PLACE-BASED EDUCATION AT THE RIVER VALLEY OUTDOOR LEARNING CENTER: FOUR STUDENTS’ STORIES

By

DOREEN MARIE KELLER

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of DOREEN MARIE KELLER find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

__________________________________________________________
Janet H. Frost, Ph.D., Chair

__________________________________________________________
Richard D. Sawyer, Ed.D.

__________________________________________________________
R. Justin Hougham, Ph.D.

__________________________________________________________
Andy R. Cavagnetto, Ph.D.
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PLACE-BASED EDUCATION AT THE RIVER VALLEY OUTDOOR LEARNING CENTER: FOUR STUDENTS’ STORIES

Abstract

by Doreen Marie Keller, Ed.D.
Washington State University
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Chair: Janet H. Frost

The purpose of this qualitative collective case study was to explore how two fifth grade and two sixth grade River Valley School District* students experienced the River Valley Outdoor Learning Center*. Particular attention was paid to these students’ connection with and curiosity about the curriculum there. Their relationship with the place that was the River Valley Outdoor Learning Center and their connection with the outdoors were also important foci. Finally, students’ perception of their own contentment when learning there was explored. The study also explored the conditions that supported and constrained this particular program in providing place-based education approaches for its students.

Data came from interviews with the four student participants, the students’ parents and learning center educators. One of the student’s classroom teachers was also interviewed. Additional data came from documents and observations of the fifth grade participants while they partook in a three-day culminating educative experience offered by the center.

Findings suggested that the River Valley Outdoor Learning Center program that practiced a combination of place-based and environmental education pedagogies could survive and succeed when it worked within existing school systems and was supported in doing so. It was also found that the pull-out model at this center had lasting impacts on the study’s four student...
participants. Additionally, this program helped these four students to be more connected to nature. Finally, these four students’ voices offered deep and valuable insight into their own educative interactions and feelings. The research illustrated an approach that profoundly affected these four students’ lives and wellness.

*pseudonyms*
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Dedication

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Early in my doctoral coursework you made sure your home office had everything I needed so that I could work there while you cooked for, read to, and played games with my young daughter. You spent early mornings and late nights proofing reference pages. You read through my preliminary examinations over the holidays and my proposal writing months later. You offered feedback on interview protocols and read through several drafts of my dissertation when I could no longer see the words on the screen. You have put my needs before yours as long as I can remember and the last four years have been no exception to this even though I am a grown woman with my own family. You have supported me through every deadline of this work, and I am profoundly grateful to be able to share this accomplishment with you. You have always encouraged and praised my writing, and now I have written a book.

You always knew I could do this, Mom.

But I could not have done it without you.

This dissertation is your dissertation.

This doctorate is your doctorate.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In New York State during the 2012-2013 school year students spent as many as six hours over six days taking tests (Fleisher, 2011). In Lincoln, Nebraska, students devoted between 10 and 40 hours to their district, state, and national assessments (Reist, 2012). And in Delaware County, Pennsylvania, students spent almost 60% of their classroom time this year either taking, re-taking, or preparing for tests (Wiseley, 2012). A long, storied history of the reasons for, benefits to, and outcomes of testing exists in American public education. This upsurge in testing, however, may be attributed to a single factor—the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act nearly ten years ago (Kruger, Wandle, & Struzziero, 2007; Sena, Lowe, & Lee, 2007; Weems, Scott, Taylor, Cannon, Romano, Perry, & Triplett, 2010).

This law was established with a clear purpose: “To close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind” (NCLB, 2002). The mandate requires states to develop and carry out annual assessments linked to state standards, identify schools not making sufficient gains in student scores, and impose sanctions on such schools (NCLB, 2002). Although a recent empirical study (Dee & Jacob, 2011) has reiterated NCLB’s positive impact on student math scores, particularly at the early grades, and it can be argued the law was well intentioned, its negative effects such as reduction of non-tested curriculum and increased student stress garner far more attention in the literature, as discussed below.

Because student test performance directly impacts the survival of a school, reallocation of instructional time to focus disproportionally on the tested content areas at the cost of other subjects, the arts and physical education in particular, is a common and well documented practice
Schools have assumed a credentializing role where mastery means individual achievement, through a competitive process. Teachers' work is defined largely by the
curriculum and assessment system which demands efficient/effective coverage of
content-oriented material organized in discrete time periods with prescribed problem
“bits” that are easily evaluated as either correct or incorrect. (Hart, 2010, p. 158)
This perpetuation of the factory model of schooling is successfully standardizing what students are taught at what grades, but it fails to account for students’ diverse talents and needs.

The competitive environment created by NCLB, which is focused on repeatedly testing students’ skills and knowledge, is creating a pressure-filled world for children as early as elementary school. As a result of high-stakes testing, students start experiencing increased stress as early as second grade (Duffy, Giordano, Farrell, Paneque, & Crump, 2009; Galloway, Pope, & Osberg, 2007; Shallcross, 2011). Research has suggested a link between significant anxiety in some students at the elementary level and high-stakes testing situations (Kruger et al., 2007; McDonald, 2001; Putwain, 2009; Strumpf & Fodor, 1993). It remains hard to reliably determine the prevalence of test anxiety, but some older studies have reported that such stress affects up to 40% of young students (McDonald, 2001). The impacts of test anxiety are well documented. Children have experienced nervousness and increased worry (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000;
Sena et al., 2007), negative mental health and academic effects (Weems et al., 2010), and even substantial psychological distress (Weems et al., 2010) as a result of test anxiety.

