

A Study on the Sense of Place among 4-5 Years Old Children in Regional Interaction through Mosaic Approach

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Abstract: This paper explores how 4-5 years old children develop the sense of place in the regional interaction in one Chinese kindergarten, with 44 children participating in this study. We have used the mosaic approach as a form of participatory research over a four-month period. The main methods used included observations, interviews, photo-taking, kindergarten trips, and drawings. Our findings showed that the interaction is the direct experience of young children with the environment and an important dimension in the formation of the sense of place.

Keywords: Chinese young children; Sense of place; Mosaic method; Regional activity; Regional interaction

1. Introduction

The term "Children's geographies" first proposed by Hart ^[1] encompasses the 'space' and 'place' that children experience. Children's geographies began by suggesting that the presence of children and their childhoods is embedded in place. Place is an important guide to the study of children and childhood. The place mentioned here includes physical and social space, both of which together shape children's lives. Places such as "children's bedroom" and "children's restroom" are neither ordinary spaces in the eyes of adults nor geographical locations, but they are productive places with certain intellectual discourses and specific interactive behaviors ^[2]. By emphasizing that childhood is constructed in different spaces and places, and in different ways, it helps us to better understand "children's places" and "children's appropriate places", so as to build a life framework suitable for children. Secondly, Children's geographies emphasize the differences between children and adults in the use of space, the sense of place, and the emotion of the environment. Children experience the world in their own unique way, while adults should understand children from the perspective of multiple living world. The environment for children is not simply a context or object in which to engage in activities, but a place that provides various opportunities for children to take root in their experiences. A child enjoys a place not because of what it is or what it has, but because of what it allows him to explore. For example, unoccupied, dark or empty places, such as secret forests, empty courtyards, abandoned buildings, etc., which are colored by fear and danger in the eyes of adults, are rated as favorite places by children ^[3].

Region is a unique spatial setting in kindergarten, and regional activity is an important part of kindergarten's daily life. What does the region look like in the eyes of young children? How do children play in the region? What about the children's experience of regional activities? These kinds of questions may not be clear to us because the reality is often only what adults think the area is: teachers control the time, often pulling children back to reality from the unique world they have constructed. Activities that belong to children are invisibly taken away from them, and their experience of place is invisibly disregarded. Children's exploration of space and place is a kind of natural instinct. In infancy, children show their perception and sensitivity to space, but we have not helped them to realize and explore the unknown world. Therefore, this study does not only consider the region as an environment for young children to live, communicate and grow, but also focuses on the interaction in regional activities, listens to and understands young children, and analyzes the reason and condition in the formation of the sense of place in the regional interaction from the perspective of Children's geographies, so as to improve the regional activity quality.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 *Space and place*

Space and Place, as two major themes of geography, can be transformed into each other to a certain extent. Space is often associated with words such as infinity and freedom, which are objective, abstract and meaningless. Compared to space, place is understood as a specific place where people experience and give meaning to their emotions, experiences, values, etc., which is often associated with safety and limitations, which is subjective and concrete^[4]. Space can be transformed into place with the addition of human activity and meaningful events.

Norberg-Schulz argues that place is a whole made up of the nature, form, color, texture and other aspects of a concrete substance together with related cultural events^[5]. Tuan argues that place is a spatial framework that contains emotions, a condensation of values, and an object that people can inhabit^[4]. Kevin Lynch believes that over time, the experiences, emotions and experiences resulting from a person's interactions with the surrounding environment become rooted there, and the environment becomes a place^[6]. Relph points out that a place is a general feeling that is formed by people's active physical contact and mental perception of a variety of factors (environmental amenities, natural landscapes, lifestyles, etc.)^[7].

2.2 *Sense of place*

A sense of place is in some ways an innate human capacity that strongly and positively connects us to the world and is an integral part of all our environmental experiences^[8]. The deep emotional connection between people and place is reflected in the 'respect for place', first proposed by Wright, which expresses man's respect for geographical space, and the 'love of place', proposed by Tuan, which expresses man's love for place. In 1960, Lynch gave a preliminary explanation of the concept of sense of place in his book 'The Image of the City', that is, the representative and impressive aspects of the urban environment^[9]. Relph believes that place is the center of human experience, and sense of place is the deep emotion, thought and sincerity of people, which is genuine and long-lasting, and is generated by the interaction with the place^[7]. Steele regards the formation of the sense of place as an experiential process, which is a combination of a person as the subject, and the environment in which the person is located as the object^[10]. Hummon understands the concept of the sense of place from two perspectives: on the one hand, it is an interpretive view of the environment and the place; on the other hand, it is an emotional experience of the environment^[11]. Tuan argues that the sense of place is a result of the interaction between the physical environment and the personal experience in the process of growing up. Personal experiences during growth accumulate and interact with each other, emphasizing the relationship between people and places in a given space^[4]. Moore et al. argue that sense of place is a very complex term that is often used to capture the relationship that people establish with places as they interact with them. The development of a sense of place is considered to be a process in which undifferentiated spaces become meaningful places^[12].

