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THE MJE FORUM / LE FORUM DE LA RSÉM

WRITING CHILDHOOD PLACE STORIES TO LEARN ABOUT PLANNING FOR TEACHING AS PLANNING FOR PLACEMAKING

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ABSTRACT. This two-part MJE Forum piece explores how writing and sharing childhood place stories in a "Children and Place" course can support reconceptualization of planning for teaching as placemaking. Part one presents a childhood place story that Janine Tine wrote as a graduate student in the course. Part two highlights key ideas about place and about children and place, considering examples of these ideas in Janine's story. Her summers spent at her grandparents' acreage reveal key elements of childhood place attachment and the grandparents' role in socially constructing the place it became for the children. The course invites participants to consider parallel opportunities for teachers' social constructions of classrooms as places that evoke students' place attachment.

ÉCRIRE DES RÉCITS DE LIEUX D'ENFANCE POUR EN APPRENDRE DAVANTAGE SUR LA PLANIFICATION DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT COMME PLANIFICATION DE LA CRÉATION DE LIEUX

RÉSUMÉ. Cette contribution explore comment le fait d'écrire et de partager des récits de lieux d'enfance dans le cadre d'un cours peut contribuer à repenser la planification de l'enseignement comme une démarche de création de lieux. La première partie présente un récit de lieu d'enfance que Janine Tine a écrit alors qu'elle était étudiante aux cycles supérieurs. La deuxième partie met en lumière des idées clés sur le lieu ainsi que sur les enfants et le lieu, en examinant des exemples dans le récit de Janine. Les étés qu'elle a passés sur la propriété de ses grands-parents révèlent des éléments clés de l'attachement des enfants à un lieu, ainsi que le rôle des grands-parents dans la construction sociale du lieu.

INTRODUCTION (JULIA)

Janine Tine and I came together to write this MJE Forum piece because of shared convictions about how classrooms should be the best places possible for students. For many years I had been researching the topics of "place and space" and "children and place." I found that cultural geographers offered conceptual

frameworks for understanding how places work, why they are important, how they evolve, how they are experienced, and how they are changing. Studies by both psychologists and cultural geographers provided clarifying research about children's needs of place and attributes of their favourite places. I wondered how all of these ideas might inform thinking and research about students' experiences in schools as places, which I also explored in teaching a course called "Children and Place."

I came across Gordon's (2000) book, *Seeing through places: Reflections on geography and identity*. When I read how she wrote about her childhood places, I knew I could ask students to do the same. Because of my experience with pre-interview activities, which took the form of requests for drawings to be completed prior to interviews, I was certain that it would be important and helpful for authors of childhood place stories to begin their writing process by drawing a diagram, picture, or map of the site of their childhood place story. Students in the Children and Place course were delighted to engage with their childhood place stories. A number of students told me that they polished their stories and presented them to their families as gifts.

Janine was one of those students. She presented the story to her family members and suggested that we write and publish about it. Janine had been surprised by all the details that came back vividly while writing it. We both felt the power of the story and in writing this MJE Forum piece, we set out to learn more about where the story's vitality came from and where it was leading.

PART ONE: MY CHILDHOOD PLACE (JANINE)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: What many now call Salt Spring Island is part of the unceded territory of the Coast Salish people, including the Quw'utsun (Hul'q'umi'num speaking) and W̱SÁNEĆ (SENĆOŦEN speaking) peoples.

A sprawling two-storey secondary school now stands on the site of my childhood place: 200 Rainbow Road, on Salt Spring Island in British Columbia.[1] Extending from the front of the school is a soccer field, a monoculture of non-native grass. At its edge is a length of packed silt — the only evidence of the long gravel driveway that was once the entrance to my grandparents' two-bedroom home where they raised their five children.

Gone are the moss-adorned cedar sheds; the sweet-smelling, bee-buzzing orchard; the gardens with scarecrows that seemed alive; the weeping willow; and the lush forests. Standing in a perfect rectangle in the school's courtyard are four Douglas fir trees that once held the tree fort where I played many summers with my siblings and cousins. There, high in the trees, we found security and belonging. We were the child architects and engineers who worked and played on our grandparents' five acres, our days interrupted only by calls for meals, baths, and bedtime. Figure 1 shows a map of the acreage.

THE JOES AND THE REST OF US

I moved away from Salt Spring Island when I was 3, but I and my siblings — Rachele, Jacqueline, and "Big" Joe — returned most summers, travelling to the island from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan with our mother. There, we met up with our cousins — Jamie, Carolyn, and "Little" Joe — who came from Edmonton, Alberta, with their mother Paulette, my mother's sister. Little Joe, only one and a half years younger than my brother, often exclaimed in frustration, "I'm not little, I'm big!" He quickly outgrew Big Joe in stature, but his name never changed.

