CONNECTING IN THE COULEE: A HERMENEUTIC STUDY OF YOUNG CHILDREN'S PLACE-BASED EXPERIENCES

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my husband, Sebastian Patten, who embodies the importance of following one's passion and finding purpose in life. Additionally, it is dedicated to my children, William and Emily, who exemplify the joy and excitement that come from learning. This work is also dedicated to my parents, Donna and Robert Barnes, who taught me to always strive toward the best of my ability and to the find joy every day. To each of you, I am thankful!

ABSTRACT

This study is a hermeneutic inquiry into the questions, *How do place-based experiences cultivate a child's sense of place?* and *How do place-based experiences impact student engagement?* It explores student perspectives of place-based experiences and interprets how these opportunities foster the development of sense of place.

Grade three and four students engaged in place-based learning at a local coulee near their school were interviewed about their experiences and learning in relation to the coulee. Through a hermeneutic lens, conversations were analyzed through reading, building understanding and expanding interpretations.

The findings demonstrate how meaningful and intentional place-based experiences nurture a multidimensional sense of place. The complexity of the topic is examined through providing insights into different components of the concept. The study further explores the potential of place-based learning in creating a meaningful curriculum and offers opportunities for continued discourse around sense of place.

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Because my Teacher Told me to…

I distinctly remember the day. Twenty bright-eyed grade ones engaged with the task I had diligently planned as we waited for a visit from the principal. Her purpose was to ask students what they were learning, and why. Every teacher can attest to hearing these questions. *Why does this matter to me? Why is this important? Why are we learning this?* They seemed to echo through the halls and classrooms of elementary, middle and high schools from students, parents and even teachers. So that year, we had set out to address some of those questions by explicitly sharing with our students the purpose for their learning. Eagerly on board, I carefully considered the tasks I had planned for students, ensuring that I would take the time to help students understand the "why". I felt confident about my approach. I knew why we were learning what we were learning and was certain that my students recognized the purpose as well. But, then came the moment of truth, "Why are you learning this?" The quiet reply rang loudly – "Because my teacher told me to." It was in that short, powerful moment that I realized that the roots of this question went far deeper than I had imagined. It wasn't that there was no purpose to the learning, or even that students weren't aware of the purpose. Instead, it was about whether the learning was purposeful and relevant to those that it was intended for. Through this lens, I began to wonder why, despite the best efforts of teachers, students often seemed to have no real connection to their learning. They seemed unable to find its relevancy. It simply isn't enough for educators to impart to their students the answers to these questions. Rather, it is about supporting students in finding learning opportunities

that allow them to make meaning of the work, and to make connections to the importance of this learning in their own lives.

Clarke Pope (2001) shared similar findings after exploring the experiences of a number of high school students.

> These students explain that they are busy at what they call “doing school”. They realize that they are caught in a system where achievement depends more on "doing" – going through the correct motions – than on learning and engaging with the curriculum. Instead of thinking deeply about the content of their courses and delving into projects and assignments, the students focus on managing the workload and honing strategies that will help them to achieve high grades. (p. 4)

“Doing school”, as she termed it, has become the norm for many students. Students come to realize that they need to go through the motions in order to graduate, go onto post-secondary school and then get a job in the workforce, without questioning their place in society and the world. Paulo Freire (1993) argued, (as described in more detail below), that education is simply a “banking system” where “the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (p. 53). He further claimed, “The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (p. 54). Freire’s claim is echoed by Clarke Pope when she described how the students in her study began to “accept the passive role imposed on them” (Freire, 1993, p. 64). She explained:

> They studied the material, read the textbooks, and completed the assignments, for the most part, because they had to, not because they wanted to or because the subjects genuinely interested them. Students often memorized facts and figures without stopping to ask what they meant, or why they were asked to learn the facts in the first place. (Clarke Pope, 2001, p. 155)

These findings are not exclusive to high school students. Like Clarke Pope, my experiences with younger grades tell a similar tale. While working with rubrics and other

assessment criteria, young students often become more concerned with completing the rubric and getting the best score, rather than recognizing the deep learning that is intended to take place. Additionally, simply finishing the work becomes the main focus for many students. Questions that support them in going through the "correct motions" take precedent over those that deepen their understanding of the topic they are studying. Considering these common experiences alongside the reading I had been engaged in, the importance of questioning how we connect students to the curriculum became a significant topic to explore. I began to think more deeply about opportunities and experiences that teachers could provide their students in order to help them find relevance and purpose in their learning.

The Dying Tree: Predicament of Efficiency

We have seen through curriculum redesign, both in our province as well as in other countries, that conversations about how and what our youngest citizens learn continue to take the main stage. Many researchers contend that the perpetual structuring of classrooms with the intent of sculpting citizens capable of contributing to our economy fails to provide a more sustainable education for students (Apple, 2001; Orr, 2004; Prensky, 2012). In their article, "21st Century Learners and Learning", Friesen and Jardine (2010) painted a historical picture of present day schooling by exploring how the factory model, established by Fredrick Winslow Taylor, emphasized the importance of efficiency where workers were "to learn by rote and repetition the efficient accomplishment of this one, isolated task" (p. 8). This model, they explained, was reinforced in schools in order to build student capacity to learn content in the most efficient way possible. Tasks became segmented into distinct manageable parts that could

be sequentially learned. Through this process, Friesen and Jardine argued that disciplines taught in school suffer from fragmentation that dilutes the true nature of the topic. They contended, "Our very understanding of the disciplines of knowledge that have been entrusted by teachers and students in school has been shaped by the fragmentation inherent in Taylor's efficiency movement" (p. 13). Orr (2004) further maintained that we have "fragmented the world into bits and pieces called disciplines and subdisciplines, hermetically sealed from other such disciplines, (thus causing students to lose) a broad, integrated sense of the unity of things" (p.11). This lack of interconnectedness makes it easy to see why many students – and teachers – struggle to understand the purpose behind the tasks being presented. Rather, Friesen and Jardine (2010) asserted, "Under regimes of efficiency, students and teachers are not required to be thoughtfully engaged in teaching and learning". Instead, "teachers and students alike are subjected to this loss of control: both do what they are told, in the sequence they are told to do it, and are assessed by those who will measure the efficiency of such work" (p.11).

Despite ongoing changes to curriculum and pedagogical practices, many believe that the loudest and most persistent voices in the conversation about 21st century learning continue to be those of corporate and political bodies that place emphasis on the economy and prosperity. According to Williams, Gannon and Sawyer (2013), "The hooking of the '21st century learner' to the economy is a dominant theme of discourses on the '21st century learner'" (p.800). Competitiveness in an ever-growing global economy pushes policy makers and curriculum planners to continue to stress the importance of ensuring that students are prepared to make worthwhile contributions to the well-being of the country. Sahlburg and Oldroyd (2010) go further to explain how "education for

competitiveness implies a certain kind of education that will increase employability and productivity in national or global markets" (p. 285). This certain kind of education, Pinar (2004) argued, continues to follow a business model. Although the assembly-line factory may no longer be as prominent, schools continue to be modelled after contemporary corporations which "represents, presumably, an improvement" (p. 27). On the contrary, "in this corporate model, however, the economic function of schools remains unchallenged, and the modes of cognition appropriate to even corporate schools are fewer and narrower than intelligence more broadly understood" (p. 27). Teachers constantly grapple with new methods and best practices being thrown at them for the sake of better preparing students. But, not surprisingly, with underlying past constructs of education continuing to be the foundation, a lack of connection to the work endures.

Related to this, Orr (2004) argued, that "the purpose of education is to give students upward mobility and success" (p. 11). Curriculum and teaching so closely tied to economic competitiveness and preparation for the future workforce precludes students from engaging in meaningful learning about what it means to live well in our world. In fact, even more ominously, the way in which we currently teach students has the potential to actually disengage them from their learning as well as from the world around them. Dewey (1897) wrote:

> I believe that much of present education fails because it neglects this fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life. It conceives the school as a place where certain information is to be given, where certain lessons are to be learned, or where certain habits are to be formed. The value of these is conceived as lying largely in the remote future; the child must do these things for the sake of something else he is to do; they are mere preparation. As a result, they do not become a part of the life experience of the child and so are not truly educative. (p. 79)

Rather than imparting information and asking students to practice skills, how can we instead support students in having "life experience" that is in fact "educative"? Pinar (2004) argued, "Teaching – from the point of view of curriculum theory – is a matter of enabling students to employ academic knowledge (and pop culture increasing via the media and the internet) to understand their own self-formation within society and the world" (p. 16). Education from this position, becomes not about the capacity to complete tasks using the prescribed steps that have been taught, but instead, about developing one's own sense of self and sense of the world they can use throughout their lives. Curriculum, according to Aoki (2005), should focus "on a broader frame, that of 'man/world relationships', for it permits probing of the deeper meaning of what it is for persons (teachers and students) to be human, to become more human, and to act humanly in educational situations" (p. 95). Friesen and Jardine (2010) found that this sentiment was echoed not just through the work of researchers, but also through the voices of students themselves, who shared views such as:

> We want to do work that makes a difference to me and my world.
> We want to do work that is relevant, meaningful and authentic.
> We want to be able to work with others in the classroom, online and in the community. (p. 3)

This outcry from students is cause enough for us to consider whether learners, who are both naturally curious about the world in which they live, as well as eager to contribute to it, are being provided with opportunities to question, explore and discover their own surroundings, and the places they are connected to, in such a way that they are able to make an impact on those spaces.

CHAPTER 2: PLANTING NEW TREES – CONSIDERING ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO LEARNING

Introduction of a New Seed: What is Place-based Learning?

I have fond memories of exploring the small line of trees that separated the fields across from my house. Living in the last row of houses in our small town, opportunities to explore the outdoors were abundant. At the end of my back alley a large pond of water emerged every spring full of tadpoles and bullfrogs ready to be found. Knee-deep in water, armed with a pail, I became a scientist, exploring the small ecosystem that had appeared. As I recall those experiences, I recognize how they not only helped to shape my understanding of the world, but also gave me a sense of place for the community in which I lived. As I moved into my teaching career and found my home in a grade one classroom, I began to incorporate explorations of place into my daily routines. Perhaps this was a natural consequence of the grade one program of studies which emphasizes exploring the local community alongside learning about seasons and the needs of plants and animals. Yet, many of my colleagues were teaching these "units" without ever leaving the classroom.

However, by failing to engage with the world around them, students experience a disconnect between what is learned and what is present and real in their surroundings. In his video on place-based learning, David Sobel described how learning about the world becomes an abstraction without meaningful encounters in it (EnviCenterCU, 2012). Recalling an experience as a high school science student, he stated, "It never occurred to me that there was a relationship between the cross section of the flower (in the classroom) and flowers outside because there was no back and forth between inside school and outside school". I believe my passion for embracing the world outside the

school walls came out of a desire to begin to bridge some of this disconnect for the young students that I was teaching.

Fertilizing the Roots: Foundations and Underpinnings of Place-based Learning

Reading more of David Sobel's work, I began to recognize that my aspiration to engage in teaching and learning through exploring the places in which we live was in fact place-based learning. Place-based education has arisen out of a desire to reconnect and reengage students with their world. As a pedagogy that promotes engaging in experiences within a local context, Woodhouse and Knapp (2000) described place-based education as an opportunity which "recaptures the ancient idea of 'listening to the land' and living and learning in harmony with the earth and with each other" (p. 6). With roots in citizenship and ecology, place-based pedagogy aims to develop responsiveness for local communities and natural surroundings. Sobel (2013) provided some detailed examples of place-based education in action. In one instance, he described how two teachers sought to improve the condition of a local park. By working with their grade five and six students to study the flora and fauna of the park, the students developed a plan to revitalize the park, replacing the exotic species with native ones. Throughout the process, students also had to use problem-solving skills and eventually present their plan to town representatives in order to put it into action. The outcome, he explained, "Was a successful synthesis of meeting a community need and addressing the district and state curriculum guidelines" (p. 16). Additionally, he detailed how grade three students "completed a nature trail map and guide for the conservation land adjacent to the school" (p. 58). Sobel also noted that place-based education is not just about science and natural incentives as "some of the best school/community projects, for example, focus on

community history" (p.84). Others, like the North Coast Rural Challenge Network, are working with small rural schools on "creating economic and environmental sustainability" (p. 125). Schools working with the organization have engaged in a variety of economic endeavors including starting a mushroom growing business, organizing a food concession for sporting events, and a "Food From the Hood" garden products business, all of which are intended to forge a connection between creating higher academic achievement and contributing to the community.

Watering the Sprout: Why Place-based Learning?

So why take up place-based learning? Smith and Sobel (2010) argued, "In schools, children are experiencing a growing disconnect between their lives in communities and what they encounter in classrooms" (p. 39). This, they contended, can be mitigated by allowing students opportunities to interact with their surroundings, as seen in the examples above. "Place- and community-based education injects value and meaning into the school experience. We see its benefits time and time again in higher levels of student engagement, civic participation, and environmental stewardship" (pp. 42-43).

Learning in one's own backyard also allows students to engage in real-life experiences. Clifford and Friesen (2000) argued for many students "learning has been reduced to what they do in school. Living is what they do in the real world" (p.93). Too often, school becomes about preparing students to succeed in the distant future. Students view school as a place to learn prescribed material, whereas living is what is done outside of that building. The foundations of place-based pedagogy promote learning not just for the future but also and perhaps more importantly, for the present. Sobel (2013) argued:

> The new idea here is that we're not preparing students for tomorrow; we're preparing them to solve the problems of today. You don't learn about ecology so you can help protect nature in the future. You learn so you can make a difference here and now. (p. 18)

Place-based educators argue against a sole focus on economic priorities in education and instead propose educational goals for ecological sustainability. Woodhouse and Knapp (2000) asserted "Education should prepare people to live and work to sustain the cultural and ecological integrity of the places they inhabit" (p. 4). This is not to completely relinquish the recognition of the economy as a vital part of communities. Rather, Sobel (2013) explained, "Through a balanced focus on economic development and environmental preservation, the community and its businesses get revitalized, state curriculum standards are met, and students are given invaluable opportunities to learn in real-world settings" (p. 5). Place-based learning provides opportunities for valuable connections to be made between students, schools and local communities.

The foundation of this educational approach has been established through the work of critical pedagogy and eco-pedagogy. As referenced above, in his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Paulo Freire (1993) began to counter some of the common beliefs around social mobility and progress generally found in education. Opposed to the "banking concept" of education where "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who are knowledgeable" (p. 53), Freire proposed that educators "abandon the education goal of deposit-making and replace it with posing of the problems of human beings in the relations with the world" (p. 54). Many of the foundations of place-based education as it lives today echo Freire's principles for combating social justice issues involving communities and the environment by asking students to both find and solve problems. He wrote:

> Through problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves, they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. (p. 64)

More recently, Michael Apple (2006) continued to explore the relationship between education and power. He maintained that even still "every institution, policy, and practice and especially those that now dominate education and the larger society establish relations of power in which some voices are heard and some are not" (p. 229). His work on critical pedagogy challenged these power relationships and instead proposed:

> By showing successful struggles to build a critical and democratic education in real schools and real communities with real teachers and students today, attention is refocused on action not only in charter schools but on local elementary, middle, and secondary schools in communities much like those in which most of us spend our lives. (Apple, 2003, p. 15)

Concern for the environment is a conversation that occurs naturally when discussing critical pedagogy. David Orr, a key environmental educator has passionately advocated for schooling that places emphasis on our ecological relationship with the world. Recognizing that "knowledge carries with it the responsibility to see that it is used well in the world" (p. 13), Orr (2004) argued "all education is environmental education" (p.12), and educators have the responsibility to stress the importance of these principles in school. Out of this call, eco-pedagogy, a term Jardine (1993) explained, is "meant to reawaken a sense of the intimate connection between ecological awareness and pedagogy" (p. 50) has emerged. This movement, argued Kahn (2016) has allowed

> Environmental educators to understand that the domination of nature exists also because of the dehumanization of society and unless one understands and responds to the structural forces behind planetary dehumanization, such as global industrial capitalism and militarism, there is little reason to be hopeful that teaching people to be respectful of the land will have a meaningful educational or political outcome. (p.351)

Considering this powerful message, place-based pedagogy invites students to make connections with all aspects of the community in which they live: economic, social and natural. Place-based education, explained Sobel (2013), "teaches about both the natural and built environments. The history, folk, culture, social problems, economics, and aesthetics of the community and its environment are all on the agenda" (p. 13).

So, what is the significance of this work for our present educational practice? With our national, provincial and local governments working alongside organizations, including schools, to strengthen a nationwide commitment to truth and reconciliation with Canada's First Nations, Inuit and Metis populations, it is imperative that we also recognize other ways of thinking and knowing. Connection to the land is a fundamental aspect of Aboriginal cultures and therefore work on this topic is timely in supporting the understanding of others, and the significance of other worldviews. Environmental issues and concerns continue to be one of the most pressing issues for many researchers, organizations and political agendas. Individuals continue to discuss ways to ensure our world remains a healthy and sustainable place for living, not only for people but also for the rest of the organisms that call our planet home. In their article, "The Future of Teaching in Alberta", The Alberta Teachers' Association (2011), wrote the "growing environmental crisis" is one of the trends we need to pay particular attention to.

> We need to shift from an anthropocentric view of the world to a holistic view in which human beings are seen as part of the web of life. Adopting this approach will prevent us from separating ourselves from the world and pretending that we can control or manage what we "do" to the world. Once we realize that all life is interdependent, we will abandon the notion that continual growth is sustainable and that the ecological crisis can be solved as a set of isolated problems (Capra 1996). (p. 21)

Considering ways to support students, (our youngest citizens of the earth), in connecting to their world should be pertinent to all educators.

Through exploring this topic, it is clear, from my point of view, that place-based learning is a beneficial and worthwhile endeavor for students. Research into the topic has shown that meaningful interaction with one's surroundings has the ability to increase academic achievement (Sobel, 2013), enhance student motivation and engagement (Powers, 2004), and allow students to learn from members of the community (Santelmann, Gosnell, & Meyers, 2011). Case-studies alongside theoretical papers demonstrate the impact that place-based education has on learners (Azano, 2011; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Takano, Higgins, & McLaughlin, 2009; Wason-Ellam 2010). The work of these researchers has established that there is room for interpretation of the curriculum, moving on from our traditional approaches and unlocking new ways of engaging students with the world beyond the classroom. Place-based learning, I believe, has the potential to re-orient our way of looking at education in such a way that we begin to shift our understanding of what it means to learn.

CHAPTER 3: GROWING UP FROM THE ROOTS IN THE GROUND – WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

Sense of Place

With a greater understanding of the rationale of place-based learning, my next juncture was to consider how this pedagogy might provide a setting for us to look more closely at how we connect students to curriculum. What continued to resonate deeply with me was the voice of that little grade one student declaring, "Because my teacher told me to". Instead, the answer should have been – because it is important to me! Because I care about the topic! Because I want to make a difference!