Students’ anxiety and stress may be further complicated by other consequences of this curriculum and instructional shift toward tested content only. Specifically, students may experience decreased interest in or connection with school learning due to teachers’ reduced opportunity to frame learning around problems or themes relevant to their students’ lives. Berliner (2010) has argued this inability to make the content relevant and therefore engaging is distancing students from curiosity, a vital twenty-first century skill. When there is no relevance in learning, the act of school may become a chore for children. And when school becomes tedious for young students, they often look forward to the breaks that activity classes provide. However, as mentioned previously, many of those classes, the arts and physical education especially, are losing time to subject matter that is tested (Berliner, 2010; Hannaway & Hamilton, 2008; Ladd, & Zelli, 2002; Pedulla et al., 2003). This brings up yet another problem facing young students that is only compounded by the reality of a shifting curriculum: the lack of physical activity. Henley, McBride, Milligan, and Nichols (2007) have contended this decrease in physical education time and the exercise it can provide is negatively impacting students’ health and wellness.

As shown in the research discussed above, the effects of teaching practices taking hold in response to NCLB certainly do not seem to be helping students live healthier lives, but may reasonably be charged with aggravating issues facing young children today. One such issue is the product of a cultural shift that is underway which finds the majority of children choosing to be sedentary and remain indoors. Richard Louv (2007) has provided evidence of this phenomenon which he refers to as “nature-deficit disorder”: only 6% of children ages 9–13 play
outside on their own; bike riding is down 31% since 1995; 90% of inner-city kids do not know how to swim; and 34% have never been to the beach (p. 57). As stunning as this may sound, it seems many children prefer this path. One San Diego fourth grader explains the choice is clear for him: “I like to play indoors better because that’s where all the electrical outlets are” (Louv, 2008, p. ix). Long ago, the end of the school day marked the beginning of outdoor chores after a long walk home. Now traffic, homework, media devices, and parents paralyzed by stranger-danger fears have all but put a stop to children walking home and going outdoors in general (Louv, 2008). Furthermore, the decline of students’ access to the outdoors at school, to physical education classes and to the socialization that takes place at lunch and recess makes students’ own choices to remain inactive and inside an even more urgent problem.

The innumerable consequences of these cultural shifts, exacerbated by NCLB, include the current obesity epidemic. The Centers for Disease Control (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.) has reported childhood obesity has more than tripled in the past 30 years. For example, the percentage of children aged 6–11 years in the United States who were obese increased from 7% in 1980 to nearly 20% in 2008; in 2008, more than one third of children and adolescents were overweight or obese (http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/obesity/facts.htm). Because many students are inactive at home and in school, they miss out on the stress-reducing benefits of physical activity (Matheny & McCarthy, 2000; Ratey, 2008). These issues and outcomes suggest that a new educational goal is needed: for all students to experience learning that includes a focus on health and well-being (Bishop, 2004; Sorensen, 2007; Swayze, 2009; Tolbert & Theobald, 2006).
Place-based education (PBE) is a way of thinking about education that presents the potential to address these tough problems. Simply put:

Place-based education is the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students’ appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens (Sobel, 2005, p. 7).

Place-based learning involves students of all ages getting out of the classroom and connecting with their natural environment, but the learning differs in how interdisciplinary it is. Some contend that PBE is more than just a different methodological approach to teaching, however. David Gruenewald (2003) invites all players of the PBE movement to push their boundaries about what PBE can do. Specifically, he suggests the merging of critical pedagogy with place-based education referring to it as a critical pedagogy of place. The purpose in advocating for a critical pedagogy of place is to give PBE a much needed theoretical framework to make it a true pedagogy instead of a mere method of teaching.

Place-based education is appearing more and more in the literature even during this time when the stakes have never been higher nor garnered more attention. Teachers, programs, districts and states who are recognizing the importance of student engagement, civic leadership and academic achievement at the same time insist that students can be passionate and active while learning. One Vermont teacher explained, “Place-based curriculum, particularly hands-on
activities, gets students engaged. It’s the concrete connections that are so important. It makes learning authentic and meaningful. The authenticity comes from relevance” (Jennings, Swidler, & Koliba, 2005, p. 59). Additionally, Powers (2004) noted in her cross-program study analyzing the impacts of four PBE programs, “place-based education affects student motivation for and engagement in learning. Several teachers said that students paid more attention to their studies and tried harder because they knew the community was involved and cared” (p. 27).

