

IMPROVING FACILITATION OF THE SECRET SPOT EXPERIENCE
TO MAXIMIZE STUDENT CONNECTION WITH AND KNOWLEDGE OF PLACE
IN WILDERNESS AND NATURAL HISTORY EDUCATION

by

Laura Marie Strong Holmquist

Co-Founder/Co-Director
Ravenwood Natural Science Center

www.RavenwoodNSC.org

P.O. Box 2084 BigFork, MT 59911

Laura@RavenwoodNSC.org (406) 837-7279

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ABSTRACT

This action research project examined the instructional practices involved in facilitating secret spot experiences for 5th and 6th graders. Students at Ravenwood Natural Science Center participated in solo, quiet, reflective times each day in a natural setting designed to increase their affective attachment to, and cognitive understanding of, natural places. Data collected included in-depth interviews, journals, and observations of students along with reflective analysis instructor journals. Evidence documented student described characteristics of secret spot experience which resulted in increased understanding of change in facilitation techniques such as an “awakening” of the senses exercise prior to and a reflection exercise following each secret spot experience.

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“If I had influence over the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life...”

~Rachel Carson, The Sense of Wonder (1965)

INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time, during the Great Depression of the 1930's in the United States, a boy was orphaned at the age of five in the Appalachian mountains of Tennessee. His Cherokee grandmother and half-Cherokee grandfather adopted him and raised him to respect nature in the Cherokee way. They called him “Little Tree.” One day, while exploring in the forest, Little Tree discovered his secret place. “When I saw it, I knew it was my secret place, and so I went there a whole lot,” says Little Tree in Forrest Carter’s The Education of Little Tree (1976, p. 58). He found out that both of his grandparents, too, had secret places, and “Granma” asserted that it was necessary to have a secret place where you can build up your spirit mind, a place where you can watch how the world moves from spirit to physical and back through seasons of life. Although fictional, this story emphasizes a special relationship to place that needs to be fostered in children starting at a very young age.

For generations tribal peoples around the world have had an intimate, intertwined relationship with their natural environments. The land physically, emotionally, and spiritually supported them, and was reflected in their community structure. In his powerful book, The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight (2004), Thom Hartmann notes that prior to the emergence of what he calls the “Younger (Dominant) Cultures” about seven thousand years ago, “the anthropological record shows that not one culture believed itself to be separate from and superior to nature” (p. 177). In today’s city/state societies, young people rarely have the opportunity to even get to know their place, much less realize their dependence on it. Even our rites of passage in the wilderness for young adults have, for the most part, disappeared.

Adults and kids are busy with work, distracted by television and video games, and in general living further from the earth in urban or suburban landscapes than any humans in our collective history. A fourth-grader quoted in Last Child in the Woods by Richard Louv (2005) sums this change up with the surprising (or not so surprising) statement, “I like to play indoors better because that’s where all the electrical outlets are.” This transformation in our relationship with nature has profound implications for the mental, physical, and spiritual health of future generations (Louv, 2005).

At Ravenwood Natural Science Center, secret spot time is a routine activity in every program for both children and adults. But *how* do students learn in their secret spot? What are the essential characteristics of a secret spot that lead to a deeper learning experience? I set out to discover the answers through my research question.

For many years I was lucky enough to live and work in the backcountry of Yellowstone National Park. Having grown up in Billings, Montana, I was a “city girl” but still had daily access to the sandstone rims for scrambling and building forts, encountering yucca and pines, and moving around with the awareness of sharing my place with rattlesnakes. My favorite book throughout school was My Side of the Mountain (1959) by Jean George. At age seventeen I leapt at an opportunity to spend what would turn out to be the first of many summers working with the Youth Conservation Corps in Yellowstone National Park. The program’s directors and crew leaders encouraged us to keep a journal, and I noticed the people I respected most had a practice of doing so away from the group. And so I began... each day after dinner I would find a quiet spot somewhere away from camp to write. More often than not, however, I ended up not doing much writing at all. I would quickly become distracted by the daily routine of some animal or another. Out of the corner of my eye I’d catch a glimpse of a bird flying in to a bush followed by a loud raucous commotion and the eviction of another bird. Sometimes an elk or

deer would walk by or cross a stream. And sometimes I would get distracted by no animal at all but become completely immersed watching the sun set behind the mountains as the last light shimmered on a cold lake or witnessing the story of a tree blowing in the wind.

I didn't have a name for the practice, it was just what many of us did if for no other reason than to get away from the group and be alone for a while. In the following years with YCC, I began leading crews and later became the program director. In my new roles I saw the sitting and journaling time from a different vantage. Sitting alone, quietly, stirred a sense of wonder in people as they observed interactions in wildlife, looked closely at a plant growing nearby, had an insect crawl over their toes, or listened to the buzz of life in the forest. It seemed the reflective sittings brought their senses to life and opened pathways for complex new learning, often without them even knowing it.

Later, as I continued my own education as a naturalist, I realized almost all educational theories modeling natural cycles include this time for inspiration, observation, reflection, and awareness. Joseph Cornell's Flow learning method influenced my early teaching (Cornell, 1989), and more recently, I've harmonized our curriculum with Jon Young & Wilderness Awareness School's adaptation of the learning cycle through the "Medicine Wheel" blueprint (Young, 1983), which by design encourages this type of solo experience in nature on a routine basis. Infusing the Cornell and Young approaches with my own insights, I developed journal exercises to enhance the secret spot experience for Ravenwood students. I had hoped journal activities would help younger students focus on a specific aspect of the place they had chosen and sit for a longer period of time allowing the animals in that place to return to their normal daily routines. What I didn't know was how I was doing. Were my instructions before their secret spot time clear and effective? Were the kids hearing what I thought I had said? Were the

journals serving their intended purpose? How could I frame the experience so that students were observing with all of their senses?

FOCUS QUESTION

How can I improve my facilitation of the secret spot experience to maximize student connection with and knowledge of place?

PROJECT CONTEXT



Ravenwood Natural Science Center is a nonprofit education organization based in BigFork, Montana, whose mission is to *encourage understanding and conservation of our complex natural systems through an experiential wilderness and natural history education*. As founders, directors, and instructors of Ravenwood, my husband, Brett, and I created a place where people could deepen their connection to the land through long-term mentoring and residential learning experiences. How did Ravenwood come to be?

I hold a bachelor's degree in Wildlife Biology from the University of Montana in Missoula and have research experience in the field with bears, wolves, bald eagles, goshawks, loons, woodpeckers, voles, and snags (standing dead trees). Throughout my experience in the field, I became increasingly fascinated with the interrelatedness of all things. My passion for this concept incorporates the study of ecology and the human societies interacting with their environment. Brett's background is in education. He taught in a public elementary school for several years and worked for a myriad of environmental and outdoor programs before we launched Ravenwood. Combined, we have 30 years experience in outdoor education with children of all ages in both day and residential programs. During college, I led day programs with Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks' Project Wild and Project Wet, Project Learning Tree, and later Alaska's Tundra & Wildlife program. As mentioned, I also led crews and directed Yellowstone's Youth Conservation Corps, an eight-week summer program for teens. In my seven years with YCC, I experienced the full cycle from student to teacher and was able to reflect on what a powerful and important thing it is to develop an intimate knowledge and love of a place guided by experienced mentors. I also worked as an interpretive ranger for Expedition: Yellowstone! a weeklong residential program serving upper elementary school groups.

Comparing my residential and day program experiences, I felt strongly that, assuming equal instructional content and quality, students in residential or long-term mentoring programs experience the biggest impact. Living and learning (waking up, cooking, and working) in residence produces a certain attachment to place, as well as to the people sharing the experience, and the concepts and skills developed there. Better yet, an opportunity to return to the same place time and again with the guidance of a trusted mentor epitomizes the power of natural learning models. In this context, a person can foster nature awareness (an applied knowledge of place and self perception) that will flow into relationships with family, friends, and community.

The pieces continued to fall together after my experience in Yellowstone and travels teaching and learning in Latin America and Europe with a move to a small village in bush Alaska. Brett taught and I worked nearly full-time as a substitute. My time immersed in Yup'ik Inuit culture brought to life the long history of indigenous education I had studied in Native American classes and felt in adventures in the southwest United States. We knew it was time to break out of the four walls and bring students back to the greatest teacher of all, our incredible earth. Thus, during the dark quiet of an Alaskan winter in the year 2000, Brett and I hatched the idea of Ravenwood Natural Science Center (honoring the nimble intelligence of ravens celebrated in native folklore). With powerful lessons in tow, we headed back to our native Montana to begin building a land-based experiential education center.

