

Social Studies:
From a Sense
of Self to a
Sense of the
World

**Pamela Brillante
and Sue Mankiw**



Preschool Through **Primary Grades**

A Sense of Place: Human Geography in the Early Childhood Classroom

Walking downtown is four-year-old Abby's favorite thing to do with her dad. Today is the first day that Abby hasn't had to wear a coat on their walk. They walk under shady trees and stop to notice all the white flowers blooming outside the library where Abbey and her grandma go for story hour with Abby's friends. The smell of lilies of the valley permeates the air. As they get closer to downtown, Dad picks Abby up while they cross the broken sidewalk near the post office so she does not get hurt on the rough terrain. It can be difficult for her to navigate uneven ground with her walker.

Approaching the town's music stage, Abby tugs on her dad's sleeve; she wants to hear the musicians playing their shiny instruments. Abby points out the sign that says STOP on the busy street corner by Poppy's Bakery. The nice women who work there always talk to Abby and let her pick out a cookie while her dad buys warm, delicious-smelling bread for Sunday dinner. Abby loves going to "her downtown," where she knows she is part of the community of friends, neighbors, and merchants she meets along the way.

ALTHOUGH THEY MAY NOT REALIZE IT, ABBY and her dad are studying geography on their walk downtown. Understanding geography is important for all people. Many times geography is taught within social studies instruction because it plays a crucial role in developing children's awareness of relationships between people and the environment. Abby is learning about the people and places in her community and how she fits in. The sidewalk by the post office has not always been broken and the flowers have just started to grow—these changes help Abby learn that some places transform over time. Abby remembers certain places based, in part, on the sensory experiences she has had there before. She remembers the library where she attends story hour with her grandma, the stage where she listens to music, and Poppy's Bakery where she smells warm bread. While Abby has been to other libraries, stages, and bakeries, they do not hold the same meaning for Abby as the ones in her downtown.

Abby's feelings and memories about her downtown are related to her sense of place—an essential part of cognitive, social, and emotional development. A sense of place comes from a feeling of connectedness, be it physical, emotional, or spiritual, to a specific geographic area (Relph 1976). Developing a sense of place through geographic experiences helps build the social and emotional foundation children need and will one day use as adults.

A child's developing sense of place

Most children are born ready and eager to explore their physical world. Drawing on the work of Jean Piaget, Gandy (2007) suggests that children begin developing their sense of place during early childhood. Equipped with curiosity and their five senses, young children explore and manipulate materials in their environment to understand the world around them.

In preschool and early primary classrooms, geography is often viewed traditionally, focusing on activities that build geographic skills, such as mapmaking. However, the geography discipline consists of two main subfields: physical geography and human geography. While physical geography is the study of the natural environment, human geography is the study of the relationship between humans and their natural environment (National Geographic n.d.).

With human geography as a framework, the focus shifts to include a geographic sense of place. Developing this sense of place lets children know that they belong in the

physical world around them and in the social and cultural world they share with others. When teachers implement geography projects and investigations with the goal of increasing children's connections with their physical environments, children enhance their cognitive skills as well as social and emotional ones. Yi-Fu Tuan (2001), the Chinese American human geographer recognized for his definitions of space and place, wrote that people of all ages need to develop a sense of place in order to understand their status in the world and form a sense of self-identity. Sense of place becomes part of what adults need to be considered *geo-literate*—having the tools and knowledge to protect natural and cultural resources, reduce violent conflicts, and improve the quality of life worldwide (Edelson 2011). Through interactions with the environment and each other, children develop geo-literacy skills, become empowered, and see themselves as capable social beings.

A sense of place = A sense of belonging

A developing sense of place is linked to a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging contributes to children's overall social and emotional development and is an essential aspect of school readiness (Epstein 2009).

Keep in mind that space is different from place. While space is location, place is used by humanistic geographers to describe our attachment to specific locations (Cresswell 2013). To put that succinctly, our address marks the location of our house, but place describes where we feel at home (Vergeront 2013). In "Pedagogy of Ecology," Ann Pelo describes a recent visit home: "In Utah I remembered, with a child's open-hearted joy, how it feels to give [yourself] over to a place, to be swept into an intimate embrace with the earth. In Utah, I understood that place is part of our identity—that place shapes our identity" (2009, 30).