A handful of empirical studies that examine the link between the practice of PBE and its impact on student learning (Emekauwa, 2004; SEER, 2000 & 2005; Von Secker, 2004) have challenged the notion that time spent away from the popular approach of teaching to the test leads to falling test scores. The focus in one Louisiana (Emekauwa, 2004) and two California (SEER 2000 & 2005) studies looked directly at whether or not students who were exposed to a PBE-like approach would make gains on their states’ high-stakes tests compared to students who were part of a more traditional experience. Findings in all three studies supported the success of PBE in meeting standards. In the Louisiana study the findings were particularly well received by school administration because the district superintendent had specifically sought a new approach and banked that place-based learning would deliver. Additionally, many other studies have offered a look into a wide range of PBE implications including achievement motivation, student achievement, community engagement, student critical thinking skills, and student environmental literacy and stewardship (Athman & Monroe, 2004; Powers, 2004; Volk & Cheak, 2003).

Notable pockets of PBE exist throughout the Pacific Northwest, but in Eastern Washington State few schools or programs practice the pedagogy. One outdoor learning center in the River Valley School District (RVSD) (a pseudonym) strives to guide students’ learning and love for nature in this way. In this case study, the focus was on learning from the students
who have had many interactions over several years with the people and place that is the River Valley Outdoor Learning Center (RVOLC) (a pseudonym).

Two gaps exist in the literature. First, although the PBE literature represents educators’ and even administrators’ voices often, the voices of students who experience this type of learning firsthand are silent. At first look this gap may go unnoticed because many (Jennings et al., 2005; Powers, 2004; Volk & Cheak, 2003) have reported students’ reactions from the teachers’ or parents’ perspectives. Second, most of the PBE literature focuses on courses and programs in which students are immersed in the pedagogy full time. It is unclear what effect an ongoing, pull-out program that is combined with a more traditional educational experience may have on students. Much can be learned from listening to the experiences and unique stories of this study’s four student participants.

**Research Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore how two fifth grade and two sixth grade RVSD students experienced the RVOLC. Particular attention was paid to these students’ connection with and curiosity about RVOLC curriculum. Their relationship with the place that is the RVOLC and their connection with the outdoors were also important foci. Finally, students’ perception of their own contentment when learning at the RVOLC was explored.

Students’ reflections of their experiences offered information about what components of the RVOLC’s pull-out PBE program should continue to be supported in moving these and other students toward a stronger relationship with nature and a better awareness of their own wellness in connection to the outdoors. Additionally, components of the program that may have hindered these and other students’ experiences may provide valuable information to this and other PBE programs like it.
The questions that guided this case study included:

1) What are the students’, the educators’, and the parents’ perceptions of these students’ experiences of the RVOLC’s pull-out, place-based program?

   With particular attention paid to:

   • students’ connection with and curiosity about RVOLC curriculum
   • students’ relationship with the place that is the RVOLC
   • students’ connection with the outdoors
   • students’ perception of their own contentment when learning at the RVOLC

2) What has supported these and other students’ experiences at the RVOLC?

3) What has hindered these and other students’ experiences at the RVOLC?
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

One suburban school district’s outdoor learning center, referred to here as the RVOLC, provided the setting for exploring four students’ perspectives about their place-based experiences in this collective case study. The research literature discussed in the following sections provides a look at the current educational landscape, offers information about place-based pedagogies in particular, explores how the RVOLC situates itself within this context, and demonstrates the need for the proposed study. The first element in this discussion seeks to illustrate a wide range of educational theories and approaches used today. This illustration served as a theoretical lens that framed the study, one that explored the perspective of students who experienced diverse approaches. In the second section, PBE is defined, situated within the context of the educational landscape, and compared to a couple variations of its approach. A brief synthesis of the PBE literature concerned with student impacts concludes this section. Finally, a look at the RVOLC and how it fits into these various contexts is provided along with an explanation of the need for the proposed study.

The Current Educational Landscape: A Theoretical Lens

As noted earlier, the narrowing of curriculum and instruction as a result of NCLB legislation has had a marked effect on the diversity of teaching approaches employed by teachers today. In spite of the current testing culture, however, some schools and even many individual teachers depart from the path of teaching to the test. The following look at a small selection of educational theories along with examples of how those theories play out in practice is meant to offer one representation of a diverse educational landscape that represents classrooms today. The theoretical orientations were chosen purposely, from a traditional conception of education
all the way to educating for social change, in hopes of providing a lens through which RVOLC students’ perspectives can be understood. The landscape proved particularly useful in this study because RVOLC students were exposed to pedagogies along the entire landscape in one given day, especially if they traveled from a classroom setting to the local aquifer for a place-based lesson and back. While a seemingly infinite number of educational theories and teaching approaches could be explored as part of this landscape, the focus here is narrowed to three broad categories: (a) a traditional orientation that explores Thorndike’s theory that is founded on behavior control and examples of related traditional practices; (b) a reform or progressive orientation that first explores constructivism and how it plays out in practices that work to honor the learning theory, and next explores the closely related theory of situated learning and how it is practiced in experiential and project-method approaches; and finally, (c) a social justice orientation that explores critical pedagogy and how it plays out with problem-posing and dialogical methods.

A Traditional Orientation

Traditional instructional approaches are based on a behaviorist approach promoted by Thorndike. He is also recognized as being the founder of educational psychology, and his approach to teaching based on the repetition of stimulus-response has had a lasting influence on what many teachers practice today as part of a traditional teaching methodology.