We found our home between the Swan and Mission Mountains in northwest Montana, a place that holds the remaining intact and connected wilderness of the Rocky Mountains. After three years of work at the BigFork public school and summer wildlife research in northwest Montana and Oregon, Ravenwood Natural Science Center began programs in the fall of 2003. Capitalizing on our connection, we first launched a natural science field study course called, Camp Corvid. Named after the famous family of birds, “Corvidae”, which includes crows, ravens, magpies, and jays, Camp Corvid is a weeklong program for 4th, 5th, and 6th grade school groups offered each fall and spring. Corvids are renowned for their ingenuity and audacity; traits fitting for the age group represented. During this residential experience, students, teachers, and parents/chaperones typically from a self-contained classroom focus on the natural sciences: geology and soils, watersheds, botany and wildlife biology, and humans on the land. Daily awareness activities during Camp Corvid allow students to connect lessons with their lives through the use of their senses.

Coupled with the awareness activities, the routine of visiting a secret spot solidifies the “sense of place” experience for Camp Corvid students. We hope that by developing this practice at Ravenwood, children will be inspired to discover a secret place near their home. For, as Robert Michael Pyle concludes in The Thunder Tree (1993), “These are the places of initiation, where the borders between ourselves and other creatures break down, where the earth gets under our nails and a sense of place gets under our skin.”

To facilitate the secret spot, each small group, or “clan”, is directed toward a certain area in order to effectively spread students out across the landscape. From there, both the children and the adult chaperones are instructed to locate a place that draws them intuitively, a spot where they’ll be uncovering lots of “secrets”. They use all of their senses to gather information about the area and become intimately in tune with that place. Each time they return to their spot, they are instructed to sit quietly at first: just listening, watching, feeling, smelling--being still to wait for their spot to return to baseline. The guided journal activity during Camp Corvid asks them to observe any changes from previous visits. Journal activities incorporate observation and inquiry with art and reflection and seem to help students of this age maintain focus during secret spot time.

Two students (one boy and one girl) from each Camp Corvid group are selected to return to Ravenwood for an extension program called Common Ground. Once each year during an extended weekend in October, these select students and their adult chaperone (usually a parent) gather from around the state representing several different communities and cultures. During Common Ground, we focus on the influence of landscapes in the development of cultures, recognizing the commonalities among the clan-based ancestry of all humans while learning some of the skills of prehistoric hunter-gatherers. Since Common Ground is at least the second Ravenwood experience for these students, secret spots are taken

to the next level. This time, no required journal entries are used in their secret spot. Many of these students say they have been exploring in the natural world since their experience with Camp Corvid. Some have even sought out a secret spot of their own at home and designated or created a nature journal during that time. Having practiced their skills of patience, Common Ground students seem to be able to gather information from their senses more continuously without the interruption of the journal assignment.

“Learn to hear voices in the wind, music in mountain streams and bird songs. Lie under the stars at night and fall asleep to the call of the owl and the whip-poor-will. Dream dreams so real, they will not be dreams, they will be visions.”

*~Ingwe (M. Norman Powell), Grandfather of Wilderness Awareness School,
The Spirit of the Leopard (1995)*

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Children need wildness. This is the conclusion of The Geography of Childhood (1994) by Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble, who preface their amazing essays by stating that, “wildness—even in its simplest forms—can nourish a lasting attachment to the earth, and in turn, nurture self-esteem” (p. xv). When I reread this book for this project, I was stunned by how powerfully it affected me. I not only run an educational organization, but am also raising a child of my own: Talon Strong Holmquist, age 2 ½ years. As parents, Trimble asserts, “our job is to pay attention, to create possibilities—to be careful matchmakers between our children and the Earth” (p. 172). As educators, our job is to do the same with every child we encounter.

Humans are adapted to live and learn on the land. Yet, western society has completely forgotten this fact. Most parents in the United States, according to Richard Louv in Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder (2005), say that children aren't playing outside much anymore—not even in the back garden or the neighborhood park. Even in just one generation's time, Louv reports after interviewing hundreds of urban, suburban, and rural parents across the country, children spend less time in nature than their parents did when they were young. Children were “unlikely to be able to tell you about the last time they explored the outdoors, or stretched out in solitude in a field to listen to the wind and watch the clouds move.” Contrast that with this excerpt from Robert Paul Smith's “Where did you go?” “Out.” “What did you do?” “Nothing.” (1957):

“...that was the main thing about kids then: we spent an awful lot of time doing nothing...All of us, for a long time, spent a long time picking wildflowers. Catching tadpoles. Looking for arrowheads. Getting our feet wet. Playing with mud. And sand. And water. You understand, not doing anything.”

Jon Young of Wilderness Awareness School views this new development in humans as a giant sensory nutritional deficit. Human brains evolved in the natural world. Therefore, the mind reflects the forest. The more you feed the brain diverse natural stimulus, the happier it is. When asked why children aren't outside, the parents of Louv's interviews point to diminishing access to natural areas, competition with electronic entertainment, increased homework, longer school hours and other time pressures (2005). But most of all, parents cite fear—of traffic, nature itself and, most of all, strangers. While violent victimization of children has dropped dramatically (38 percent since 1975 according to Duke University's 2005 Child Well Being Index), fear created by media covering a few tragedies is increasing (Louv, 2005). But the risks of this new culture are staggering: dramatic increases in childhood obesity, attention difficulties, depression, and long-lasting repetitive-stress injuries related to overuse of

keyboards and video game controllers. And, above all, society's disconnection with and disrespect for the land has led to the worst environmental degradation and social injustice in the history of the earth (Gore, 1993; Hartmann, 2004, and any publication from the Worldwatch Institute).

What has to happen, now, is an intimate reintegration of the landscape with our lives. Environmental education, wilderness, and natural history programs around the world are attempting to address this by creating safe, guided experiences for group and solitary exploration in nature to, as Louv puts it, "Plant the seeds of an alternative future and to strengthen child development" (2005). Studies are showing what we have known for millennia: there is an enormous positive impact of direct nature experiences on human health and cognitive development (Kahn, 2001; Louv, 2005). According to Brian Sutton-Smith (1990), up until about 7 years of age communication in children is more by play than by speech. Given that, he asserts, "their childhood right to play is the same as our adult First Amendment right to free speech." The habitat this play evolved with is nature.

The upshots of increased contact with nature are convincing. Current research is showing that children as young as five showed a significant reduction in the symptoms of attention-deficit disorder when they engaged with nature (Louv, 2005). Environmental psychologists find that nature in or around a residence helps to reduce stress and protect the psychological well being of children (Kahn, 2001). Academic performance in the form of improved grades in all content areas and standardized test scores as well as increased skill in problem-solving, critical thinking and decision-making, creativity, cooperative play all result from contact with nature (Louv, 2005).

The mental, physical, and spiritual health of our children is just one benefit for healing the broken bond between young people and the land. Healing the land itself so that all humans and other organisms can

be supported is the larger context. The goal of most nature education programs is to create a more environmentally responsible citizenry based on an understanding of ecological processes. Most programs focus on children, who will be making the critical decisions of the future. It has long been known and discussed by renowned conservation thinkers like Aldo Leopold (1949), Olaus & Mardy Murie (1962), and Rachel Carson (1965) that for humans to understand and care for natural places, they must experience them. It has always been understood by mentors from tribal societies and documented more recently, that in order to be effective, education must be experiential with actively involved students (Jernstedt, 1980 in Herbert, 1981), the teacher serving more as a guide, and the process of learning equally important to achieving the goal (Herbert, 1981). Unfortunately, education, and life in general, has moved away from a connection to the land. Gruenewald (2003) says that for teachers, “the greatest challenge we face is that both dominant cultural assumptions about what it means to be an educated person and dominant, institutionalized educational practices remain disconnected from the land and its lessons” (p.33).