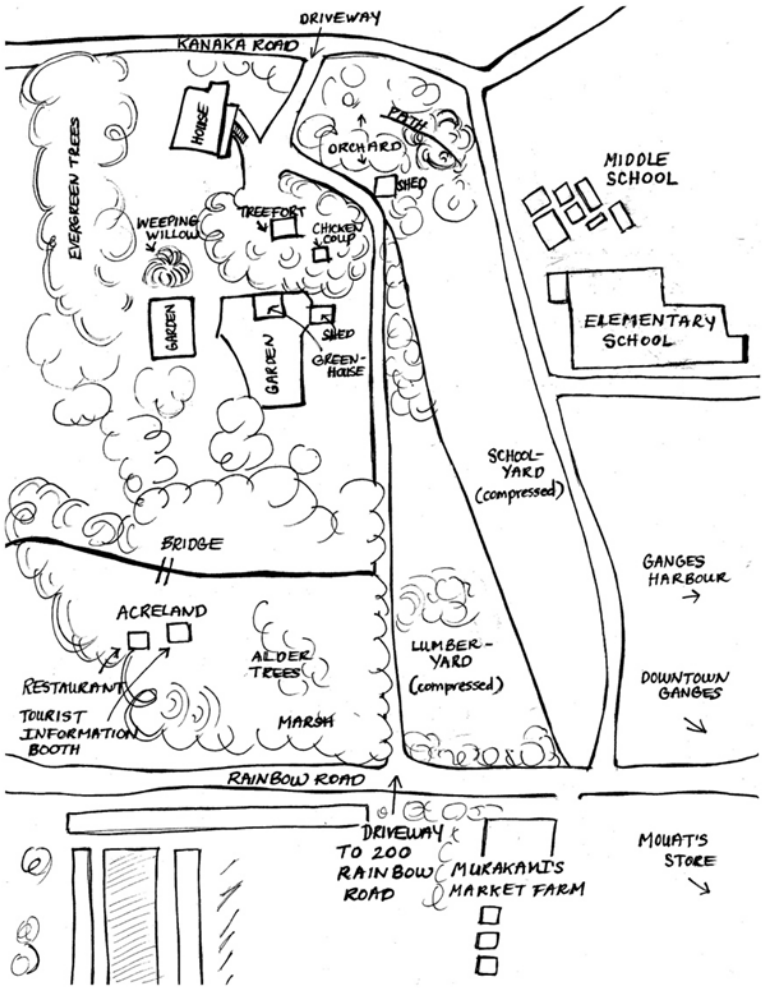


FIGURE 1. *Map for Childhood Place Story*

By the summer of 1985, Rachele and Jamie — both 11 — were well-established leaders of our pack. Rachele was the rule maker and visionary, her brunette pixie hairdo always sitting just right. Jamie, athletic and handsome, was the charismatic instigator of adventure. We marvelled as he drove the tractor, swung high in the trees, and used David-and-Goliath-style slingshots, made by our grandpa, that sent rocks flying with fierce speed. Jacqueline (9), Big Joe (5), and Little Joe (3) all tried to keep pace with Jamie, as they too had an unquenchable thirst for exhilaration. Jacqueline, with her jet-black hair and agile body, largely kept pace. The Joes did not. I, age 7, stuck close to Rachele, preferring order with creativity and innovation. Cousin Carolyn (age 10) was the socialite, bringing the two groups together with the promise of fun. She was also our brave messenger and talented smooth talker, occasionally sent to ask our mothers for a treat, or for a sleepover with our cool and Parisian-chic Auntie Care (short for Carolyn) in her tent in the orchard — visiting from Victoria where she worked at the Parliament buildings. We played all day long, with brief pouting about an injustice: a missed turn on the swing, an uneven share of garden peas eaten under the weeping willow, or failure to secure a coveted spot beside our grandma during early-morning cuddles — the only time she slowed down. The pouter, unsuccessful in their bid for sympathy, grudgingly rejoined the group minutes later.

A PEACEFUL REFUGE

Our grandparents' acreage offered peace and security, not only to all seven of us grandchildren, but to all who entered. For example, there was one young man from the neighbouring area named Robbie, who rode a large, three-wheel bike with a basket over the back wheels. To avoid being teased by nearby school students, Robbie travelled through the driveway that went from one end of our grandparents' property to the other, connecting Rainbow Road to Kanaka Road. Another regular who sought refuge was a deer whom we affectionately and innocently named Limpy due to his inability to run. Limpy's haven was the forest east of the house. Early each morning he wandered through the acreage, eating Transparent apples off the dew-covered orchard grounds, confident that no one would hurt him, yet ready to limp away at the sight of a stranger. We watched Limpy eat while we ate our own breakfast on the large front deck, its overhang lined with hanging baskets of fuchsias still dripping from their early morning soak. Our breakfast included fresh eggs gathered from the chicken coop, most certainly not by Little Joe, who clutched the eggs so tightly in his chubby hands they'd be crushed by the time he passed the honeysuckle vine.

As we ate, we argued over what our first activity of the day would be — me often successfully bidding to visit Pierre, Grandpa's wooden scarecrow in the vegetable garden. Pierre's second-hand outfits changed annually as the years

passed, looking more and more fit for a senior citizen. In the early years Pierre held an old wooden plow. As he aged, he clutched an empty wine bottle in one hand and in the other, tin pie pans tied together that clattered in the wind.

CAUTIONARY TALES AND A LOT OF LAUGHTER

We children enjoyed almost total freedom, but Grandpa liked to watch over us while he worked in his vegetable garden alongside Pierre, or while he worked in his work sheds. One shed was full of saws, axes, and antique log peaveys hanging in their assigned spots. This was a place we rarely entered because we were convinced by our grandpa that if we did, we would leave with a finger or two missing. A more strictly forbidden place not even the most ardent hide-and-seeker would go near was the septic tank buried behind the house. For me, the mere thought of walking anywhere close to that area caused my legs to feel weak. Grandpa only needed to tell Carolyn once (word spread fast among us children) that anyone who walked in that area would die, not by eternal fire but by eternal sewage.