Looking more closely at the construct of place-based education, the concept of sense of place has emerged as an essential component of this pedagogical approach. "Sense of place—meaning and attachment, cognition and affect—is in essence what place-based education is intended to teach" (Semken & Butler Freeman, 2008, p.1054). Researchers have maintained that the development of a strong sense of place impacts place attachment which leads to higher civic and environmental participation, and, ultimately healthier social and environmental communities (Ardoin, 2006; Gruenewald, 2003; Powers, 2004; Smith 2007; Smith & Sobel, 2013). This development, they believe, is essential in building the capacity of students to become more active in their communities and the world, a major aim of place-based education. Smith (2007) explained:

> All of these educational experiences are aimed at developing in young people a sense of affiliation with the places where they live. Absent this affiliation, there is little chance that the forms of care essential to environmental and social stewardship will emerge. (p. 192)

And yet, current educative practices often impede the development of sense of place and further sever the relationship between students and the content with which they are engaging. Our current educative system is founded on the "non-place-based modern/industrial worldview" that "indoctrinate students into a life of theory and practice and practice of detachment from their experience of place and community" (Sanger, 1997, p.4). As previously explored more thoroughly, this detachment from place makes it difficult for students to make important connections between the topics they are exploring and the world around them. In his article, "How My Schooling Taught Me Contempt for the Earth", Bill Bigelow (2014) explained, "We (students) actively learned not to think about the Earth, about the place that we were. We could have been anywhere – or nowhere" (p. 37). He goes on to describe that through a lack of connection to place, these students "unconsciously" watched as the land around their homes was changed because they learned how to "*not question"* the world around them (p. 39). Conversely, developing a sense of place through place-based education persuades students to question and think about the earth in an engaged and active manner.

In her dissertation, Tran Gauci (2016) explored sense of place and place-based education in preschool programs. She maintained, "If most of the children within a classroom have strong ties to the neighboring stream, using the stream as a topic of investigation to teach various concepts across different subjects may be meaningful for the children." (p. 14). By using curricular approaches such as place-based learning that aim to develop a sense of place, we are furthering the capacity for students to engage in their learning.

"Sense of place, or the meanings and attachment to a setting held by an individual or group, is increasingly garnering attention in popular and academic writings" (Stedman, 2002, p. 561). As an interconnected theory that includes multi-dimensions of place, Lim and Calabrese Barton (2006) defined the concept as "a complicated, ecological system that includes physical, biological, social, cultural, and political factors with history and psychological state of the persons who share the location" (p. 107). Sense of place is developed through an individual's perception of a place, which includes interactions between ecological, sociological and historical elements (Ardoin, 2006; Gruenewald, 2013; Mueller Worster & Abrams, 2005; Smith, 2010; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Woodhouse, 2001). Attachment to place, therefore, results from a personal journey characterized by physical, social and emotional components (See Appendix A for Sense of Place Construct, Appendix B for Sense of Place Definitions and Appendix C for Sense of Place Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions).

First and foremost, development of one's sense of place encompasses an understanding of the physical elements of the place and the interdependence of elements within it. Knowledge about the living and nonliving components acquired through interactions within the space, provide the background for developing this understanding. Ardoin (2006) wrote, "Without the physical environment as a context, there could be no sense of place" (p. 114). Although the physical space is essential for a connection to a place, social relationships that are created through interactions with a place are also foundational in the development of sense of place. "Social scientists emphasize the importance of places in making us who we are, and as a part of understanding where we are" (p. 116). Sense of place from the lens of a social-cultural factors recognizes that

place can be imagined "as a lived entity that results from a transaction between the forms of narratives available in and constitutive of a community and its material environment" (van Eijck & Ross, 2010, p. 871). Within this environment, social capital is developed through the interactions of the group. Smith and Sobel (2006) contended that social capital is an essential part of community and one that is important for our well-being as it forms the basis of trust. The historical context of a place including economic and political factors that have influenced a place is another element of this construct. Adams, Greenwood, Thomashow and Russ (2016) explained, "Our sense of place also reflects our historical and experiential knowledge of a place, and helps us imagine its more sustainable future" (para. 2). Other research indicates that places with historical elements and strong heritage positively impact sense of place (Bradley, 2011; Rippon, 2011). Sense of place, therefore includes an understanding of the history of a place from multiple viewpoints.

> Essentially, then, instances of place-making consist in an adventitious fleshing out of the historical material that cumulates in a pointed state of affairs, a particular universe of objects and events – in short, a place-world – wherein portions of the past are brought into being. (Basso, 1996, pp. 5-6)

This historical sense of place is not only that of long ago, instead, our memories and the stories we tell about places also function to foster a sense of place.

Through an interaction with these facets of sense of place including place-attachment and place-meaning, individuals can come to realize their own place identity. This perceptual sense of place is encapsulated at an intersect of these lenses. Much attention has been directed toward understanding the concept of place-attachment both in adults and students (Altman & Low, 1992; Casey, 1996; Stedman, 2011; Semken & Butler Freeman, 2008). Many researchers in the field define place-attachment as the bond

or connection between individuals and their surroundings. Related to this, place meaning also develops as a result of personal meanings created through the experiences within place. Through creating this personal meaning, a sense of self is developed which includes feelings of efficacy, belonging, competence, value and self-esteem (Ardoin, 2006; Smith, 2010; Wilson, 1997).

Swinging from the Branches: What is Meant by Engagement?

It is important to define engagement for the purpose of this study in order to establish a connection between sense of place and engagement. Engagement is a complex and debated concept in education. Axelson and Flick (2011) argued, "Few terms in the lexicon of higher education today are invoked more frequently, and in more varied ways, than *engagement*" (p. 38). This argument is not confined to higher education. One would find it hard to identify a teacher who had not been implored to ensure that student engagement was at the forefront of their teaching and learning. Yet despite the frequency of the term, the definition of engagement continues to be only partially unpacked because it is highly dependent on many contextual factors. Regardless of the definition, educators seem to coincide on one common understanding: that student engagement is an important factor in student learning. Willms, Friesen, and Milton (2009) explained:

> A great deal of thinking about educational change as it relates to student achievement and engagement is framed in terms of preparing students for their future after graduation from high school – to help students toward a good job or in the transition to post-secondary learning. However, we also have to recognize that young people's engagement in school affects not just their future, but the quality of their daily lives and experiences now. (p. 7)

While there are a variety of dimensions of engagement including emotional and behavioral, I am most concerned with students' cognitive engagement in relation to my study. In their work, Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) explained how "cognitive

engagement draws on the idea of investment; it incorporates thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills" (p. 60). Willms, Friesen, and Milton (2009) further explored cognitive engagement, which they explain includes an element of emotional engagement. They defined this as intellectual investment, "a serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning, using higher order thinking skills (such as analysis and evaluation) to increase understanding, solve complex problems, or construct new knowledge" (p. 7). In these definitions, engagement includes a key element of investment in learning to deepen understanding and solve problems. A main outcome of place-based education is for students to find meaning in their learning which is demonstrated through engagement in understanding and problem-solving about topics that are relevant to them. Layering onto cognitive/intellectual investment, is the idea that engagement can be examined through a variety of perspectives. Vibert and Shields (2003) suggested a number of lenses through which we can explore engagement. Engagement, they believe, can be understood through a "rational/technical lens" where engagement is fixed around test scores and students taking part in school life, an "interpretive/student-centered lens" where engagement is about students working autonomously or a "critical/transformative lens" in which engagement is about taking up and critically examining problems. For the purposes of my study, engagement will be further defined through the critical/transformative lens because in place-based learning "engagement in learning and school life is a form of engagement in and with the world at large" (p. 228). This way of approaching engagement places emphasis on the importance of sense of place and place-based education in going beyond the classroom walls into the world around us. By dissecting the research focused on sense

of place, the knowledge, skills and dispositions that are intended to be fostered through place-based experiences can be identified (See Appendix C for Sense of Place Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions). Through examining knowledge, skills and dispositions, I recognized that many of these are the ones that the above definition of engagement encompasses, namely problem solving, critical thinking, environmental awareness, stewardship and respect, and care for a place. Therefore, it would seem that through directly engaging in local experiences which aim to develop a sense of place, a meaningful link between intellectual understanding and application emerges. Orr (2013) argued, "In the reciprocity between thinking and doing, knowledge loses much of its abstractness, becoming in the application to specific places and problems tangible and direct" (p.186). A student's desire to take action in their community through place-based projects they undertake correlates to their level of engagement in their learning. Willms, Friesen, and Milton (2009) stated, "From the perspectives of both human and social development, participation and engagement in learning are key to both individual and collective well-being" (p. 7). Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) examined research around task characteristics and engagement. Many researchers, they explain, found that ownership, authenticity, collaboration and real-world connections develop all forms of engagement but namely cognitive engagement. These characteristics of task design that have a strong correlation with engagement are also the defining characteristics of strong place-based education. Therefore, there is a mutuality between sense of place and engagement since fostering a sense of place, including affiliation and connection to one's surroundings, can only be achieved when students find relevance and engagement in the work in which they are participating.

Research Question

Considering the importance of a student's perception of relevancy and engagement in learning, it is important to look at place-based learning and its connection to a child's sense of place from the perspective of the child's own experience. Tapsell (2007) claimed, "Very little is known about how children perceive the natural environment. Despite the fact the children are one of the largest user groups of outdoor spaces, their views are rarely sought" (p. 45). My goal for this study was to concentrate on student perspectives of place-based experiences and how these have impacted their sense of place. The focus of this thesis, therefore, was to engage with the question: *How do place-based experiences cultivate a child's sense of place?* Embedded within this question, considering the relationship described between sense of place and engagement, is the secondary question: *How do place-based experiences impact student engagement?* The primary objective of this work was to explore the ways that students engage in place-based learning to discover and interpret how their experiences impact their sense of place and engagement in their learning.

Literature Review: What does the Literature say?

Narratives from place-based settings, which have been positioned from the perspective of teachers and researchers, asserted that there is a positive correlation between place-based experiences and understanding of place (Azano, 2011; Howley, Howley, Camper & Perko, 2011; Tran Gauci, 2015; Wason-Ellam, 2009). Although this outcome is encouraging, only a few studies have specifically analyzed the relationship between place-based learning and sense of place from the perspective of students (Cumming & Nash, 2015; Kroencke, R.D., Hoormann, K.A., Heller, E.F., Bizub, J.M.,

Zetts, C.J. & Beyer, K.M., 2015; Lim & Calabrese Barton, 2006; Lim & Calabrese Barton, 2010).

Kroencke et al. (2015) found that as knowledge of natural space increased, so did sense of place. Additionally, Cumming and Nash (2015) concluded:

> In reflection, the sense of place being nurtured in the bush setting allowed for a connection to both place attachment and meaning, strengthening a sense of place in that setting. In turn, connection to a more positive learning environment influenced the development of new positional identities for staff and students in the bush setting. (p. 307)

Frequently, past research on these topics have focused on quantitative studies measuring place attachment and place identity, (Stedman, 2002; Semken & Butler Freeman, 2008), and advocacy accounts describing the positive impacts of place-based programs (Gruenewald, 2003; Hoyland & Elliot, 2015; Sobel, 2014; Smith & Sobel, 2010). Additionally, case studies that look closely at young students engaging in place/nature-based pedagogy are often situated in Europe, Australia and the United States. Only recently has research on this topic has emerged within the Canadian/Albertan context (Chambers, 2006; Ghafouri, 2014; Hoyland, Howley, Camper & Perko, 2015; van Eijck & Roth, 2010).

After a thorough examination of place-attachment research, Lewicka (2011), argued a need for further research into both place-attachment and sense of place, particularly in the area of understanding the processes in which these develop. Her review also highlighted the past emphasis on young infants or adults in place-attachment research, leaving space for focus on school-aged children. Previous studies of place-based learning and sense of place provided interpretations and knowledge essential as a starting point for understanding this topic. At the same time, it is clear that there is room

to continue to uncover truths and interpretations about sense of place, especially from the perspectives of the students who are engaging in the work.

CHAPTER 4: ENTERING INTO THE WOODS – METHODOLOGY

It is always *something* that happens that awakens our interest in pursuing interpretation. There is always a story that happened once upon a time.
(Jardine, 2006, p.229)

Why a Hermeneutic Inquiry?

It was our first year as a brand-new community school. As we began to settle into our new surroundings, questions about the community began to emerge in the grade one classrooms. Have you been to the splash park? Do you know the blue park? Have you walked around the pond? Do you go to the community center? Where do you live? It was easy to see that the students had an interest in the community. As we began to investigate more closely, it was a natural consequence for the class to explore these places first hand. Students went on community walks, analyzed Google maps and discussed their own experiences in the community. As the time spent in the community became more frequent and students understanding of this space broadened, I decided to pose the question "What is the next best thing for our community?"

Although I recognized that beginning such an inquiry would be meaningful to students, the seriousness in which the students took on their role as "urban planners" was both surprising and exciting. By using familiar places that held personal connections, the grade one students began to problem solve in a local context, coming up with solutions to real concerns in their community. Near the end of our study, several students had the opportunity to present their work to the Community Association at the annual Residents' Engagement Symposium. One student, after presenting her idea for a community garden, found out that the community was in fact planning a garden. Her sense of pride and accomplishment is one that I will never forget.

This story was one of the many that awakened my interest in further understanding place-based experiences and their role in students' learning. As I reflected on this story and many others in my graduate classes, I was inspired to continue my own learning journey, intrigued by the connections students made with their communities when given the opportunity, and encouraged by their dedication to understanding the world through this lens. Jardine (2006) wrote:

> Rich and memorable experiences catch our attention and ask things of us. As such, the venture of coming to understand such things is characterizable as "more a passion than an action. A question *presses itself upon us*" (Gadamer, 1989, 366, emphasis by Jardine) and places us and our being-in-the-world into question. (p. 297)

I began to wonder what it would be like if there was another way to approach learning. I began questioning my way of being as a teacher and as such my "stories" became the ones that "*strike* us, *catch* our fancy, *address* us, *speak* to us, *call* for a response, *elicit* or *provoke* something in us, *ask* something of us, *hit* us, *bowl* us over, *stop* us in our tracks, makes us *catch our breath*" (Jardine, 2016, p. 297). I was overcome by the desire to further uncover how experiences with surroundings changed the way that students reflected on, discussed and expressed their understanding of the world around them. This uncovering, Moules, McCaffrey, Field, and Laing (2015) explained, is the premise behind the concept of *aletheia*. "*Aletheia* occurs when something opens that was once closed, when something reveals itself or is revealed" (p. 3). Place-based learning, as a way of being in the classroom, had revealed itself to me. The more closely I looked at the topic, the more I discovered connections to my own work. Although I hadn't previously had a name for the approach I was using, delving further into the literature allowed me to recognize that place-based learning encompassed what I had been observing.

Furthermore, Jardine (2006) explained that *aletheia*, by definition, also means "to liven up, to enliven" and, by doing so, "is linked to the adrenaline rush of insight, the giddy breath of generativity and newness ('the new, the different, the true') [Gadamer, 1977, p. 44]) and liveliness, the weird feel that something has *happened*" (p. 311). My experiences had functioned to interrupt and unsettle my everyday "taken-for-grantendness of things" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 72) and now I was truly overcome by a desire to know more.

As I pieced together what I was trying to achieve, it became evident that this work was hermeneutic in nature. Hermeneutics, as Moules et al. (2015) described, "(Is) the practice and theory of interpretation and understanding in human contexts" (p. 3). As previously explained, the primary purpose of this study is to further understand students' place-based experiences and to discover and interpret how these experiences impact sense of place and engagement in learning. This goal goes beyond providing a description of place-based learning as a phenomenon or even a recount of an individual's experience of place. Instead, it requires employing a hermeneutics approach focused on interpretation through deep understanding. Moules et al. explained, "More hermeneutic in intent than a "what is" question are questions that imply interpretation" (p. 82). A study based around the question, *How do early place-based experiences cultivate a child's sense of place?* requires that I take part in interpretive reflection in order to come to an understanding of place-based experiences.

This hermeneutic study of place-based learning and its impact on young children's sense of place, is intended to cause reflection from a new perspective while still recognizing the topic has a "life of its own" (Jardine, 2006, p. 311). Acknowledging

the historical underpinnings of the work, therefore, must be considered as my own inquiry commences.

As established in the introduction, the conversation around place-based learning is not a recent one. Rather, educators and researchers alike have taken an interest in this pedagogy, seeking to describe and demonstrate the value of place-based learning. Considering this history, hermeneutics is an appropriate methodology for this study due to its emphasis on upholding what Gadamer (1989) called a "historically effected consciousness" (p. 30). Place-based learning already maintains its own conversation and "interpretation can only ever enter into a conversation that is already going on – there has to be something already there to interpret, then good interpretation attends to the history of the topic" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 37). In order to uncover new interpretations of place-based experiences in young learners, findings cannot be explored in isolation from the history of the pedagogy itself. Rather, considering, interpreting, questioning and reflecting on the tradition of the place-based learning alongside new findings and interpretations, allows for recognition of a "strangeness", (Gadamer, 1989, p. 297) for what I don't know about the topic. This "strangeness" must be constantly balanced with my own bond and "familiarity" (p.297) that I personally have with the subject. Gadamer maintained that the "locus of hermeneutics is this in-between" (p. 297). Further to this element of hermeneutics, is a back and forth movement between the "whole" of the topic and the details that emerge for me (the hermeneutic circle). Gadamer (1989) has upheld the notion that "we must understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole.... Thus the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole" (p. 291).

Engaging hermeneutically within the topic of place-based learning has allowed me to continually consider the larger picture of the topic while taking time to pause and reflect on the nuances that emerge through the work. Moules et al. (2015) shared:

> Approaching a topic of research historically does not therefore mean writing a history of it (though it could), but establishing a context for the terms of understanding by which the researcher, and the readers, can enter into a fresh understanding. (p. 37)

By looking at the topic of place-based learning through a new lens, I am attempting to understand in a different way, "while preserving the topic's integrity, the whole of it, as it lives in the world" (p. 75). My intention is not to change the theories and understanding we already have about place-based learning because, as Gadamer (1989) wrote, "The understanding of something written (or witnessed) is not a repetition of something past but the sharing of a present meaning" (p. 394). Instead, I want to interpret place-based learning through a fresh lens, a new perspective, one that includes the voice of the students who are engaging in these experiences themselves.

Intertwined Roots: Assumptions, Prejudices and Truths

How and why did my research begin? What are my truths in respect to this topic? What prejudices do I hold? These questions arose as I began to discuss this work with others. Understanding the process of hermeneutics more clearly, I have come to recognize that my assumptions and prejudices stem from my own previous knowledge of the topic of place-based learning. These prejudices have shaped my understanding of the topic this far and have led to my questions and a desire to further uncover more of the truth of place-based learning. Gadamer (1989) believes, "It is necessary to fundamentally habituate the concept of prejudice and acknowledge the fact there are legitimate prejudices" (p. 289). Without my prejudices and initial understanding of the topic, I

recognize that I wouldn't have arrived at the place I am in this journey. If hermeneutics is the search for the truth, then this pursuit must begin with the acknowledgement of my own known truths and assumptions. Nature and community experiences have been an integral component of my own teaching and learning throughout my career. As such there are underlying assumptions that I have had in relation to this work. One such assumption, which has shaped the foundation for this work, is my certainty in the power of meaningful experiences in student learning. Furthermore, I am confident that place-based education provides the basis for these engaging, authentic learning opportunities.