2.3 *Regional activities*

Regional activities are a product of Western education. Some scholars believe that regional activities originated from Montessori Children's House^[13]. Montessori^[14] proposed dividing the learning room into several different areas and designing different levels of manipulative materials for children to choose independently and work automatically. Some scholars believe that under the trend of Open Education, which has triggered changes in Open Curriculum and Open Space, there is a closer and more direct relationship between regional activities and the Open Space Education Program. Since the 1980s, as an 'imported product', regional activities have been introduced into China in the form of curriculum space organization, which has played a positive role in the reform and the practice of China's early childhood education^[15]. Ying Cai et al conducted a detailed research on kindergarten's regional activities through three aspects of territoriality, body distance, and spatial orientation in the spatial language perspective^[16].

2.4 *Methods*

For the convenience and purpose of the qualitative study, the researcher chose a private kindergarten in Yantai City, China (hereafter referred to as 'X'), with a total of 18 classes (6 classes for primary, secondary, and tertiary education respectively) as the sample. On the one hand, all classes in the X are

equipped with a sufficient number of independent regions with rich contents, which has the basic conditions and requirements to help the researcher complete the study. On the other hand, X has 'universal characteristics' and 'general features', which ensures that the results of the study are generalizable within the same range.

There are a total of six middle classes in X, with the number of children in each class ranging from 25 to 30. Three classes were randomly selected for the study, and these three classes, together, have regular regions such as the puzzle area, construction area, art area, library area, plant corner, and role-play area. The number of children in each class varied: 16 in the class 1, 19 in the class 2, and 9 in the class 3, for a total of 44 children (children were selected based on the principle of voluntary participation).

The reasons for choosing middle-class children as the research participants are as follows: middle-class children are at the age of 4-5 years old in the development of self-consciousness and independent views, beginning to form the initial cognition of things around them, and they have a certain degree of ability to express themselves through drawing and speech.

The mosaic approach was used in the data collection for this study. During the four months of data collection, the following four categories were eventually collected. (as in Table 1)

Table 1: List of data collection

Type of data	Amount of data
Researcher participant observation	10
Children's drawing	67
children's photography	425
Children's interview	20

3. Findings

The study focuses on children's place-based behaviors, which are their direct experiences of the place environment. The study explores the formation of children's sense of place by understanding their participation in regional activities and interactions with people, things, and objects.

The dimensions of children's place-based behaviors encompass four aspects, including activity participation, activity time, teacher-child interaction, and child-child interaction (see Figure 1).

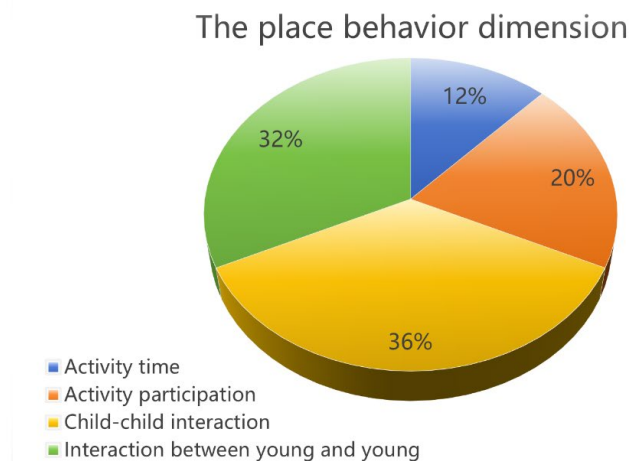


Figure 1: Percentage of each tree node of the place behavior dimension

3.1 Activity Participation

The Tinkertoy area, Inserting toy area, and Art area have great attraction to young children, attracting them to actively participate and establish a sense of place with the region. In contrast, the reading area, which is boring and meaningless, is classified as an infrequent area for children to participate. With low-participation activities, the whole place is filled with a silent and cold atmosphere, lacking vitality and interactive energy, which affects the children's experience and satisfaction, and then affects the construction of the children's overall sense of place.

3.2 Activity time

The researcher investigated the frequency of children's visits to the areas. In the case of Child 8, for example, his favorite area was the plant corner, and the teacher confirmed his fondness. In the recording form, the researcher found that he visited the plant corner six times in a week. He took pictures of his favorite plants in the plant corner and introduced them to the researcher:

Schroeder also observed in his study that for some participants had accumulated many vivid, lasting memories of their special places and had developed strong attachments to the places. For some, these bonds had developed over many years, while for others an emotional connection was formed on their first visit^[17]. As Child 32 mentioned the beginning of a new semester, the first time he set foot in the puzzle area he was captivated and filled with a sense of exploration and enjoyment.