Other than these stipulations, most activities were undertaken without warnings. For instance, despite Jacqueline falling out of Grandpa's car one day in 1979 while Grandpa drove her and Rachele down the neighbour's driveway (it was Rachele who loudly alerted Grandpa that her 3-year-old sister had opened the door and gone overboard), the protocol of wearing a seatbelt for leisurely rides was never enforced. The story of the mishap, which concluded with Jacqueline being inspected by a gaggle of geese and nipped in the backside by a gander, lived on in our laughter. Our family custom of laughing during occasions that most people would react to with sombre emotion was thought by family friends to be inappropriate but intriguing.

Adding to our sense of security throughout our summers spent at the acreage was our grandpa's singing of French folk songs such as Sur le Pont d'Avignon and his stories of being an ambulance driver in the army. With a glimmer in his eye, Grandpa assured us that, as a trained paramedic, he was able to tend to us should we injure ourselves while playing outside — and he often did. His real talent lay in post-wound care. With a quick flick of his finger to my head, he used the other hand to rip off a bandage without me feeling the pain of the dirt-caked adhesive pulling from my skin. While Grandpa's stories as a paramedic were a ruse crafted exclusively for us grandchildren, he did in fact serve in WWII, working as a linesman and patrolling what many now call the West Coast Trail.

A PLAY PARADISE

Beside the apple orchard was our greatest source of happiness: a play paradise that our lean and muscular grandpa constructed amidst the Douglas firs and western red cedars. At its heart stood a two-storey treehouse. Nearby was a

swing tied to a horizontal rope strung 15 metres above the ground between two trees. This provided endless fun for Jamie and Jacqueline, who took turns swinging into the open space below. I, on the other hand, coveted any rare chance to sit on the swing in solitude, allowing the rhythm of my feet sweeping back and forth on the grooved forest floor to organize my every thought.

We often entertained ourselves by riding the hand-held zip line and sit-down trolley — each trolley extending across its own separate section of the forest. Auntie Paulette, five-foot-eleven and too selfless to say no to our pleas for her participation, took the most memorable trip on the child-sized trolley, which stopped midway, leaving her hanging in the middle of the forest as we all erupted in laughter. If we ever needed a pause from our rousing activities, we lounged in the canvas hammock before pushing one willing, or unwilling, occupant back and forth with all our might so that the hammock flipped 360 degrees, cocooning them inside.

Our most coveted pastime was taking tractor rides, where we were chauffeured around the property by our grandpa, his fedora hat covering his receding hairline. We'd all jam ourselves into the wooden trailer attached to the tractor — little ones in the middle, older ones on the outside — with the little ones weaseling their way to the edges the moment Grandpa faced forward to drive. At 5-years-old, I vividly recall descending the long flight of steps from the front deck of the house one sunny summer morning, quickening my pace on the rock landing where the garter snakes liked to gather, only to see Grandpa leaving with my siblings and cousins on the tractor. I cried, having been left behind. After a quick turnaround in the field and a return trip up the driveway, Grandpa picked me up by the St. John's wort to join the ride, salty tears still flowing.

AKERLAND

Our grandpa was always ready to construct with his arthritic hands that which our lively minds created. In the summer of 1985, when I was 7, we had plans for the forested section of the property to become Akerland (a fusion of our last names). At its entrance, Grandpa constructed a wooden bridge over the winding streambed—which had the habit of rising with rainwater—so that the Joes, who were then 3 and 5, could enter the forest with ease. Akerland was slated to be a paradise of forts nestled amid the alders and cedars, abundant bracken fern competing for sunlight on the forest floor. Taken with the splendour of the place, we were confident that Akerland would attract visitors from all over Salt Spring Island, even though we had no plans to advertise.

Carolyn and I designed a tourist information booth, which our grandpa promptly constructed for us close to a large nurse log and just far enough away from the stinging nettle. The booth, a raised covered fort made from two-by-

fours and plywood with a deck at the front, was only accessible by a wooden ladder. I was so pleased with the frugal structure—my imagination embellished its shortcomings. We filled the booth with stacks of pamphlets we had gathered from the Bowen Queen ferry as we insouciantly sailed the Salish Sea; a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II witnessed our petty theft.

Jamie, Rachele, and Jacqueline planned a restaurant with sand dollar currency to receive guests. On the menu were freshly picked blackberries, purple prune plums, and a variety of garden produce. The featured items were Grandma's famous cucumber sandwiches, delectable homemade cherry pies, and Scottish shortbread, which we planned to transport by wheelbarrow from the house a hundred metres away. The restaurant was to be constructed by Grandpa the following summer and would be complete with running water — if the garden hose could reach far enough.

ONE LAST HUG

That summer, when we said goodbye to our grandparents at the ferry terminal, Grandpa vowed to work on Akerland in preparation for our eventual return. Big Joe, his four-foot frame clothed in a grey Mickey Mouse sweatsuit sticky with tree sap and smelling like Christmas, stepped forward, saying: "Yeah, if you don't die first." Grandpa, visibly shaken, gathered himself and flashed a reassuring smile, promising he would see us next summer. Aware of his unease, I gave him one last hug.