Another central prejudice I have come to recognize in relation to this work, is my belief that one of the vital purposes for learning centers around the individual coming to live well in our world both socially and ecologically. As a result of this belief, one truth I have been considering through reflecting on the question and outcomes of this study, is structured around what the outcomes of place-based learning might be. Does sense of place lead to student agency, achievement, engagement and meaningful learning? Or does having agency, achievement and engagement allow for a sense of place? I am curious to discover what components of this aspect of place-based learning I am able to uncover through my work.

Within hermeneutic analysis, Moules (2002) cautioned the researcher to acknowledge how our present beliefs and assumptions impact the way in which we undertake our work. She wrote:

> I cannot remove my subjectivity from my work, but I can take it up with a sense of responsibility in recognizing how it translates into the way I listen to my participants, what I hear, what stands out to me, and how I interpret it. (p.12)

Like Moules suggested, throughout my analysis I have been always conscious of ensuring that I recognize and consider my own personal connections to the topic of place-based learning. Uncovering the present meaning in hermeneutics speaks to the notion of truth, a key element of hermeneutic inquiry. Although a goal of the work, researchers engaging in hermeneutics also recognize that truth based in a present interpretation of that experience. Moules (2002), helped to clarify this idea when she explained:

> Gadamer's (1989) regard of "truth" is that it can always be understood differently, and one understanding is not absolutely better than another. He maintained that interpretation carries the expectation that it will encounter both meaning and truth, without which understanding is not possible. Both, however, are not absolute; they are contingent, preferential, referential, and changing. This meaning is one in which I am situated in, with what I know to be true at that present time. (p. 11)

Further, Moules (2002) shared the understanding that through the pursuit of finding answers to questions, a variety of answers and interpretations may result. Ultimately though

> All interpretation works under the promise of truth...When we opt for a given interpretation, we do not do so because we know it to be true...but because we believe it to be the best, the one that offers the most promise and is the most likely to make the text intelligible and comprehensible for us. (Madison, 1988, as cited in Moules et al., 2015, p. 135)

Therefore, through this work, I remain humble in recognizing that my interpretation of what I have witnessed during these place-based experiences is intended to offer what I believe to be the most valuable interpretation of the questions at hand.

CHAPTER 5: WANDERING THROUGH THE TREES – RESEARCH APPROACH

A precursor for inclusion in this study was for participants to be engaged in quality place-based learning at the site where data collection would occur, therefore teacher participants identifying themselves as having a focus on place-based learning was a prerequisite. I further defined this focus as employing place-based learning experiences intentionally embedded into learning opportunities for students. Additionally, evidence of student learning would be authentically connected to the students' place-based learning experiences and would be observed.

Site and Participant Selection

Moules (2002) explained, "Hermeneutics chooses the best players, on purpose. Still, it is significant to recall that the topic is not the participants, nor should the writing be a portrait of the participants" (Moules, 2002, p. 14). Participants for this study were chosen through selective recruitment. Potential research sites were contacted through emails and phone calls, requesting their participation. Due to my relationship with the school board where I work, I had a number of contacts that I communicated with to discuss potential participation. As I began to identify research locations, connections with colleagues became a valuable resource in identifying an appropriate site for a number of reasons. These colleagues had an understanding of my passion and work within the topic of place-based learning, and their suggestions for schools to connect with were based on a sound understanding of the study. Additionally, having a connection to the schools I contacted allowed for an open and candid conversation about the purpose of my work. I was able to authentically share my intentions and goals and get a sense of whether the study location would be a good fit.

After considering a couple of locations, I identified a school that fit the definition of place-based learning. Situated in a city in Southern Alberta, the school accommodates approximately 425 kindergarten to grade four students. Students are organized into mixed grade configurations with students from multiple grades working together in a classroom cohort. Classes are also a part of a "pod" which is defined as a small community within the school that collaborates with one another. As a relatively new school, opening its doors only four years prior, the teachers had the opportunity to collaboratively build a collective philosophy of education centered around three pillars: peace education, place-based education and design thinking. It was evident through reviewing the school's philosophy, engaging in conversations with staff and exploring the school itself, that the research location was a suitable study site as it met the criteria for place-based learning. In a blog post on the school website, it is stated:

> From those beginning days, we have taken up the focus of 'place-based learning' as a way to engage our learners in exploring the environment of their community as a way to value and appreciate the patterns, relationships and nuances found in nature, in Indigenous story and in the ways human beings connect with the world in which we live.

Another description of the school emphasized, "our students can be expected to develop deep understandings of 'place', the world in which they live, their community, the land, the province, the country, the world" (School Website). Evidence of the learning community placing importance on place was obvious within the school environment itself. Displays exhibiting artifacts from the surrounding natural spaces were in abundance throughout the school (See Appendix G for School Photographs). Furthermore, school learning spaces had been named using local places from within the community. The environment clearly demonstrated the school's commitment to having

students learn “through and within the context of place – coming to know the land where they live as more than first streets they drive on to get to school, or to get to the local mall” (School Website).

Another important aspect of the site selection was the identification of the school having a place nearby that they explored. Within the community in which the school is located, a coulee runs through the length of the neighourhood. The term coulee is a regional term, describing a landform located predominantly in Alberta. Stemming from the French-Canadian word *couler*, meaning to flow, a coulee is defined as a small valley or gully resulting from an area of drainage (City Park Website). Coulee ecosystems nourish a wide variety of flora and fauna. Grasses such as fescue and Spear Grass, trees and shrubs including Trembling Aspens, White Spruce and Dogwood are popular plants of the area (City Park Website). Making their home in coulees are a variety of animals including the Richardson Ground Squirrel, deer, coyote, porcupine, Swainson Hawk and a variety of small birds (City Park Website). The coulee located in this community is also of particular archaeological significance due to discovery of a number of artifacts including a 2000-year old stone circle or tipi ring (City Park Website). Having this landform as a prominent component of the community, the school has recognized its potential in providing a natural space for place-based learning to occur. A post on the school website shared:

> Children and their teachers visit the Coulee and immediately feel connected – as the children will so often say, 'this is *our* place!' Sitting beneath the trees or scattered across the grassy hills, students may be calm or inquisitive, gently listening and exploring or running uninhibitedly through the paths. Regardless of their stance, they are absorbing information about this magical place, sharing Indigenous stories and re-telling tales they have heard before or read, observing and asking questions plants, animals and ecosystems. These experiences prompt learners to explore further – to write, read, investigate, create, innovate and

> express their understandings from a wide variety of perspectives which may or may not be similar and may prompt even more questions or investigations. This is science, social studies, mathematics and language instruction in its most authentic form – response and reaction to real life and the connections, patterns and relationships evident in that real living. The Coulee inspires and invites a greater commitment to understanding, recognizing, celebrating or questioning who, what, why, when, where and how real living, growth and change is happening in the real world.

My interactions with the students and staff, observations from initial visits from the school and travel around the community itself defined a school site that was a suitable location for this research study to take place.

In order to identify teachers who would be appropriate for my study, as well as be open to participating, I shared my research questions and approach with the staff and spent some time getting to know their work. Through these conversations, a relationship began to form between myself and a couple of teachers who co-taught grade three/four classes. These two teachers had been a part of the school since its opening and therefore had contributed to the culture that was present within the building. During our initial conversation about place-based learning and their class context, the teachers explained that they were a part of a committee of teachers at the school who were working toward establishing a more formal "coulee school", helping to define and share with others the potential of place-based learning within the school setting. The principal of the school shared the following about the committee. "Teachers were definitely interested and willing to broaden perspectives on Coulee visits to become intentionally connected, more frequent and aligned school-wide in our learning objectives, goals, tasks, questions and assessments" (School website). These teachers had a common belief that the curriculum could be and would be taught through opportunities to explore and engage with the coulee. Both teachers had also taken up the opportunity to participate in a land-based

learning professional development series. This experience had provided one lens in which these teachers took up place-based learning. They shared an explicit focus on the natural environment as well as observation and exploration of the space.

In their classrooms, place-based learning was the driving force for student learning. The teachers explained that exploring the local coulee began at the beginning of the school year. On the second day of school, the grade three and four students made their way down to the coulee, cameras in hand. A quote on the class twitter account read, "Making our learning real #grasslands. We are connected to our place. #couleeschool." During the discussion, it became clear that for many of these students, this was not the first time they had gone to the coulee. Most of the students had been given opportunities to visit the natural space since grade one when the school first opened. One teacher participant explained that in their classroom, "Curriculum is taught through the native animals and plants here in the coulee." Concepts were introduced using the examples present in the students' own backyard. This work entailed exploring coulee locations, reflecting at sit spots, solving math problems, taking detailed observations and engaging in authentic tasks back at school (See Appendix H for Student Artifacts). Students were often asked to take up relevant questions such as "What would we do if the coulee was gone?" The bulletin boards outside the classrooms of the teacher participants demonstrated how tasks were integrated with learning from the coulee and twitter posts frequently included #connectingtotheland, #placebased and #couleeschool alongside photo evidence of students engaged in these activities (See Appendix G for School Photographs). These teachers voluntarily offered to take part in this study, expressing

interest in my interpretation of how place-based learning was impacting the sense of place of their own students.

After they consented to being a part of the study, I then recruited school-aged participants from the students in their classes. I had previously determined that working with a couple of teachers and five to ten students would allow for a variety of perspectives to reflect upon and analyze. Of particular importance was beginning a relationship with these young students prior to data collection. Establishing a rapport would enable the students to feel comfortable with me observing them as they engage in place-based experiences as well as conversing with them about their experiences. Moules et al. (2015) stated, "One of the first tasks on the interviewer is to engage the participants and create an atmosphere of comfort and trust where the participants feel safe to articulate their experiences" (p. 92).

Before selecting participants for the study, however, I had the opportunity to spend time in their classrooms. Students shared their learning with me and asked lots of questions about who I was and why I was there. The atmosphere in the classroom was one of curiosity, but it was also accepting and welcoming. Students were eager and willing to talk about their learning experiences. I was given the opportunity to share my study with the students, explaining their role and answering questions they had. Students were informed that they would have time over the next few weeks to decide if they wanted to take part in the study. It was also explained that although their parents' consent was required, it would ultimately be for them to decide whether they would like to participate. At the end of my time, many students were eager to be interviewed and to share what they knew about the coulee.

When I returned to the school, I was able to go through the consent forms to select interview participants. I made my decision based not only on students who consented to be interviewed and audio-taped, but also on a diverse selection of students including males and females, students in grades three and four, students who had been at the school since it opened, and others new to the school (See Appendix D for Student Participant List). I ultimately selected eleven participants, because I felt that each of them provided a different perspective to consider. Although I selected the participants through this recruitment, those chosen for the study are also considered somewhat inconsequential as their role is to provide language that allows for interpretation and understanding of place-based learning, rather than simply telling *their* story of their experiences.

It is also important to note that although I was able to choose my research site, the participants who decided to take part may not necessarily be the "best" participants for the study. Nevertheless, "it has to be considered, however, that those who volunteer do so for a reason and when one listens deeply enough, there is truth that needs to be heard" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 90). Due to confidentiality, student participants are identified throughout this study by pseudonyms (See Appendix D for Student Participant List).

Data Collection

Considering the purpose of hermeneutics, methods employed by researchers in the field are intended to gather information that allows the researchers to gain the most understanding they can about a topic. As Moules et al. (2015) effectively articulated, "Understanding *begins* with an address but it only begins there. Understanding about a topic has to be cultivated. Everything is potential data if it helps to further the interpretation of the questionability of the topic" (p. 83).

As my exploration of place-based experiences is focused on young learners' point of view, opportunities to observe place experiences as well as talk with students about these experiences were an important part of my data collection. Qualitative in nature, observations of the students in their classroom/outdoor setting, conversations and interviews with students about their experiences and collection of student artifacts related to the experiences students have engaged in were the primary method of data collection.

In his work on hermeneutics, Gadamer (1989) placed emphasis on the importance of conversation as the fundamental element of understanding. Conversation, he argued, "is a process of coming to an understanding" (p. 387). For this reason, conversation was the main method of data collection and a semi-structured interview format was employed throughout this study. Mason (2018) described semi-structured interviews as qualitative in nature, aiming to have an "interactional exchange of dialogue" through a "fluid and flexible structure" (p. 110). Questions asked during the course of the interviews were open-ended with the intent of allowing participants the opportunity to authentically share their experiences.

> Semi-structured interviews are those where the interviewer has prepared a list of topics to be explored, and questions to be asked, and follows that list during the interview but also ensures that the questions elicit open responses by the participants that enable lines of conversation to be developed in situ in ways that could not have been anticipated when the interview schedule was being planned. (Brown & Danaher, 2017, p. 2)

Although the main participants of this study were students, I initially had conversations with the teacher participants. The purpose of those discussions was to provide me with a context and background knowledge about the places around the school, student experiences and learning opportunities within those places, and the intended learning outcomes. These conversations supported my understanding of the contextual

perspectives of place-based learning in this classroom with this group of students (See Appendix E for Teacher Discussion Prompts). After this initial discussion with the teachers, each student participant was each interviewed twice. The first interview was used to gather initial information about the student's sense of place in relation to the coulee that he/she had visited throughout the school year. Prior to the first interview, I had not been to the coulee with the class and had only viewed it briefly. This allowed me the opportunity to picture the place through the eyes of the participants. Approximately a month later, I returned to the school to engage in another interview with the participants. Prior to these interviews, I accompanied the students on a coulee visit. As a result, my questioning during the second interview was more directed at the specific experience of that student, as well as on questions that had arisen from the first interview I had undertaken. Interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed to be used during interpretation and analysis. While guiding questions established through a semi-structured approach were used to orient and begin my conversations, I was also open to new questions that arose during the discussion. At times during the interviews, I was able to interpolate meaningful questions to provide direction to help in understanding. Through this approach, conversation was able to occur naturally while, at the same time, guiding the participants to reflect deeply on their experiences (See Appendix F for Student Interview Questions).

Since this study is focused on the experiences of young learners, collecting multiple representations of student understanding of the place-based experiences was important in my data collection. Kirova and Emme (2012) stated that "commonly used methods of experiential accounts based on oral or written descriptions of lived

experiences is limiting as children rarely produce 'thick descriptions' of their lived experiences if they rely solely on language to do so" (p. 142). Considering this perspective, I gathered artifacts alongside recorded conversations to present a more accurate account of the experience. Student written work, drawings and photographs allowed for breadth and depth of data (See Appendix H for Student Artifacts). Observations of place-based experiences were also included as qualitative data for this study (See Appendix I for Coulee Photographs). In order to fully understand and interpret the experiences of places the students participated in, it was important for me to actually experience and witness them for myself alongside the students. I documented my observations and thinking along with the context details at the time of observation at the coulee in a research journal. My personal observations, similar to artifact collection, permits a more truthful interpretation of the experience. Although important, to engage authentically in hermeneutics, these observations were accompanied by the aforementioned methods of data collection to ensure that there is "good demonstration that researchers have gone beyond only their own perception and reflection of the topic" (Moules et al., 2015, p 83).

Interpretive Analysis

My analysis of the data collected was centered to reflect upon how the accounts of place-based experiences brought understanding to the topic. Jardine (2006) asserted, "Even though interpretive work is not possible without a living connection to its topic, it is *the topic* that is the centre of interpretive work" (p. 309). During data collection, I had the opportunity to reflect on my first set of interviews over a period of time prior to my next observation and interview of participants. As I initially listened to the experiences of

the participants, I began to myself ask questions such as: What is it that the students are saying? What do those words offer in terms of understanding the topic? What did I observe? How does this observation help me to more fully understand the experience? Equally important in this reflective questioning was the conversation I had with myself about what wasn't being said, what wasn't mentioned and how those ideas also provide insight into an understanding of sense of place. During this reflection, I began to look back at previous articles and began to compile some of my own ideas that were uncovered by examining the interviews. According to Murphy Augustine (2004), this method allows for depth of analysis which might not have been noticed by simply coding the data through discovering connections during a cycle of reading, researching and writing. She explained, "Writing and reading through all the interviews put them into relation in ways that changed with each interview" (p. 750). My thinking was continually expanded and developed through listening to recordings of interviews and reading transcripts. This "interpretation as analysis" served to "read for ideas that stand out, raise questions, provoke curiosity, answer questions, catch our attention and, most importantly, call our present understanding into question" (Moules et al., 2015, p.136). Each interview and artifact presented a new perspective to consider, which built greater understanding and a larger picture of place-based learning. "Interpretive analysis can be thought of as a movement through the landscape of the topic, such that perspectives change with the varied points of view of interview participants and are informed by reference to disciplinary and other pertinent literature" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 118). In order to be able to bring about understanding and interpretation of what I had witnessed, heard and read, careful reading and rereading of the text was employed, alongside referencing both

literature I had already explored, as well as new articles uncovered during this reflection. Moules (2002) explained how attention to the words spoken through reading and rereading, provides the researcher with a greater opportunity to understand the text. She wrote:

> Allowing for the bringing forth of general impressions, something that catches the regard of the reader and lingers, perturbing and distinctive resonances, familiarities, differences, newness, and echoes. Each re-reading of the text is an attempt to listen for echoes of something that might expand possibilities of understanding. (p. 14)

Analysis, therefore, was a continued cycle of reading, building of understanding, re-reading and expanding my interpretations. For, as Gadamer (1989) explained, "There is one conversation between the interpreter and the other, and a second between the interpreter and oneself" (p. 387).

Due to the recursive nature of hermeneutic inquiry, analysis and writing continued to take place concurrently as my understanding of place-based experiences and sense of place began to reveal itself in relation to the interviews, observations and artifacts I collected. Moules et al. (2015) claimed, "Interpretive writing is at the heart of hermeneutic research" (p. 139). As such, pausing to write down my thoughts and wonderings before once again moving back to the data was in essence the nature of the hermeneutic circle. "This movement in and out of the data allows for consideration of that which might not have been initially visible, and enhances the understanding of the topic" (p. 166).

CHAPTER 6: SITTING BY THE RIVER – CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF PLACE

> Pyle goes on to ask, famously and poignantly, "What is the extinction of the condor to a child who has never known a wren?" His question propels us out the door and beyond the walls into the world of wrens and robins, banana slugs and beetles—out the door and into the world of experience, because experience matters.
>
> (Pelo, 2014, p. 9)

But what of Experience? Gadamer and Wilson

As I began to reflect on place-based learning and its emphasis on engaging with the local community, some of the first analysis from my interviews centered around the experiences themselves and how these were essential to the development of sense of place. Sanger (1997) argued:

> The first step in developing connection to the land requires experience…and experiential education of the land gives students not only knowledge of the place but also communicates that land has value, that students' experiences outside the classroom have value and that students' own personal knowledge has value. (p. 5)

In order to fully uncover interpretations of my questions around sense of place and engagement, the concept of experience and its role in place, was important for me to recognize and explore. Jardine (2006) investigated the idea of experiences being essentially connected to a topic or thing. He wrote, "Therefore, when students say that they are interested in children's experiences, the hermeneutically proper question is 'Children's experiences of what? What is the topic, what is the terrain, in which you wish to meet children and understand their ways?'" (pp. 13-14). In place-based learning, the types of experiences children engage in are intended to promote and encourage the development of sense of place. When looking at these experiences, the "terrain" to understand is students' endeavors in a specific, local place. The type of experiences of, in and with that place will define one's affiliation to it. "Students' experiences will

determine what to become connected to and the nature of those connections" (Sanger, 1995, p. 5). Acknowledging this, it is also important to recognize that experiences can be defined differently based on their purpose and outcome. This multiplicity of experiences is what distinguishes a simple outing around a community from one that allows participants to feel a change in themselves as a result. In his book, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1989) introduced the notion of experiences and how they stand to impact us. In the preamble of the book, he explained, "However paradoxical it may seem, the concept of experience seems to me one of the most obscure we have (p. 341)". Experience and our understanding of it, is a complex and diverse landscape. Gadamer initially speaks of the concept of *Erleben* in which experience is about enlivening or heightening that experience. He wrote:

> "*Erleben* means primarily 'to be alive when something happens'. Thus, the word suggests the immediacy with which something real is grasped – unlike something which one presumes to know but which is unattested by one's own experience, whether because it is taken over from others or comes from hearsay, or whether it is inferred, surmised, or imagined. What is experienced is always what one has experienced oneself. (p. 53)

Place-based experiences that allow for *Erleben*, provide an experience that is distinctive and personalized to the individual participant. The experience allows one to be alive in the moment of the experience. *Erleben* according to Jarvis (2016), can be described by how one changes from the experience.