3.3 Teacher-child interaction

Children of all ages need places to feel safe, socialize, express themselves creatively and explore^[18]. In this study, teacher-child interactions were mainly focused on four aspects: management and control, participation and guidance, support and evaluation, and problem solving. It was found that teacher-child interactions in the region were mostly initiated by the teacher, which included both positive and negative interactions.

The construction of a sense of place is not only dependent on physical entity, but more importantly, it is related to the experience and meaning of the place, and more precisely, it usually involves the establishment of relationship with others. Therefore, the absence of teachers affects the construction of a sense of place in young children.

Teachers' positive and supportive evaluations can enable children to gain self-esteem and self-confidence, stimulate their enthusiasm for participating in activities, enhance their spirit of exploration, and increase the frequency of their visits to the area. Here, children develop a positive sense of identification with the area and themselves, forming a long-term emotional bond, which is conducive to the construction of children's sense of place.

3.4 Child-child interaction

Children's peer as special role is added a bold and colorful stroke in regional activity. Along with the interaction with peers, young children slowly form a long-term, stable, and attachment relationship, then developing a strong and meaningful sense of place.

Young children's mutual support can enhance the effectiveness of children's activities, and promote children's learning and interactive communication. Children can complete activities more excellently, understand the contents of activities more deeply, and feel the fun and sense of achievement brought by mutual help, so that children can love and enjoy the area, and continue to have a longing for the area, forming a positive experience of the area.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The place-based behavior analysis focuses on how young children play in regional activities. There are both long-term and high-frequency participation, positive teacher-child and child-child interactions, as well as short-term and low-frequency participation, negative teacher-child and child-child interactions in the region. Place-based behavior is young children's direct experience of the environment. By participating in the activities and interacting with people, things and toys in the region, children acquire the information provided by the region and construct the regional experience. Children with positive attitudes will get closer to, support or enhance behaviors toward the place, while children with negative attitudes will reduce or engage in behaviors toward the place accordingly, which affects the formation of the sense of place in the change of interaction and behavior in the region.

Children's intuitive feelings and personal experiences in regional activities come from the restrictions and control of time and space, which affect the generation of children's sense of place. Teachers, as the controller of time and the arranger of space in regional activities, determine the schedule and the region while implementing the process and observing the rules, placing young children in the so-called 'efficient' and 'reasonable' time and space for adults. In this way, children are placed in the time and space that adults call 'efficient' and 'reasonable', and their bodies and minds are disciplined and restrained. We found

that most of the children expressed their dissatisfaction with the short time of the region, and especially hoped for a certain degree of time extension, because the children would leave the region reluctantly every time, often appearing to complain in a low voice, "I haven't finished the puzzle, I haven't finished the game". Similarly, there were also unreasonable factors about regional arrangements. The children's sense of identity and dependence on the region is reduced every time by the shout of the teacher "Don't move around the area", which affects the generation of the sense of place. Teachers should break the 'rigid' boundaries into 'flexible' edges, strengthen the systematic and comprehensive understanding of regional activities, pay attention to the division and integration of the regions, focus on the relationship between the local and the whole. Not only can the regions maintain relative independence in terms of external structure, but also make different regional functions interchangeable and establish connections, enhance the educational linkage between regions, integrate the learning and emotional experience gained by young children, so that young children can get a complete sense of place in the process of experiencing integrated regions.


As Loris Malaguzzi said, education is made up of complex interactions. It is only when there are bonds and connections with others that a person can feel the meaning of his or her own existence and progressively develop in the process of exploring the world and recognizing the ego. The kindergarten region is enlivened by the interaction between teachers and children. As a place where children construct and organize complex interpersonal and social relationships according to their own unique way of thinking, the quality of teacher-child and child-child interactions in regional activities can have a certain impact on young children's sense of place, with the quality of teacher-child interactions having the greatest impact, as teacher-child interactions accounted for the highest percentage of the content mentioned by young children in the dimension of place-based behavior(36%). Respectful, democratic, and new teacher-child relationships can help children's sense of place. Teachers need to recognize the double wholeness and asymmetry in teacher-child interactions, identify their own multiple identities and integrate themselves into children's activities, establish a multi-layered interactive mechanism, give personalized feedback support, and adopt positive evaluations and attitudes, just as Urie Bronfenbrenner showed in his ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner suggests that the influence of teachers on peer systems should not be underestimated. Teachers' evaluations and attitudes toward the children in the classroom also influence the way children interact with each other, and children will project such evaluations and attitudes back to other children, influencing their interactions with each other. In both teacher-child and child-child interactions, increasing positive place-based behaviors that satisfy young children's emotional experiences can help promote the generation of the regional sense of place.


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