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## Playing in Literary Landscapes: Considering Children's Need for Fantasy Literature in the Place-Based Classroom

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# Playing in Literary Landscapes: Considering Children’s Need for Fantasy Literature in the Place-Based Classroom

by Sarah Fisher

While all of children’s lived experiences are essentially rooted in place, Louise Chawla (1992) has noted that children “need to be brought from rootedness to a sense of place through education, which creates enough separation between the self and its surroundings to allow conscious appreciation” (p. 83). The efforts of place-based educators have been grounded in this premise, as well as in the belief that an appreciation for place developed in childhood influences the way those children care for the places they dwell when they move into adulthood (Sobel, 1993, p. 78). Laurie Lane-Zucker, in her foreword to David Sobel’s book, *Place-based Education: Connecting Classrooms & Communities*, reminds us that imagination is necessary if we are to inspire “authentic renewal and revitalization of civic life” (2005, p. iii).

Place-based education often employs a process of re-storying, whereby students are asked to respond creatively to stories of their homeground so that in time, they are able to position themselves, imaginatively and actually, within the continuum of nature and culture in that place. (p. iii)

The importance of imagination in place-based curricula is a direct and obvious conclusion when we characterize abstract attributes of place, such as memory, to imagination. Memory requires creative cognitive processes. However, in my own practice of this philosophy as an elementary school teacher in a rural town in southwestern Pennsylvania, I often found myself conflicted over the issue of imagination in place-based education. This was particularly true in regard to the central role imaginative literature played in the life of my classroom and in the lives of my students.

## The Local Watershed or Harry Potter?

In my third grade classroom a few years ago, nearly a third of my students were participating in the local baseball and softball leagues. Their games were hosted at a park near our school. A few of my students had noticed that the mud in the adjacent creek was tinted orange. As a class, we had been talking about the pollution of our local water sources from abandoned mines and the beehive coke ovens that lined the stream a hundred years ago. My students wondered if the orange coloration was a result of pollution or the minerals in the mud and were concerned about its impact on the wildlife that lived there. We decided to learn more about our local watershed and conduct some water testing. We stayed inspired with the project for a week or so until our Parent Teacher Organization held the annual book fair. In one period, my students went from asking “Can we please map the stream during recess?” to “Can we please have some time to read Harry Potter?”

My students became engrossed in their novels for the next few weeks, some writing their own Harry spin-offs and acting out the narrative on the playground. After several uninspired attempts

on my part to rally us back around the local pollution problem, I abandoned the project. I was despondent at having missed an authentic opportunity to connect classroom and community, and yet I suspected that the students' engagements with literary landscapes were contributing in some way to our connection to place, perhaps even directly.

Are the philosophies and pedagogical practices of literature-based classrooms congruent with place-based classrooms? In this paper, I argue that not only is imaginative literature compatible with place-based philosophies, but it can become a powerful centerpiece of a curriculum aimed at educating for a sense of place and inspiring life-long readers.

This discussion is informed by data collected as part of an ongoing research project in which I explore the ways aesthetic engagements with literature influence readers' experience of place. Acknowledging the tradition of place attachment studies, which often include adults' perspectives on the relationship between childhood places and identity construction, I draw from interview data from eight adult participants. I begin with a theoretical argument for the inclusion of imaginative literature in place-based curricula, followed by a discussion of a number of themes that emerged from participants' responses. I conclude with suggestions for carrying out these ideas in place-based and literature-based classrooms.

## **Realistic or Imaginative Literature?**

Louise Rosenblatt, known for her contributions to reader-response theory, states, "In aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (1994, p. 25). In fantasy literature like the Harry Potter series that took over my classroom, this might mean being introduced to a world of alterity, a world that little resembles the dimensions of the place in which we live. Sometimes, reaching the conclusion of a fantasy book, or other imaginative literature, we are even left with a feeling of longing for the literary landscape we have left behind and a deep dissatisfaction for our own world.