Thorndike’s call for stimulus and response. Thorndike regarded teaching as a science primarily concerned with behavior control: “It is the first principle of education—to utilize any individual’s original nature as a means of changing him for the better—to produce in him the information, habits, powers, interests, and ideals which are desirable” (as cited in Rippa, 1988). Thorndike’s reference to an individual’s original nature is important because it was central to his
beliefs and recommendations for how teaching should be viewed. He felt intelligence was determined by nature, that a “person whose intellect is greater or higher than that of another person differs from him in the last analysis in having, not a new sort of physiological process, but simply a larger number of connections of the ordinary sort” (Thorndike, Bregman, Cobb, & Woodyard, 1926, p. 104). He defined these connections as the relationship between a stimulus and response, and because nature is largely the determiner of how many an individual has, exercise or emphatic drilling of a certain stimulus and response has the potential to strengthen the bond (Spring, 2008). This belief has significant implications on teaching and learning. First, because the number of connections signifies intelligence and because Thorndike believed that practicing could strengthen them, the teachers’ role and value came from their ability to control the stimuli. If the teacher is able to incorporate rigorous routines of recitation, then, it was believed, that pupils would get smarter. Second, because he believed the number of connections were easily measurable, he felt the scientifically constructed test was at the heart of the educational process (Spring, 2008).

Traditional teaching methodology. Traditional instruction is often characterized by a teacher-centered approach wherein the teacher is the authority (Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Povey, 2002) and learning activities place value on students finding, repeating or committing the correct answer to memory (Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Stipek et al., 2001). In a traditional classroom students usually work individually and sometimes in a competitive setting (Boaler, 1999). Assessments are concerned with whether or not students can give back information, and if they are able to repeat facts or concepts given to them through methods of instruction that represent repetitive practices of drilling or recitation (Bacevich et al., 2004). The early twentieth century influence of Thorndike is clear here because it closely resembles the stimulus-response pattern.
Examples may include the common practice of young students getting a spelling list on Monday, practicing the words through recitation or writing it down several times, and then being tested on their ability to spell the words in class on Friday’s written test. The way in which most of the learning activities are presented is often disconnected from students’ experiences and lives (Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Schoenfeld, 2002). The classroom setting of straight rows, structured rules, and a great deal of drilling on facts differs greatly from the reform movement.

The Reform or Progressive Movement

**Constructivism and social constructivism.** These learning theories sit a bit further left from the traditional conception of education and are grounded in the belief that people construct their knowledge based on their perceptions and social interactions. This way of thinking about student learning moves beyond what Thorndike characterized as a place where stimulus-response connections are key. Here a theory of the way students think is considered. One can look to constructivism, generally associated with Jean Piaget, as a conception of cognition concerned with the developmental stages a person experiences (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 1998). Children actively construct new knowledge based on their developmental stage and past experiences, thereby building constantly changing schema (Papalia et al., 1998). Therefore it is important that they learn with understanding rather than through recitation or facts drill. Cognitive constructivism directly challenges the idea that recitation or drilling facts with young students contributes to meaningful learning. Lev Vygotsky, who is generally associated with social constructivism, focused on the social or collaborative function of learning. He explained in his work:

> Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level and, later on, on the individual level; first, between people and then inside the child. This
applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57)

Vygotsky’s main assertion was that learning happens through social and cultural interactions; it is collaborative in that it cannot be separated from one’s affiliations.

**Constructivism in practice.** First the distinction must be made that constructivism is a theory of knowing, not a theory of teaching. The implication on practice follows that, “adopting a constructivist theory of knowing does not imply that all learning should be discovery oriented and that direct instruction should always be avoided” (Bransford, Derry, Berliner, & Hammerness, 2010, p. 53). In fact, Bransford (2000) has contended that facts do matter and can be communicated using the more traditional method of direct instruction, however, this must be done in a way that pays attention to why the facts are important and how they relate to the students’ ability to achieve competence or mastery of the subject. If teachers do not take care with framing the content around learning goals and broader concepts and instead try to impart too many disconnected facts in a short period of time, the “curricula [will] fail to support learning with understanding” (Bransford, 2000, p. 24). Teachers who take into account the constructivist view that people create new knowledge based on what they already know and believe will work to constantly assess students’ prior knowledge. Or, as Bransford (2000) describes in more detail:

Teachers need to pay attention to the incomplete understandings, the false beliefs and the naïve renditions of concepts that learners bring with them to a given subject. Teachers then need to build on these ideas in ways that help each student achieve a more mature
understanding. If students' initial ideas and beliefs are ignored, the understandings that they develop can be very different from what the teacher intends. (Bransford, 2000, p. 10)

This type of teaching honors what students bring with them to their learning. As a product of being informed by constructivist theory, this approach also acknowledges that learners thrive in communal contexts. The practice also assesses students’ progress toward mastery in formative and diverse ways.