THE SECOND HOLE

By August of the following summer, having not yet travelled out west, we were still in our home provinces. I prematurely happened upon the news that our 66-year-old grandpa had passed away from a stroke while he was playing the second hole of the island golf course. My Auntie Jocelyn (my mother's sister who also resided in Saskatoon) dropped by our house on her bike to inform my mother. From my hiding place in the backyard, I watched and listened from a distance, dismayed by my mother's sobbing. With heavy hearts, our families prepared to fly to Salt Spring Island.

With the passing of our grandpa, we were introduced to the notion of death and were about to realize that there were people other than ourselves in need of attention and care.

BLACKBERRIES FOR SALE

The first morning back on Salt Spring Island, we devised a plan that went beyond ourselves. Seeing that our grandma and our mothers were mourning, we decided that a purchased gift was in order — but first we needed money. Following Rachele like a family of ducklings, we trekked through rainwater that had pooled at the mouth of the driveway the night before and crossed Rainbow

Road to the Murakami's market farm to purchase 50 green plastic strawberry baskets. Mrs. Murakami greeted us with her usual poise, the brim of her straw hat so wide she appeared extra petite. We were willing to offer 25 cents per basket and were elated when Mrs. and Mr. Murakami gave us the baskets at no cost, simply because we were "Jack and Mary's grandchildren."

Returning home, we picked blackberries for hours from the towering bramble that bordered Akerland. We were all determined to do our share, while also ruefully receiving our share of scratches from the unforgiving thorns.

We set up our blackberry stand at the edge of the driveway by the marsh. We enlisted Willy, a 4-year-old cousin, who had come that day from Fulford, a farming and logging community on the south end of the island. Being the youngest, and eager to please, Willy agreed to wear a brown paper bag that read "Blackberries, $1." The bag covered most of his body, leaving visible only his round face and dark curly hair, his tanned arms and hands, and his steel-toed work boots. I can't remember whether we paid him for his labours or assumed that allowing him into our exclusive circle was payment enough. Regardless, his generosity served us well. His gentle and warm smile caught the attention of many people driving by. At one point, an Islander sporting a baseball cap, three-day stubble, and jeans and a T-shirt pulled over. He asked us if we'd be able to pick 40 pounds of blackberries at a dollar a pound so he could make wine. We were thrilled. Barely able to comprehend having so much money, we quickly abandoned our roadside stand. Despite the spitting rain and looming grey clouds, we zealously picked buckets and buckets of blackberries all afternoon and evening, careful to not allow raindrops to enter our buckets and spoil our harvest.

When our customer returned the next day, bathroom scale in hand, we proudly presented him with the blackberries. Eager to fulfill our plan to buy our grandma a gift, Jamie, with a flip of his dark brown locks and a quick adjustment of his aviator eyeglasses, fearlessly led us down the root-laden hardpan forest path to the elementary schoolyard and then to Ganges harbour, which functioned as Salt Spring Island's downtown. Rachele, who acted more like an adult than her 12-year-old self, led from behind, her navy and white striped sailor blouse and matching shorts freshly ironed for the outing. Carolyn was in the middle of the pack. She was chosen to carefully clutch the $40, not necessarily because of any proven ability to be responsible but because of her assurance that she, knowing how to shop, would talk her way into finding us a bargain, stretching our money as far as it could go. Jacqueline and I stayed close to Carolyn. We were the lookout girls, eyeing every passerby with playful suspicion, me ready to scream, Jacqueline ready to tackle should someone try to steal our money.

The cashier at Mouat's General Store welcomed us and offered us condolences on the death of our grandpa. Carolyn, after consulting the rest of us, selected an overpriced white and blue ruffled apron with "Our Grandma is the Greatest" printed across the bodice. We were certain Grandma would love it, as she was often in the kitchen preparing our meals from recipes written on the inserts of old pantyhose packages. We wanted to buy our mothers a gift, too, but we couldn't find anything we felt was suitable. We decided to give them the rest of the money — minus a few dollars used during our stop for candy at the Old Salty store, a stop initiated by my sweet tooth — to put towards school supplies for the coming school year. Both our families lived on modest budgets, so we were certain that easing their financial pressure would bring them solace in their time of grief.

In presenting our grandma with the apron, we proudly lined up, side by side, from shortest to tallest. Teary-eyed, Grandma leaned down and enveloped us with hugs and kisses as her short curly black hair rubbed against our heads.

SUNDAY BEST

The next morning, in Ganges, my mother and Auntie Paulette guided us through the doors of a quaint funeral home, and, down the hall — the thick moss-like carpet rebounding under our bare feet — to the dimly lit back room. At first tentative, not knowing what to expect, we were soon pleased to see that our grandpa looked as kind as always, dressed in his Sunday best: a navy suit, impeccably ironed white shirt, and a wine-red tie. Little Joe was first to touch him, gently grasping his limp hands. Carolyn affectionately kissed his forehead, noting how unusually cold he was to her lips. When I stepped in and placed my 8-year-old hand on Grandpa's chest, I felt as connected to him as I always had. He felt strong and familiar, despite the absence of the smell of cigarette smoke and Ozonol.