In this discussion, I broaden my consideration from the distinctive genre of fantasy embodied by otherworldly texts like Harry Potter to the more inclusive term, imaginative literature. Imaginative literature emphasizes a reader's particular aesthetic response to a text rather than a genre categorization. In this sense, imaginative literature describes a work of fiction, or poetry, in which the literary landscape differs from a reader's lived experiences, and through aesthetic engagement, prompts the reader to envision the "storyworld" as an "alternative universe," distinct from her own and capable of inspiring wonder through alterity (Blackford, 2004, p. 33). For example, although I refer to Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods* as historical fiction, to a reader in 2015 the literary landscape might be considered imaginative.

The notion that imaginative literature can nurture a local sense of place differs from a traditionally held assumption in literary theory that suggests child readers prefer literature that resembles their own experiences, or realistic literature. This belief, while not a completely invalid measure of anticipating reader-response, influences teachers' evaluation and selection of classroom literature (Blackford, 2004, p. 12), and the scholarship and resources available to educators for the inte-

gration of children's literature into place-based classrooms often reflects this same reductionist premise.

Nodelman and Reimer (2003) warn that when teachers use literature to promote a prescriptive instructional message or theme, they run the risk of discouraging their students from experiencing its pleasures. Ardent readers, people who are intrinsically motivated to read and do so often, are not expected to "parrot" the interpretations of other readers, including their teachers. Nodelman and Reimer write,

Ardent readers don't often read with a primary focus on absorbing a message as truth to live by. They don't think of the act of reading literature primarily as a form of self-administered therapy, in which they treat a story or poem as good advice about their own future behavior. Nor do they usually focus centrally on the information about geography or history that novels or poems convey. They tend to see their reading of literature as a source of questions to think about rather than answers to accept. (p. 36)

With place at the center of a reading curriculum, an intended aesthetic engagement with literature can easily become an exercise in efferent reading, in which children read specifically for information they might take away. This expected "take-away" might be implied through the structure of a lesson or the teacher's words and actions (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 24). Efferent reading positions the child as a more passive consumer of textual messages, rather than as an active meaning-maker. Children's fantasy, such as the works of E. B. White and Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax*, both of which I used in my instruction, can be justifiably included in the place-based classroom when the content provides seemingly direct and convenient place-conscious "take-aways". However, these books often take the place of other works of imaginative literature that children love, like Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, popular series books, and retellings of traditional fairytales. In my own efforts to reconcile critical pedagogies of place with a literature-based approach to instruction, I neglected the wider body of research on reader-response and often missed the broader place potential of engaging with imaginative literature, simply because I could not directly connect the content to my students' observable lived experiences.

## **Imaginative Literature's Hidden "Place" Curriculum**

Included on many syllabi for children's literature courses for pre-service teachers around the country is the following quote by Charlotte Huck (1982):

Literature records the depths and heights of the human experience. It develops compassion by educating the heart as well as the mind. It helps children entertain new ideas, and develop insights they never had before. It can stretch the imagination, creating new experiences, and enriching old ones. Literature can develop a sense of what is true and just and beautiful. (p. 317)

Many children's literature scholars would argue that fantasy is quite possibly the most critical genre for instilling these values in elementary classrooms (Norton, 1999, p. 352). A type of imaginative literature, fantasy is a genre characterized by motifs that extend beyond the realm of what

is physically possible in our own lived experiences. While the very nature of this genre in particular may seem contrary to the goals of place-based education, fantasy is “a literature of possibilities” (Pierce, 1996, p. 180) that works to re-story a reader’s perspective within his or her place. Norton (1999) concludes, “Fantasy writing helps children expand their curiosity, become observers of life, learn to be sensitive to rules and variations within rules, and open their minds to new possibilities” (p. 352). Pierce (1996) agrees: “Fantasy creates hope and optimism in readers. It is the pure stuff of wonder, the kind that carries over into everyday life and colours the way readers perceive things around them” (p. 183).

