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SECRET SPACES OF CHILDHOOD AND THE PEDAGOGY OF PLACE

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There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.
- Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (1940)

If you drive around cities and suburbs in the U.S., you will notice that children no longer play much outside. As you observe streets devoid of children, your first assumption may be that they are at school or at parks competing in team sports. Gradually it dawns on you that as more green space is paved over, as inner cities are further neglected, as fear of strangers intensifies, children are relegated to worlds without sidewalks or main streets connecting them to a wider community of neighbors. At this point you ask, “Where do the children play?”

In the last 30 years the range of independent mobility for North American 12-year-olds has shriveled from one mile to 550 yards. Children have less privacy, yet paradoxically, more access to media. Current statistics indicate more hours are spent watching screens than attending school. Should we worry that growing up minimally engaged with plants and animals might prove dangerous to nature itself?

The UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre’s report on the well being of children indicated that of 21 wealthy nations in 2007, the United States was rated at the bottom of the list and came in last or next to last on three of six criteria—health and safety, behaviors and risks, and family and peer relationships. These statistics suggest that childhood itself is increasingly under fire as a worldwide demographic, cultural invention, and

social institution. Grim as the figures are, they only hint at the reality of growing up in a society disrupted by violence, driven by competition, and divorced from nature. As Brian Sutton-Smith, play specialist, has put it, “the opposite of play isn’t work. It’s depression.”

How educators use and create spaces for children determines how the next generation experiences reality. Yet, in a world of high stakes testing, we may be losing not just recess but also those psychic locales where imagination and confidence can grow. That’s why we need collaborative pedagogies to look at where children and adults learn most enjoyably.

Certainly practices of self-discovery where learning and play meld deserve to be treated with as much care by educators and families as the cultivation of literacy and mastery of math. Yet we know little, it seems, about the vitality recreation draws from sites of natural beauty.

Starting as a question about how the young process their own ecology, *Secret Spaces of Childhood* developed in 1998 at the University of Michigan as an investigation of cultural memory. Campus-community partnerships, coordinated by Residential College students, grew from our study of children’s literature. Curious about the power of fantasies like “*Crusoe’s Island*” or the “*Secret Garden*” to shape our core identities, I wondered how children’s stories change over time, and how images like *Hogwarts* or *Tarbeach* fashion feelings within society.

A two-day conference enabled a thousand children to celebrate Nichols Arboretum with performances and story telling. At the Residential College, architects, children’s authors, educators, storytellers, and artists discussed issues of environmental justice and the need to preserve sanctuaries for free play. Walls displayed illustrations from children’s books. Participants shared a sense of having been profoundly shaped by hideouts of their own making. Even the sole public zone in the exhibition, Gerald McDermott’s charcoal drawing of a medieval winding stone staircase at the Detroit Institute of Arts, conjured a “pathway to the infinite”: “We all have secret spaces...where we separate ourselves from the rest of the world, and incubate. We imagine ourselves into existence.”

Recently *The Poetry of Everyday Life* has provided me tools to plan and even document community-engaged scholarship, observing how and where children make their own structures, whether in shelter building, collage, poetry, or drawing. Seminar participants seek to understand the role of children’s voices in public and city life; to develop teaching, collaboration and leadership skills in school settings; to experience poetry as an imaginative response to local geography such as the Huron River watershed. Partnering with local children and their teachers, we embark on field trips, journal, write poems and make art about place-making, organize a poetry reading, and mount an exhibition at the Ann Arbor Public Library.

Some explore the role of forts; others photograph and map schoolyards, theme parks, and designated “kid spaces” as these reflect class backgrounds and assumptions about the nature and needs of elementary school children. Or they examine and compare specialized curricula related to local organizations like Retired Police Horse Adoption, The Greening of Detroit, and Hands On Museum. Some document contested land use or a problem that prevents playing in the neighborhood (application of pesticide, recent crime, lack of access).

The project produced mini-documentaries about children’s “places of special meaning” and how “ordinary” spaces often inspire stories. It filmed children’s author Christopher Paul Curtis (*The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963*) in his hometown Flint speaking with schoolchildren about their experiences of play and place. Such sharing can help us look around and find common ground with others. Some of these children helped inspire *Where Do the Children Play?* airing on American Public Television through 2010 (<http://www.michigantelevision.org/childrenplay>). As William Cronon puts it, “To protect the nature that is all around us, we must think long and hard about the nature we carry inside our heads.”

Article by Elizabeth Goodenough, Scholar and Activist in Children’s Studies

Dr. Elizabeth Goodenough of the University of Michigan helped produce “Where Do the Children Play?” a project that encompasses an award-winning PBS documentary written and directed by award-winning filmmakers Christopher Cook and Mark Harris for Michigan Television, a three-volume anthology, and an outreach campaign to promote outdoor play via community conversations throughout the U.S. Located at the Ginsberg Center in Ann Arbor, WDCP? builds partnerships with organizations such as the Alliance for Childhood, the National Wildlife Federation, and Children & Nature Network. In addition to *A Place for Play: A Companion Volume to WDCP?*, Goodenough’s books include *Infant Tongues* (1994), *Secret Spaces of Childhood* (2003), and *Under Fire: Childhood in the Shadow of War* (2008).

More information at <http://www.wfum.org/childrenplay/index.html>