**Situated learning.** Situated learning theorists (Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Lave, 1996; Putnam & Borko, 2000) have gone beyond constructivist philosophy in their assertion that “the physical and social contexts in which an activity takes place are an integral part of the activity, and the activity is an integral part of the learning that takes place within it” (Putnam & Borko, 2000, p. 4). The claim here is that learning is closely linked to the physical setting and the social interactions that serve as layers of the activity; these pieces contribute to how knowledge and skills are developed. Challenging the approach that views learning as an individual endeavor and cognitive capability as the acquisition of facts and concepts, Lave (1996) argued this view of learning is shortsighted as it ignores that we are inherently social, relational beings. Additionally, Boaler and Greeno (2000) have offered that in the example of learning mathematics, the trajectory of participation is what “learning mathematics is” (p. 172). In other words, students learn best through lived participation in a social context.

Both Lave (1996) and Boaler and Greeno (2000) have contrasted a socially situated approach with a more didactic, traditional education similar to what Thorndike’s theory informs. They have noted in their separate investigations that the traditional highly de-contextualized and individual focus hinders learning. By contrast, a situated learning orientation highlights the importance of “authentic classroom activities” that focus on students being occupied with that
which holds real-world or everyday applicability (Putnam & Borko, 2000). This has special significance when it is acknowledged that the most widely held purpose of education is to prepare students for life outside school and inspire a habit of learning even when formal education ceases. This mode of thinking about learning values “authentic activities [that] foster the kinds of thinking and problem-solving skills that are important in out-of-school settings” (Putnam & Borko, 2000, p. 5). Two approaches, experiential education and the project method, described below in turn, contribute well to how situated learning can be realized in practice.

**Experiential approach and the project method.** An experiential approach embraces both constructivist and situated learning thought in that it is based on the premise that it is essential for all educative experiences of children to be facilitated through action and through their direct experience with a local agent. The most famous and vocal proponent for experiential education is John Dewey. In his *Experience and Education* (1938) Dewey advised that “…the teacher should become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, occupation, etc. in order to utilize them as educational resources” (p. 40). In his recommendation, Dewey called for the replacement of traditional practices of students learning from textbooks and examples that provided little relevance to their lives. William Pinar (2005) has commented:

Dewey’s criticism of the classical curriculum was insightful and unrelenting. He said that a teacher who is crafting experiences from which students can construct their own learning must be concerned with and aware of the local—the place where the students live, work, play, and learn—and start from there. He pointed out that a teacher who takes a more didactic approach need not know any of this if the essential facts that are important for the student to know are inherently disconnected from the child’s life. He
argued that the child’s experience must form the basis of the curriculum, and in so doing synthesize the apparent antagonism between the two. (p. 9)

This call for a more experiential approach has been linked to the progressive school movement for over one hundred years.

Not unlike Dewey’s early twentieth century advocacy for experiential learning, William Kilpatrick’s call for a project method approach dates back to the early 1900’s. The main tenet of this method aligns closely with situated learning in that the focus should be on that which is a “wholehearted purposeful activity in a social situation as the typical unit of school procedure” (Kilpatrick, 1918, p. 320). According to Kilpatrick, the act of school and learning should Center on projects. Further, the most effective “purposeful activities,” Kilpatrick contended, are those the students themselves chose. Also like Dewey, Kilpatrick’s project method was in part a reaction to what he noticed as the failure of schools at the time to help students realize their potential. He noted that learning framed around relevant units of the students’ choosing “is the best guarantee of the child’s native capacities now too frequently wasted” (p. 334). Even though the project method was never realized on a broad scale, some schools today use the approach as a guide that frames all curriculum and instruction decisions (Robin, n.d.).

Educating for Social Change

Critical pedagogy. The point furthest removed from Thorndike’s theory and a traditional approach is critical pedagogy. Henry Giroux (2010) defined critical pedagogy as an "educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action." Critical pedagogy has been illustrated and examined through the works of Apple, Freire, Giroux, Haymes, hooks, Kincheloe, and McLaren among many others.
However, Kincheloe (2007) said it best by reminding us that “North Americans must be demanding in their efforts to make sure that Paulo Freire and his South/Latin American colleagues and progeny are viewed as the originators of this hallowed tradition” (p. 11). Two ideas that are central to the theory of critical pedagogy are discussed briefly here: (a) the notion of praxis as an educational goal, and (b) a re-imagining of the teacher-student relationship. For education to legitimately matter to the individual and especially to those who experience oppression, the notion of praxis is crucial. Freire (2000) referred to this concept as *Conscientização*, pronounced con.seen.cheese.a.so., or “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). This quality and practice are what every educator should hone and strive for always, according to Freire. A different conception of the teacher-student relationship must also occur for students to feel comfortable, valid, and empowered to think for themselves and to think critically about what is happening in the world around them as part of critical pedagogy. Freire (2000) offered a definition of new roles as “teacher-student” and “student-teacher” instead of a more traditional perspective, “The students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (p. 81). To Freire, students should always be active learners who internalize the problems and link them to their prior experiences. They should increase awareness, construct knowledge, dialogue, teach each other and the *teacher* and learn from each other.