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Many adults fondly recall places in their childhoods. They remember a favorite tree they climbed, the creek where they looked for frogs, the smells and sounds of playing on the streets after dark, or the backyard clubhouses where they imagined and pretended with

About the Authors

Pamela Brillante, EdD, is an assistant professor of special education at William Paterson University of New Jersey, with a specialty in early childhood special education. Pam has researched the access to geography education for all children. brillantep@wpunj.edu

Sue Mankiw, EdD, is an associate professor of education at William Paterson University. Sue teaches language arts and social studies methods courses for early childhood pre-service teachers. mankiws@wpunj.edu

friends. Adults remember neighborhood stores and other places they visited over and over, where they met familiar friendly people. These relationships foster a deep connection and sense of commitment to people and places.

Human geography as a vital early childhood subject

Many children today do not have the same experiences of playing and roaming freely through the neighborhood, as children did in generations past. Children's interactions with places are becoming impersonal—shopping at chain stores in malls and interacting with technology instead of their environment. Yet children still need to develop the necessary skills to become informed and active decision makers who are connected to the world around them.

Including Everyone

Children with identified disabilities such as cerebral palsy, autism, intellectual delays, and vision impairments

may experience internal and external barriers that prevent them from being physically independent or limit their interactions with the environment. Programs should be designed to remediate delays and provide early intervening services to support children with disabilities while also implementing developmentally appropriate early childhood practices (Sandall et al. 2005). High-quality inclusive programs demonstrate respect for children's abilities and differences while ensuring they promote the development and learning of all children. For example, by giving children with disabilities opportunities to play and explore their environment independently alongside peers without disabilities, children are afforded the dignity of risk—the opportunity to experience success or failure (Teel 2011). Too often, children with disabilities are overprotected by parents and teachers and, therefore, may never experience the consequences of poor choices. Risk taking provides individuals with disabilities different learning opportunities and new experiences in their environment. They can test their limits and discover capabilities they may not have known they had (Opportunity for Independence 2011).

Adapting for Many Languages

Language also contributes significantly to fostering young children's sense of place and belonging. Children's sense of belonging can be impacted when they are members of a community in which their home language is not spoken. Since so much of learning in preschool builds on prior knowledge, and much of that prior knowledge is learned and understood in the home language, it is important for teachers to design classroom activities to help children connect prior learning in their home language with new learning (Nemeth 2009). For example, the inclusion and acceptance of many languages and cultures should be immediately visible to children and families arriving at school. Effective teachers learn which languages are spoken in each child's home and post Hello or Welcome signs in all the families' languages to demonstrate that the children and their families are important members of the school community (Nemeth 2014). The classroom should have materials, such as books, music, and dramatic play props that represent what the child sees and hears at home in order to nurture the sense of place and belonging in the classroom.



Planning Accessible Activities

An accessible curriculum allows all children to interact with the environment and develop a sense of place. Truly accessible curricula promote active participation of all children, regardless of ability or language. From the beginning of the school year it is essential that early educators intentionally create and plan open-ended investigations that are universally designed to meet the physical and language needs of all children in the classroom. This thoughtful planning and design of classrooms and activities allow children to explore and connect to their physical world to better understand and make meaning of their environment.

Teachers as place-makers

In the most recent publication of the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies, the National Council for the Social Studies (2010) defines social studies as the promotion of civic competence—the ability to actively participate in society. Within social studies, geography education promotes development of reasoning and inquiry skills by generating questions and using an inquiry-based approach to explore the answers (Bliss 2008). These skills are essential for gaining independence in work and school. Many geography-related investigations and curriculum

ideas for young children begin with children's relationships with people and places. Since children's experiences with nature and the environment outside of school can vary tremendously, teachers can intentionally plan explorations of the landscapes, soundscapes, and smellscapes of the school environment with walking tours and explorations of the school building, school grounds, and local neighborhoods. In addition to fostering academic skills and knowledge acquisition, these explorations will help children develop a relationship with the local environment, which nurtures a sense of place.

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For young children, physical environment can play a role in development and attachment. Accessible environments reflect the idea that all children are valued and their differing abilities or modes of learning are understood and respected. Teachers can begin planning for all children by making sure they prepare the classroom environment.



Classroom environments are integral to a child's development of a sense of place. When teachers understand how the geography of the classroom and the arrangement of the classroom furnishings help to either support or hinder their instructional objectives, they are acting as what Schneekloth and Shibley (1995) termed classroom "place-makers." Teachers' purposeful use of environmental design helps children understand the space and the place they share with peers and adults (Schneekloth & Shibley 1995).