> The essence of the heightened experience, then, is that it is an experience that stands out from the flow of ordinary life, but does not (radically) change that life. One 'emerges' from an *Erlebnis* 'enriched and more mature', perhaps, but one's life, and one's priorities, have not been called into question. (p. 71)

In place-based endeavors, *Erlebnis* allow students to have experiences that are different from their regular school day and, as such, leave with deepened feeling about their relationship with the place before they arrived.

Beyond *Erleben*, Gadamer goes on to describe *Erfahrung*, "a genuine experience – i.e., an encounter with something that asserts itself as truth" (p. 483). *Erfahrung*, according to Gadamer, is about gaining knowledge and understanding through an experience, insofar as one's truth of something is shifted.

> This kind of "experience" is not the residue of isolated moments, but an ongoing integrative process in which what we encounter widens our horizon, but only by overturning an existing perspective, which we can then perceive was erroneous or at least narrow. (p. xiii)

Thinking about *Erfahrung* through the lens of place-based learning, this type of experience is desired, as it stands to help students develop a sense of place through changing their perspective about the local places around them. Through expanding their understanding of the place, students will potentially gain greater appreciation, attachment and meaning. Jarvis (2016) concisely explained Gadamer's concept of experience in this summary:

> As opposed to 'ordinary experience', in which our expectations are more or less left untouched, and as opposed to 'heightened experience', in which our expectations are reflected back to us and affirmed, *Erfahrung* covers those experiences in which something is challenged and we are forced to see things anew. (p. 78)

Considering how experiences of place can vary, the ways in which experiences are set up and shared with students stand to impact the way they understand a place. Place-based learning, through its definition would hope for opportunities for students to "see things anew" (p. 78). In her work on the significance of place in curriculum, Ellis (2004) shared:

> If children are to thrive, it is critical to consider the experiences available to them and the way place works to enable or limit these. The social and physical conditions of children's lives are both interdependent and constrained by place. (p. 39)

While reading the interviews of students sharing their experiences within the coulee, I began to explore how their interactions resonated with Wilson's (1997) article, "A Sense of Place". In it, Wilson described various place-based experiences including: immersion within a space, seclusion while in a space, exploration of a place as well as modification and personalization of a place, discussing how each stand to support and develop a child's sense of place. These ideas were consistent with my observations of the students' interactions within the coulee. It appeared that personal experiences within this space had potentially opened the door for the development of sense of place within this community. I was also curious to explore whether these experiences went beyond the ordinary, as Jarvis (2016) described and instead allowed for heightened or genuine experiences with the coulee.

Immersion

Wilson (1997) argued that sense of place can be increased by students spending time immersed in natural environments. "Direct exposure to a variety of plants, to sun and shade, to water, sand and soil, to wildlife and weather changes immerses children in the world of nature and tends to foster a rich sense of place experience" (p. 193). When first initiating conversations with the students about the coulee it was evident that immersion was an important element of their own experiences there. Many students had been visiting the coulee since grade one and each of them were able to describe a variety of conditions in which they had spent time in the coulee. During the current school year, students had been visiting the coulee since the second day of school, heading down to

listen, see, touch and smell the coulee in the fall. Benjamin shared, "We go there quite a bit…We usually do different things every time. Sometimes we just go for a walk. Last year we built sculptures and stuff for birds." It was evident through these discussions that going to the coulee was a distinct component of their educational experience. Smaldone, Harris, and Sanyal (2008) maintained the more time one spends in a particular place, the more one is moved from appreciation of the physical space to a stronger connection to that place.

Additionally, students spoke about the coulee as if it was a natural part of their vocabulary, a familiar place to them. They shared anecdotes such as:

[Billy]: It's just over there.

[Layla]: It's near where I live.

[James]: You know where the big water drainage is? Like way over there? The coulee is across the road.

[Charlie]: The coulee is really close to the school so we go there a lot.

The coulee was recognized in relation to the other landmarks in the community and the location of the coulee was explained through their own experiences of travelling there. The teacher participants also shared how important it was for students to go to the coulee regularly, and for students to experience the place in a variety of seasons. The familiarity of the coulee in this way demonstrated how students had been immersed within the space.

Seclusion

Considering the meaning and knowledge that experiences stand to cultivate, opportunities to visit a place is not simply about immersion in an environment, but also about an understanding of that place. Providing students with occasions to be secluded

allows time for reflection and contemplation about what the place is telling them. Wilson (1997) wrote that sense of place can be fostered when we "create opportunities for seclusion and quiet" (p. 192). This sentiment was shared by students when I spoke with them about the coulee. Violet said, "The coulee is quiet and I like quiet." After being asked about why the class quietly listens in the coulee, Bob shared, "Lots of times when the wind is blowing around there we hear the tops of the trees moving and it sounds nice." During my own visit to the coulee with the class, students were asked to find a secluded space to sit and listen as soon as they entered the space. Teacher Jenn asked the students to "make a connection to the ground. Become grounded and quiet." With this quiet came the sounds of the coulee – a single chickadee singing, the slight wind rustling the trees, a quiet trickle of water underneath the ice. These subtle sounds were too delicate to hear before the opportunity to simply sit and be. Payne and Wattchow (2009) maintained, "A slow pedagogy, or ecopedagogy, allows us to pause or dwell in spaces for more than a fleeting moment and, therefore, encourages us to attach and receive meaning from that place" (p. 16). Through this opportunity to dwell, students were being given an opening to get to know the coulee through reflection.

Exploration

> For children, the attractiveness of a place is closely related to the possibilities for active use of the place. Because children want to explore and manipulate, their favorite places tend to offer a variety of opportunities to do just that.
> (Wilson, 1997, p. 192)

It was evident both on my visit to the coulee and during discussions with the participants, that one of the most important aspects of the coulee was the opportunity for students to explore. While making our way to our coulee destination, students were overheard sharing sentiments such as "I remember this place" and "Didn't there used to

be rocks here?" They were witnessed sliding down the hill on their bottoms through the snow and eagerly exploring the hillside when given the opportunity "get to know" (Teacher Jenn) a space within the coulee better. In their own research, Kroencke et al. (2015) found that a strong sense of place was correlated to the knowledge of the places nearby. For these students, exploring the coulee allowed them to gain a greater knowledge of the coulee itself. Lily shared, "I really enjoy being able to walk around freely. We don't get to go too far but we get to look at a bunch of stuff." Similarly, Bob explained that the coulee, "Makes me feel really happy because we get to wander around 'cause we have a pretty big space to explore most of the time, but it's usually in the same boundaries." The experience of exploration in the coulee was one that the students valued. After being asked why the coulee was important, Oakley explained, "It lets me explore and lets me learn different things and it's just a nature place I like to go to." Interestingly, Oakley spoke as if the coulee had its own identity, one that allows the students to get to know it on a personal level and to become part of it through this exploration.

Personalization

The students not only explored the coulee on their visits, they also were provided opportunities to change the surroundings through their interactions with it. Wilson (1997) argued, "Encouraging children to create, change, and personalize spaces and places can counteract some of the otherwise generic elements of the school environment and foster feelings of attachment" (p. 193). Students shared how they had been able to personalize the coulee by adding their own elements such as building animal homes, providing offerings to the place and creating art that they could return to. Violet shared, "A couple

of years ago when our class went down to the coulee, we made little shelters for animals." This memory of personalization through creating animal homes was also shared by Bob and Oakley. In their work, Cumming and Nash (2015) explored the role of ownership toward a place. They maintained that interactions within a place, combined with a sense of ownership, contribute to a sense of place. When I visited the coulee with the class, students created a special art piece out of natural materials to give as an offering to the Earth (See Appendix H for Student Artifacts). Katie described hers. "We were making something special to us or our group that was a circle shape that had a memory." When asked about the purpose of this task, Katie further explained, "So you have something special in the coulee that you can go back to." The participants had experiences in the coulee that allowed them to personalize the space through using the natural elements of the place.

Influence

When asked about their responsibility for the coulee, without hesitation, each participant I interviewed felt that it was their role to care for the place and to influence others to do the same. They shared examples of actions such as not littering, keeping the coulee safe and respecting the coulee by leaving it the same way they had found it.

> [Researcher]: What are your roles and responsibilities then for the coulee?
>
> [Bob]: Don't litter, don't take things away, don't pick plants or anything.
>
> [Researcher]: Is there anything else you want to add?
>
> [Bob]: And if you do anything to the coulee, try and fix it as soon as you can and make it as good like how you had it before. If there is any garbage and there is a garbage can nearby, you can pick it up.

These attitudes toward the coulee, as developed through the students' experiences within it, were consistent with Wilson's (1997) belief that, "children have an inner need to modify, change, and influence their environment" (p. 193). Additionally, when students were asked about how they might solve a problem they encountered within the coulee, they were eager to offer solutions. Sanger (1997) wrote, "Education should provide meaning and value to places and embed students in the processes of those places" (p. 4). Students shared how their learning about the coulee would be shared with other classmates at their grade assembly. They explained how it was important to tell others about the coulee and what they knew about it. As a result of having experiences that provided students with expectations for how to respect the place they were in, students were given further opportunities to develop their sense of place not only for the coulee but also within the larger community in which they lived. Most student participants recognized their role as citizens of their community and were passionate about ensuring they could influence others' behaviours and actions within the coulee as well.

Beyond Wilson: Other Experiences of the Coulee

Although many of the experiences in the coulee that I witnessed and had described to me were consistent with Wilson's characteristics of valuable place-based experiences, I also recognized some other components within these experiences that supported sense of place through Gadamer's definition of "*Erfahrung* – the genuine experience".

Relationality

From my perspective as an observer, the experiences that were provided to the students encouraged them to develop relationality with the coulee. When walking past a

section in the coulee, Charlie suddenly exclaimed, “The Aspen trees are my habitat.” For Charlie, the coulee was more than just a space, it was a special location that was a part of him. Bob furthered explained how time played a role in a strong connection when he shared, “Lots of times it teaches us to respect the earth and more, 'cause I don’t think if I didn’t ever go to the coulee ever in my life, I would be ripping off branches.” For the participants, there was an understanding of a relationship between themselves and the coulee. It went beyond simply being present in the place, to a reciprocal relationship. The participants recognized they had a connection with the coulee, one that was important for them to maintain. Teacher Jenn encouraged the students to think about and discuss what she described as, “the relationship of reciprocity” and to consider their attachment and connection to that place through their actions. Bob continued to describe this relationship when I spoke to him a second time. He shared, “We had to go and find things to build an honouring for the Earth. But if we took anything from the Earth, we’d have to honor the Earth back. Like maybe giving the tree a hug, if you took something from the tree.” This relationship, for Bob, was akin to a friendship, as he described when asked why it was important. He exclaimed, “How would you like it if somebody just took something from you for some reason and didn’t do anything back?” Through the experiences that students had undertaken in the coulee, they were provided with opportunity to develop a relationality with the coulee that continued to build a strong connection with that place.

Wonderment

“We cannot have experiences without asking questions” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 356). On regular occasions, students were asked to quietly ponder what they observed in the coulee, jotting down their own wonders about the place. The teacher participants

modelled this process throughout the walk through the coulee as well. Teacher Jenn asked:

> Do you ever wonder who walked this path before you? Think about whether the Indigenous path was paved. What evidence of the present can you find as you walk through the coulee? I challenge you to wonder about who travelled on the path before you.

Students' visual journals contained pages of coulee wonderments captured both during and after their visits (See Appendix H for Students Artifacts). After our trip to the coulee, Katie shared her personal wonders, "I wondered about why the trees are so different from each other. Like there's no two identical trees." When asked whether she had a chance to explore these questions back at school, Katie replied, "Sometimes yeah. We know more about the coulee so we focus on what we know." Some of the students shared that they did not always answer their wonderments back. Instead, my understanding was that the purpose was to frame experiences in the coulee in ways that allowed for questions that exposed some of the students' assumptions of the coulee. Through this approach, which Gadamer describes as *Erfahrung*, students are asked to think about the coulee differently and perhaps challenge their previous beliefs about the coulee.

From my observations, conversations and analyses, the experiences this group of students had shared in the coulee in fact set up the conditions for a healthy sense of place to be developed. Opportunities to experience the coulee in a variety of ways enabled a different aspect of sense of place to be fostered. In her article on sense of place Wilson (1997) concluded:

> The development of healthy environmental awareness and concern starts with a feeling response to nature. Such a response comes primarily by way of firsthand positive experiences in the out-of-doors, especially in environments fostering a "sense of place" experience. (p. 194)

Students' descriptions of their time in the coulee portrayed positive experiences that had allowed them to immerse, explore, seclude, influence, personalize, relate and wonder in the space.

CHAPTER 7: WHISPERING IN THE WOODS – SENSE OF PLACE

A Multi-Dimensional Construct

My original objective for this research study was to explore the question, *How do place-based experiences cultivate a child's sense of place?* From my perspective as a researcher, the experiences described above provided the conditions and opportunities for development of sense of place. As I immersed deeper into the student interviews, I began to consider to what extent these experiences did in fact foster sense of place. Murphy Augustine (2014) explained "writing and reading works in tandem as methods of analysis" (p. 751). It was critical that I look closely again at both my interviews with students as well as other research I had explored about place-based learning and sense of place. I began to reflect on my own construct of sense of place, a multi-dimensional concept that is comprised of a variety of facets including sociological, historical, ecological and perceptual components. I wondered to what extent, and in what regard, the participants I had interviewed demonstrated these different components of sense of place. As previously stated, "Very little is known about how children perceive the natural environment. Despite the fact the children are one of the largest user groups of outdoor spaces, their views are rarely sought" (Tapsell, 2007, p. 45). It was important to fully explore the students' perspectives in order to begin to uncover how their own sense of place was being constructed.

"More than just a Forest": Ecological Sense of Place

When asked about a special place, it is often natural for us to begin by describing the physical attributes of that location. Our memories of a place are closely rooted in what the space looks like, feels like, smells like, and sounds like. These imageries are

often clearly depicted for others. Young children's descriptions of place are not an exception to this rule. When students share a favourite spot, they almost always start with the parts where they have physically engaged. Ardoin (2006) explained, "Without the physical environment as a context, there could be no sense of place" (p. 114). When I first met with the participants in this study, I invited them to begin by telling me a bit about the coulee. Their initial descriptions painted a picture of the coulee in my mind (See Appendix I for Coulee Photographs). Katie explained, "The coulee is a place where it's calm and there's lots of wildlife. But umm it's very foresty and it's full of nature." Her classmates shared similar ideas, often with a focus on the natural elements of the coulee including the variety of animals they had encountered. They spoke of moose, rabbits, birds, fox, owls, deer and woodpeckers, as well as about plants they explored, namely the wolf willow. Oakley was eager to share her knowledge of the animals that lived in the coulee.

> One time when we were in the coulee, I'm pretty sure there's a moose that lives there. Yeah, on video one of my friends they catched the moose and its baby on video and I got to see it.

The participants not only recognized the living elements of the coulee but also shared their thoughts about the non-living elements. Charlie explained, "It's really fun to go there and look 'cause there is a hidden stream. You have to through the trees and then you are there." Ardoin, Schuh and Gould (2012) maintained, "The biophysical characteristics of place – such as the landscape as well as the plant and animal species that interact within the ecosystem – are one of the fundamental components of sense of place" (p. 586). The student conversations demonstrated their understanding of the connections between the plants, animals and places in the coulee. When asked why the

coulee was important, almost all participants referenced the natural elements and the significance of the coulee in this. The participants shared ideas such as:

[Katie]: Cause it's a habitat for lots of animals.

[Layla]: So that animals can have a place to live.

[Violet]: Because it's a habitat. It has habitats for lots of animals. It's where they get their water and food and shelter.

[Jake]: Because a lot of animals need the coulee and especially grasses and trees.

Throughout our discussions, students were in agreement that what defined the coulee was the abundance of plants and animals that inhabited its space. Clearly, students recognized there was an interconnectedness of nature in this place through their acknowledgment that its importance went beyond simply being a place.

The students were also aware of the location of the coulee within their community. The participants passionately attempted to explain the location of the coulee through descriptions of the areas around it. Perhaps most convincing was Lily who explained, "Well how we get there is, walk down the path that way. And then we go across the road that way, and go across the road again and then go down. Sometimes we take a different path." And indeed, when I travelled with the class to the coulee, this was exactly the direction we took. This understanding of where the coulee was situated in relation to both the students' homes and the school was consistent with the findings of Kroencke et al. (2015) who maintained:

> If individuals are knowledgeable about parks or other outdoor venues in their neighborhoods and communities, it seems reasonable that they would also be cognizant of the attributes of these places, namely presence of trees, wild animals, and natural bodies of water, such as lakes, ponds, or streams. Also, if they are aware of the attributes of these sites within their community it may be because they unconsciously seek them out for the benefits they provide, such as a venue

> for modes of outdoor play or a hideaway from a possibly stressful home environment. (p. 139)

In reflecting on my conversations with the participants, I began to recognize that their sense of place, from an ecological perspective actually went deeper than a simple understanding of the physical characteristics. Students' experiences, in fact, seemed to demonstrate the idea about how "a resultant resilient bond with the natural environment, can ignite students' sense of wonder and love for the natural world" (Litz & Mitten, 2010, p.5). Questions and wonderings about the coulee were embedded in conversations, observations and throughout the student work (See Appendix H for Student Artifacts). While on our way down to the coulee, James worried aloud, "I am wondering about the nests. I only saw two nests but there used to be four so I wonder what happened to the other two." Whereas Oakley, after spending a quiet moment reflecting in the coulee, questioned, "I wonder why so many trees are bent." These questions not only defined the students' curiosity about this natural place but also recognized its beauty and uniqueness. The students held an appreciation for the natural surroundings they were engaging. James said, "What I enjoy learning is how nature works and the beauties of nature that they (the coulee) have."