**Problem-posing education and dialogics.** Two teaching methods that guide the practice of this social change orientation to education were offered by Freire and are discussed briefly next: (a) a problem-posing approach, and (b) a dialogical practice. A problem-posing focus is an important part of critical pedagogy that underscores the practice of framing all learning
around where the student fits in the context of current world social justice issues. “In 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” (Freire, 2000, p. 82). Students learn along 
with the teacher how to think, to reflect on their lives, experiences, and the activities of others 
around them. Also, in critical pedagogy, using a dialogical approach is vital. Freire (2000) 
contrasted dialogue with a traditional approach, warning that it too can easily revert into a mere 
transmission of knowledge:

Since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers 
are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue 
cannot be reduced to the act of one person’s “depositing” ideas in another, nor can it 
become a simple exchange of ideas to be “consumed” by the discussants (p. 89).

In other words, the teacher should not use the act and process of discussion as a guise for 
imparting information or trying to get students to subscribe to a certain way of thinking. For 
critical thinking to take place, the learning environment must be a human one that adheres to the 
precepts of democracy. All players need access to power:

The important thing, from the point of view of libertarian education, is for the people to 
come to feel like masters of their thinking by discussing the thinking and views of the 
world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their 
comrades (Freire, 2000, p. 124).

Critical pedagogy serves as the far left bookend to this illustration of the educational 
landscape that includes a traditional orientation, a reform orientation, and an educational 
orientation concerned with social justice issues. This landscape has offered a lens through which
the RVOLC’s students’ perspectives about their experiences and unique stories can be explored and better understood, especially given that the student participants of the study are exposed to various modes.

**Place-Based Education**

Place-based education began emerging in the literature only in the late 1990s as a pedagogical approach per se, even though its roots run deep in many other well-documented practices of progressive education dating back to Dewey in the early 1900’s. The earliest writings using the term PBE emerged after 1995. With that in mind, the literature here is primarily from the 2000’s. A brief exploration of the nuances of PBE and several examples of the practice make up the following section. Additionally, a look into where PBE fits into the context of the previously described educational landscape is offered, and variations on the practice as well as a summary of the literature that explores PBE student impacts is presented.

**Definition**

David Sobel’s explanation of PBE is accessible and widely recognized: “Place-based education is the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum” (2005, p. 7). Teaching approaches related to PBE—project-based learning, service learning, and interdisciplinary studies to name a few—have often been misidentified as place-based when they lack crucial PBE elements. Because PBE is an approach unique to the local setting and therefore very diverse, its practice can be easily misrepresented and misunderstood. Many celebrate this lack of cookie-cutter definition (Bishop, 2004; Jennings et al., 2005; Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2005) and others warn of the dangers in succumbing to it (Gruenewald, 2003; Smith 2002). However, a common theme in PBE is that this pedagogy is highly dependent on
the context of the local environment, and is almost always grounded in the layered interaction of many individuals from the wider community—local watershed educators, representatives from the Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and park rangers, for example. Place-based learning can consist of an adventurous writing workshop in remote Northern Canada (Asfeldt, Urberg, & Henderson, 2009), an urban, multi-cultural garden project helping displaced children (Cutter-Mackenzie, 2009), or an English/science combination course journaling activity that allows students to witness Sandhill Cranes making their spring visit to a protected wetland (Bishop, 2004).

As evidenced by these examples, the physical setting for place-based learning is not limited to expansive open land in rural areas. Tolbert and Theobald (2006) have provided a look into how PBE in seven urban centers may offer a much-needed solution to neighborhoods in decay. One of the programs they highlighted showed how eighth graders, while on an excursion to the Minnesota River, discovered numerous deformed frogs, forwarded the information to the University of Minnesota, and later the environmental issue became news around the world. Another example showed how Cabrini-Green residents, before the complete demolition of the projects in 2011, reclaimed their place by investigating abandoned parts of the nearby school before it was scheduled to be bulldozed. Cabrini-Green was a Chicago public housing project built in the 1940’s that accommodated 15,000 low-income residents at its peak. Through the years the project’s name became synonymous with rampant violence and crimes. Several intriguing historical documents were discovered that helped the students piece together a bit of their history. The authors here, one of whom, Paul Theobald, has been credited with coining the term place-based education back in 1997 (Gruenewald, 2005), make the plea for educators to join in re-writing the story of “America’s passed-over urban places” (p. 274).
One could argue the most poignant potential of PBE is realized when a place-based approach helps to re-write the stories of its teachers/students and the places they inhabit (Asfeldt, Urberg & Henderson, 2009; Cutter-Mackenzie, 2009; Senechal, 2007; Sorensen, 2007; Tolbert & Theobald, 2006; Volk & Cheak, 2003; Von Secker, 2004). Since this pedagogy calls into question the readily accepted, dominant culture, capitalist ideology of preparing students for work, teachers are free to pursue the possibility of working toward more lofty goals. Inspiring students’ reinhabitation (Gruenewald, 2003) of their place and developing students’ critical awareness that calls into question oppressive hegemones among them. Teachers using a place-based approach are able to affect greater agency in their students and themselves. As an example of this, Asfeldt, Urberg, and Henderson (2009) express an explicit end goal of their journey to the remote Canadian north: “As educators promoting place-consciousness, stories of the place are essential. Without them, the landscape is at risk of appearing empty, which makes it more vulnerable to myriad human abuses” (p. 37). The diversity of PBE experiences is apparent through these examples, but what is common to all of them is the learning begins with the place that is relevant and close to the students.