The need, now, is for students to have regular, extended experiences in the natural world in order to nurture a relationship with the land and “otherness” (Gruenewald, 2003). According to Herbert (1981), learning retention is dependent on the amount of reality involved, the directness of the experience, and the number of senses involved. He states that learners need a sense of uncertainty or risk, and responsibility. Responsibility for one’s own learning comes from interest (Jones, 1995). Citing John Dewey (1938), Herbert makes the point that growth is dependent on overcoming difficulty through intelligence. If students see a link to their own world, and further, have to use that knowledge in their lives, they will, of course, understand it better. If students are interested in a subject, they will have an intrinsic motivation to learn more (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). Interest, a psychological state of focused attention, increased cognitive function, persistence, and affective involvement can come from

situations that can then lead to a long-term individual predisposition (Hidi, 1999 & 2000). Therefore, setting up experiences in an environment of trust and support where students must apply their knowledge, for example, being responsible to a team for success, teaching others a new skill, presenting a subject to the group, or surviving outdoors, cements the learning as a whole body experience. Additionally, if students are involved in decisions leading up to the experience they will have a personal commitment or investment and be responsible for implementing those decisions (Herbert, 1981). Moreover, Herbert (1981) suggests it is important to guide students through a process of reflection. Again, quoting, Dewey (1938), “Learning is thinking about experience” (Herbert, p.10). Students are stimulated to analyze where they are in the process of the experience and what they have learned from the encounters. Using new information in another demanding situation, what Herbert (1981) terms “bridge-building” is a way of reflection that allows students to see how what they have learned can be applied to their lives. Herbert (1981) supports the idea that the whole process of preparing for the experience, from fundraising to logistics should be a part of the adventure where students are impelled to act by being in a situation where they are responsible to others, uncertain of the outcome, and have a stake in the experience.

The outcomes of experiential learning help in the maturing of a human. Landscapes are pedagogical. Gruenewald (2003), drawing from seminal ecological philosophers Paul Shepard (1982) and David Abram (1997), draws attention to the need for the meaning of human social development and the meaning of literacy to be recovered from our shared human heritage in which both language and development were “for millennia deeply intertwined with the land” (p.34) and nonhuman others. Shepard (1982) theorizes that the only reason humans would persist in destroying their own habitat is that we have removed ourselves through “progress” and “civilization” from the natural world with which we evolved, and in doing so, have stunted our development into mature adults. He asserts that

youth development, in the evolution of our species, took place through prolonged periods of engagement within a familiar landscape populated by a rich diversity of plant and animal species. During this time in childhood, the psyche would imprint on the landscape and see that “outer and inner natural history are intertwined” (Shepard, p.98). Only in maturity, dependent on rich experiences with the natural world, can we have harmonious relationships with our self and others—human and nonhuman (Gruenewald, 2003). Only when we cultivate our relationship with land do we move beyond ownership and acquisition to the power of discovery and observation transcending the dead-end human dominion over nature (Nabhan & Trimble, 1994).

Residential experiences affect participant relationships on many levels. They can lead to responsible behaviors in thought and action in social situations, as in contributing to a common goal or evaluating a situation from a wider and more thoughtful perspective (Palmberg & Kuru, 2000).

Increasing both frequency (Vaske & Kobrin, 2001; Lindemann-Matthies, 2002) and time (Gruenewald, 2003) in a natural place creates attachment to that place and in turn, increases environmentally responsible behavior (Vaske & Kobrin, 2001). In addition to realizing a dependence (functional attachment) on the land and an identity (emotional attachment) associated with a particular place (Vaske & Kobrin, 2001), Shepard (1982 in Gruenewald, 2003, p.35) suggests, “deep immersion in wilderness can, through proper mentoring, help lead people into a mature adulthood in which the destruction of habitat would be avoided.”

If, then, our goal is to create safe, meaningful places for children to experience nature, what does it look like if we’re successful? For as Gary Paul Nabhan in The Geography of Childhood discovered, “We sooner or later realize how differently each of us moves through any terrain. ...we do not see the land with the same eyes, nor smell it with the same nose. It sings different songs to each of us, and what we hear changes in accordance with our years” (Nabhan & Trimble, 1994). While adults spend their time

scanning the land for scenic panoramas, kids are on their hands and knees engaged with what is immediately before them. Children need intimate places, places they know well and feel comfortable in. When discovered and constructed by kids themselves, these nest-like places are a powerful part of developing self-image (Sobel, 2002). Gaston Bachelard observed “when we discover a nest, it takes us back to our childhood” (Nabhan & Trimble, 1994, p.7). Playfulness is the essence of a wilderness experience for a child. MaryAnn Kirkby, an environmental psychologist, has confirmed that most preschool children play in nest like refuges whenever such microhabitats are available. Indeed, some psychologists believe that such a “predilection for enclosed spaces with good vistas is a genetically programmed human response” (Nabhan & Trimble, 1994, p.8). At a time when playgrounds are becoming increasingly paved and structured or eliminated all together, we need to create places with vegetation and earth for tunneling and climbing. “Better to let kids be a hazard to nature and let nature be a hazard to them,” naturalist Franklin Burroughs is quoted in support of this freedom (Nabhan & Trimble, 1994, p. 9).

Adventuring from family to the land, children develop a sense of worth from the security and relationship with the earth. Edith Cobb in The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood (1977) found, too, that beyond that, the roots of creativity in great thinkers had a strong connection to nature. Children can come to the awareness that “knowing and being are in some way coincident and continuous...and that this kind of knowing is in itself an achievement of psychological balance.” Nature’s diversity reassures that difference is the norm and helps us to learn tolerance. Cobb’s ideal was for all children to be rooted and have a “living ecological relationship” to a place. Robin Moore agrees concluding that children use the landscape “as a medium for understanding the world by continually destructing/reconstructing it” (Childhood’s Domain, 1986). Regard for wilderness, for what philosopher and ecologist Aldo Leopold (1949) calls the “land ethic”, comes later.

Native peoples acquired an appreciation of the power of other lives that sustain us early on in life. Thinking like a naturalist was (and is still, in some cases) a requirement for survival. Modern peoples must find a way to rebuild this respect. Connection with the natural world can start with a bird or beetle, a berry or a cone. Our job is to provide time and space for children to discover that thing. Secret spots embody both.

METHODS

In order to better understand the facilitation skills and student learning experiences of secret spots, I developed several data collection strategies: observation of students during their secret spot time, chronicling how I framed the experience including introduction and closure, and upon completion of the program, interviewing each student and collecting a sample from their journal (if applicable). While we provide curriculum in wilderness skills and natural history and science, the secret spot affords the best opportunity for kids to make their own discoveries. Were they learning about themselves through the full use of their senses?

During the fall of 2005, I observed, interviewed, and collected journal samples from four students in the 5th or 6th grade. My intention was to thoroughly understand the experiences of a few deeply rather than the experiences of many broadly. I completed a pilot study in the fall of 2004 where I collected data from a larger, more diverse group, including pre- and post-surveys, interviews, journal selections, and my journal. What I learned was that all the breadth in the world does not equal depth. So, for this

project, I selected a limited number of students that I could track daily responses from over the course of the entire program. This could only be done one student at a time.

Three 5th grade BigFork Elementary classroom teachers each selected one student attending Ravenwood Natural Science Center's Camp Corvid expedition. Since students were not available to me prior to their arrival at Camp Corvid, I asked the classroom teachers to pick a student that they thought would get a lot out of the Secret Spot experience. There are a range of students and a range of experiences during secret spots. It is my attempt to describe a model experience. I wanted to use students who would be able to be the experts for the procedure and be able to be a confident source of information, then distill it out and teach to all. The fourth student was a BigFork Middle School 6th grader who was asked back to the follow-up program called "Common Ground" having attended Camp Corvid with her 5th grade class the previous year. I specifically chose this individual because I have a strong relationship with her and know her to be honest and comfortable speaking openly about her time with me. In addition, she has had the unique opportunity, as a student in a multi-age class, to attend Camp Corvid twice!