Influential research by Kritchevsky, Prescott, and Walling (1969) looks at the organization of the physical environment. They observe that poor arrangement and organization of furniture and materials, such as pathways that interfere with the play of other children or materials that are not arranged in a logical and accessible manner, cause children to be more dependent on the teacher for guidance and instruction. As a result, teachers spend a significant amount of time directing and addressing the needs of the whole group, which inevitably leaves less time to assist individual children.

Designing accessible, inclusive classrooms

Room arrangement is a key element in many research-based curriculum models (Sussna Klein, 2002). While teachers can organize the room to encourage children to be independent and have access to play materials, room arrangement can also foster a sense of place. Teachers can implement the following ideas:

- Involve children in making decisions when developing or rearranging the classroom centers; let them have a voice about the location of materials to strengthen their feeling of belonging. The idea that the space and materials belong to them—and being actively encouraged to use them—fosters an emotional attachment to the space.
- Have children make classroom signs that tell others where things are located and how everyone shares materials. The environment communicates important messages; materials that are not accessible suggests they are "off-limits" so children become more dependent and reactive to the teacher instead of more independent and collaborative with peers.
- Help children remember activities shared with peers and teachers by pulling together classroom photos to make books of the children joyfully playing in the classroom spaces. Recalling and reflecting on previous project-based activities in which the children explored and interacted with peers and the environment helps them develop a deeper connection to the space and the people.
- Include photos of families (e.g., as props in the dramatic play/house area or in homemade books about the children and their families at home) to bridge the home-school community, and depict many kinds of family structures. Displaying these pictures demonstrates that each child's family is accepted.



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- Create a sense of safety and security. Design personal, intimate spaces, including nooks and crannies indoors and outdoors, to help children understand spatial relationships. Large boxes, pop-up tents, and small benches that fit one or two children help them attain some independence and autonomy within their environment.

Nurturing the whole school community

Exploring and being part of the larger school environment is also important when developing a sense of place.

Teachers can plan activities around these events and ideas:

- Plan visits to different classrooms around the school so children have the opportunity to share experiences with other children. Having common experiences links people and places, helping children make social connections outside of their families.
- Engage children in whole school activities centering on a common theme or purpose, like planting a garden or participating in field day activities. This reminds children that they share the space and share a common attachment to the space with others.
- Organize schoolwide family evenings on the playground. Families and children can play together outside of school hours and develop a sense of place with the school while getting to know other students and families.
- Host schoolwide activities such as multigenerational family dinners or cultural celebrations to highlight the commonalities and differences of traditions and demonstrate that each family's culture is valued and respected.
- Wear T-shirts with specific school colors or mascots to foster a sense of school spirit and community.
- Take photos showing the children, their families, and the teachers interacting in the classroom and neighborhood and post them to a class blog or website. This helps develop the psychological attachment that forms the basis of sense of place.

Exploring the neighborhood

Being part of the outside community, whether in a city center or country landscape, brings new and different sounds, smells, and fine and gross motor experiences to a developing sense of place. Teachers can expose students to these experiences in several ways:

- Take the children outside. Allow them time to explore everything outdoors—mud puddles, trees, sticks, rocks, statues, parks, playgrounds, parking lots, and more.

Children's Books That Foster a Sense of Place

- *Alphabet City* (1999), by Stephen T. Johnson
- *Nana in the City* (2014) by Lauren Castillo
- *Around the Pond: Who's Been Here?* (1996), by Lindsay Barrett George
- *Sam and Dave Dig a Hole* (2014) by Mac Barnett, illus. by Jon Klassen
- *Buenas Noches Luna* (2006), by Margaret Wise Brown, illus. by Clement Hurd (Spanish language version of Goodnight Moon)
- *Tap Tap Boom Boom* (2014) by Elizabeth Bluemie, illus. by G. Brian Karas
- *Come On, Rain!* (1999), by Karen Hesse, illus. by Jan J. Muth
- *Tar Beach* (1996), by Faith Ringold
- *Flower Garden* (2000), by Eve Bunting, illus. by Kathryn Hewitt
- *The Bus for Us* (2013), by Suzanne Bloom
- *In the Woods: Who's Been Here?* (1998), by Lindsay Barrett George
- *The Green Line* (2014), by Polly Farquharson
- *Listen to the City* (2001), by Rachel Isadora
- *The Listening Walk* (1993), by Paul Showers, illus. by Alikei
- *The Snowy Day* (1976), by Ezra Jack Keats
- *Wave* (2008) by Suzy Lee