In their study, Kroencke et al. (2015) demonstrated that "participants' knowledge of a nearby natural area where they are able to play is strongly associated with components of a strong sense of place, particularly ecological place meaning" (p. 139). They further explained that as children grow their knowledge about a place and recognize it to have characteristics that are enjoyable, sense of place is developed through using it as a venue for playing and exploring. My experiences with the participants I interviewed revealed this same finding. The anecdotes shared by participants outlining their

knowledge of biophysical elements demonstrate that they have in fact begun to develop the foundations that lead to an ecological sense of place which includes a deep understanding of the natural elements and their relationships. Ecological sense of place was evident through the ways that the students described, shared and interacted with nature within the coulee. Because, in the words of Benjamin, "I have learned that there is more to it than just a forest."

"Respect the Space": Sociological Sense of Place

Although the biophysical features of a place and an awareness of them is an important component of sense of place, the concept is more complex than simply having an understanding and appreciation for the natural space. Many researchers concerned with sense of place argue that place is a socially constructed concept that requires interactions within spaces and with other people in order to form. Stedman (2002) maintained, "Sense of place can be conceived as a collection of symbolic meanings, attachment, and satisfaction with a spatial setting held by an individual or group" (p. 563). These symbolic meanings are created through experiences that individuals have together within a space. Therefore, place becomes a concept that includes social and cultural aspects of groups. According to Gruenewald (2003), places have a shared identity created through the interactions of communities within that space. Mueller Worster and Abrams (2005) furthered this idea, explaining, "When humans group together in a place, they create a local institution, where the members maintain social behaviors, structures and norms in order to coexist with one another and the environment" (p. 526). When I first heard the participants responses to my questions related to the sociological sense of place, I couldn't help but feel that their answers

seemed memorized and impressed upon rather than their own beliefs about the norms and behaviours that were expected in the coulee. Before I visited the coulee with the class, students made comments such as, “At the coulee we pick up garbage”, which I suspected was an expectation that had been emphasized by their teachers. At the same time, I recognized that this was partially how a sociological sense of place manifests itself. When a group sets the rules for a space, it is socially acceptable for participants in a group to follow those expectations. When I visited the coulee with the class, it became evident that the norms and structures the students spoke of were not just something rehearsed. Instead, the ways the students described their place in the coulee was, in essence, a living and breathing way of being. As well, the norms that had been impressed upon them were co-constructed as a group through their interactions within the space. Van Eijck and Roth (2010) explained, “Place, as a social construct, is defined by the perspectives people attribute to it and, in turn, these attributions collectively become the voice by which people are bound up with the places represented” (p. 879). When walking along the road toward the coulee, there was a buzz of excitement among the students. Some were chatting with their classmates, while others were running through the snow. And yet, when we reached the coulee, there was a sudden shift of energy throughout the entire class. It was almost as if a calm came over the students, like they were suddenly aware of their surroundings. This change demonstrated a recognition of a way of being in the coulee that was different than how they behaved in other areas of the community. As Ardoin (2006) argued, this also demonstrates how “the individual functions as a part of society, which develops, portrays, and often promotes an aggregate understanding of

place" (p. 116). The students truly demonstrated a desire to behave a certain way when they were present in the coulee and not just that they were expected to.

A sociological sense of place develops as students demonstrate understanding of the place through their shared experiences and engage in collective behaviours in a space. When questioned about their roles and responsibilities in the coulee, the participants genuinely understood their part in caring for the space, such as not littering, not picking flowers and leaving things as they were. Bob was earnest in explaining:

> If you do anything to the coulee, try to fix it as soon as you can and make it as good like how you had it before. If there is any garbage and there's a garbage (can) nearby you can pick it up.

Benjamin agreed, stating, "Respect the place…so that others can go there and use it too." These responsibilities were also recognized through group reminders during visits to the coulee. Teacher Jenn reminded students to be "respectful in the coulee" as they entered. It is apparent that this place was not only a physical space, but also a socially constructed one as well. Through their visits to the coulee, students engaged in place-making. It was not simply about visiting the space and identifying the biophysical aspects of the coulee. Instead, through their journeys, the students collectively developed a shared identity of the coulee, defining the place and how they should act in it as a collective. When the class settled in a familiar location, they recited an acknowledgement of the land, recognizing the importance of the place for them as a group. Bob also shared how the coulee needs to be respected in order to be experienced by the group. He explained:

> We have a pretty big space to explore most of the time but it's usually in the same boundaries. But then everywhere that there is a place that we could go, there was a path, and you went, a teacher would be standing there and they'll say that you can't go that far. And say you were in a space you weren't supposed to be in, you might get lost and not hear the chickadee call.

While in the coulee, the students demonstrated a collective responsibility for the space. As they were sitting and quietly listening, another group of students (from the same class) came noisily along the path. Teacher Jenn took the opportunity to share how this disturbance impacted the students' experience in the coulee. Students shared how their quiet had been interrupted and how they lost their connection with the natural sounds of the coulee. When asked by Teacher Jenn who else might feel that way, the students were quick to contribute ideas about other members of their community using the space for a sense of solitude, as well as the animals in the area. The students collaboratively discussed how to solve this problem if it occurred again in the future, ensuring the place remained as they hoped it would.

Place-making has been impacted not only by students' experiences together, but also by the variety of social and cultural factors they bring to the table. For many of the participants, the coulee was not just a place they visited as a class. The students also hiked, biked, picnicked and explored the coulee with friends and family. They were eager to communicate these experiences, which have also played a role in their sociological sense of place. On the other hand, Lily shared how learning about the coulee was a new experience for her and one she was learning about from her classmates. She explained, "At my other school we never went outside to learn about things. We only went on field trips to the Science Center." When speaking about Lily with her teachers, Teacher Sarah explained that she had not had the same place-based opportunities as the rest of the class in the coulee due to her being new to the school. At the same time, she clarified how this allowed Lily to share new and unique perspectives about the coulee. My own conversations and observations of the participants demonstrate a sociological sense of

place that is consistent with Gruenewald's (2003) belief that "human experience, identity, and culture are intimate with and inseparable from our relationship with places" (p. 626).

"They Actually Found Teepee Circles": Historical Sense of Place

Sense of place is also influenced by a variety of factors related to our shared understanding of the history of the place. Sanger (2006) asserted that this historical component plays a significant role due to the fact that stories are embedded in the history of a place. "Individuals have stories that represent their personal history, just as the land has a story of its own that includes people and its stories" (p.6). Through the work they had engaged in with their teachers, students were aware of some of the historical underpinnings of the coulee. Sanger (1997) suggested that, "a history of a place also fortifies the context and strengthens the relevance of what students experience" (p. 5).

It was clear through my conversations that the participants understood that the coulee, as a landform, had been around for many years. Lily explained, "It's near a bunch of houses. There used to not be houses. It's really sad there is now. It used to be just grasslands." This feeling of unhappiness for the loss of natural land indicates that there is a recognition of the use of the space beyond one's own needs. Additionally, participants recognized the coulee to have importance to other groups besides their own. Billy commented, "The Indigenous used to hunt bison there." And when speaking about the coulee, James understood that not only did the coulee have importance in his life, but also for others at a different time. He stated, "Yes, it is very important because that's where the First Nations used to live. They actually found teepee circles there." The participants understood that other groups of people may have used the coulee differently during a prior time. The students discussed the Indigenous perspective of the coulee on multiple

occasions during our conversations, suggesting that there had been attempts to build meaning of the place through this perspective. In her own work. Chambers (2006) described her purpose for bringing student teachers to places situated near them.

> Our hope is that in visiting these sites, in bringing teachers to hear the stories of these places and their significance, that we are given the opportunity to renew our relationship with the present and all of that which lies two days away, backwards and forwards. (p.35)

Stories allow participants to develop a sense of place that recognizes the impact of time and history on our relationship with the land.

Pictures and experiences in the coulee also evoked memories for the students. Billy, when recounting his trip to the coulee, shared:

> Last time we were down there, there were some…well actually there were three downy woodpeckers, so I have actually four I have seen in my life. And it actually kind of reminds me of my Grandma's place because they have lots of birds there.

When viewing a picture of the coulee, Bob revealed, "It's like a really nice horizon, almost like the mountains and my grandparents live on the other side of the mountains so it kind of makes me think of them." These memories suggest that students' recollections and personal histories help develop their own sense of self in relation to the coulee as well as other aspects of their lives.

Although the students shared understanding of the historical underpinnings of the coulee, I was left wondering what voices might be missing from the story of this particular place. When analyzing descriptions of place, van Eijck and Roth (2010) asked, "What is exactly this place that is written about? Is this a valid and reliable account of the place? Whose (account of the) place is recounted here?" (p. 876). These questions are important, they argued, because only some accounts of place are taken into consideration.

> Such representations become voices of the place by means of which it is articulated in always culturally and historically marked ways by the readers of these documents and hence listeners to the place. In turn, these social constructions can become material reality in which only particular voices shape the place. (p. 880)

Within this work, I believe there is room to continue to build understanding of the ways that young students' historical sense of place is influenced by certain voices, and to explore how we ensure that all perspectives are heard in the conversation because "place is a multitude of voices that tell places rather than a single voice" (p. 880).

"It's just a Good Place to be": Perceptual Sense of Place

> In place-based teaching, the most important senses of place to consider are the personal meanings and attachments that exist between each student and the place or places offered as the context for the curriculum.
>
> (Semken and Butler-Freeman, 2008, p. 1045)

Through a deep understanding of a place, biologically, socially and historically, a perceptual sense of place begins to unfold through the intertwining of these other components (See Appendix A for Sense of Place Construct and Appendix B for Sense of Place Definitions). Mueller Worster and Abrams (2005) contended, "Through the process of contextualizing learning in the local social and ecological context, students can develop relationships, construct knowledge and feel strengthened identity. These relationships can result in developing the students' sense of place" (p. 533). How students feel about a place, how they describe their mood and feelings during and after being in the place, and their sense of self and belonging, is a result of their understanding of the place through the other domains. Kroencke et al. (2015) lamented, "Perhaps most importantly, development of a sense of place in a child can help children in the development of their own identity" (p. 132). This aspect, then becomes one of the most significant to consider when looking at sense of place. When students feel a personal

sense of identity in a location, research has shown that this also supports development of self-worth, confidence, self-efficacy and engagement. Wilson (1997) claimed:

> In addition to supporting learning about the natural world, sense of place experiences also impact on the child's developing sense of self... a warm stimulating environment tells children that they are valued and that their way of learning is understood and respected... Such messages impact strongly on how children perceive themselves as learners and explorers. This, of course, also affects self-esteem, feelings of competence, and sense of rootedness. (p. 191)

To consider students' perceptual sense of place, I first considered how the participants perceived the coulee as a space. Casey (1996) recalled, "In a phenomenological account, the crux in matters of place is the role of perception" (p. 17). Overall, the participants shared that the coulee was a significant place to them. The importance of the place was often related to aspects of nature and respecting the space, but also to their own feelings of happiness and enjoyment when spending time within the coulee. Throughout the classroom space, provocations, photographs, writing and other artifacts were scattered around the room demonstrating the prominence of the coulee to the class throughout all aspects of their learning (See Appendix G for School Photographs and Appendix H for Student Artifacts). Not only did the students share that the coulee belonged to the community as a whole, they also demonstrated that the coulee helped establish their own feelings of belonging. The coulee was a place where they learned in and grew together. It wasn't simply a spot where they spent time, but an overarching component of who they were as a class. When asked about his experiences and how the coulee made him feel, Billy shared the following:

> [Researcher]: So, after you've gone down and you've had all those experiences, how does it make you feel?
>
> [Billy]: Ummm…lucky

[Researcher]: You feel lucky? Why do you feel lucky?

[Billy]: Because well none of the other places (in the city) have a coulee like that. The statements demonstrate a sense of pride and privilege in belonging to the coulee exhibited by the students.

Place-Attachment.

An important component of sense of place, especially within the perceptual domain, is the development of place-attachment as a result of exposure in a space. As described above, "place attachment refers to an affective bond formed through direct experience in, or vicarious engagement with, a place" (Semken & Butler Freeman, 2008, p. 1047). Through repeated positive exposure and experience with a place, a connection is formed. Looking closely at place-attachment as a vital component of perceptual sense of place, it was evident from the beginning of my time with this group of students that the coulee was a valued and special place for them. Students were eager to share with me little details about the coulee, and they continually spoke about it in a positive manner. Both Benjamin and James shared, on more than one occasion, "It's a really cool place to be." The other participants agreed, frequently stating how the coulee was a nice place, how it was enjoyable to visit, and how it made them feel happy. It was clear from my conversations that the perception of the coulee from the perspective of the participants was a positive one. Ardoin (2012) wrote, "Certain places evoke an almost immediate intimate and emotional connection" (p. 114). Looking at other research in the area of place-attachment, we learn this component is often quantitatively measured through the use of a Likert scale which determines the extent to which participants agree with statements such as: "It's my favourite place to be", "I am the happiest when I am there",

and "This place is very special to me." (Semken & Butler-Freeman, 2008; Stedman, 2002, Stedman, 2003). The students participating in this study shared these same kinds of affirmative statements about the coulee. Their feelings of contentment and happiness were demonstrated through both their conversations with me, as well as observations I made prior, during and after the visit to the coulee, suggesting that in fact, they had developed a strong place-attachment toward the coulee.

Place-Meaning.

Though favorable perceptions, demonstrating attachment to the coulee, were clearly noted throughout my interviews, I was also interested in learning how the students' feelings were related specifically to place meaning, a key component of sense of place. Stedman (2003) asserted, "Researchers ought to examine not just how much the place means. . . but what does it mean?" (p. 826). Place-meaning goes beyond finding the extent to which a person is attached to a place and further looks closely at the meaning they attribute to a place. "Place attachment, in addition to being a measure of the strength of an individual's attachment to a place, also encompasses the more emotional or symbolic meanings that people give the places" (Smaldone, Harris & Sanyal, 2008, p. 480). On a number of occasions participants were asked to explain how the coulee made them feel or to share words that described the coulee from their perspective. Their responses were extremely powerful in understanding the place-meaning that students attached to the coulee. Peaceful, calm, quiet, relaxed, happy and free were consistent adjectives describing feelings evoked by this place. In her own work on sense of place, Tran Gauci (2016) asserted:

> Teachers believed that children's sense of place was not just about children knowing that they existed in a place. It was about them being in a place, the

> connections children had to the place, and the different emotions that those connections evoked. (p. 64)

This finding was also consistent among the participants in the study. Calm and peaceful were the two most common descriptors of both the coulee itself, as well as the feelings that the coulee invoked. At one point, James reflected, "It makes me feel calm, relaxed and excited at the same time." Much of the research centered around understanding sense of place has concentrated on measuring place meaning through a quantitative rating scale of place-meaning items which describe places (Kroencke, et al., 2015; Semken & Butler-Freeman, 2008; Stedman 2002). These researchers, when measuring place-meaning, ask participants to rank items on a 1-5 scale based on how they perceive the place in question. Included in this list of place-meaning items are descriptors of place such as tranquil and relaxing. Work in this area has consistently noted that places that were highly valued, and as a result, were tied to strong place-attachment and place-meanings. These were often rated using words such as: beautiful, relaxing, fun and tranquil. Although my own work was not centered around a quantitative measurement of place-attachment, the recognition of the coulee as a calm, peaceful, beautiful place was consistent with research from this perspective. When asked why he liked being in the coulee, Bob explained, "Cause it's beautiful and nature and a whole bunch of animals are happy there." The meanings placed on the coulee by the participants in my study were consistent with work undertaken by Cummings and Nash (2015), who found that students expressed feelings of calm and relaxation in relation to a nature setting. When asked what words come to mind when he thinks about the coulee, Billy shared, "Calm because like the flow of the stream, it makes a nice noise." My conversations and observations of both the student and teacher participants demonstrated that their experiences have supported

the development of their own place-meaning of the coulee, which as a result, strengthened sense of place.

Lim and Barton (2006) wrote in their own place-based research that "having lived in a neighbourhood, students have developed a multi-dimensional sense of place including biological, historical, socio-cultural, political" (p. 119). My own study seems to echo this finding. Student participants shared anecdotes that demonstrate a strong sense of place was being nurtured in relation to the coulee. Each experience has presented a different opportunity to support the development of the students' sense of place by creating an interplay between ecological, cultural, historical and perceptual factors. This connection has played a role in both place-attachment and place-meaning for students which has further cultivated sense of place.

Another place? Another time? Does Context Matter?

Considering students' positive perceptual sense of place related to the coulee, I began to wonder about contextual factors and the role they played in sense of place development. Although, instinctively, I believed that the place itself played a very important role, I was curious about the extent to which the context of the coulee impacted the development of sense of place with this particular group of students. A number of factors began to play in my mind. First, was the space itself. In his study of special places for youth, Van Andel (1990) found that participants placed high value on attractive places, ones that included green areas that contained certain feature such as trees or free, open spaces. The students visiting the coulee frequently shared their thoughts about the beauty of the coulee and the fact that they were lucky to have such a place in their community. The place itself and its features definitely seemed to play a role in their high

appreciation for the coulee. Derr (2002) also explored individuals' reasons for place use, in particular natural places. He found that children's priority for places were the activities a place enabled, followed by having togetherness in the place with family and friends, and finally by place features. These factors also seemed to play a role in place perception in my work. Students continually spoke about the activities they engaged in, the different people who enjoyed the coulee with them and the different features of the coulee. Although I did not specifically discuss with students how their perceptions of the place might have changed if the coulee did not allow for these factors, it seems that when students feel a place allows for these elements, the conditions for development of sense of place can be more fully fostered. This is an important aspect to consider as it pushes into question further research around how sense of place can be cultivated in places where this type of environment may not be present.

I was also interested in how time impacted positive feelings about the coulee. Perhaps not surprisingly, research has demonstrated that sense of belonging is strengthened by increased familiarity. Smaldone, Harris and Sanyal (2008) demonstrated how affinity to a place can change both through experience and over time. They contended "more meaningful, emotionally-based 'place-identity'" (p.500) takes time to develop. Students had been offered many opportunities to explore the coulee both within school and on their own. Layla excitedly shared, "I go trail running there", while other participants shared their experiences of walking, biking and exploring the coulee with family and friends. The coulee was not just a place for learning and peacefulness at school, but also a place for family outings and other recreation. Students engaged with the coulee on a number of occasions both during and outside of school. Many of the

students had been visiting the coulee since grade one and had multiple exposures throughout the year. These experiences were remembered and shared by the participants. Violet recalled, “A couple of years ago, when our class went down to the coulee, we made little shelters for animals.” It is clear that the frequency of the visits played a role in students’ sense of place. Visiting this place was not an isolated moment in time, but rather an inclusive endeavor that allowed for sense of place to be developed over time.

While most of the experiences that students had engaged in within the coulee were perceived as positive for these students, this was not exclusively the case. Guiliana (2003) found that while positive interactions that result in positive feelings toward a place can build self-identity, the opposite may also be true. Negative experiences and feelings about a place can play a harmful role on place identity. During one conversation, Oakley shared an adverse experience that she had had in the coulee.

> One time I got scared because my dayhome went down there and we were riding our bikes and when we went down to eat on the benches, one of the boys told me that it was a dead rabbit. But it was actually a pillowcase with spray paint on it. So, then I was like so scared. I was like five so I didn’t want to be down there ever again.