Secret spots are done once a day during both Camp Corvid and Common Ground. After introducing the experience, in which I gave directions, boundaries, and taught at least one awareness technique, I shadowed these four students each time they went out to their secret spots, observed them, and collected field notes using a "T" datasheet recommended by Dr. Bill Hug of Montana State University. In the left field of the datasheet I wrote my observations, and in the right field I wrote my thoughts. In this way, the "T" datasheet helped to visually separate direct unbiased observation with hypotheses and thoughts on student behavior and other environmental conditions. The 6th grade student attending Common Ground had three secret spot days, and the other three students, all in 5th grade and attending Camp Corvid, had three secret spot days. I hoped this observation time would provide me an eyewitness

account of student behavior during the entire secret spot time. I was also able to examine interactions between students and between students and the landscape. In addition, I gained a perspective with which to read their journal responses. Prior to the beginning of the first secret spot, I spoke with students privately and asked him or her if it would be okay to watch them during their secret spot time. I told them why I was doing this and each granted me the opportunity. I decided to risk altering their behavior to respect their privacy and honor the experience I would be sharing with them. While observer effect on “natural” student behavior was not studied, I assume that all students were probably inclined to display more “on task” behavior. I sat just close enough to the students to see their actions while keeping as much distance as possible. I obtained parent permission to enlist these students for the study by phone, prior to the start of each program. I stayed with each student until it was time to “caw” (our way of calling in a scattered group) all of the students in from secret spots. Because of this, I did not observe students returning from their spot to the circle where we meet before and after secret spot time. Field notes were later used to track trends in what I said versus what the children did. By combining information from field notes holistically with my journal and the interviews, I was able to paint a picture of each student’s experience. If I taught a certain awareness skill or reminded them to use one they already knew, or read the directions to the journal activity aloud versus letting them read it to themselves when they got to their spot, did it make a difference in how they acted or what they journaled? An additional use of the field notes surfaced when I was able to look back at them and remember some of the questions I had while observing them. I was then able to bring these up during the interview process at the end of the program.

Throughout the course of the programs, I also kept a researcher journal chronicling how I facilitated secret spot time. I noted how I framed the experience, how I carried out the instructions to the journal activity (if applicable). What did I say and do? When? And why? Often I took notes during my

observation time so that my words and actions were fresh in my mind and added context later in the evening after students were tucked in their teepees. I tried to record notable comments students made to me regarding secret spots when they returned to the circle or any other time of day. Often students referenced secret spots during our final reflection circle immediately prior to their departure from Camp Corvid. In addition, I kept note of comments from classroom teachers and parent chaperones regarding their observations and thoughts. This was the most difficult part of the data collection. Directly after secret spots, we moved to our field day and the whole program needed to be orchestrated on a continuous basis. Finding time (and remembering) to record notes of this nature was very challenging. The effort was well worth it in the end, however, as this data collection tool served as the most revealing in combination with the others. I used my log to compare against all other forms of data. As I researched and learned more myself about effective ways to frame the secret spot experience and incorporated those into my routine, I was able to track the paths I took as a facilitator and see the affect on the children.

Upon completion of programs, I interviewed each student to gain insight into their thoughts, attitudes, confidence, growth, and overall personal experience during their secret spot time. During each interview, the student and I sat somewhere outside just away from the rest of the group during their final camp clean up. I used a semi-structured interview outline combining suggestions from You and Your Action Research Project (McNiff et al., 1996), Action Research (Mills, 2003), Dr. Bill Hug, Montana State University (personal communication), and “Designing Structured Interviews for Educational Research” (ERIC, 1997). I asked what they remembered about my orientation to secret spot time, what they would tell their parents about that time, what they remembered learning, and what they found valuable about their secret spot time. I also inquired about whether they felt their experience helped them connect and/or understand the natural world better. As recommended by Bell, Osborne, and Tasker

in their article, “Finding Out What Children Think” (1985), I explained what I hoped to achieve before asking any questions, usually starting off the session with small talk to create an informal atmosphere. In addition, I sat alongside (rather than opposite) the child to set him or her at ease. I tried to make each interview feel like a casual conversation, so not all questions were asked of each student, but I did try to ask questions in the same order starting with questions that were wide open and broad to more specific, narrowly focused questions. Follow-up questions were asked as needed. I wrote student responses down and if necessary added detail later to keep the interview flowing. This process went well for all but one student, who also happened to be the only boy in the study group. For this child, the interview never reached a relaxed state, and consistent with the advice by Bell et al., I kept the interview short. In later discussions with the classroom teacher on this student, she said, “Yeah, he probably wasn’t the best one for your interview, huh?” It seemed there was a lack of communication between she and her co-teacher, to whom I had given the original instructions on student selection. This boy was shy and takes a long time to reach trust. Therefore, it was hard to get honest feedback from him.

In a perfect world, I would have liked to interview the children after each secret spot. Since, often times I had recorded in my field notes an observation that I would have liked to follow up on, but by the time the interview rolled around at the end of the program, the incident had faded and the question seemed out of context. However, when appropriate, I wove these inquiries, developed during observations, into the interview. Interviewing students after each secret spot was impossible due to instructional duties with the whole group. I studied interview responses for inconsistencies with what I expected to see, where I could be clearer, what worked and what did not.

Finally, for the three 5th grade students in Camp Corvid, I also collected two samples from each student’s journal to assess their new knowledge, understanding, and awareness. As discussed earlier,

journal exercises are not done during Common Ground and therefore not available for the 6th grade student.

Of the three student journal activities for secret spot, the first was an orientation, introduction, and directions exercise during which students mapped their secret spot including the cardinal directions and features they found noteworthy near their center point. While developed before this project, the literature strongly supports the design of this initial activity. Stephen Trimble in *The Geography of Childhood* (1994) says research suggests we have map-making genes promoting our ability to integrate our experiences of geographic space. Children and adults begin their descriptions of place with landmarks. Obviously accuracy increases with active participation, with walking through a given landscape. This is the first activity in “lost-proofing” taught at Ravenwood. We later follow up by mapping our entire day (each day), tying together a sequence of places and events with stories told from a “bird’s eye view.”

The second journal activity focused on plants: beginning to learn some vocabulary and describing one plant down to the veins on a leaf. The final entry was a free-write reflection. I collected the first and last of these journal exercises as samples of student work.

I began the analysis by reading over all of the field notes, highlighting notable observations and looking for themes as recommended by Geoffrey Mills in *Action Research*, Chapter 5, on Data Analysis & Interpretation (2003) and Dr. Bill Hug’s “Qualitative Data Analysis” compilation/adaptation (provided in person and available online). I then looked across observation field notes for all four students in the study group and looked for similarities or stark differences in behavior and began to list themes present in the data. During the next read through, I organized all student actions reflected in the field notes into

those themes. After redefining the themes based on the complete inclusion of information present, I established categories accordingly. Subsequently, I took each student individually and looked at their actions noted in my field observations compared with my facilitation as recorded in my researcher journal. I added notes right on the field observation form as clarity presented itself.

Next, I read over the interview transcripts to get a feel for them, underscore comments I thought were remarkable, and compare responses between students. Looking for insight into student attitudes, knowledge, and understanding, I then (like the field notes) created themes and placed statements from all students into those categories. I refined the categories based on additional topics. I then collapsed the categories into more broad groupings for the purposes of interpretation.

Finally, I viewed the journal selections and did an initial read through. I then reread the orientation/mapping piece in each student's journal. To produce support for student understanding of the cardinal directions and orientation in their learning place, I compared what each student mapped to the answers they gave to the questions in the journal as well as my own knowledge of where they were and what surrounded them. I recorded these thoughts right on the copied journal page. Next, I moved to the final journal selection. On a second read through of the reflection piece, I established preliminary categories to generate evidence of the student's attitudes and feelings on the Camp Corvid experience in general and their secret spot in particular. I then sorted the text into those categories. After slight modification of categories based on the selections, I ended up with four categories of comments.

Afterwards, I holistically combined field notes from my observation of each student and my researcher journal with their interview transcripts and journal data to create a description of each student's

experience in their secret spot. When all was said and done, I developed conclusions based on this evidence and used the information to guide changes in my facilitation of the secret spot experience.

“The thing I’ll probably remember the most from my time here is the secret spot. I liked how it was so quiet and you could really listen and hear all of the birds.”

~Kyle, grade 5, Camp Corvid student at Ravenwood Natural Science Center (12 May 2006, continued researcher journal)

DATA & ANALYSIS

Please note: Student names have been changed to respect their privacy.

OBSERVATION FIELD NOTES

Field notes revealed four categories of student behavior while in their secret spots: signs of feeling relaxed in their spot, indications of awareness either active or passive, being a part of wildlife interactions, and working on their journal activity discovering or integrating naturalist knowledge or practicing a wilderness skill. A field note example is attached as Appendix A.

