



## Exploring insideness in urban children's sense of place

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### ABSTRACT

This study, informed by phenomenology and ethnography, explores urban children's relationship with their urban environment: In what ways do urban children exhibit "insideness" in their sense of place? This study proposes "insideness" as a conceptual construct to understand urban children's sense of place in its ecological and dynamic nature. Employing qualitative research methods, the study explores place stories of urban children who live in low-income, immigrant neighborhoods in New York City. The study finds that as children cultivate their sense of place, they construct "insideness" in their sense of place including 1) environmental understanding (i.e., contextualized, comprehensive, and critical understanding of a place), 2) environmental competence (i.e., knowing how to navigate and engage in a place), and 3) diverse, strong affective relationships with a place. Using "insideness" as a conceptual tool, this study discusses children's emplaced understanding and active and dialogical positionality in the development of their sense of place.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent decades, research on place has proliferated in various academic areas such as environmental psychology, philosophy, geography, and urban planning and architecture. However, relatively limited attention has been paid to place inquiry from the education community (Hutchinson, 2004). Recently educational researchers and designers have begun to include "place" under various names and programs. Whereas there has been increasing interests in and attempts for sense of place approaches and practices, less attention has been paid to developing a coherent pedagogical framework through documenting and explaining what children's sense of place is and how place matters in an educational context (Gruenewald, 2003; Nespor, 2008). This led us to realize that a fuller understanding of children's sense of place is necessary in designing of educational approaches. This inquiry has grown out of our desire as urban educators to be informed about designing and implementing place-conscious education. This inquiry is pedagogically oriented in that we hoped an understanding of how children develop insideness in their sense of place would inform us and other educators about how to support their students' construction and cultivation of sense of place.

Our primary research interest is to explore urban children's sense of place in its ecological nature, using the concept of

"insideness" as a way to examine children's sense of place. Considering the dynamic and complex nature of one's sense of place, making any effort to categorize children's sense of place could be problematic. For example, children may be insiders in some aspects or dimensions in their place experience, while they may not be in other aspects, dimensions, or contexts. Thus, by imposing categories and labels on children, we risk essentializing their sense of place and missing what might be important as aspects of one's sense of place – that is contradictory, complex, and dynamic. In this study, we take the conceptualization of insideness and outsideness as interpretive lenses rather than as analytic categories to apply in an empirical study as Relph (1976) noted. Thus, instead of characterizing each child's sense of place into categories, we explore "insideness" aspects or events in a sense of place when it is expressed or exhibited in children's stories through their narratives and visual representations. In the study we are not trying to answer *what* (e.g., Who is an insider or an outsider? Who exhibits stronger insideness in their sense of place?). Rather we try to explore *how*: In what ways do urban children develop and exhibit insideness in their sense of place?

Drawing upon the conceptualizations proposed by three components model of place (Relph, 1976; Stedman, 2002), we framed our exploration of children's place experience with three guiding questions: 1) How do children perceive and represent their place, 2) what activities frame how children engaged in their place, and 3) what meanings do children construct regarding their place? We pay attention to how these aspects overlap to illustrate insideness in their sense of place.

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## 2. Conceptual background

### 2.1. Sense of place

In this study, “sense of place” is employed as a conceptual construct to guide the exploration of children’s relationship with their place(s). In the literature, various aspects of human relationships with a place have been theorized, explored, and discussed using various constructs such as “place affiliation” (Moore, 1986), “place attachment” (Altman & Low, 1992), “place identity” (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996), “place satisfaction” (Stedman, 2002), “place bonding” (Pearce, 1977), and “sense of place” (Olwig, 1982). Among the diverse constructs, we employ “sense of place” for the conceptual features that the construct offers: Sense of place offers a broad, encompassing conceptual basis for the exploration of human relationships with a place (Smaldone, Harris, & Sanyal, 2005). We define sense of place as a person’s cognitive, affective, and embodied understandings of a place that are cultivated through a living ecological relationship with the place (Cobb, 1977; Lim, 2006). Sense of place, therefore, includes a person’s overall relationship with a place as a collection of cognition, attitude, and identity based on meanings created by the person (Stedman, 2002). Thus this broad definition allows us to explore the diverse ways and meanings that children develop from their place experiences.