By creating an alternate world governed by its own set of rules, fantasy writers incorporate ideology and social commentary into their literary landscapes. The genre presents seemingly unimportant characters as vital players in the plot and often uses magic to empower the powerless. While inviting the reader to question what it means to be human, fantasy “roots us in universals,” but also “speaks to us of our place in the world” (Egoff, 1988, p. 18).

Like the efforts of place-based education, fantasy authors employ literary elements that distance us from ourselves just enough to reflect and appreciate the landscape. By offering us a literary landscape that evokes the multidimensionality of places through language and form, fantasy writers construct other worlds that starkly contrast our lived experiences and force us to reference our own world for comparison. For children, this is an especially important exercise in separating from the milieu to appreciate their rootedness in place. Spencer (2003) reminds us: “It is impossible to keep thinking and imagination apart, especially in the ‘firstness’ of children’s early encounters with the world they have to learn to make sense of....They explain things to themselves in terms of sameness and difference” (p. 107).

More generally, Holly Virginia Blackford’s reader-response research (2004) suggests that it is the possibility of aesthetically engaging with difference, or alterity, that keeps children reading. In her efforts to explore young girls’ identification with female characters in literature, she realized that the assumption they would identify with female characters in the first place was her own imposed contrivance (p. 7). Her work not only supports the idea that our misguided methods can hinder children’s aesthetic engagement with literature, but reminds us that pedagogical insight into the role of literature in the lives of child place-makers should be explored through the experiences of readers themselves.

## **Embodiment of Imaginative Literary Landscapes through Play**

**Methods.** Borrowing from place attachment studies that include adults’ retrospective interpretations of memories as data, I recruited adult participants in order to explore the congruency of imaginative literature with place-consciousness in their histories as readers. My goal was to gain insights into the design of a more authentic reading curriculum in place-based classrooms that sustains place-conscious habits of mind beyond childhood, but also honors an imaginative worldview as an important part of development. Survey and interview data were collected from eight participants for whom a literary self was a central part of childhood identity. These participants were women between the ages of 25 and 54, who were enrolled in a Fantasy Literature for Chil-

dren course I was instructing. Participants were asked to share memorable childhood experiences with literature that they felt left them with lasting positive connections to places or had influenced the way they see the world more generally.

**Results.** Overall, participants' personal responses reinforced the theoretical argument that children's aesthetic engagement with imaginative literature can inspire new ways of seeing and being in a place. However, their memories also highlighted the fluidity between children's intrinsically motivated engagement with imaginative literature, their need for play throughout childhood, and their developing identities as place-makers. Beyond new perspectives acquired during the act of reading, participants described three kinds of literary experiences that left them with enduring connections to childhood places: 1) special places where reading took place (e.g., inside a forsythia bush in the backyard); 2) ritualistic initiations into reading experiences (e.g., consistently following the same path through the public library to the shelf housing a favorite book); and 3) the embodiment of imaginative literary landscapes through play. In the following discussion, I limit my consideration to the third theme, as it is specific to imaginative literature and challenges us to construct a more inclusive repertoire of literature in place-based classrooms.

**Out-of-school settings.** While participants were not prompted to consider out-of-school experiences, all respondents enthusiastically described experiences in out-of-school settings. The current research encompassing children's responses to literature, as well as studies of children's special places, also privilege children's out-of-school experiences. Seen as more "authentic," these home and community contexts prompt learning and the construction of meaning that is intrinsically motivated, unbound by schools' physical limitations for movement, and less mediated by formal academic expectations that can narrow and isolate learning experiences (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 620).

**Transforming real spaces into imagined ones.** Leah shared that after reading *The Boxcar Children* by Gertrude Chandler Warner when she was around seven years old, she emptied her bedroom closet and inhabited it as if it were a long-forgotten boxcar, sheltering her from an impending storm as it did for the characters in the book. She would crack the sliding doors just enough to "let the smoke escape" as she cooked her food in the white plastic Easter basket she had excavated from the basement toy box.