Over the course of the program, every student settled into their spot becoming still and quiet at least 67% of the time (two out of three days). In the case of our experienced student, Hannah, this increased to 100% despite mild to heavy rain both days. By contrast, two of three first time Ravenwood students displayed a transition period where on the first or second day they seemed restless, unused to being still, alone, or sitting on the ground. For one of these students, Lila, it rained heavily on the second day and she seemed unsure of how to calm her mind under this circumstance. While Brian spent the entire first secret spot making small, fidgety adjustments. On the other hand, Susanna seemed to feel at home immediately, but on her last day was feeling ill and seemed less connected. The typical secret spot

experience consisted of moving sticks on the ground, indicating they were making themselves comfortable, lying down on the ground, and even closing their eyes demonstrating a state of relaxation.

Part of making the spot their own was the site selection itself. Three of four students selected sites that were moderately or heavily forested, often times with a low canopy. Consider this evidence from my field notes on the first day of Camp Corvid for Brian, “He finds a spot in a patch of small dog hair grand firs where he is barely visible. It looks like a fort of trees around him” (Holmquist Field Notes, 17 Oct 05, “Brian” 1/3). The final student in the study group, Hannah, chose a spot along the lakeshore with tall thick grass obscuring her from view. This was interesting in light of the research presented in the conceptual framework on children seeking small private places. Photos 1, 2, and 3 show the three Camp Corvid students at their secret spots.

Photo 1: *Susana at her secret spot*



Photo 2: *Lila at her secret spot*



Photo 3: *Brian at his secret spot*



Field note data showed all students in the study group used their secret spot time to practice an awareness technique they had learned including actively using their senses in observing the natural world. These are exciting findings! Increasing nature awareness is a major goal of all programs at Ravenwood Natural Science Center. Every student used an invisibility technique I taught called “fox walking” on the way to or from their secret spot.

I observed every child looking in all directions including up at the trees and sky and down at the ground beneath them as well as feeling plants, cones, sticks, or rocks. Susanna even smelled one plant she picked up (Holmquist Field Notes, 11 Oct 05, “Susanna” 2/3). All of the children in the study group showed signs of active listening and bringing all of their senses fully alive while in their secret spots.

Wildlife interactions were a common goal for the children. They were all rewarded with unique encounters with various wildlife species during their secret spot experiences. All of the children were able to at least listen to birds. Two of the children got to observe (and in the case of one, even be involved in) significant wildlife activity. Hannah watched two Canadian geese fly directly over the lake honking continuously as they passed by her perch on the shore. Despite a drizzling rain the entire trip,

she was also able to see a woodpecker (discovered in the interview) on a snag behind her by turning to see what she had heard (Holmquist Field Notes, 1 Oct 05, "Hannah" 1/2). But Susanna had the most interesting encounter. The first day Susanna went to her secret spot (despite fox walking diligently), she disturbed a red squirrel in the tree above her. First she was able to watch the squirrel chase off another squirrel running up and down a more distant tree. Then, it came over and chattered at her directly from above. Susanna watched, smiled and looked very excited as the squirrel went on for several minutes and the squirrel came quite close to her. When it moved to a further tree, she completed her journal activity and then moved to a different spot where she could look clearly at it as it moved around (Holmquist Field Notes, 10 Oct 05, "Susanna" 1/3). What is most interesting about this encounter is that it happened only once. During the subsequent visits, the squirrel did not react so strongly to Susanna. While I only observed these two girls having exhilarating wildlife interactions, I also hope that the other two students keyed in to the life around them and became aware of even the smallest of insects living underneath them.

The final category that surfaced in the field notes was completion of their journal exercises, integrating naturalist knowledge, or practicing a wilderness skill. The three children in Camp Corvid worked on their journal activity each time they went to their secret spot. All of these students exhibited behaviors consistent with integrating knowledge of the natural world while engaged in completing the journal exercise. I saw students look closely at the sun, mountains, and other landmarks to figure out their directions and study a plant carefully. In the case of Hannah, who had no journal to complete, during one of her secret spot times, she worked diligently on making cordage out of dogbane provided the evening before (Holmquist Field Notes, 2 Oct 05, "Hannah" 2/2). In addition, she conducted her own experiment on how much rain was falling by catching it in her raincoat and measuring it with her finger displaying integration of scientific understanding.

Data recording and analysis of the field notes of the children at their secret spots proved very beneficial. I was able to directly observe their behavior, interaction with each other and other species, as well as create clarifying questions for interviews. Students displayed mannerisms consistent with making their secret spot their own and becoming comfortable in their place, developing awareness techniques such as using all of their senses and practicing invisibility techniques, observing and interacting with wildlife, and finishing an assigned journal activity integrating scientific knowledge and wilderness skills.

INTERVIEWS

After analyzing all four interview transcripts using the procedures described in the methods section, the data categories yielded multiple examples of how students were thinking about their secret spot experiences. Five main categories evolved from the data: enjoying time alone in a quiet space, becoming more aware by actively using their senses, observing animals and plants in their natural habitats, being outside for an extended period regardless of weather, and realizing the intrinsic value of wild places. A sample interview transcript is attached as Appendix B.

One example that illustrates the first category is this quote from Lila, “I really liked [the secret spots]. I loved that it was really quiet” (“Lila” Interview Transcript, 14 Oct 05). This sentiment was echoed by every single child. Strikingly, at one point, two students said almost exactly the same thing integrating this sentiment with the following two categories. First from Hannah, “[Our secret spot] was a time to ourselves when we got to listen to nature” (“Hannah” Interview Transcript, 2 Oct 05). And Susanna remarks, “[Our secret spot] was a place where we got to sit by ourselves, observe animals in natural habitats, and listen” (“Susanna” Interview Transcript, 12 Oct 05). It appears that children are rarely

given the opportunity to experience true quiet or be alone and that these children, anyway, found it remarkable.

The opportunity to awaken their senses and be an active observer of nature resonated with all of the children in the study group. Contemplate this evidence from Hannah, “Because I was down in my secret spot, I noticed small sounds and movements; things I wouldn’t have noticed other times like the ripple the raindrops make on the pond or hearing a small bird chirp far away. I wouldn’t have even seen those things other times” (“Hannah” Interview Transcript, 2 Oct 05). This was a common comment from all four children. “I saw a deer bed that I would have never seen unless I had been fox walking around my secret spot and exploring with my senses,” exclaims Susanna (“Susanna” Interview Transcript, 12 Oct 05). Interviews revealed that one of the things common to all student memories about my facilitation of the secret spot on the first day was keying in to each sense individually. This was a new piece to my orientation in addition to the fox walking and owl vision lessons I have been doing since the beginning. This struck home for me as something that was really valuable to them in centering on the task at hand, and “wiping off the road dust,” a way of clearing their brains of whatever they carried when they arrived. Two students brought up the instruction of the two invisibility techniques, fox walking and owl vision, as things they remembered from my initial orientation as ways to perturb the baseline of the forest minimally. Interestingly, the same two students highlighted their memory of me testing their awareness upon return from their secret spots. I did this by having them close their eyes while standing in the circle and asking them questions that would make them think about what was around them. For example, I might say, “With your eyes closed, point to the direction that is east. Point to the nearest tree to you.” Followed by, “Keeping your eyes closed, answer this question in your mind: What is the color of the shirt on the person to your left?” After a series of four questions, students were invited to open their eyes and check themselves. The theory is that these awareness tests serve an extrinsic motivation

to begin creating the habit of paying attention to their surroundings and noticing details. The fact that two students brought this up as something they remembered was support for their inclusion in my secret spot facilitation routine.

A frequent trend revealed in the interview transcripts was the opportunity to observe plants and animals in their natural habitats. Brian remarks, “I thought the leaf rubbing was cool and I learned new terms for the leaves” (“Brian” Interview Transcript, 19 Oct 05). Susanna was spurred to further research multiple natural mysteries she discovered, “[I found interesting] all of the trees [in my secret spot] and the nest we found afterwards together (“Susanna” Interview Transcript, 12 Oct 05). And, finally, let’s hear from Lila, “I learned that there are lots of mushrooms that are white and thistles around here. And, I sat on a prickly woody thing” (“Lila” Interview Transcript, 14 Oct 05). Each child commented on at least one aspect of plant or animal study from bird nest structure to woodpecker foraging, from mushrooms to small mammal travel paths.