Chauffeured to the funeral service by Grandpa's former work colleagues in newly washed B.C. Hydro vehicles following the hearse were Grandma and three of her five children: Auntie Care, Auntie Jocelyn, and Uncle David. We children arrived at Our Lady of Grace Church soon after with our mothers. I was dressed in a white cotton puffed-sleeve dress patterned in tiny pastel pink rosebuds, its belt wrapped tightly around my skinny waist. The pomp at the church, the flower arrangements adorning the altar, the solemn shoulder-to-shoulder formal wear, and Grandma's string of pearls reserved only for the most important of occasions — marked for me the reality that something significant had happened. My grandpa was gone forever.

The funeral was a tearful occasion, but — as revealed to me by my mother years later—comic relief was provided for those who sought it. When 1 Corinthians 15:55— "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?"—was

read from the Bible, it served as a lighthearted reminder to my mother of Grandma's epiphany during funeral planning: "What? I always thought that verse was written by Shakespeare!" she had exclaimed. And later in the service, lingering in Uncle David's mind was his comment days earlier of going to visit "Jack in a Box" at the funeral home, adding giddy relief to his deep pangs of sorrow. (My grandpa, Jack, had always been proud that he shared the same "off" sense of humour with his only son). There was no comic relief for me, Jacqueline, and my cousins, however, as our heartbreak didn't allow such reprieve. Rachele was the only one not overcome with sorrow. She cheerfully held onto the sentiment that Grandpa died doing what he loved—golfing—and that he was now enjoying the splendour of heaven.

Exiting my pew at the end of the funeral service and lost in thought, I was inadvertently left without my sisters and cousins due to the slow-moving crowd that filled the narrow aisles and separated us. Tears flowed down my face as the coffin was being wheeled away. In an attempt to console, my grandparents' elderly friend, wearing a dress much too bright for a funeral, towered over me saying, "Don't worry, it's okay." I was not okay, and I felt as though I never would be.

Later that day, at the refuge of the acreage, I stood in the vegetable garden studying the orange and magenta everlasting flowers crawling up the cuffs of Pierre's pants. I munched on Candyland red tomatoes, their juice dripping onto my Sunday best, as Pierre scared crows. While I was intent on being alone, Auntie Care came along and convinced me that Grandpa would want me to be with my sisters and cousins despite my grief. With her encouragement I headed up past the weeping willow to the house. There, I found the others in the laundry room fashioning makeshift aprons made of snow-white tea towels and resumed my regular childhood duty of play. At first, it felt strange that its enjoyment required effort. Nonetheless, I eventually settled into my role as bartender, as we poured unintentionally stiff drinks to be served to the many guests gathered on the front deck.

PEACE FLOWS THROUGH ME

A few years after Grandpa passed away, Grandma, unable to keep up the acreage and its gardens, sold the property. The house was used as a school board office until it was moved to another location a few years later. Construction of Gulf Islands Secondary School began soon after, in 1992 — the same year that I began high school in Saskatoon. Three years later, on one of my summer visits to the island to stay with my paternal grandpa in Fulford, B.C., I nostalgically returned to my childhood place, curious about its transformation. As I sat on the grounds of the school and looked up at the Douglas fir trees, I wondered if the students ever noticed a few old tree fort boards still nailed into one of them. Did the students and staff know of my grandparents' place? My answer came

when I suddenly realized that I did not know exactly who had lived on the land before my grandparents occupied it. In this realization, I was reminded that the same space can mean different things to the different people who inhabit it. One group may not know, might forget, or perhaps might not consider or acknowledge the inherent familial and cultural connections of the group who stewarded the land before them.

Now a parent of four children, I further appreciate the significance of childhood place attachments, and the life-long wellbeing that they provide. The memories I hold of my grandparents' place are immune to bulldozers and builders. They live with me and give me a sense of security when I find myself vulnerable. I imagine myself as a child playing in the tree house, swinging among the trees, lying in a canvas hammock, or visiting Pierre among the everlastings, and peace flows through me. This peace meanders like the driveway that ran through my grandparents' place, a continual line of movement offering joy and resilience to those who worked and played on it, refuge to those who travelled through it, courage to those who ventured beyond it, and solace to those who wept.

PART TWO: PLANNING FOR TEACHING AS PLACEMAKING (JULIA & JANINE)

Janine wrote "My Childhood Place" as a required assignment for the Children and Place course which was intended to introduce students to concepts and analytic frameworks from literature on "place and space" and on "children and place." Writing and reading one another's childhood place stories was expected to bring more meaning to the concepts encountered in course readings.

A key analytic framework for place was one provided by Eyles (1989, as cited in Ellis, 2005). He explained how place is the source of social structures—that is, the rules, resources, and available relationships with individuals, ideas, and institutions—that enable or constrain the everyday lives that people can shape for themselves. Importantly, the everyday lives that people shape for themselves result in the identities they develop—that is, their motivations, values, roles, and habits of mind.

What we witness in Janine's childhood place story is a two-tiered process of placemaking. As one tier, the grandparents socially constructed the place that the acreage could be for the children, and with those provisions, as the second tier, the children engaged in their own placemaking and building of routines and relationships. This two-tiered view of children and placemaking can have parallel application for conceptualizing planning for teaching as planning for placemaking in classrooms. The social structures that teachers introduce in their classrooms can both enhance the quality of the everyday lives students shape for themselves as well as create opportunities for the students themselves

to contribute additional routines or resources that support further placemaking, relationships, belonging, and positive identities.