Beginning when she was six years old, Anne remembers that she and her sister would play *Little House on the Prairie* in the large tractor shed on their grandfather's farm. The excess produce stored there and the large industrial produce scale were used as if they were part of the Oleson's general store.

When Rachel was ten years old, she built a fort in the woods behind her house with other neighborhood children to hoard found objects, like the Littles from the *John Peterson* novel.

In their childhood, Jenny and her sister would play "Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf," a game in which one girl would be the unsuspecting Little Red Riding Hood walking through the forest and the other would attack her in the persona of the wolf. The game was

played on the deserted playground equipment at their neighborhood school when school was not in session.

**Multisensory ways of knowing.** Participants' descriptions of the "real" places within which they inhabited imaginative storyworlds are characterized by multisensory ways of knowing that transformed the affordances of the physical landscape for play, as well as the meaning of the literary landscape. Three decades after playing *The Boxcar Children*, Leah describes the texture of the yellow shag carpet inside the dark space of her closet. She recalls the way she had to grip onto the recessed round metal knobs on the outside of the sliding closet doors and to handle them differently from the inside where there was nothing to grab onto to push or pull. Jenny recalls the place where she would play *Little Red Riding Hood*: "the play structure was under some eucalyptus trees and there were woodchips in the play area, so the smell of the trees and tanbark, along with the sound under our feet, is still palatable to me." Multisensory memories like these reinforce and extend children's cognitive understandings of the places they dwell.

**Everyday objects in literary landscapes.** Part of the "realness" of playing in these literary landscapes is the integration of everyday objects into the game. Everyday objects, with properties the children had come to know in a multisensory way within and outside the parameters of their play, were utilized to access the literary narratives, some validating book-inspired imaginings and some prompting extensions to the books' narratives (Walton, 1990, pp. 21-28). Physical objects became a kind of trans-textual artifact that bridged real and fictional environments through the child's assignment of meaning.

Using her hands to recall the dimensions of the basket she used as her boxcar cooking pot, Leah says, "There was a white plastic handle that had the holes on either end and the basket had the little buttons...t. And you could take them off and that's how I would be able to hook it over the bar and then have it hanging there." Like the characters in *The Littles*, Rachel and her neighbors would collect odds and ends to repurpose. They would create maps and leave notes for one another outlining special quests or supply lists. Once, Rachel and her friends were even inspired by the plot to attempt to use a pet dog as an animal courier.

Anne remembers braiding her hair and wearing dresses her mother had sewn for her to embody the literary Laura Ingalls Wilder. For participants, the literary landscapes became part of the mythic history of the objects they incorporated into their play even when the game was over (Unt, 2009, p. 386).

**Readers as place-makers.** Participants characterized their childhood experiences as some of their fondest memories in their histories as readers. Considering them from a place-conscious perspective, we can see that they are also about children as place-makers: they describe a transition from abstract space to a personally meaningful place, they connect to place through all of the senses, and they offer ownership and governance of a manageable space. These complex connections to places are made up of a layered narrative fabric that is woven with strands of "real" and fictional stories and meanings, a fluidity that changes focus as readers/place-makers move

between objects and relationships in real and imaginative storyworlds (Wilkie-Stibbs, 2005, p. 176). They emerged from intrinsically motivated aesthetic engagements with imaginative literature rather than a prescribed set of expected “take-aways.”

## Implications for Place-based Curricula

While all of children’s performative imaginative play has the potential to nurture multisensory ways of knowing a place, imaginative literature has particular affordances for place-conscious educators. Children are intrinsically motivated to engage with imaginative literature. As argued above, research in reader-response and literacy development connect imaginative literature to children’s psychological development and their ability to construct meaning as place-makers. The centrality of alterity to the literary landscapes of imaginative literature requires child readers to see their own places anew and to envision how those places might acquire new meaning through their own repositioning. Furthermore, creating classroom conditions that encourage place-consciousness can positively influence children’s transactions with literature, better enabling academic goals to be met.