- Plan field trips in children's neighborhoods, places such as local stores and bodegas, parks and city centers. Explore issues of accessibility with the children. For example, have them discover if they can easily enter stores or use equipment independently, and allow them to problem solve. Point out the uses of multiple languages on signs or in written materials, if available.
- Help children pay attention to their environment in new ways, for example, by going on a listening walk or a smelling walk. Take a digital camera or audio recorder with you to document children's observations through pictures, videos, and sound recordings.
- Invite the outside world inside by sharing experiences with families and asking them to do the same. You might ask families to bring in examples of what they do for work or play, or even Skype with family members from different parts of the country or world as a way to partner around children's learning.

Project-based investigations

Teachers can nurture children's sense of place by planning project-based investigations of their local environment. Teachers might begin the investigation by inviting children to share what they want to learn about the world around them. What are their interests? What do they wonder about? Below are items teachers can consider:

- What do the children want to know? What places would they like to explore? Agree on a topic, and brainstorm with the children to create an idea web related to the study. Are children talking about their adventures at the local park, or has the talk at lunch turned to eating healthy foods?
- Which places in the community are familiar to the children? What other facets of those places can the children explore to develop deeper knowledge about specific areas of their community? Many children know some things about their favorite places, bakery, for example, but most are unaware of what happens behind the scenes, where everything is made. Exploring how the bakery produces their favorite treats adds depth to children's learning and makes their relationship with the place stronger. In-depth exploration helps children think deeply about the environment and develop more personal connections. The longer length of a project also benefits students with disabilities and dual language learners who may need additional time to process the information.
- Who and what are the available local resources (e.g., experts, materials) and what questions might children ask of or about them? Perhaps there is a wonderful

bronze statue in the middle of a nearby park where children play or a spot in the school courtyard for a classroom garden. Teachers can invite an artist to talk about the statue or invite a master gardener to help children plan a garden.

Abby loves going on walking field trips with her preschool class. Today everyone is excited because they are going to the library to get their own library cards. As they walk to the same library where she and Grandma attend story hour, Abby notices construction workers fixing the broken sidewalk. The jackhammers and other tools they use are so loud! Abby tells Mrs. Rodriguez, her teacher, that it is a good thing there are no musicians on the music stage today because no one would be able to hear them and "that might make everyone sad."

As Abby gets ready to cross the street by the post office, she sees Mrs. Nelson, another teacher, making sure there is nothing on the ground that could get stuck in the wheels of Abby's walker. Even though Abby likes it when her dad carries her across rough terrain, she knows she can use her walker to cross on her own.

The whole class, including Abby and Marco, who uses a wheelchair, go up the ramp by the side door of the library. Mrs. Nelson points out the Spanish and English signs on the door. Abby does not know many Spanish words, but she knows her friend Maricruz speaks Spanish at home with her grandmother who lives with her family.

After listening to the librarian read several stories, the children look for books to take home. Abby uses her walker to get around most of the library by herself. The teachers make sure both she and Marco can reach everything, and they wait to see if anyone needs assistance. Mrs. Rodriguez and Mrs. Nelson encourage all the children do things for themselves, only helping when they are really needed.

After getting their new library cards, the class starts the trip back to school. This time they walk by Poppy's Bakery and smell cinnamon buns. Everyone wants to go into the bakery, but Ms. Rodriguez says, "Maybe the next time we take a walking field trip we can stop at the bakery. Perhaps we can go in the back door and see where everything is made."





Conclusion

Tuan's (2001) research explores how very personal geography can be by explaining that people have a tendency to experience and interpret the world from an egocentric point of view. We mark events in the timeline of our lives according to places, thereby making those places a part of our identity.

It is important for early childhood educators to understand that early geography experiences, such as actively exploring spaces and manipulating objects in the environment, help children develop cognitive skills and begin to understand the world around them. These experiences are the foundation for understanding our sense of place. Thus, our sense of place relies on both the experiences we have had and the thoroughness of our education.

When teachers plan curricula and activities with a genuine commitment to engendering a sense of place, all children have multiple opportunities to interact with peers and the environment, to form deep psychological and physical attachments to people and spaces. Teachers have a responsibility to facilitate human geographic learning so that children are prepared to function independently in society and to contribute as informed citizens of local, state, national, and global communities in a global age (NCSS, 2010).

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