a school ethos places teachers and others in a school community in a tenable position to acknowledge and celebrate children's experience on children's terms, rather than being forced to distill it into easily identifiable, manageable, and measurable objectives. Describing the fun and learning that can emerge through the "mess" of primary experience, Sobel (2008, 82) called it "rapture... curriculum at its best," but many schools are unable or unwilling to countenance this apparent "untidy

creativity" (Tranter and Malone 2004), which requires not only attention to physical needs, but extra time, training, and community involvement as well.

In a school where play receives priority, children receive the message that this type of learning is not only legitimate and supported, but also honored (Stone 2005), leading to a sustained attachment to one's school as a beloved place, a refuge (Kirkby 1989), a remembered symbol of an emerging environmental identity. This requires that teachers be regarded as co-participants in the process of learning, as co-interpreters of a place, and not just as vehicles for information delivery or enforcers of playground rules. As the Tranter and Malone study emphasized, teachers' knowledge of their students, acquired through willing, sensitive participation in the schoolyard environment, made a significant difference in students' opportunities for environmental learning. If we expect children to acquire the environmental lessons that will be the most meaningful for them, we need to take careful note of which aspects of a place they gravitate to. These preferences may well accompany and influence them on the journey into adulthood (Wells and Lekies 2006; Vadala, Bixler and James 2007). On a recent visit to an urban public charter school, my guide pointed out well-tended gardens and colorful play apparatus that the school had worked very hard to acquire and maintain. Then he gestured toward several patches of tall weeds growing along the embankment of the schoolyard fence, with trampled paths winding between them. "But that is the favorite play place for most of the youngest children," he said with a smile. "The wilder it is, the better."

A patch of weeds, a patch of woods, a hill of dirt or grass, a tangled bank: these and countless other such overlooked places are valuable environmental opportunities existing within schools. Children will perceive and utilize them according to their needs and abilities, but the adults associated with these schools ultimately determine the extent and quality of such interactions. An effective place-based approach recognizes the need for community-wide support of outdoor play and embeds it within the ethos of the school.

Considered through opportunities for outdoor play, place-based education realizes the potential of the affordances present in a school environment and prepares students to perceive and utilize affordances yet to be encountered in other places. The development of competence in one place can lead to carrying that place and its lessons with us when we move on, which is ultimately the promise and fulfillment of experiencing the good life in childhood.

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