When asked how she felt about the coulee since this occurrence, Oakley explained that she had changed her mind about the coulee through her experiences with the class. She shared that after many positive visits with her peers, she felt comfortable and safe going to the coulee now. She remembered other important facts about the coulee and recognized that it was, in fact, a good place to spend time. This story highlighted, as Guiliana suggested, the importance of the context of the experiences in places. Because Oakley was given the opportunity to visit the coulee on multiple occasions, she was able to change her mind about how she felt about the place.

An additional contextual factor I considered was the extent to which the students' views of place were shaped by the teachers' perspectives. A reoccurring theme that has been discussed throughout this paper, has been a shared understanding by the students of the coulee as a special environment unique to their neighbourhood. Embedded within this, was the belief that natural spaces hold and provide value and importance to communities. Students made connections between the coulee and other natural areas of the city they had visited, identifying how these areas were similar in their purpose and structure. When shown pictures of the coulee, Oakley reflected, "It makes me think of Glenbow Ranch because at Glenbow Ranch there is a steep hill that goes down and it kind of looks like that." The students' views of nature and the coulee as a treasure seemed, at least in part, to have been fostered through the idyllic view of nature embraced by the teachers themselves. As described within the methodology section, the teachers participating in this study had a number of assumptions around the notion of place and place-based learning, namely a focus centered around reflective observation, exploration of the natural spaces and respect for nature. During my initial conversations with the teacher participants, they both spoke highly of the coulee. It was personified as a tranquil location in which "curriculum is taught through the plants and animals in the coulee" (Teacher Sarah). As discussed in the sociological dimension of sense of place, the teachers themselves played a role in forming the structures and norms that students presented within the coulee. Respect, quiet and reflectiveness were modeled and emulated throughout the visit in which I took part in. Considering the impact that teacher have on establishing expectations, the group identity within the coulee was influenced by the teachers own beliefs about how one should engage with a natural space. Additionally,

it seems plausible that the students' opinions of the coulee were at least in part shaped by the idealistic view of nature presented by the teachers.

After considering these factors present in the place experiences, it appears that context plays a significant role in the development of sense of place. In this particular case, the students many positive experiences within an attractive place, which occurred frequently over time and were facilitated by educators passionate about nature, positively impacted students' sense of place within their community.

"I know the Ways of the Coulee"

When we consider sense of place, the ultimate testament of a deep lasting connection, is acknowledging the place in profound ways. One of the most compelling statements shared during my conversations with the participants came when Oakley said, "I know the ways of the coulee." Knowing the ways of the coulee – this simple yet powerful statement brings to light a true understanding of place-based learning and sense of place within this group of students. We may ask why is it important for someone to "know the ways" of a place. We wonder, how does knowing a place and its ways allow for a deeper and more personal connection to that place? This statement goes beyond simply knowing a place in the superficial sense, and instead refers to knowing a place as it is, as it has been, and as a unique entity. In her article, "The Land Is the Best Teacher I Have Ever Had": Places as Pedagogy for Precarious Times", Chambers (2006) asked, "What is the significance of this landscape and what can it teach us?" (p. 35). It is clear from Oakley's statement that the coulee has significance, that is has something to share with others and that the students can learn about it in many ways. My goal for this hermeneutic study was to interpret place-based learning through a fresh perspective, one

that included the voice of the students who were engaging in these experiences themselves. Oakley's words resonated and provided me with this fresh perspective to explore sense of place through the eyes of the students. Pelo (2014) explained:

> When we visit a landscape again and again, visit and notice, consciously, what we find there, visit and talk about what we notice—when we visit a landscape again and again, we come to know its particularities: the changes in light and shadow, the life and death of the green things, the movement of the lively things, the way rain slicks across rock and slips into dirt. (p. 7)

The idea of knowing the ways of the coulee speaks to a connection that goes beyond simply entering into the coulee or even engaging with it. Instead, there is a feeling that the student recognizes the nuances of the space. I began to look more deeply at my conversations through this lens of "knowing the coulee" to explore and discover another perspective and understanding of sense of place, one that focuses on the idea of knowing. Upon reflection, I began to see other narratives that echoed this notion of knowing the coulee. Charlie explained, "You get to actually recognize the coulee cause the first time I was there, I was a little nervous to be there, but now I recognize the coulee." Knowing is to feel comfortable in the place so that you recognize the unique characteristics and gifts that the coulee has to offer. Benjamin reinforced this when he shared, "There is more to it than just a forest." When questioned further about this statement, he continued:

> There's animals and plants and lots of places to go. It feels like it's a part of (our place). That's important. There is just so much to learn from it. I didn't know the coulee before I started going there. I didn't know it would be that big. It expands really far.

Capra (1996) spoke to this relationship through the idea of individuals gaining an ecological viewpoint of the world. Through the lens of this worldview, Capra explained:

> Deep ecology does not separate humans, or anything else, from the natural environment. It sees the world not as a collection of isolated objects, but a network of phenomena that are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent.

> Deep ecology recognizes the intrinsic value of all living beings and views humans as only on particular strand of the web. (p. 7)

Benjamin's statement speaks to the coulee as a living entity, one with which the student has an interconnected relationship with. This idea of the place as a living thing is consistent with van Eijck and Roth' (2010) thinking about place. "That is, we view place as a lived entity that results from a dialogical transaction between a community and its material environment at a particular moment in cultural-historical time and which hence shapes and is shaped by their identity" (p. 887). The idea that knowing the ways of the coulee, also recognizes that it is much larger than us as individuals. Katie, when speaking of the coulee and the grasslands, shared, "They make me feel like I'm tiny 'cause they're so huge. You learn more and more every time. I like that you learn something new every single time." Experience is what you make of it. For some a trip into the coulee might be just that, a trip, and as a result they aren't changed by the process. For these students however, this was a journey in which their active participation with the space enabled them to see things anew and to change their perspectives each time they stepped into the coulee.

I've Seen Change Sometimes: Transformations in the Coulee

One of the more indirect ways that students seemed to "know the ways" of the coulee, was through their knowledge and understanding of transformation within the space. Many of the participants made comments both knowingly and also unconsciously about how the coulee seemed to change over time. While walking down into it, students frequently noticed both subtle and larger changes within the space. Bob exclaimed, "Didn't there used to be rocks there?" when walking past an area frequented by the group and James was overhead questioning the number of nests he observed. When asked to

expand on this later, he shared, "I wondered why some nests were missing. 'Cause I only spotted two today and there is supposed to be four." Recognition of these delicate differences demonstrated how the students were acutely aware of their surroundings when in the coulee. This acknowledgement of change also went beyond the day-to-day observations. When visiting the coulee, Teacher Jenn, asked them to "choose one thing to listen to. We will come back in the spring to see how it has changed." Through her instructions to the class, the teacher was preparing the students to recognize and pay purposeful attention to these changes. It was clear that students had taken this direction to heart as Oakley shared, "I've seen change sometimes. Like two trees close together." Similarly, Charlie explained:

> Every time we go to the coulee we see the change and how the coulee has changed over and over. Sometimes you'll see deer and moose and all kinds of animals. We wanna see what we can find and show how interesting it could be.

This thought about discovering the new and recognizing the change is consistent with Casey's (1996) statement, "Instead, a place is something for which we continually have to discover or invent new forms of understanding, new concepts in the literal form of 'grasping together'" (p. 26). Each time the students stepped into the coulee, they were asked to continue to learn its ways, to use this information to build on their understanding, and to engage in *Erfahrung* which in turn challenged their own beliefs about the coulee and as a result strengthened their sense of place.

CHAPTER 8: WALKING WITH THE WIND – ENGAGING WITH THE COULEE

Although my definition of engagement has mostly remained the same throughout this study, my understanding of engagement through the lens of sense of place and place-based learning has expanded by delving deeply into the work. Pelo (2014) stated, "When we change perspective, when we step away from our habitual ways of seeing and understanding, we find new details" (p.8). This statement resonated deeply with me as I worked with students to gain further insight into how experiences in the coulee impacted their engagement in learning. Throughout my conversations and observations with both the teacher participants and the students, it became evident that the coulee was an embedded aspect of the learning in the classroom. Student writing, artwork and photographs connected to the coulee were observed in the classroom setting (See Appendix G for School Photographs and Appendix H for Student Artifacts). During our initial conversations, the teacher participants conveyed how the coulee was a foundation for studying many of the curriculum concepts introduced in class. The teachers intentionally utilized the coulee as a relevant and meaningful provocation for subjects such as Alberta's history and landscape, as well as native plants and animals. Thinking back on my initial reflections centered on making learning meaningful for students, I was keenly aware that the good intentions of these teachers to support student engagement in learning through the coulee did not necessarily produce engagement. Instead, engagement had to begin with the students themselves.

I began to explore the relationship between the coulee and engagement through speaking with the participants about their learning. When questioned about whether the coulee provided them with an opportunity to learn, the students whole-heartedly spoke of

how the coulee had much to teach them. After sharing how he was excited to go to the coulee, I asked James why he felt so enthusiastic about visiting the place. He explained, "'Cause I get to learn stuff." Benjamin, too, reflected that the coulee was important because, "There is just so much to learn from it." He went on to explain that learning about the coulee helped him to understand the place that he himself inhabited.

> [Researcher]: What do you enjoy learning about at the coulee? What are the things that help you enjoy your learning?
>
> [Benjamin]: Learning about the coulee long ago. What was there.
>
> [Researcher]: How is going to the coulee and talking about the coulee helping you learn about the past?
>
> [Benjamin]: Because I am learning about what happened in this place.

Facts shared by students demonstrated an understanding of curricular concepts learned through the coulee work. The students were able to share a wide variety of information about the types of learning that the coulee helped to evoke for them including plants and animals, Indigenous peoples, places in their community, and more. They went on to describe the variety of ways they were sharing this information with others including hosting assemblies and creating virtual museums. This was evidence of the impact that place had on their learning of concepts and topics. It was clear through my conversations that the coulee was a source of learning. It provided an important venue for the students to engage with the topics they were learning about in class.

Engagement with Learning

Although it was clear that students were learning in the coulee, this did not necessarily denote engagement with the topics they were exploring. I was further

interested in how the coulee supported the deeper forms of cognitive and intellectual engagement that I have defined above. Engagement from this perspective is related to an emotional and cognitive investment in learning that allows for a deepening understanding of ideas and construction of new knowledge (Willms, Friesen & Milton, 2009). Through my conversations with Katie, it was clear that she had developed an interest in learning from the coulee. She shared how the coulee was "like a space you can go to get more knowledge." Lily further explained how the coulee caused her to be interested in her learning and to want to learn more. She lamented, "At my other school, we never went outside to learn about things. We only went on field trips to the Science Center." When questioned about this, she described how the ability to go outside and into the coulee helped her to feel interested in her learning. It caused her to ask questions such as "How the animals move? How they eat? What they do to survive?", all centered around an inquiry into the workings of the coulee. While in the coulee, a commitment of the students to construct new knowledge related to the coulee was witnessed. This was observed as students sat down to write their questions and observations in the space (See Appendix H for Student Artifacts). Through this act, the students demonstrated a willingness to sustain effort required to comprehend complex ideas about the coulee, a component of engagement defined by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004). Participants were meaningfully engaged throughout the process and afterward shared how they often explored their "coulee wonderments" when they returned to school. Their questions and observations related the coulee revealed understanding of the interconnectedness of the place. Student work in both their visual journals and artifacts situated around the room demonstrated a strong relationship between the learning in the

coulee with the other aspects of learning in the class (See (See Appendix G for School Photos and Appendix H for Student Artifacts). It was clear from the student work samples that the coulee provided a space for engagement in understanding concepts once back at school. The students made connections between their learning in the coulee and other learning experiences, recognizing the complexity of topics they were exploring.

A desire to problem solve and prompt change was another component of engagement that was evident. The student participants' willingness to care for the coulee in a number of ways was observed and communicated throughout the study. During conversations, students shared ideas such as:

> [Billy]: Respect the places…so other people can go there and use it as well
>
> [Katie]: Don't litter, uh don't be too loud because it's the animals home. You're basically disturbing their home.
>
> [Charlie]: It's a nice place to be. If it got wrecked I'd be really sad.

This attitude of care and respect for the coulee helped to support my understanding of how place-based learning can build engagement through the critical/transformative lens described by Vibert and Shields (2003). The researchers explained that when looking at engagement from this perspective, it goes beyond simply discussing issues in the classroom. Rather, critical/transformative engagement demonstrates an impact of the work in students' lives outside the school walls. The students' willingness to protect the coulee and to share this with others, demonstrates engagement within the "real" world. The students recognized that the coulee was more than just a learning space for them, and instead it was a crucial element of their community as a whole, because as Billy shared, "None of the other places in (our city) have a coulee like that."

Reflecting back to my analysis around knowing the ways of the coulee, a relationship between sense of place and engagement became further evident. As Schussler (2009) revealed, "Engagement in learning involves formulating a deeper connection between the student and the material whereby a student develops an interest in the topic or retains the learning beyond the short term" (pp. 115-116). If we consider that emotional engagement is concerned with creating a meaningful connection to a topic, then a commitment to knowing and sharing the ways of the coulee demonstrates this type of relationship. It is clear that a relationship has been developed when considering the following statement from Benjamin.

> There is more to it than just a forest. There's animals and plants and lots of places to go. It feels like it's a part of (our place). That's important. There is just so much to learn from it. I didn't know the coulee before I started going there. I didn't know it would be that big. It expands really far.

Katie also communicated her engagement from the lens of developing and retaining this deep interest in the coulee.

> [Researcher]: So, when you are at the coulee what kind of things have you learned from your experiences there?
>
> [Katie]: I have learned like everything about the coulee. When I had just been to school when I just started school here I didn't know much about the coulee and now I know everything.
>
> [Researcher]: So how do you feel differently about the coulee now that you have been there so many times?
>
> [Katie]: It feels like going back to it is weird because you learn more and more every single time.

This statement suggests Katie's desire to continue to build her connection with the coulee and to continue to learn from it. It also speaks to the importance of students having recursive experiences that allow for repetition in their learning. Through recursion,

students can build on their learning to gain deep understanding of the topic and continue to engage with the topic.

Although I feel through my conversations and observations that students were emotionally, cognitively and authentically engaged in their learning as a result of their exposure to the coulee, the participants found it difficult at times to explain in detail how the coulee allowed them to invest in their learning. I had attempted a variety of ways to elicit the ways in which the place supported their engagement, yet the result was not as I had expected. This observation has caused me to consider how researchers and educators can gauge engagement with students. Perhaps observations are imperative in recognizing the emotional, intellectual engagement that has been described. Additionally, it may be important that educators consider how students understand engagement and how we empower them to speak to their engagement with a topic. Nevertheless, authentic experiences with place, like the ones experienced by this class, appear to be a strong foundation for helping students to engage deeply with their learning. The coulee provided students with an interesting and informative place to initiate learning. Through continued exposure, the coulee further delivered stimulus and a close, intimate, recognizable space for students to engage in intellectual, connected learning about topics they were exploring as a class.

Mindfulness in Learning

An aspect of engagement in learning that I had not anticipated when I began exploring sense of place, was the impact of place on students' ability to be prepared and available to engage with their learning. I discovered, throughout my observations and conversations, ways in which the coulee made the students feel and how these feelings

impacted their ability to engage in the learning once back in class. When asked if going to the coulee helps with learning in school, James responded, "Yeah, it does. It helps me stay calm." Billy also enthusiastically shared that the coulee supported his learning. "It's a calm and peaceful place to be." In their work on mindful approaches in nature settings, Adams and Beauchamp (2020) found, "All the children interviewed reported feeling a sense of calmness whilst engaging in the mindful activities in the nature reserves" (p. 4). Additionally, they observed that students were calmer in school as a result of mindful experiences set in nature. The teacher participants in my study were intentional in creating coulee experiences that promoted mindfulness. The purpose of these activities was to provide students with opportunities to focus on the immediate space around them. The coulee offered students a calm and relaxing setting for them to center and ground themselves, which in turn supported their ability to engage in their learning. For some students, such as in the case of Lily, this mindful approach went beyond simply finding calm. Instead, it provided an essential learning support. Lily shared, "It's a nice place to go to relax, to have some time alone. It helps me calm down when I get emotional, 'cause I have ADHD." Clearly, the coulee offered Lily a needed refuge to refocus her attention on her learning.

Langer and Moldoveanu (2000) observed, "The subjective 'feel' of mindfulness is that of a heightened state of involvement and wakefulness or being in the present" (p. 4). While the students were in the coulee, they were observed engaging in mindful practice. Katie then shared about her learning relation to the coulee.

[Katie]: It makes me feel free.

[Researcher]: Why does it make you feel free? That's a great word.

> [Katie]: 'Cause like you've been to the coulee, you feel calm and your mind is set to what you're going to do. You're free to do your work.

The coulee for Katie was a space where she could be in the present, which enabled her to focus on her work and what was important. The students frequently spent time quietly observing in the coulee. They were being a part of the place. Through this practice, students felt more readily open and available for their learning. Langer (2000) goes on to further explain:

> The simple process of mindful learning, of actively drawing distinctions and noticing new things - seeing the familiar in the novel and the novel in the familiar – is a way to ensure that our minds are active, that we are involved, and that we are situated in the present. (p. 222)

As noted previously, students deep and meaningful learning experiences provided a space for recognizing these nuances and to see "the familiar in the novel and the novel in the familiar" (p. 222). In his work on mindfulness and place-based education, Deringer (2017) described how these two concepts share many of the same goals. He examines how mindfulness and place-based learning can both support the work of critical thinking and deep engagement. "Being mindful of what is meaningful to students helps students to learn subject matter with greater depth and intensity. Mindfulness and PBE share the goal, and in many cases the outcome, of providing engaging learning experiences for students" (p. 339). It seems through my exploration of engagement and place-based learning, that engaging in mindfulness within the coulee, provided an opportunity for participants to become present and engaged in learning as a result of the calm that the coulee evoked.

CHAPTER 9: CONNECTING IN THE COULEE – IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM

Sense of place, built upon through coulee experiences and the subsequent classroom tasks, was a foundation for developing deep connections with the coulee. The extent of these connections varied depending on the participant and his/her own personal perceptions of the experiences, but nevertheless were evident. Sanger (1997) wrote, "Students' experiences will determine what to become connected to and the nature of those connections" (p. 5). Through my interpretation and understanding of sense of place in relation to this study, I have come to see how place-based learning creates important connections for children, namely connections to nature, people, learning and self.

One of the most prominent findings was the formation of an intense and lasting bond with nature formed through immersion in a natural place. Bob shared that he had learned to "respect the earth. That certain animals live in the coulee and it helps them." Students overwhelmingly demonstrated a desire to continue to engage with the natural space. While Sanger (1997) argued, "Currently schools give students the language, metaphors and worldview of independent individuals without helping them be connected to, or responsible for, the land the communities that they inhabit" (p.4), the place-based learning experiences that these participants had engaged in provided a context for this connection with the land. Additionally, students also demonstrated how their coulee experiences impacted their personal connections with others. Family and peer interactions were an essential aspect of the coulee experience. Chambers (2006) described how visiting a place allows for these connections to flourish. "Visiting, though, is a form of renewal, a way of renewing and recreating people, places and being, and their relationships with one another" (p. 35). Students consistently shared how they spent

time in the coulee, not only with their class, but also with their families, engaged in a variety of activities. Oakley shared how her experiences in the coulee provided her with an opportunity to work with classmates she didn't normally work with. She explained, "I've experiences like hanging out with new people. I usually don't hang out with (student 1) and (student 2)."