### 2.2. Constructivism

Children have great chance to strike out alone or with peers to explore the environment, looking for new experiences and adventure (Moore, 1986; Sobel, 1993). Constructivism supports us in looking into children’s active engagement in the development of their sense of place (Matthews, 1992). Children do not passively react or adapt to environmental elements but rather leverage various cognitive activities to mediate the influence of the place. The place is not an objective phenomenon rather it has to be interpreted and reconstructed by children. Thus children’s development of sense of place needs to be viewed as a dynamic process of children’s experiencing, interacting, and sense-making (Chawla & Salvadori, 1999). Furthermore, place experience is facilitated within physical, social, and cultural contexts where all the objects and events have specific meanings that are socially constructed as well. Therefore, research is not to discover and define the “eternal child”; rather, it is for the “historical child” who exists in real places in real time under particular social and historical conditions (Grause & Walsh, 1998). This emphasis on context is a main argument of transactional constructivism (Matthews, 1992). To develop a fuller understanding of children’s place experiences, we need to understand the place as it is experienced, interacted with, understood, and constructed by children.

Over time, children’s interactions with the environment and the assimilation of environmental experiences would produce a feeling of competence and confidence. As the children develop, new place experiences and opportunities need to become available to support the growth of competence. If children encounter too many barriers (e.g., parental restrictions and interventions, streets with heavy traffic, social deprivation, etc.), motivation toward competence will waver and desirable development might be disturbed. Children need to cultivate and be satisfied with their place experiences to support their healthy development and to maximize their developmental potential (Moore, 1986).

### 2.3. Conceptualizing child–place interaction

A transactional view on child–place interaction offers a way to approach complicated processes of place experience (Colledge,

1987; Hart & Moore, 1973). This view suggests that one can understand children’s sense of place by how they dynamically interact with place through the various activities they engage in and the environmental behavior they take up (Matthews, 1992). A transactional view also emphasizes the dialectical relationship between children and place. How children make sense of place-based information informs how they solve the problems or challenges they confront in that place. At the same time, how children seek to solve problems within places informs the new place-based knowledge they acquire.

The transactional view focuses on children’s relationship with their place “in action” (Graumann, 2002). A child–place interaction cannot be assumed as a simple and static stimulus–response relationship nor can it be explained by examining the child and the place alone (Greeno, 1994). Rather, the transactional model indicates the importance of both the context and process of transaction. By keeping children’s relationship with place “in action,” how and why transactions shape children’s sense of place are foregrounded (Colledge, 1987). Further, such an “in action” stance places children’s identification of affordances and other qualities of place as of equal importance as the place itself. Thus, to develop a holistic understanding of children’s sense of place, we need to look into the interactional and relational relationship between a place and a child, that is, *a child in a place* (Graumann, 2002).

The transactional view also emphasizes children’s relationship with their place as on-going. Human beings are ever-changing, and thus the meanings and relationships we ascribe to place are dynamic. Sense of place is never a final product/artifact. The development of a sense of place is always in progress. This view stands in contrast to much of the earlier work on place which viewed place as a static concept (Smaldone et al., 2005). Within this view, place takes on a static role with essential identities based on tradition and history (Gustafson, 2001). While static models have offered depth of understanding, the actual meaning of place is often abstracted from its context. With a dynamic view of place, the focus of inquiry should be on the process of how actively children cultivate their relationship with a place. In this child–place relationship, children purposefully participate in a place with intentions, therefore, the place is being used and evaluated in terms of its affordances in the relationship (Min & Lee, 2006). To examine the interactional nature between a child and a place, we employ two concepts: place identity and affordances of place, which work together in a dialectical relationship to facilitate one’s place experience.

#### 2.3.1. Place identity

Place identity is formed through an accumulation of cognitions and affects about the physical environment encompassing the past and present (Lalli, 1992; Sandberg, 2003). Some have argued that place identity is akin to a “potpourri of memories, ideas, feelings, attitudes, values, preferences, meanings, and conceptions of behavior and experience” (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 59). This stance points out that one’s environmental past (i.e., the collection of earlier place cognitions of the person) have a significant influence on one’s subsequent place identity (Proshansky, 1978). In other words, not only has place identity taken shape through the experiences one has had in the world, it also significantly shapes how one comes to understand their current and future place in their world.

Place experiences are filled with diverse objects, spaces, and places that may or may not satisfy one’s biological, physical, social and cultural needs. Therefore, place identity has an evaluative quality; it can lead a person to make positive or negative assessments of their world. When children are positioned in a place, they draw upon their place identity to assess and make sense of whether

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