In the following sections, integrating place-conscious pedagogy and literature-based curricula, I seek to reconcile aesthetic experiences with imaginative literature with place-consciousness. Many of these ideas are already being carried out in place-based classrooms and literature-based classrooms, but I discuss them through a reframing of the classroom as place and a renegotiation of the perceived limitations of place-conscious project-based learning. The intention is not to de-center place from the curriculum, but to enrich children’s experience of it within and beyond the physical boundaries of the school. The aim is also to nurture cognitive and multisensory place-conscious habits of mind that will inspire children to love the places in which they dwell. The hidden place curriculum of imaginative literature is reframed through observable multimodal, multisensory experiences that emphasize multiple dimensions of place.

**Reflect on the classroom as place.** Patricia Tarr (2004), writing from a Reggio Emilia perspective on the classroom as place, critically examined the kinds of commercial materials primary teachers hang on the often cluttered walls of their classrooms. She challenges teachers to reconsider the ideological assumptions implied by the physical environment we create (p. 2). The general practice of critically reading our classroom space and the implicit messages we send our students about the kinds of knowledge we privilege becomes foundational when we realize how much environment influences their sense of place.

**Create special reading areas that honor children’s desire for alterity.** Recognizing a connection between the construction of place and aesthetic reading experiences, teachers have often organized classroom reading areas to mimic the home environment (Curtis & Carter, 2003), but adding imaginative elements from the literature students are reading prompts them to negotiate their position, socially and physically, within the narrative. The campfire displayed in Figure 1 was a temporary fixture in my classroom reading area when my class was studying oral storytelling traditions and picture-book variants of traditional folktales.



**Display objects and artifacts that represent the narrative fabric of the place and the fluidity of children’s real and fictional environments.** Pahl and Rowsell (2010), writing on what they term artifactual literacies, explore the narrative qualities of children’s everyday objects from a perspective of place-consciousness. Like the participants in my study, Pahl and Rowsell find that objects permeate the superficial boundaries of home/school/community and real/fictional environments and can significantly influence the meaning of a defined place. Their work with children focuses on integrating personal artifacts from home and community into literacy classrooms. They have found that everyday artifacts act as “sparks” for place-conscious activities and discussions that allow children to engage in literacy practices critically, creatively, and imaginatively.



Figure 1. A campfire placed in classroom reading area for the study of folktales.

Figure 2 shows a collection of trans-textual literary artifacts that emerged out of my third-graders’ experiences with imaginative literature. After each book we read as a class, we added an artifact to our collection that would serve as a souvenir from another “place” we had experienced together. Students created some of the artifacts (miniature crowns for Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*); some were teacher-created (a little wooden raft for LaMarche’s *The Raft*); and some were found objects (a piece of iron pyrite after reading Levitin’s *Boom Town*).

**Renegotiate the perceived limitations of place-conscious project-based learning.** Place-based educators often advocate for project-based learning curricular models that integrate grade-level content from all disciplines around a central classroom inquiry or problem that usually connects the classroom with the community beyond. Sobel (1998; 2008) has written about a number of meaningful projects that integrate imaginative literature and play, such as mapping storyworlds and creating imaginative scavenger hunts outside; the following are a few additional ideas.



Figure 2. A collection of third-graders’ literary artifacts.

**Organize opportunities to play in literary landscapes.** Children’s ability to move through the classroom space is restricted by the physical space, authoritative expectations, and classroom routines (O’Donnell, et. al., 2010). In a literacy classroom, where the work is often seen as primarily cognitive, children may move from one center to another during a class or have the opportunity to find a spot in the room to read independently, but creating a space in which children are awake to place and simultaneously engaging in the interpretation of imaginative literature is rarely considered. This neglects the rootedness of much of children’s experiences with imaginative literature outside of the classroom.