A universal statement that came from the interviews was that just being outside was remarkable for these children. “I could have spent all day out there,” declared Susanna when asked if she would have preferred more, less, or the same amount of time for each secret spot activity (“Susanna” Interview Transcript, 12 Oct 05). Lila pronounced, “Everywhere you go there’s a new thing to see. If you look up and down you see interesting mysteries” (“Lila” Interview Transcript, 14 Oct 05). For these children, the opportunity to explore, wander, and test themselves in the elements was exhilarating. I asked this direct facilitation question to try and gauge student perception on the amount of time I gave for each secret spot. All students in the study group answered that the time allotted was good from their perspective. This is discussed further when combined with the researcher journal and conversations with parents, teachers and co-instructor, Brett.

Finally, all students alluded to an understanding of the intrinsic value of nature. Susanna acknowledged this concept clearly, “[I understand] how valuable life is and we shouldn’t wreck all of nature” (“Susanna” Interview Transcript, 12 Oct 05). Lila seconded, articulating, “[The natural world] is a really peaceful place and the animals just want to be left at peace” (“Lila” Interview Transcript, 14 Oct 05). Brian concurs, noticing, “The animals are really quiet most of the time” (“Brian” Interview Transcript, 19 Oct 05).

Interviewing the children in the study group was incredibly valuable. Despite the diminished level of information I received from Brian, in all cases I was given a rare and wonderful opportunity to hear from the children directly how they were felt about their learning in their secret spots. And, better than just having them write something for me, I was able to ask follow up questions for clarity, and offer the student a chance to sit with me one on one and express their thoughts.

STUDENT JOURNAL SELECTIONS

Selections from student journals gave me further insight and clarification into how the children were thinking about their secret spot experiences. The first journal selection, as mentioned, was an introduction and direction map. Students were asked to draw a map of their secret spot using themselves as a center point exploring ten steps in all directions. Their map would include notable rocks, trees, game trails, and other interesting discoveries. Afterwards, they were to add the cardinal directions to the map and answer questions about directions of certain land features from their spot. In addition, they were asked to list all of the animals that they thought (based on habitat and evidence) used their spot when they weren’t there. The data presented in this journal selection showed a strong attention to

understanding directions, studying the ground carefully, and integrating scientific knowledge of directional landmarks and sun location as well as habitat and naturalist terminology.

Regardless of whether or not the directions on the maps were completely accurate, evidence of the thinking process was present. This laid the groundwork for the remainder of the program when we work, through intense inquiry, to acquire complete confidence in directions using landmarks and sun location as a beginning step towards being wise in the woods and understanding a greater context for plant growth and animal behavior on the landscape. For an example of showing application of vocabulary important in forestry and biology, consider the following from Susanna's journal selection. Although no requirements for labeling are made in the instructions, Susanna labeled a small tree on her map as "sapling" and a dead tree as "snag." Lila drew moss and mushrooms near the center point of her map implying that even if she didn't put together that it was a wet area, she will from now forward have an association between those two families when another piece of evidence guides her to that integrated conclusion.

The final free write reflection piece yielded direct entries on how students thought about their time at their secret spots and Camp Corvid in general. After analyzing the data as described in the methods section, four categories surfaced: skills learned, awareness gained, natural science knowledge discovered, and fun! Across the board, the first sentence of all three samples was essentially replicated and is represented by Brian, "I had so much fun at Ravenwood! I hope I get to come back sometime." I was excited to have that category represented, because what's the point if it's not fun? A second category was skills learned. The skill to prepare for an all day hike in the mountains was represented in the two girl's reflections. Length and duration both played a factor. For the boy in the study group, his favorite part was "when we made the debris shelter." Each day students prepared themselves for their

day in the field. For many children, this responsibility is a first or rarity in their home lives. Students pack water, raincoat, lunch, and their journal and pencils. There's no going back once we're on the trail. This accountability combined with the physical test of endurance during the day was unique for these kids.

Entries like the following from Brian produced the next two categories. "I've learned a lot about nature and what it does," he wrote. Lila and Susanna included detailed accounts of lessons they enjoyed under the scientific knowledge learned category. They noted such topics as geological time, glaciers and erosion, and tree identification games. Pooled with the data suggesting an increase in nature awareness, these records produced a window into the minds of these children. This final category was absent in Brian's journal reflection, however. Susanna directly cited secret spots as a favorite activity mentioning that she was sad to have to leave Ravenwood, "but at least we got to do one more secret spot today." Lila reflected on a powerful unity experience that took place at the fire the final night. To build the fire, all of the children helped prepare the structure, which they had been practicing throughout the program. Brett created a coal by friction using our bow drill kit, which he then placed into a tinder bundle. Each child then blew into the bundle and by the end it had ignited into flame! Lila cogitated, "We all put our breath into the fire and it was an awesome thing to do." These glimpses into the moments that resonated with each child were a rare and wonderful thing.

RESEARCHER JOURNAL LOG

The unifying data source was my researcher journal log, establishing itself as the corroborator for a holistic look at the affects of my facilitation of secret spots. Using a combination of the categories from the other data sources, I looked at timing of behaviors and comments versus what I had said in my framing of the activity. I also added enlightening comments from any other time of day. While most of

my entries were from the children in the study group, I also jotted down remarkable comments from other students, teachers, parent/chaperones, and my co-instructor, Brett.

However, the first change I noticed in my facilitation of secret spots came before any data had been collected. During the Common Ground weekend, we had invited a guest instructor who had been trained with Wilderness Awareness School. I asked him to facilitate the first secret spot so that I could observe him. He agreed and I picked up some great phrases. From my researcher journal on the evening of 1 October 2005, I wrote, "*I was surprised at how similar it was to what I do since I've never had any formal training in secret spot facilitation nor studied with Wilderness Awareness School.*" I go on to describe the awakening of senses done on that morning. Slowly, deliberately, keying in to the senses one at a time. I loved how this went for the group. Since this was done with a group of what could be called "level II" students, I adapted it some for those still at "level I" in Camp Corvid. The essence of how I frame the secret spot experience has stayed the same, though, modeled after this observation.

I noticed a direct link between times I taught, or later reminded the children of, an awareness technique and their behavior during the activity. For example, when I reminded the students to look up above them through the trees and get to know their spot in all directions, there was a direct application of that practice either during that secret spot or the next. This was revealed (in addition to clear observation) in comparing my researcher journal with the field notes. An excerpt illustrating this is below. First is my journal entry followed by field notes from observing Brian the next day.

Researcher Journal for Laura M.S. Holmquist

Date: 17 October 2005

Location: Grizzly Base Camp, north of Bigfork, Montana

Time: evening

At the closing secret spot circle today, during an awareness test, I asked the students if they could picture in their mind's eye exactly what it looked like in front of them while sitting at their secret spot. Could they remember what it looked like when they turned left or right? How about all the

way behind them? I encouraged them to take note of this the next time they were at their spot and to remember to look up and down as well.

Secret Spot–Field Notes

Collected by: Laura M.S. Holmquist

Date: 18 October 2005

Location: Grizzly Base Camp (north of BigFork, MT)

Student: Brian, grade 5, BigFork Elementary School, Jodi Kulina/Julie Bonner’s class

Program: Camp Corvid

Time: 9:50 – 10:05 am

<i>Stares up through the branches and tree canopy.</i>	<i>Yay! I asked them yesterday to do this but didn't remind them today.</i>
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One of the invisibility techniques I taught the kids was “owl vision”. This technique involves remaining unfocused as you walk or sit so that you can catch movement more readily in hopes of seeing more.

Another example of seeing immediate changes in action occurred after one of these lessons.

“This morning I taught owl vision. The kids got really into it and practiced actively in preparation for heading to their secret spots. I noticed Lila’s head was upright more, and she didn’t watch the ground as much. I hope that this means she’s using her owl vision!”

(Holmquist Log, evening, 13 October 2005).

My journal also furnished me with an opportunity to process comments made by students at the daily closing secret spot circle, in passing throughout the week, and in the good-bye circle to create a better understanding of how the children were assimilating this experience. Taking into consideration the episode of Susanna’s red squirrel encounter from the field notes, now add this selection from my chronicle to the story,

“Susanna tells me today that she’s never watched an animal in its habitat moving around. She remarks to me that it seemed to know its area so well! This is awesome! She’s becoming aware of how this is really home to animals and they know this place just as well as we know our bedrooms and kitchens” (evening, 10 October 2005).

In this way, my researcher journal substantiated certain evidence that had been discovered through the other three data sources.

The journal also served as a source for context of events.

“It rained hard all day and has been for a few days. Everything is so wet and the kids and adults are doing great keeping up their spirits and being thankful for the weather and the opportunity to test our skills under the elements. Building debris huts and bow drill fires will be a real challenge! Hannah seemed to stay focused the entire time in her secret spot. Despite the garbage bag raincoat, she seemed comfortable and peaceful” (evening, 1 October 2005).