**PBE and the Educational Landscape**

Tolbert and Theobald (2006) have offered that literature endorsing a place-based pedagogy either (a) describes it as an approach that pays attention to what is known about how kids learn, e.g. experientially, through their own discoveries, and amid a connection with different types of intelligences, or (b) recommends it as a way to better focus on what the end goal of an educated citizenry should represent: more than just a ready workforce (p. 271). These views illustrate the close ties PBE has to constructivism, situated and experiential learning. Similar to the experiential lessons Dewey advocated, a place-based approach has students start
with that which is closest to them and surrounds them daily. The hope is that through learning about their place, students will come to care about it and advocate for it. The questions What happened here? and What should be happening here? are always present in place-based learning. Also, PBE overlaps with the project method in that the focus is on that which students are closest to, that which has consequence in their lives. Learning is sometimes framed or facilitated around projects students chose and that could affect the communities in which they live.

PBE’s position on the educational landscape may be described as securely in the midst of constructivist theory, situated learning, and the experiential and project methods. One may argue, however, that PBE deserves a spot a bit more progressive than the aforementioned practices because of its added focus on sustainability education and community activism.

Variations

Place-based education shares traits with environmental education (EE), expeditionary learning, community-based learning, service learning, sustainability education, bioregional education and rural and indigenous education projects (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Bowers, 2006; Gruenewald, 2007; Powers, 2004; Smith, 2007; Sobel, 2005) and can represent widely different experiences for students. Now that it has been established that PBE is always rooted in the local place and is usually interdisciplinary in its approach, it is important to take a closer look at variations of this practice. It is hard to describe PBE as a new pedagogy when one examines the many approaches it borrows philosophy and focus from—environmental and outdoor education, and a critical pedagogy of place make up the three highlighted here along with a look at the different structures of programs offered to students.

Environmental and outdoor education. In much of the PBE literature, EE is mentioned. There seems to be a collective commitment in how PBE is differentiated from EE:
EE, on the one hand, concerns itself with environmental prophesies and catastrophes, usually in the context of studying science (Sobel, 2005; Smith, 2002; Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000). Place-based education, on the other hand, supports a more holistic approach that helps students get to know their place, a place that may be healthy and thriving, while spending time in it, usually while engaging in interdisciplinary studies. EE often takes place indoors in a traditional classroom context. Outdoor education is a broader term than EE that can be described as instruction directed toward developing a citizenry prepared to live well in a place without destroying it (Orr, 1992). The main purpose of outdoor education is to “provide meaningful relevant experiences in both natural and constructed environments that complement and expand classroom instruction, which tends to be dominated by print and electronic media” (Knapp, 1996, p. ix). Outdoor education is usually grounded in science courses, unlike PBE, which almost always is interdisciplinary. The distinctions between EE, PBE and outdoor education are slight but important and largely agreed upon in the literature.

**Critical pedagogy of place.** David Gruenewald (2003), with influence from critical educators before him, has proposed a critical pedagogy of place (CPP). In his call for CPP, Gruenewald (2003) first provided an analysis of both the critical pedagogy and ecological PBE traditions, highlighting their strengths and pointing out what each neglects to do. He examined the tensions within as well as between the two distinct approaches. He asserted that educators must pay attention to the goals of both, not one or the other, and to do this a CPP must be considered. The claim here is that while critical pedagogy has been deeply invested in examining and challenging social justice issues, it has been silent in regards to the health of our physical environment, our non-human neighbors. PBE, too, has neglected areas where more attentiveness would make good sense. PBE has developed an emphasis “that is often insulated
from the cultural conflicts inherent in dominant American culture” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 4). Gruenewald (2003) contended that both practices can benefit by borrowing from each other. He described the twin objectives of a critical pedagogy of place as “decolonization” and “reinhabitation” and called on all practitioners to reflect on these dual goals as more authentic and worthy educational outcomes. Broadly conceived, the term reinhabitation is associated with PBE while decolonization closely matches critical pedagogy goals. The educative experience that pays attention to both should therefore:

aim to (a) identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments—reinhabitation; and (b) identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places—decolonization. (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 9)

Greenwood (2009) adds to his conception of critical pedagogy of place by offering a specific conceptual approach for rural educators in particular that speaks to the decolonization aspect of CPP. He draws on commonalities of rural and Indigenous peoples’ struggle to overcome and oppose colonization wherein those in rural communities can learn from Native survivance (resistance to succumb or assimilate to dominant White culture). He contends this connection is an easy one because of both groups’ shared relationship with place and shared hardships due to “human and natural resource exploitation” (p. 4). Greenwood (2009) leaves the reader with perhaps another nuance to his earlier framework of critical pedagogy of place. Here he notes:

Critical place-based education is not merely about making school more meaningful or contributing to community life. It is about remembering a deeper and wider narrative of living and learning in connection with others and with the land. It is about resisting the
colonizing erasures and enclosures of schooling that make such remembering seem impractical and unnecessary. (p. 5)

Greenwood’s call here for all those touched by the educational community to be catalysts for challenging the existing school system and shifting the focus to honor moral and human obligations to the land and history of colonizing behavior that has taken place there has met some resistance in the literature. Stevenson (2008) for one notes the two most documented critiques—it being too theoretical and lacking practical guidance for teachers, and it venturing too far from the goal of environmental stewardship. Further variations on this more critical frame for PBE are present in the literature and, along with them come slightly different terminology which highlights their nuances—place-conscious education and place-responsive education, among them. This can contribute to a great deal of confusion, especially for educational stakeholders investigating these approaches for the first time.