In what follows, we reflect on key ideas about: the Children and Place course; the Childhood Place Stories writing assignment; the concept of place in general; and characteristics and benefits of good places for children. In Tables 3 and 4, we use examples from Janine's childhood place story to illustrate the characteristics and benefits of good places for children.

We then conclude with possibilities for engaging these ideas in teaching.

THE CHILDREN AND PLACE COURSE

After several years of collecting and studying literature about place and space as well as children and place and writing some papers about key ideas that ensued from this research, I (Julia) began teaching a course called Children and Place. I hoped that students would find the concepts generative for planning research or their teaching. I offered the course at both graduate and undergraduate levels.

In the Children and Place course, class members were introduced to "place and space" and "children and place" concepts and related research literature from cultural geography, sociology, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and education. The course had several complex aims and layered intentions, the main ones being:

- clarify the lived meanings of place and how these meanings are established,
- enhance awareness of human agency in placemaking,
- clarify how place is the source of structures that enable or constrain the everyday lives people can shape for themselves,
- examine what children draw from their places to support their growth and wellbeing.

A particular goal of the course was to cultivate understanding of the place of the classroom as the source of social structures that enable or constrain the everyday lives students are able to shape for themselves (Eyles, 1989). Literature studied in the course reviewed the characteristics of good places and what children need from place to support their growth and wellbeing. Table 1 highlights possibilities for creating connections between social structures and the desired affordances of good places for children. Affordances are action possibilities that emerge from the interaction between an object's properties and an agent's capabilities. The users understand the possible actions through direct perception or experience (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

TABLE 1. *Key Components of Planning for Teaching as Planning for Placemaking*

Social structures that teachers can plan	**What children need from place to support their growth and wellbeing**
• resources, • routines (daily, weekly, monthly, seasonal, annually, special days), • rules, • available relationships with individuals, ideas, and institutions, • instructional activities	• social affiliation (i.e., playmates, friendly classmates, like-minded peers), • a positive identity, • belonging in terms of caring for and being cared for by others (also, giving to the classroom or school and being given to), • autonomy, • space for creative expression or self-development, • opportunities to try out pre-defined social roles in conventional settings, • "sense of place" or "insideness"

The Childhood Place Stories Writing Assignment

Course participants were asked to write childhood place stories that they could share in class. Janine's childhood place story in part one of this MJE Forum piece was written in this context. This writing activity was intended to evoke authors' memories of what it was like, and how important it was, to have their childhood needs and growth supported through the dynamics of everyday life opportunities in good places — that is, places that were sources of belonging and identity while providing opportunities for social and creative self-development (Chawla, 1992). The stories were situated in many different settings or locations such as a basement, a backyard, a wooded area at or near home, an entire neighbourhood, grandparents' home or farm, a summer camp, a family summer cabin at the lake, an aunt's home, or the home of another parent, and even a bedroom walk-in closet.

Instructions for writing childhood place stories asked students to:

- read two sample place stories provided ("Places to Play" chapter in Gordon, 2000, pp. 75-106)[2] and Narrative 1 in Green and Turner, 2013)[3];
- recall a place where they spent important time during childhood;
- draw a diagram, map, or picture depicting the place;
- write a story of about 2500 - 3500 words about their everyday life in that place; and
- write a brief "about the author" section to introduce the childhood place story.

Drawing the images before writing the childhood place stories proved to be important. Harper (2002, as cited in Ellis et al., 2013) explains that "the parts of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than the parts that process verbal information," and as a consequence, "images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words" (p. 491). In addition to bringing forth feelings and emotions related to memories of the setting, viewing the diagram or drawing provided an opportunity for further recall, reflection, and analysis or recognition of patterns. Writing the stories well in advance of dates for sharing in class also allowed time for the students to reconsider sensitive material.

Although they typically did so spontaneously, students were not asked to analyze their childhood place stories. Instead, each class member was asked to select a place of current interest and to present an analysis of it to the class. Examples of settings they selected were: Playgrounds, seniors' care homes, favorite restaurants, their current backyards, their own living rooms or kitchen entertainment islands, in-laws' homes, and so forth. Sometimes their analyses led to plans to make improvements at sites that were their own such as home offices or family living rooms. Course participants' ideas about classroom and school applications of place concepts were expressed in weekly reflection responses to readings or in the final course assignments.

ABOUT PLACE

Butler et al. (2020) have argued that although place is intimately linked to our life experiences, the notion of place remains under-conceptualized in educational research. The following sections outline selected key ideas about place and about children and place with a few examples of how some of these ideas were illustrated in Janine's childhood place story.

Place has been defined as "an area or space that is a habitual site of human activity and/or is conceived of in this way by communities or individuals" (Brey, 1998, as cited in Ellis, 2010b, p. 387). Place is understood as being essential as a source of comfort, belonging, and identity, and the meaning of a place is created by what one gives to and receives from it (Relph, 1993, as cited in Ellis, 2010b.) Table 2 lists a number of ideas about place that can serve as useful focusses for reflection and discussion regarding classrooms and schools as places.