I made a facilitation change early on, after trailing Hannah on the second day of observations. I realized by walking behind her the entire way that the distance many children hiked to their spots dissuaded the practicing of fox walking the entire way. I documented this change in my journal on 2 October 2005,

“Hannah fox walked the entire way to her secret spot today. I asked the students to do this, but she is the only one within my sight who kept it up for the duration. From where we did our orientation it takes about 7 or 8 minutes, so that’s long time to keep it up. From now on, I’ll just ask them to fox walk after they depart from the road and get closer (within 50 meters) to their spot.”

I realized that students who had the patience and tenacity to fox walk the entire way would do it as their own personal challenge and that the kids who didn’t want to shouldn’t be distracted by the thought that they weren’t following the instructions.

One day my journal documented a facilitation challenge I faced.

“Introducing baseline didn’t go as smoothly [today]. I tried more of an inquiry approach and I think it was too early in their understanding for that. I thought the message ended up clear, but it was a muddy way to get there. I wanted to try something new that was more active from the student’s participation perspective, but I’ll have to keep playing with it. Then, Lila didn’t wait for baseline, so I’ll have to review more clearly tomorrow”
(evening, 12 October 2005).

After further thought on this and a conversation with Brett, I came up with what I have been using since, a hybrid lecture with a few questions thrown in to keep interest and activate brains.

Further discussions with Brett and teachers, parents, and other chaperones helped me process the appropriateness of the amount of time each secret spot lasted. As revealed during the interviews with the four students in the study group, the time was adequate and even short in some cases. As a general rule, from a baseline perspective, twenty to thirty minutes is a minimum for the birds and other animals in a location to resume normal behavior after a perceived threat has proven itself harmless. While this amount of time was good for the students interviewed, not all children take to secret spots as readily. Students whose profiles display a greater need to “move and shake” act differently during this activity. During the pilot study for this project, my journal reveals a level of frustration with this challenge. From my journal on 2 October 2004,

“Secret spots seem to be more polarized this time [Common Ground 2004, level II students with no journal activity]. Those who are ready for it are thriving—listening deeply, paying attention to changes in their spot, how their presence affects the animals, plants, wind, temperature, and the imprint they leave after they’ve been there. The few who aren’t yet ready to sit and absorb are finding it hard to sit still. One student is wandering around collecting turkey feathers. Maybe that’s okay for where he is.”

In discussing this with Brett, he concluded that secret spot time is effective for all students but may need some incubating time. He believed,

“The ultimate effect of secret spots is that they have it as a practice in their toolbox for the rest of their lives. Students have written us and told us that they’ve found a secret spot at home and have learned so much. It is incalculable how knowing and understanding their place will impact their decisions for the rest of their lives. For kids who aren’t yet ready to just sit, wandering is exactly what they need” (3 October 2004).

For me, this was an example of meeting a student where they are and realizing that there are many ways to experience a secret spot. Getting to the stage where one can sit for an extended period of time requires practice just like any other skill. For some, interacting physically with a place (if done in the right spirit) can be a stepping-stone.

One of the most exciting revelations from the researcher journal was the citations of children asking me questions they had from the natural world, often a mystery from their secret spot. I would first ask some coyote questions about the plant, scat, animal behavior, etc., and then say, “Wow, that’s cool. I don’t know, I wonder what the field guides say.” Often times, the child would run to the field guides! I would assist them if they needed help figuring out how they worked and we would continue to ask questions and search until we found the species or explanation. What fun! This was real support for the style of teaching we often use called coyote mentoring. As one of our teachers, Denny McLoughlin of High Trust Psychology says, “Questions invite thinking. Telling develops dependency.” Witnessing students taking charge of their own learning by looking things up in field guides is exactly what we like to see. Here’s a supporting excerpt from my researcher journal (evening, 12 October 2005):

“Lila found a bunch of mushrooms right around her anchor point today. She asked me what they were and described them. I asked her what size and shape they were and had her describe the texture and color (all the things that she would need to know to be

successful in keying it out with a field guide) and then said, "Huh, interesting, I don't know. Let's look it up." She ran across the lodge to the bookcase, searched with her finger on the books for the correct one, and when she found it, ran back to me. We looked through it, asked some more questions, and she finally found what she thinks was the species of mushroom that grows in her secret spot. I encouraged her to take the field guide with her tomorrow just to make sure and then she could share with us what she had found and whether or not we could eat them or if they were poisonous."

Other mysteries students in the study group researched included, "Why is this mushroom on the branch of a tree? Who would dry mushrooms on trees?" "Which birds make this kind of nest?" "What bird did this feather belong to?" and identification of various other plants and trees. This independent initiation occurred in three of the four students in the study group with me directly, and with seven other students across the study timeframe that were recorded. On the evening of 1 October 2005, I wrote about a student outside the study group who is representative,

"Louis asked me what kind of thistle was growing. He deducted that they were exotic weeds by the way they were growing in disturbed areas from the logging and found it in a book.

Tomorrow we'll make a stir-fry with some of the roots and that will really bring it home!"

Most students figure out that we are not as dumb as we seem and begin to head straight for the books, working together with a specimen and asking for support only when they get stuck. From my journal on the afternoon of 2 October 2005, here's a "level II" or one who has experienced at least one other Ravenwood program prior, response, "Later, Hannah asked me how she could find and harvest some of her own dogbane. She was already armed with a field guide and had looked it up in the index to study its leaves and habitat! Yeehaw." But, I'm sure some just think we're morons.

The four data sources yielded much information about student behavior and thinking in conjunction with my facilitation of secret spots. The strength of the data lies in their combination and triangulation. The analysis prompted structural changes in the administration of the experience.

“The focus on the natural and scientific world is definitely beneficial to the youth and the adults. I was amazed at how being here at Ravenwood showed that humans and the natural world are really part of the same place.”

~Parent chaperone for Common Ground, Stanford, Montana (3 October 2004, parent survey)

INTERPRETATION

Data collected show that secret spots are an effective way to ignite a spark of wonder in these students. How secret spots are facilitated affects a child’s experience. Children in the study group lead me to a deeper understanding of just what worked for them. From what areas I allowed them to choose from, the designing of the journal activities, to the orientation and framing of each secret spot experience, my role as the facilitator set the stage for their learning.

Children made site selections consistent with findings from Nabhan & Trimble (1994) and Sobel (2002) during the literature review in choosing small “dens” where they felt safe and could spy out. This affected the places I would include within the secret spot boundaries. I used to feel “bad” that not every student could sit right by the water, but now realize for the goals of secret spots, forested and grassy areas serve the purpose just as well, if not better. In fact, a parent chaperone from Creston, Montana observed, *“The kids who were in the woods spent more time actually exploring and journaling than the kids who were by the water who spent a lot of time throwing rocks into the lake”* (continuing researcher

journal, 10 October 2006). At the same time, being by water increases the probability that more animals will be using that spot, so I've struck a balance between these two locations for secret spot borders.

Being in their secret spots gave children the opportunity to explore freely and discover mysteries. This led to internal motivation in discovering the answers to questions. The literature asserts that when you want to know for yourself, your interest and retention of content increases. Students in the study group showed behaviors, thinking, and writing that were consistent with this.

The use of a journal activity in secret spots was useful for the students first practicing this technique. Data illustrate journaling being a force for focus and content mastery, an impetus for recall and higher order thinking, problem solving, analysis and a place for reflection. When the journal activities included natural history topics, these students displayed an increase in understanding science knowledge including vocabulary/terminology and an ability to integrate that knowledge into the greater context of connections in habitats and the processes of ecosystems. In addition, these children appeared to be able to then apply that knowledge and understanding to their lives, asking the deeper question, "Why?" Therefore, I have continued to modify and improve the journal activities to reflect these goals.

However, there is also a value in moving beyond this tool while at a secret spot and reflecting and mapping at a later time. This allows one to stay in the moment and not lose information and the lessons a place may be teaching. Data in the pilot study for this project, which queried a larger and broader group of 11 Common Ground students, cited a significant increase in student claimed ability to listen at their secret spots without journaling (10 of 11 students, or 91% said they felt they could listen better without journaling) while the same number of students still felt they could focus on their place without the journal. So, I have designed different facilitation for the different levels of secret spot readiness.