Another important connection created was the one between students and their learning. Through using the coulee as a provocation, students became more connected to their work, both through the topic of the coulee itself, as well as through the calm the coulee provided. This sense of calm also represented a prominent aspect of the coulee connection, connection to oneself. The coulee offered students a space to center and ground themselves. It was calm and relaxing as well as an exciting place for them to be. The coulee helped students connect to their own selves and supported the development of a sense of belonging, worthiness and positive self-image.

This study has uncovered deepening knowledge about how students can strengthen sense of place and increase engagement by connecting to a place in deep and profound ways. This fresh understanding of place-based learning and its relation to sense of place has caused me to ask a number of questions. First, what insights about curriculum can we gain through this understanding? Second, how can place-based learning provide the structure for curriculum that allows for deep understanding of a subject? And third, how might educators use this understanding in their own work?

Fostering an Ecological Worldview

> And from our visits questions arise: What is the significance of this landscape and what can it teach us? What is the curriculum of these places? What knowledge is held in there and here, and what if any is still accessible to us, and what is gone? What are our

> responsibilities to these sites? What can these places teach us, not just about the past, but about now and two days from now?
>
> (Chambers, 2006, p. 35)

The coulee experiences presented students with opportunities to develop relationality, a sense of relationship between the coulee and themselves. This idea of relationality also extends to different facets of the students' learning and lives. Experiences in the coulee provided a platform for students to increase their understanding of the world at large by making connections between these spaces. The students shared understanding of the relationship between phenomena witnessed in the coulee with other aspects of their lives.

> [Oakley]: So, there's Aspen trees in the coulee and I remember at Glenbow Ranch when we were there that Aspen tress have sunscreen on them. When the Blackfoot people used to live there, they would use that when it was really hot and if they didn't have sunscreen, they would use the aspen trees.

Students developed their ability to comprehend complex ideas through building knowledge of a relevant and local space and applying this to a different context. Capra (1996) described this relationship as an ecological worldview. Deep ecological awareness, he explained, "recognizes the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and the fact that, as individuals and societies, we are all embedded in (and ultimately dependent on) the cyclical processes of nature" (p. 6). Curriculum experiences should be based around opportunities for this relationality to occur. When we allow students to come to a deep understanding of a concept, students are able to recognize and build relationality for themselves. "Place-based education is therefore not only a matter of educating ourselves about the place, but also a matter of educating the place about ourselves" (van Eijck & Roth, 2010, p. 896). When curriculum is structured in such a way and meaningful opportunities to engage with a topic are provided, students stand to

develop this ecological awareness. Purposeful place-based experiences, such as those that took place in the coulee, support that theory that "if we have deep ecological awareness, or experience, of being part of the web of life, then we will (as opposed to should) be inclined to care for all of living nature" (Capra, 1996, p.12). Through this study, it has become even more apparent that nurturing this holistic lens of learning is an important and integral part of how students become active participants in their world.

Curriculum structured around an ecological worldview also builds a deep understanding of the relationships between concepts. Jardine (1993) shared a powerful image of these relationships:

> We do not deeply understand this pine tree simply through dissecting its oxygen-producing capabilities and the correlative oxygen requirements of the human circulatory system. We deeply understand it by living with this tree in such a way that our dependency on it (the one that science might help us "objectively demonstrate") can go on in a wholesome sustainable way. (p. 52)

The place-based experiences that I witnessed demonstrated students engaged in deep understanding by immersing themselves in the coulee. When Oakley shared, "I know the ways of the coulee", she projected an image of the pine tree. Oakley did not simply list a set of facts about the coulee, instead she demonstrated how she lives with the coulee in a way that reflects the interdependency of the relationship. Curriculum designed around this notion of deeply knowing the ways of the places that surround us, stands to let us continue to discover ways for "how we might understand ourselves, not as an exception to this interweaving indebtedness and interrelatedness to the earth, but as an instance to it" (Jardine, 1990, p. 117).

Embracing the Lived Experience

It is the lived experience of curriculum – *currere*, the running of the course – wherein the curriculum is experienced, enacted and reconstructed.

(Pinar, 2011, p. 1)

If the purpose of curriculum is in fact about coming to know something deeply and understanding the intricate details and connections of a place, how do we then provide opportunities for students to understand the ways of a place? In his book, *What is Curriculum Theory*, William Pinar (2004), argued, "Place has been a concept largely absent in traditional curriculum scholarship, predictably so", yet, "such a curriculum not only represents a place, it also becomes a place" (p. 94). Through my work, I have come to realize that the coulee wasn't just a platform for which to engage with curriculum, instead it *was* the curriculum. In his work, Pinar (2011) described the concept of *currere* – "the curriculum as lived experiences" (p. 1). "*Currere*", he explained "emphasizes the everyday experience of the individual and his or her capacity to learn from that experience through thought and dialogue to enable understanding" (p. 2). The experiences of students in the coulee and their resulting understanding provide strong reasoning for a curriculum of lived experiences.

Reflecting back on Gadamer's (1989) description of *Erfahrung*, a curriculum of lived experiences, provides opportunity for learning to be meaningfully awakened. Gadamer explained, "What we call experience (*Erfahrung*) and acquire through experience is a living historical process; and its paradigm is not the discovery of facts but the peculiar fusion of memory and expectation into a whole" (p. 217). Knowing the ways of a place involves this process, moving past the accumulation of facts and instead building on experiences over time, such that learning becomes whole.

These lived experiences enable integration of curriculum that expands beyond our traditional fragmentation of concepts. Rather, knowing the coulee and the recognition of

its importance, is an understanding that is built over time through a holistic approach to place. Students engaging in lived experiences through place-based learning, are provided with the opportunities to develop a strong sense of place, which integrates ecological, sociological, historical and perceptual elements. These elements are not disconnected from each other, they require integration of knowledge, skills and dispositions to fully develop.

In their work, Jardine, Lagrange and Everest (1998) explain how important this integration is:

> The phenomenon of integration or wholeness itself, as evolving an attention to place and memory and relations and community, starts to come forward. What starts to come forward is not a bluster of activities for the classroom but a way of taking up the world that breaks the spell of consumptivism, exhaustion, and panic of activities in which so much of our lives is inscribed. (pp. 126-127)

All too often a plethora of activities are thrown at students in an effort to cover the curriculum. These tasks do not stand to create deep understanding of oneself and the world. Replacing these activities with place-based experiences provides an opportunity for us to consider curriculum through a different lens, as described by Pinar (2004).

> The educational point of curriculum is to draw students out of themselves and into the unknown (to them) terrains of the "cultural field", enabling them to engage the world with passion and competence while never breaking the bridge of psychic attachment that makes the process of education subjectively meaningful. (p. 248)

The participants in this study demonstrated that through their own place-based experiences, they were able to begin to engage in such a way. Their experiences in the coulee were personal to them, and yet they had each developed a deep understanding of the interrelatedness between themselves, the group and the place. Student artifacts related to their coulee experiences demonstrate this integration rather than fragmentation of curriculum (See Appendix H for Student Artifacts). Development of sense of place,

through these meaningful lived experiences stand to change our interpretation of curriculum. If educators use place-based learning as a platform for curriculum as lived experiences, deep and meaningful connections to our world will continue to be fostered over time.

Future Considerations

When we enter into a hermeneutic inquiry, we do so with the intention of coming to an understanding of a topic through interpretation. The notion of uncovering the truth, an important element of hermeneutics, is situated within the present time and understanding of a topic. Throughout my conversations and observations with the participants, and then in my following analysis, I considered how I was interpreting sense of place in relation to the particular experiences I witnessed. Reflecting on my own prejudices, I have taken time to ruminate over my evolving understanding, in order to situate myself within my current position and to uncover the best interpretation of the topic. My journey of place-based learning has been on-going for many years, but has ultimately culminated over the past five years. In that time, my perspective has shifted as I have gained new knowledge. It is important for me to reflect on where I am now in relation to this work.

When I began, I was only aware of the term place-based learning in relation to the pedagogical approach of students engaging with the local environment as a basis for learning. Throughout my reading and inquiry into sense of place, however, I have come to know of another analogous term: land-based learning. At first, the tension between these two terms was puzzling to me. Through further exploration of the foundation behind land-based learning, an understanding of the deep focus on developing a

relationship with the land, has become apparent. This focus includes recognition of the land as more than just something that belongs to us, but is, instead, a complex and intricate component of a much larger connected web. Through my own journey of reconciliation, I have come to understand that, for some, the discomfort between the use of these two terms relates to our understanding of the theories and beliefs around decolonization of the curriculum. Reflecting on van Eijck and Roth' (2010) work around a "chronotropic" sense of place, I reconsidered how the term place-based might for some seem to focus on a scientific, colonized notion of place that "is detached from the chronotope in the narrative of the community that takes the place as a dwelling, which is inseparable from emotions and values" (p.887). Although, I now more fully recognize how these terms have come to exist from different perspectives and worldviews, my interpretation that these two pedagogies, when enacted upon with intention, are actually in support of the same goal. In both cases, the outcome is for students to live well both in and with the world through developing a strong understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things. As I continue my learning journey centered around sense of place, I find myself leaning toward further inquiry into land-based learning. Exploration into land from an Indigenous perspective and its significance in learning is an aspect of this work I am eager to pursue.

Another element of the work that I have begun to contemplate, is the concept of place-detachment. Although I didn't find specific links or understanding related to place-detachment within my own study, I am aware that this element could be an important aspect of the work that I might not be considering. My conversations with Lily brought to light the fact that I had not intentionally focused on this element of sense of place.

Throughout our discussions, Lily shared that experiences such as those in the coulee, were unique to this new school she was now attending. In fact, she specifically commented on more than one occasion that she had not been provided with these experiences at her previous school. Although Lily shared many indicators of her own developing sense of place in our conversations, her revelation caused me to contemplate how place-detachment may play a role in this conversation. The participants I interviewed all shared a sense of place in relation to the coulee, but I wondered about other students in this class, as well as students from other classes. If I had considered place-detachment more intentionally, I was curious about what I might have uncovered. Perhaps even more importantly, I considered how educators might proceed if a student did, in fact, demonstrate place detachment. This deliberation gives me reason to believe that this work is not complete and that, as researchers, we should be compelled to continue pursuit of these kinds of questions in our work with sense of place.

Final Reflections

In my research proposal for this study, I conclude by sharing the following anecdote:

> The potential of this work to impact my own way of being both individually and in the classroom, drives my passion and persistence to unearth what I can about place-based learning. "Hermeneutics demands that we proceed delicately and yet wholeheartedly, and as a result of what we study, we carry ourselves differently, and we live differently" (Moules, 2002, p. 12). By simply being addressed by this topic, my thinking has already been transformed. Continuing to proceed hermeneutically through this topic along a path of understanding and interpretation, I stand to change the ways that I live, teach and lead both in and with the world.

Entering into the work, I was eager to uncover deep understanding that would impact my perspectives. Little did I know how immersion into this topic would engulf my thinking

related to both teaching and learning as well as my own personal life. What I have come to more fully understand through this work is that, as educators, we have the ability to provide students with occasions to develop a strong sense of place and deep engagement with their learning. By taking up curriculum as lived experiences of place, we stand to strengthen a deep and lasting connection with place that fosters care and empathy for the world in which we live. It is up to each of us to make a decision to create these conditions for students. It is clear that if we do, we can truly make a difference in how students engage with their learning and the world in which they inhabit. Because of my interactions, conversations and observations with the participants, I no longer simply hope to change the ways that I live, teach and lead. Instead, I can confidently articulate that my own teaching, leading and learning has been impacted by this work. The knowledge I have gained has become a regular part of my conversations with students, colleagues and friends. Ultimately, the most profound discovery exposed through this journey of understanding and interpretation, was that the truths that have been uncovered are cause to unearth more. As Jardine (2006) so eloquently stated, "Hermeneutically understood, the more experienced I become, the more susceptible I become to the difference that the next case might bring, the more susceptible I become to being addressed" (p. 18). Once you know, there is no turning back. Instead, I continue to be compelled to follow the path of understanding that has been revealed.

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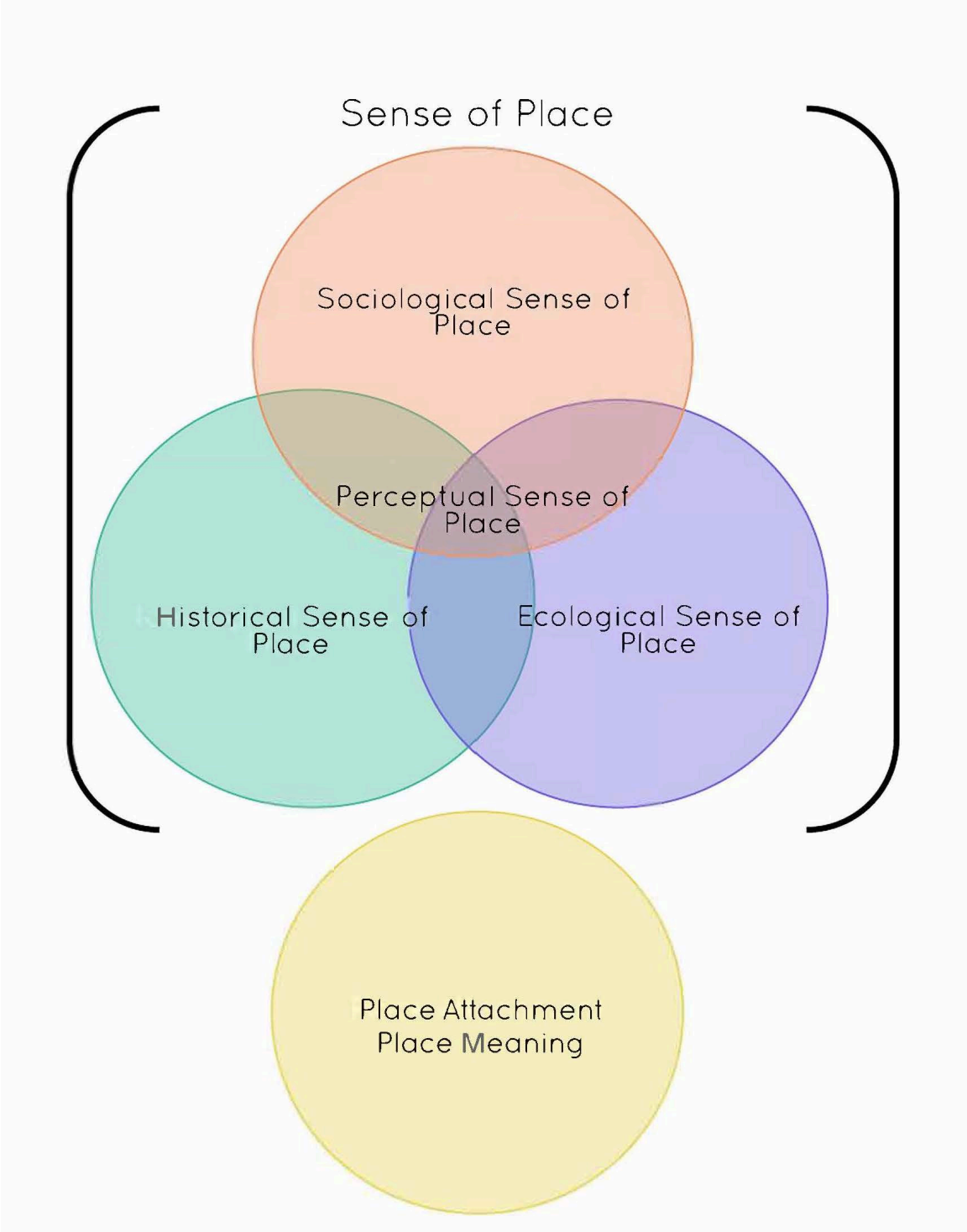
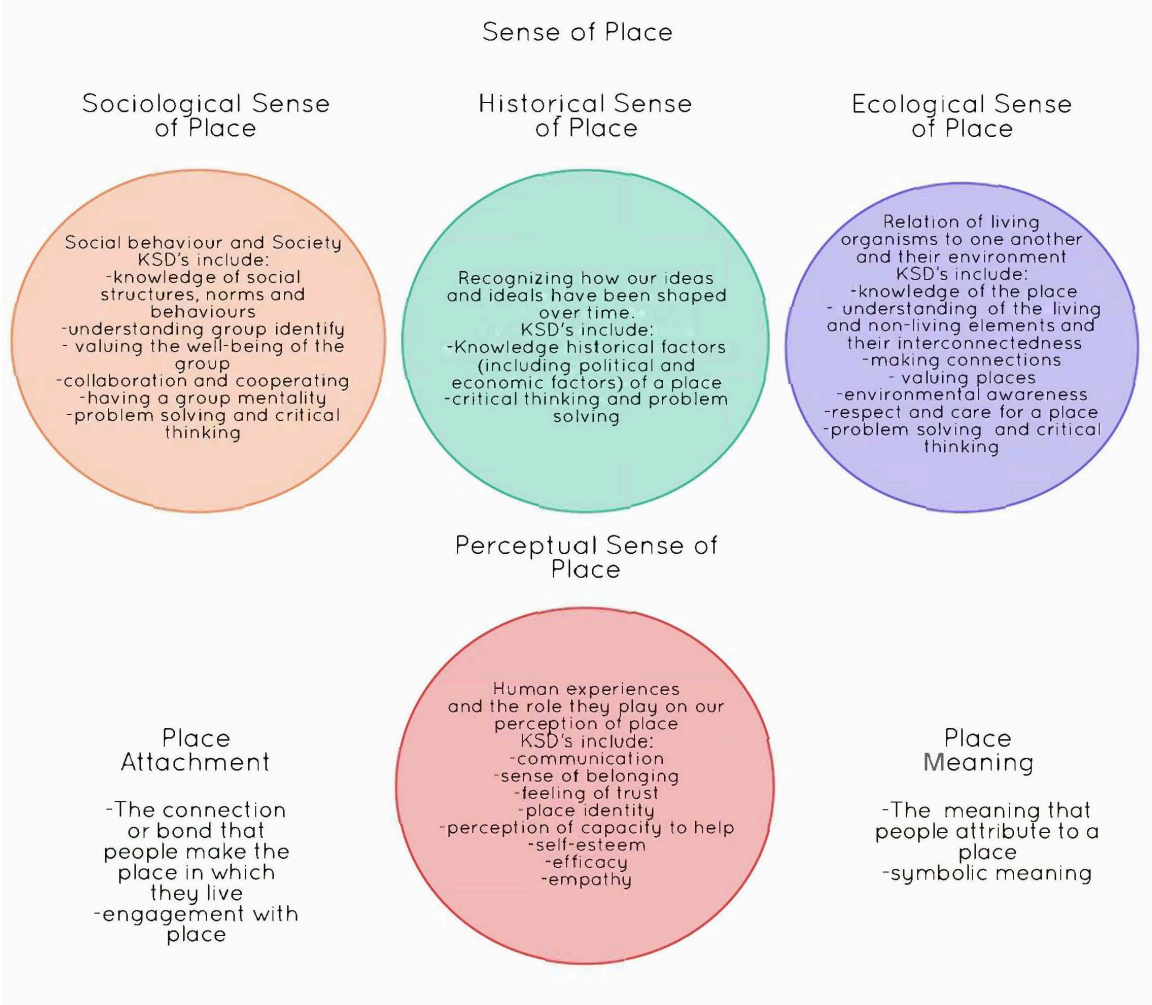
APPENDIX A: SENSE OF PLACE CONSTRUCT



APPENDIX B: SENSE OF PLACE DEFINITIONS



APPENDIX C: SENSE OF PLACE KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND DISPOSITIONS

Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions: Sense of Place
The Knowledge and Understanding of...
• the physical space and place • living and nonliving elements of places and their interactions • social structures of a group • cultural identity • environmental awareness and stewardship • how our norms, structures and behaviours are shaped by political, economic and historical factors
The Skills of...
• problem solving (asking questions, making observations, identifying solutions) • critical thinking (recognizing assumptions, questioning and challenging perspectives) • collaboration and cooperation • communication • making connections
Dispositions...
• place identity • self-esteem • sense of belonging • feeling of trust • connection or bond to the place in which they live • efficacy • respect and care for a place • empathy • valuing the wellbeing of the group

APPENDIX D: STUDENT PARTICIPANT LIST

Participant Number	Pseudonym	Grade	Selection Notes
1	Charlie	4	Worked with teachers since grade one
2	Violet	4	Worked with teachers since grade one
3	Katie	4	
4	Jake	4	
5	Lily	3	New to the school this year/grade three student
6	Bob	4	
7	Oakley	4	
8	Layla	4	
9	Benjamin	4	Teachers shared student offers a unique perspective in the class
10	Billy	3	Grade three student
11	James	4	

*Student names are pseudonyms

*Student list includes four boys and seven girls

APPENDIX E: TEACHER DISCUSSION PROMPTS

What "place" is being explored?