TABLE 2. *Selected Key Ideas About Place*

Topic	
What place is	Place is traditionally understood as consisting of the three intertwined elements of: • a specific landscape with both built and natural elements, • a pattern of social activities, and • a set of personal and shared meanings
Why place is important	• people need place for comfort, belonging, identity • people define themselves and others through sense of place • sense of place and being an insider in a community give a person a strong centre from which to face the unknowns of the larger world
How place works	• there are interconnected processes for making place out of space • history is intrinsic to the idea of place • places are legal and social creations that reserve territory for certain types of people and certain types of behaviours • place is a territory of meanings created by what one gives to and receives from an environment • places are not only contexts for human life but are themselves alive as they grow, change, or decline in response to human care or activity • places are not spaces that contain culture but are formed by the crossing routes of people and cultures
Children and place	• children and adults can have different needs of place • parental fears for children's safety limit their access to social affiliation and to space for creativity and growth • children's private hideouts or play spaces are cherished places and become internal resources • play with others in a natural environment intensifies exploration and exploration of an environment with others intensifies relationships • children benefit from connection to the adult world of work and opportunities to try out pre-defined social roles

Note: These ideas were selected from the summary section in Ellis, 2010b, p. 395.

GOOD PLACES FOR CHILDREN

In cultural geography literature, place is understood to be important as a source of security, comfort, stability, nurturance, belonging, meaning, and identity and "good places" are seen to also include "space" for growth and creative self-development (Ellis 2010a, 2010b). Chawla's (1992) review of four diverse literatures to learn about children's patterns of place preference and use also identified the importance of security and social affiliation while noting that the greatest sources of satisfaction came from opportunities for social or creative self-development. While security must be a primary feature of place, Chawla's

review emphasized the importance of the availability of space for children and youth at all ages.

In research on anti-violence practices in schools, Bickmore (2011) found that schools often allocate more resources to surveillance and control than to the facilitation of healthy relationships. One of the school board leaders in the study stated: "Everyone's so busy [now] ... there's no time to be creative or innovative. We need to do way more, to make all kids feel cared for, loved, and welcomed" (p. 683). Bickmore asserted that schools should retain an emphasis on what schools do best in terms of "providing opportunities for diverse students to learn, to shine, and to contribute" (p. 683).

In research in schools, belonging and place attachment are increasingly being studied as key aspects of good places for children (e.g., Poole, 2025; Green & Turner, 2017; Riley, 2013, 2017, & 2019; Sawler, 2005; Vaselenak, 2009).

"Placemaking" is the name given to self-consciously engaging in the social construction of the classroom as a place by thoughtfully introducing or supporting rules, routines, resources, and relationships (with individuals, ideas, and institutions.) This planning is undertaken with awareness that these social structures — rules, routines, resources, and relationships — will enable or constrain the everyday lives students can shape for themselves and their identities.

There is currently widespread attention to supporting students' well-being at all school levels and, in these initiatives and research, relationships and belonging are understood to be key to this (Poole, 2025; Yildirim & Arslan, 2024). One example of thoughtful placemaking at the postsecondary level comes from the University of Alberta (U of A) which is providing instructors and students with suggested practices and resources for "wellness in the classroom." As one of the elements, the September 2025 issue of *Wellness in the classroom support for instructors* highlights resources for students that are focused on the development of peer relationships at U of A (University of Alberta, 2025).

Immordino-Yang, in an interview with Sparks (2019, as cited in Ellis & Docherty, 2024), has emphasized that teachers' deep relationships with students are not only about friendliness and engaging socially with students, but are based on teachers' knowledge of students' potential, interests, strengths and weaknesses, curiosity, and habits of mind. Immordino-Yang explained that without getting to know their students in an ongoing way—as opposed to only in the first month of the school year—it is difficult for teachers to show respect for their cultures or to learn how those cultures shape their meaning-making with curriculum topics.

Ellis and Docherty (2024) presented instructional activities[4] that can be used with many school topics to support teachers in getting to know their students. Ellis (1998) found that when student teachers used these instructional activities, there were surprising results in the form of: enhanced relationships, on-task and cooperative behaviours, and discovery of students' personal strengths.

Janine's childhood place story illustrated the children's sources of security and opportunities for social and creative self-development at the acreage. As highlighted in Table 3, Janine's story told how the children invented games, developed routines, and created places there. These forms of play supported problem solving, striving, competition, risk taking, relationships, and positive identities. The unstructured natural environment and the reassuring and supportive presence of their grandpa were all that were needed. While classrooms and schools may not offer access to a natural environment like the acreage, ideas about "loose parts"[5] play and open-ended creative activities with space for students' interests and talents can inspire ideas about classroom or school projects, spaces, or routines.

TABLE 3. *Good Places for Children*

Attributes of good places for children	**How accomplished in general**	**Examples from Janine's "My Childhood Place" story**
Security	• "Eyes on where children play" and "Safety in numbers" (Holt et al., 2015)	• The children were always in a group and Grandpa could always see or hear them
	• Language in the making of place (Tuan, 1991)	• Laughter was emphasized even with somber topics
	• Sense of place or insideness	• The children knew their way around and were known by others at the local store
Place Attachment	• Security	• As illustrated in first row of this table
	• Social affiliation	• The children had playmates and their beloved grandparents
	• Creative expression and exploration	• The children invented games and places in the natural environment of the acreage
	• Play in a natural environment[6]	• The children's exploration of the acreage and their relationships with each other were intensified

BENEFITS OF GOOD PLACES FOR CHILDREN

Janine's story illustrated many ways that the children experienced the benefits of a good place at their grandparents' acreage (See: Table 4). There was social and emotional growth from self-monitoring their own play. Belonging and positive identity were supported by all of their special roles and contributions to their daily play and routines. Resilience grew from risk-taking in challenging their own progress in their games and play and in courageously undertaking novel adult activities to provide a comforting gift for their grandma. Even serving drinks after the funeral gave experience with pre-defined social roles in conventional settings. Their needs for agency, autonomy, and privacy were met as they invented Akerland and the tourist information booth. Janine found refuge in the garden by Pierre, the scarecrow, when needed after the funeral. And finally, memories of the acreage still bring peace to Janine now when needed.