Figures 3 and 4 show a literary landscape modeled after C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* which I constructed in my classroom using materials already available to me. Upon entering the classroom, students were asked to read a selection from the beginning of the novel in which the young protagonist, Lucy, enters the world of Narnia through a wardrobe. Students were asked to follow Lucy into Narnia, climbing and crawling through the wardrobe, as they entered class. Including students in the construction of landscapes as literary inquiries, either inside the school building or beyond, offers many opportunities for the practice of reading skills and authentic forms of assessment.



Left, figure 3. Entrance to the classroom’s Narnia wardrobe. Right, figure 4. Inside the wardrobe.

The work of Lindqvist, written about by Nilsson (2009), is built on the theories of Vygotsky and demonstrates one way we might re-conceptualize project-based learning to include imaginative literature. Lindqvist concept of the literary body in place is structured to nurture young children's social interactions specifically, but aims to create permeable borders between home and school. Her creative pedagogy of play is a specific kind of activity designed for early childhood education centers, which requires adults and children to "participate in a jointly created and shared world of fiction—a playworld" (Nilsson, 2009, p. 15). Nilsson describes the centrality of literature to this approach:

The idea is not to take a book and then perform it, but to let the book inspire creation of a play-world where children and adults can play together. The story in the book provides children and adults with a common experience to enable them understand each other more quickly and to be able to enter into the world of the story or the fairy tale. (pp. 18-19)

**Supplement the study of imaginative literature with take-home place-conscious tasks.**

When my undergraduate students and I were studying the motifs of traditional fantasy quest novels, I assigned them take-home tasks that I felt would promote place-conscious habits of mind, while also creating more permeable boundaries between course content and lived experiences at home and in the community. These included tasks such as, "Take at least four pictures of 'fantastical' places or objects around campus or town that you think could serve as the setting or portal for a fantasy novel. Come prepared to share your discoveries," and "Read at least two chapters of your fantasy novel in a fantastically strange or unusual place that connects the inner world of the novel as you see it with the outer world in which you live. Take a picture and be prepared to share how the space influenced your reading." Figure 5 pictures the obelisk on campus included as one of my students' "fantastical" places. She noted that even before she was enrolled in my course, she had found the structure to be enchanting, as if it were out of a work of fantasy.



Figure 5. The Penn State Obelisk, one student's "fantastical place."

promise of place-based education with the integration of imaginative literature into our classrooms. Although I focused here on the intersections of place and imaginative literature through play, interviewees also referred to special places where reading took place and ritualistic initia-

fantastical' places or objects around campus or town that you think could serve as the setting or portal for a fantasy novel. Come prepared to share your discoveries," and "Read at least two chapters of your fantasy novel in a fantastically strange or unusual place that connects the inner world of the novel as you see it with the outer world in which you live. Take a picture and be prepared to share how the space influenced your reading." Figure 5 pictures the obelisk on campus included as one of my students' "fantastical" places. She noted that even before she was enrolled in my course, she had found the structure to be enchanting, as if it were out of a work of fantasy.

## Conclusion

Supported by theories of reader-response and literacy development, we can claim the

tions into reading experiences as having left enduring influences on their identity as readers and their connection to place. These three kinds of literature-based experiences with place represent the ways child readers can become aware of place, either directly at a cognitive level or indirectly at the sensory level. The influence that places have on the quality and pleasure of their reading experiences can be brought about by imaginative literature. It is this rootedness of reading in the literary life-worlds of children that should be further explored (Kendall, 2008; Robison, 2011).

I agree with David Sobel (2008), when he says of place-based education, “our role as storytellers and world creators precedes our role as imparters of knowledge and cultural heritage” (p. 25). This perspective honors the role of imagination in shaping children’s lived experiences without diminishing the goals of place-based education, including as Louise Chawla (1992) described, to create “enough separation between the self and its surroundings to allow conscious appreciation” (p. 83). In these efforts, we should not have to choose between books about the local watershed or Harry Potter for inclusion in our classroom libraries. Both are important components of a child-centered place-conscious curricula: the former for our students to see the places they dwell with fresh vision and new understandings, and the latter for them to look within themselves and re-imagine what their roles in those places could be.

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