What is the activity or tasks that students are undertaking as place-based experiences?

How much experience do the students have with this place?

What are the anticipated learning outcomes for students?

What are students being asked to do/complete/create?

How often have the students explored this place?

Are the students engaging with a problem or task in this place?

How is place-based learning enacted in your classroom?

APPENDIX F: STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Tell me about the coulee? Where is the coulee? What is the coulee?

Tell me about your experiences at the coulee?

After being at the coulee, how do you feel?

After being at coulee, what did you wonder?

How do you feel about the coulee?

How would you feel if you saw someone not taking care of the coulee?

Do you like being at the coulee? Why/why not?

Is the coulee important? Why/why not?

What do you wonder about _____?

What have you learned through your experiences at the coulee?

What is something new that you have found out?

What do you now know about the coulee?

What words can you use to describe the coulee?

What do you think of when you see these photos of the coulee?

What are your roles and responsibilities at the coulee?

What would you do if someone was treating the coulee well?

What do you enjoy about learning about the coulee?

Would you like to learn more about the coulee? Why or why not?

What problems do you feel happen at the coulee? How might you solve them?

Why is the coulee important to you?

Do you feel differently about the coulee now that you have visited/learned about it?

How does visiting the coulee make you feel about learning?

APPENDIX G: SCHOOL PHOTOGRAPHS

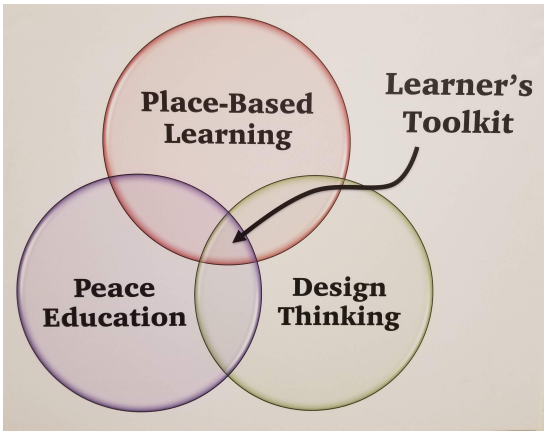


Image 1. School Model

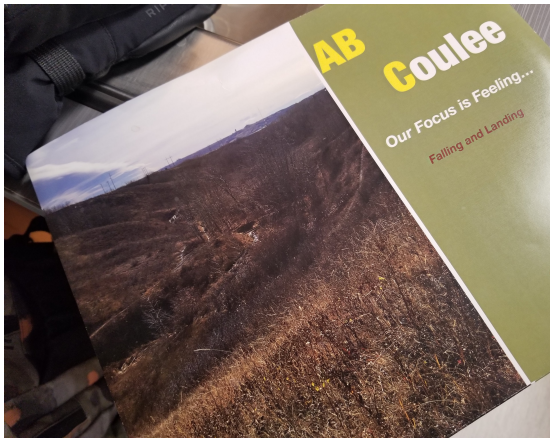


Image 2. School created Coulee Book

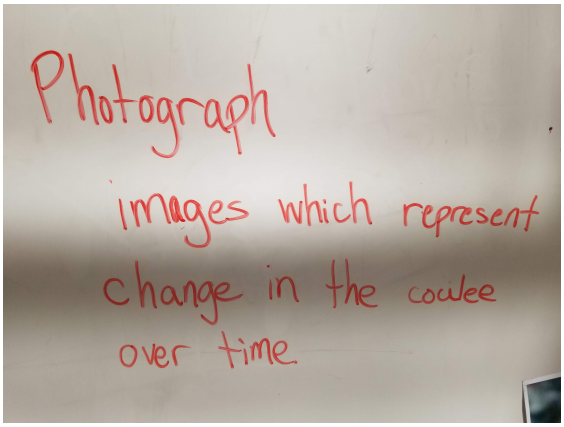


Image 3. Classroom Coulee Provocation

Image 4. Natural Artifact Bulletin Board

Image 5. Natural Artifact Bulletin Board

Image 6. School Bulletin Board

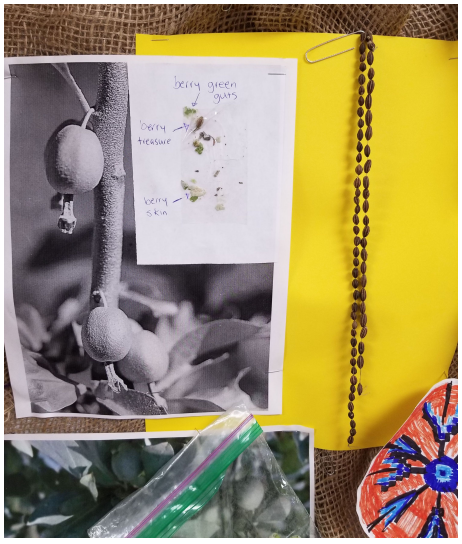


Image 7. Coulee Learning Task

APPENDIX H: STUDENT ARTIFACT PHOTOGRAPHS

Image 8. Nature Offering

Image 9. Nature Offering

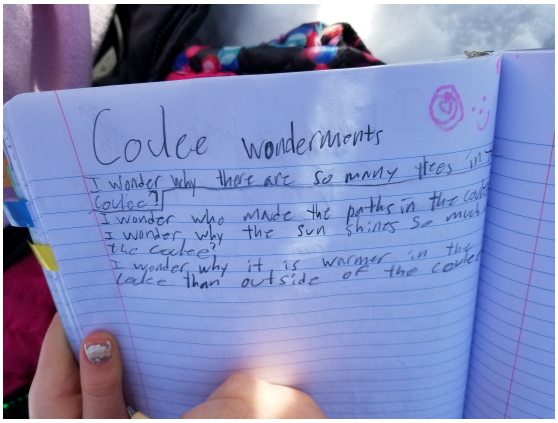


Image 10. Coulee Wonderments

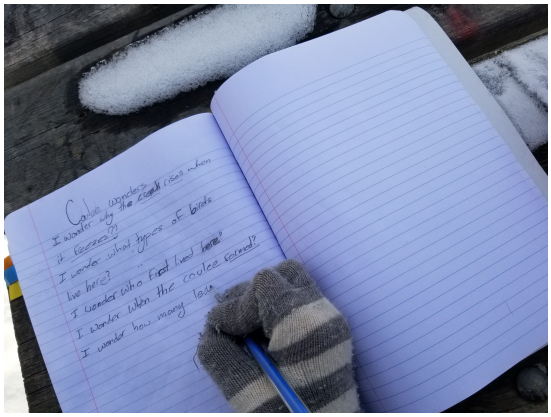


Image 11. Coulee Wonderments

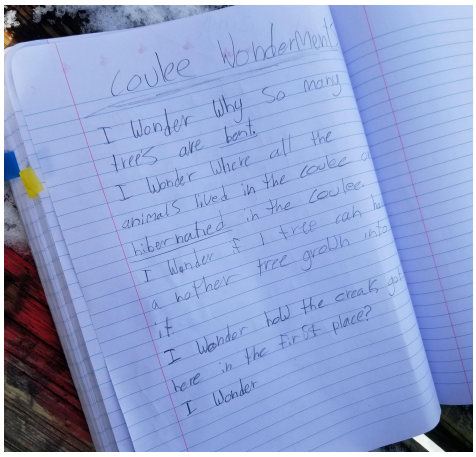


Image 12. Coulee Wonderments

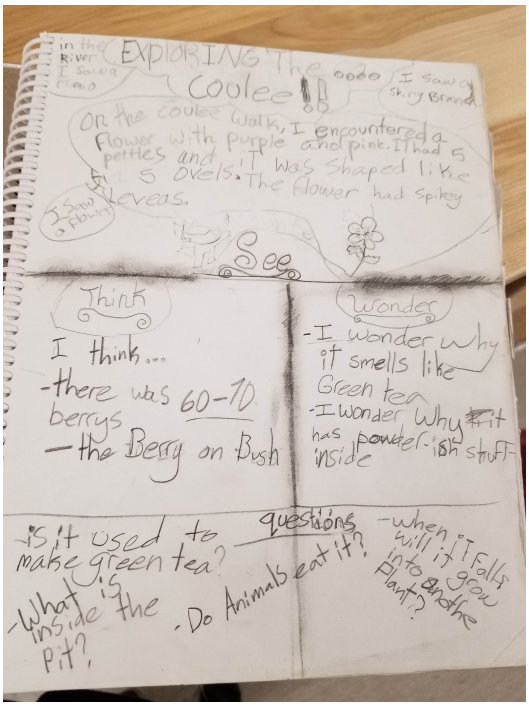


Image 13. Coulee Observations

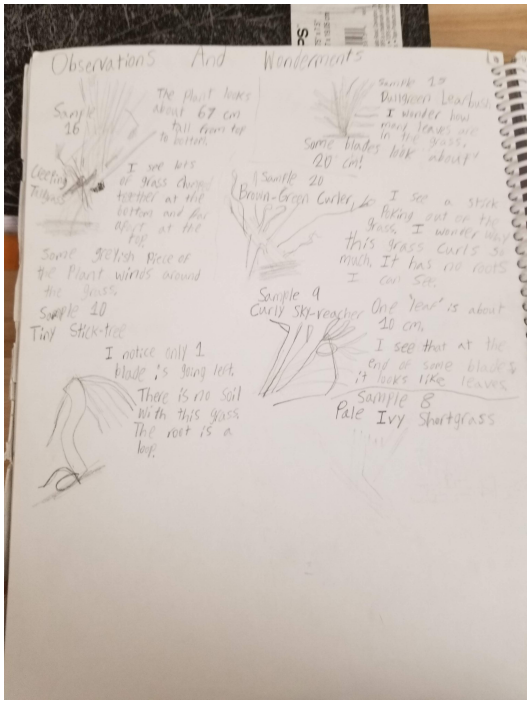


Image 14. Coulee Observations

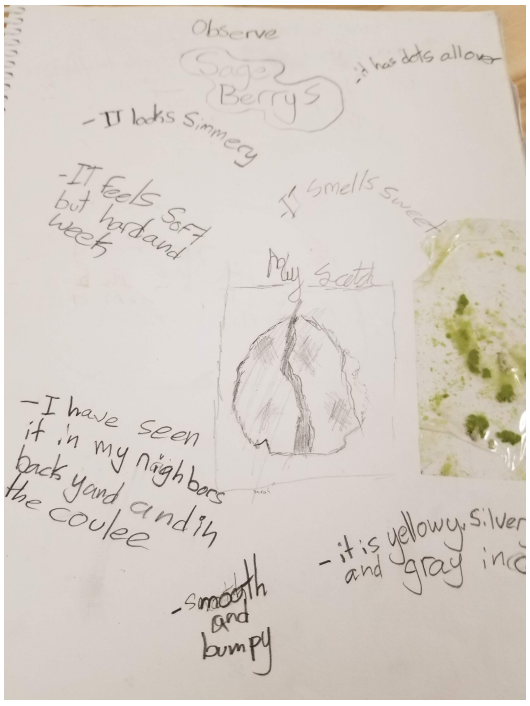


Image 15. Coulee Observations

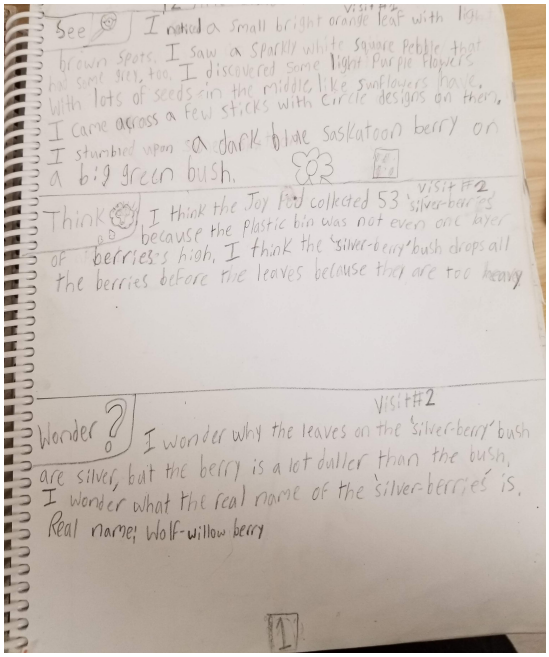


Image 16. Coulee Wonderments

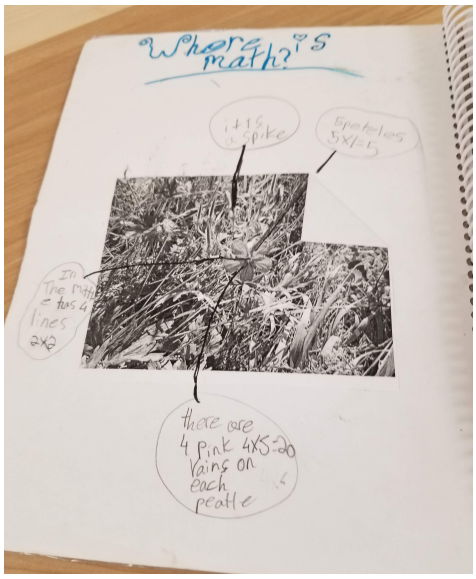


Image 17. Coulee/Math Connections

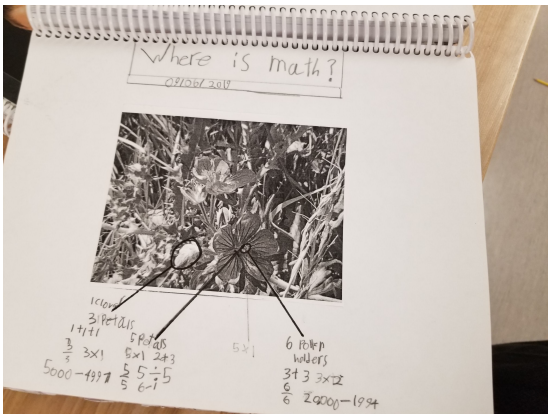


Image 18. Coulee/Math Connections

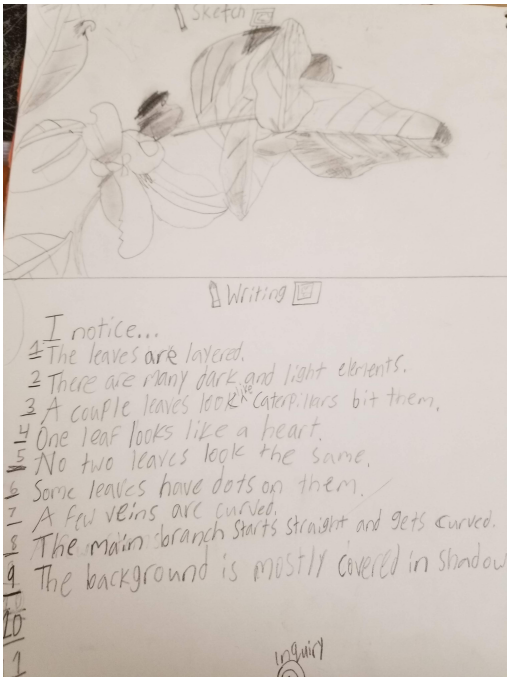


Image 19. Coulee/Writing Connections

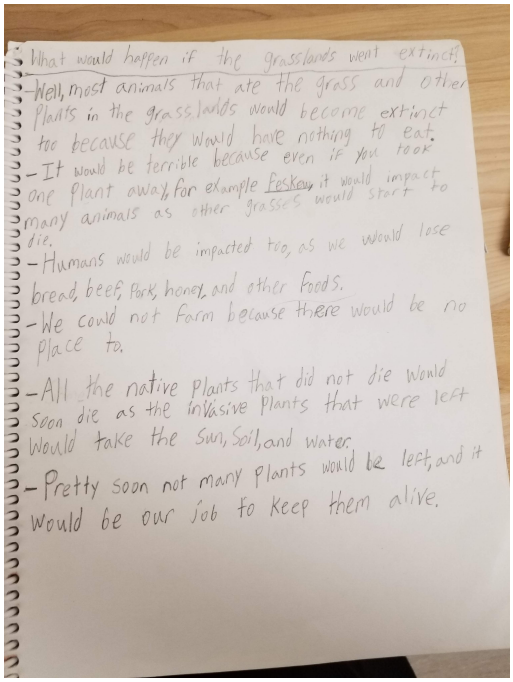


Image 20. Coulee/Inquiry Connections

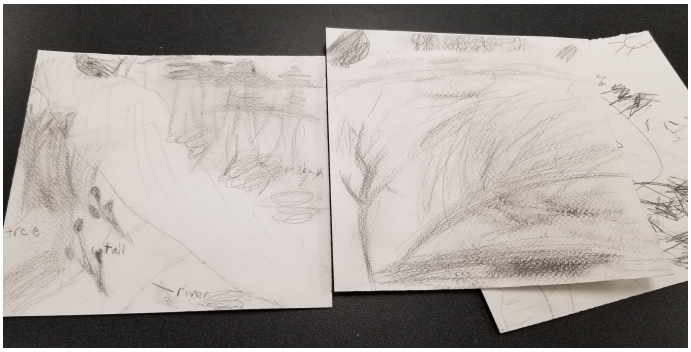


Image 20. Coulee/Art Connection

APPENDIX I: COULEE PHOTOGRAPHS

Image 22. Coulee Trees

Image 23. Coulee

Image 24. Nest

Image 25. Coulee Tree

Image 23. Coulee Stream

Image 23. Coulee Stream