How they do secret spots depends on how ready they are. However, when children are in a program that

does use a journal activity at secret spot time there is always enough “wander time” built in to the prompt.

Additional benefits of secret spots surfaced during the analysis of all data pieces including the observation field notes, interviews, student journal selections, and researcher journal log. The degree to which these benefits impacted the children’s lives varied depending on their profile at the time of their Ravenwood experience. Of these, the most powerful was the surfacing of student perceived intrinsic value of nature. That some students were beginning to hold this view was due, in part, to a connection to a place, as the literature suggested. Being in wildness enriches our lives, makes us complete, and can even be a magical and life-changing experience. All of these things can help us grow, make good decisions on the land and in society, and develop mature relationships.

I believe all students benefit from secret spots. There is a range of ways students learn in their spots. Some take to being quiet and contemplative right away, others are very active for a time. Some use their extra time to draw or read, some to wander and explore. All are valid for where the child is at the time in their lives and learning. However, it is very important to encourage the stillness to come. For most people, our minds are too busy and we must intentionally still our bodies and minds to ever really see a place in baseline. Once that calmness is within us, all other activities on the landscape are changed. Walking, hunting, fishing, floating, and any other utilitarian or scientific endeavor have a deeper meaning.

Secret spots are just one hour of each day at Ravenwood Natural Science Center, but the data point to secret spots as being a powerful and integrating piece of the pie. They create time and space for being alone, quiet, and developing and reflecting on “self.” Secret spots give children an exploratory freedom

outdoors that few in today's society have and open eyes to the wonders of the natural world, increase frequency of authentic questions, and ignite a burning desire to learn. Moreover, they offer children and adults access to the everyday life of a place and force us to really pay attention, to be in the present moment, and increase our awareness. Learning the secrets of a place helps us feel an attachment to the land and create a space for understanding the complex relationships in our natural world and with each other. Plus, it's fun!

*"If you know one landscape well, you will look at all other landscapes differently. If you learn to love one place, sometimes you can also learn to love another."
~Athos, a character in Anne Michael's novel, Fugitive Pieces (1998)*

VALUE

Structural changes for the secret spot experience focused on offering students a sense of place. I start every secret spot with an opening exercise. Centering and calming the mind, awakening and honing the senses in preparation can really help students get the most out of their time. This may include setting an intention for the experience. A typical opening concludes silently as students raise their heads after a concentrated effort to feel, hear, smell, and sense their experience with eyes closed. Then, one by one, they open their eyes to see the world with a heightened awareness utilizing a full chorus of the senses.

Allowing enough time for the experience to resonate and "sink in" is important. Sometimes, I have cut secret spots short due to transportation issues or timing events, but I am now much more aware of the importance of a genuine experience. I have altered the morning schedule to reduce the chances of being rushed, so that I never have to shorten the time, skip an introduction or a conclusion. In addition, when

journals are used, I have mindfully redesigned the activities to align with the goals of the experience. I make sure the activities are always short enough to ensure plenty of time to just be in the spot, sitting or exploring. In addition, as stressed by John Dewey, providing a structure for reflection and sharing at the end of each secret spot supports a student's need to integrate the experience and grant the chance for real learning by developing the sacred question, "What did that experience teach me?" If a group is ready, they may even be asked to hold silence until every single person has returned to the circle from their secret spots. Often, however, I will fill up this time with awareness tests, asking them questions (which they answer in their minds only) about their spot, their path to and from it, and the place they are in now. Once everyone has returned, we always share whether through stories or just sharing one word that gives us a glimpse in to the experience of their secret spot.

This project has also heightened my awareness of the importance of the entire program experience. It is critical to create a supportive program that holds up the same goals as those developed by secret spots. Because of this I am further committed to offering long-term mentoring and residential experiences for both children and adults integrating secret spots as a keystone tool through the work of Ravenwood Natural Science Center. I plan on further developing my coyote mentoring techniques through professional development opportunities, and, as Ravenwood grows, I look forward to training other staff in these techniques. I have continued to keep an informal journal using it to record noteworthy quotes and track the results of changes in our programs. In addition, we as directors have refined our evaluation process in order to continually improve our service. As we venture into offering adult workshops, the need for further research will arise. How will adult students at Ravenwood Natural Science Center view their secret spot experiences? Benefits of including secret spots in natural history and wilderness education programs are compelling, and I highly recommend their use in environmental education and naturalist training.

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APPENDIX A: SAMPLE OBSERVATION FIELD NOTES

Secret Spot-Field Notes

Collected by: Laura M.S. Holmquist

Date: 10 October 2005

Location: Grizzly Base Camp (north of BigFork, MT)

Student: Susanna, grade 5, BigFork Elementary School, MH's class

Program: Camp Corvid

Time: 4:25 – 4:45 pm

<u>Observations</u>	<u>Researcher Thoughts</u>
Susanna fox walks the entire way to her spot.	She seems very deliberate in her steps. I think she's really trying to get the skill.
She chooses a spot that is under 6 tall Douglas Fir and Western Larch trees.	We're in the "pocket" area in a dip north of the lodge. You hike up a steep hill by the cabins, and then drop down into the forested area.
Susanna gets right to work on her activity while others wander.	She was chosen by the teacher, possibly for her potential interest and ability to follow directions?
Quiet	Students were instructed to sit for a while waiting for their spot to return to baseline before beginning.
Watches a squirrel chasing another in a nearby tree. Squirrels chirping	
One squirrel stops and looks at her and chatters from a snag. It surveys the other students. She watches.	Does she think it's just for her? Does she wonder what the behavior is for or have any hypothesis about it?
Susanna looks at something across the meadow.	I think she's looking to create the map in her journal.
Writes in her journal	Assumably doing the mapping journal activity
Watches leaves falling to the ground with a gust of wind that blows through	Aware enough while writing to notice movement in her field of view
Observes the squirrel still on the branch of a snag	
Gets up and walks over to the snag	Seems to be trying to get closer to the squirrel
Walks around spot some more, exploring the area	Students were told they could explore up to ten steps in any direction from their spot after their journal activity is completed
Returns to spot and write some more	Possibly adding detail to the map? Is she done with the activity and writing other things?
Looks around at the tops of the trees. Stands up.	To see something better?
Squirrel still in snag, runs up and down. She watches.	

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Secret spot–Interview guide

Collected by: Laura M.S. Holmquist

Date: 2 October 2005

Location: Grizzly Base Camp (north of Bigfork, MT)

Student: Hannah, grade 6, BigFork Middle School, LW’s class [came to Camp Corvid in 5th grade with JK]

Program: Common Ground

Time: 12:20 pm

* **Phone Number:** --- Mom- --- (chaperone)

1. What do you remember about the orientation to secret spot?
Focusing on our senses. It took a long time, but it was nice because it was relaxing and quiet.
2. If you were to go home and tell your dad [mom was in attendance] about secret spot, what would you tell him?
That it was a time to ourselves when we got to listen to nature.
3. What do you remember learning in your secret spot?
The first day when it was raining so hard I held my garbage bag out and collected the water. I was amazed at how long it took just to get that much water and I was thinking about all of the floods lately [Katrina in the southeast US], and how MUCH water that must be.
4. What kinds of things did you find valuable about your secret spot experience?
Because I was down in my secret spot, I noticed small sounds and movements; things I wouldn’t have noticed other times like the ripple the raindrops make on the pond or hearing a small bird chirp far away. I wouldn’t have even seen those things other times.
5. What would have made your secret spot experience better?
I’d like to have some time before or after or even some other time from secret spots to explore around the area. To practice fox walking and maybe sneak up on some animals. [Wander Time]
6. Do you feel your secret spot experience has helped you **connect** with the natural world?
In what ways do you feel it has helped?
Yes, I’m more aware of the details of sounds, now.
7. How do you feel your secret spot has helped you **understand** the natural world? [Not asked]
>> The first day you looked back at the snag that was behind you. What made you do that?
I heard a noise and turned around to see what it was. It was a woodpecker.
>> Cool! What did it look like?
Oh, like black and white on the front.
>> How big was it?
Oh, like this big. [Her hands measure around 15-16 cm. (~6 in.)] [Downy?]
8. Would you have preferred more, less, or the same amount of time for each secret spot activity?
The length is okay, just make sure we have long enough once we get there so that we don’t have to rush down and can take our time walking and really looking. Like some of the kids in front of me were just like walking really fast to get there.