The benefits of space for children's placemaking and unstructured or child-led play have been recognized and recommended in many contexts. The Canadian Public Health Association (2019) presented a position statement to support children's access to unstructured play. They explained that "the term unstructured play does not have an academic definition, but has come to be used as a generic term to represent child-led play that takes place preferably outdoors but also indoors, and includes the concept of risky play"[6].

TABLE 4. *Benefits of Good Places for Children*

Benefits of good places for children	**How accomplished in general**	**Examples from Janine's "My Childhood Place" story**
Social and Emotional Growth	• Opportunities for self-monitoring and figuring things out when there are emotional upsets (Polakow & Sherif, 1987)	• "Pouters" quickly returned to the play when their objections or complaints were ignored by playmates
Belonging and Positive Identity	• "Giving to and receiving from an environmental context" (Relph, 1993, p. 36)	• All of the children had special roles or contributions to their regular play routines and to the "gift for grandma" project and all felt cared for and included
	• Having playmates, friendly classmates, caring for others and feeling cared for (Osterman, 2000)	• Each morning the children planned their play together
	• Opportunities to try out pre-defined social roles in conventional settings	• Selling blackberries and helping with serving drinks after the funeral
Resilience	• Experience with adjusting and adapting to a crisis situation builds knowledge and confidence • Play with playmates in a natural environment	• Selling blackberries and helping with serving drinks after the funeral • Intensified risk taking and capacity to assess risk
Agency and creation of a child's culture of place	• Children's special places express their needs for identity, privacy, autonomy, and control (Polakow & Sherif, 1987)	• Examples of constructing Akerland, tourist information booth, etc.

PLANNING FOR TEACHING AS PLACEMAKING: THE POSSIBILITIES

Childhood place stories like Janine's — writing them and reading them — can lead authors and readers to an enhanced appreciation of the social structures of the places of childhood. If educators can remember events or activities related to their own childhood joy, growth, comfort, and accomplishments — and examine the social structures of place that enabled these experiences — perhaps they can better appreciate the potential of planning social structures in the classroom.

Re-visiting lived experience of childhood places while reviewing place and space literature can alert writers and readers to the importance of "good places" for children and support their recognition of how places are both socially constructed and evolve. Janine's childhood place story portrayed the two-tiered development of place for the children — the first tier, in this story, taking the form of the grandparents' provision of rules, routines, support, and resources and the second tier revealing the children's own development of routines, relationships, and identities. In other words, the everyday lives the children shaped for themselves included their own placemaking in the spaces available to them and with the resources and supports provided. The childhood place story as a whole shows the grandparents' contribution and its importance. The full portrayal of the two tiers contributes to discussion of the parallel possibilities in classrooms where teachers have responsibilities for the first tier.

Planning for teaching is, in effect, planning for placemaking. Any social structures that teachers plan—that is, any rules, routines, resources, support for relationships (with individuals, ideas, or institutions), or instructional activities—will enable or constrain the everyday lives students can create for themselves. In the context of current awareness of the importance of students' relationships, belonging, and well-being in schools, it could be helpful for educators to consider employing social structures that support students' relationships, creative self-development, positive status, and sense of place (See Table 1).

In selecting, adapting, or adding social structures teachers can ask: How could relationships be better supported? How could new students more quickly acquire a sense of place? How could students regularly have space for social and creative self-development? How could all students experience positive status? What routines, resources, or activities could create spaces for students' placemaking and the resulting roles, identities, and relationships? In sum, how might teachers' thinking about and acting upon the possibilities of placemaking enhance students' place attachment for their classrooms and schools? Such thinking arguably begins by first making space for place and generating childhood memories that can inform placemaking

NOTES

1. We have permission to use actual locations and names of people in the text.
2. Mary Gordon's chapter, Places to Play, described her everyday life in play places carved out of the rooms where her parents worked—her father, a writer, whose office was in his bedroom and her mother a secretary in a downtown office.
3. Nicole Green's Narrative 1 was originally written for sharing in our Children and Place course. It described her everyday life in in her close-knit neighborhood where she lived till her family moved when she was 13 years old.

4. These activities took the form of short and fast self-expressive activities at the beginning of topics and creative assignments with visual or performance products at the end of topics. Visual organizers from creative problem-solving strategies (e.g., idea trees and analogies charts) helped teachers to efficiently lead whole-class review or brainstorming and oversee a variety of group or individual creative projects.
5. "Loose parts" are movable materials with no single purpose that children can incorporate in countless ways in creative, unstructured play.
6. Freedom in exploration of the environment intensifies friendships and friendships intensify exploration of the environment (Moore, 1986, as cited in Ellis 2010b, p. 394).

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