**Full Immersion and Pull-out Models**

The duration of students’ exposure to a place-based model, over the course of their school day and over the course of their school years, represents another variation to practice. Examinations of school-wide PBE approaches are most common in the literature (SEER 2000, 2005; Sorensen, 2007; Swaminathan, 2004; VonSecker, 2004), but district-wide (Emekauwa, 2004), grade-level (Volk & Cheak, 2003), and even college-level PBE courses (Asfeldt et al., 2009; Knapp, 2007) are also explored. In contrast to these immersion PBE models, Elaine Senechal (2007) has offered a first-person account of how she took it upon herself to reframe her science curriculum to have a place-based focus. In this example, her secondary students experienced the approach during one period of their secondary school day, not entirely unlike an exposure in which students are temporarily pulled out of their routine classes. Similarly, one
action research study (Swayze, 2009) was conducted that was interested in the effects and
success of an informal, voluntary and extra-curricular environmental education experience that
focused on the local places and cultural values important to an adolescent Indigenous population
displaced by new construction developments. These final two are the exception to the rule of the
literature that looks mostly at more comprehensive PBE programs where students are fully
immersed all day every day in this kind of learning. Similar to Senechal (2007) and Swayze’s
(2009) contexts, students at the RVOLC experienced the pedagogy in a pull-out model where,
throughout their elementary school career, all RVSD students traveled to the Center for lessons
each year. This unique combination of diverse approaches—a traditional classroom experience
that is supplemented with place-based lessons several times each year from kindergarten through
fifth grade—reflects a model not represented in the PBE literature. Now that PBE has been
defined, situated on the educational landscape, and explored through variations of its practice, it
is time to look at the literature which begins to illuminate the effects of such a practice.

**Place-Based Impacts**

The following section will be limited to a specific look at student impacts even though
effects on communities (Smith, 2007; Sobel, 2005; Smith & Sobel, 2010) and teachers (Jennings
et al., 2005; Powers, 2004; Smith, 2007; Thomas, 2005) are also well represented in the
literature. As pressure for districts to help all students reach standard remains constant, PBE
program implementation is sometimes turned to in hopes of raising test scores (Emekauwa,
2004). In addition to the number of studies concerned primarily with examining the positive
relationship between PBE and student achievement as measured by test scores (Emekauwa,
2004; SEER, 2000 & 2005; Von Secker, 2004) discussed earlier, findings from empirical, place-
based studies (Powers, 2004; Toth-King & Marcinkowski, 1996; Volk & Cheak, 2003) and
stories of PBE programs (Haymes, 1995; Sorensen, 2007; Smith, 2007; Swaminathan, 2004; Swayze, 2009) alike reveal discoveries researchers sometimes were not expecting—noticeable gains for students with disabilities, special education students, or students relegated to the margins of society because of race or class.

One empirical study looked at the Pine Jog Model School, part of the EE Program in Palm Beach County, Florida (Toth-King & Marcinkowski, 1996). A mixed-method investigation was conducted that found across-the-board achievement increases for students involved in the program, but, “the greatest gains in achievement, however, showed up in the urban schools with large numbers of minority students and students from groups low on the socioeconomic scale” (p. 85). Additionally, special needs, at-risk, and “lower ability” students were shown to gain skills and confidence that, in one case, caused a student to be exited from the school’s special needs program in the Investigating and Evaluating Environmental Issues and Actions (IEEIA) program at a public elementary school on the island of Molokai, Hawaii (Volk & Cheak, 2003). Authors pointed to the sense of student control as a reason learners excelled. Powers (2004) has shared that perhaps one of the most interesting findings in her evaluative study was one the team wasn’t looking for. A strong connection surfaced between the community-based learning experiences and “student motivation toward learning” particularly in special needs students. Additionally, some place-based approaches can be grounded in the pursuit of social justice, and these quests can affect far more than just student performance (Asfeldt et al., 2009; Cutter-Mackenzie, 2009; Senechal, 2007; Sorensen, 2007, Swayze, 2009).

The RVOLC

The RVOLC opened its doors in 2001, funded in part by money from the Fish and Wildlife Aquatic Lands Enhancement. From its inception it has operated under the direction and
staffing of the RVSD, spending the majority of its resources on lessons, trips, and professional development aimed at serving its district’s four elementary schools. During the 2009-10 school year, the RVOLC served 10,000 pre-K-college students. Most of these students were in kindergarten through fifth grade and attended school in the district that funded and staffed the Center. The Center extended its services to students and teachers from nearby school districts as well, one of which was the second largest in Washington State. In the following section an explanation of the RVOLC’s mission and goals is offered, a look into how the RVOLC supports its district in meeting NCLB testing demands is presented, and a critique of how the RVOLC situates itself within the aforementioned PBE definitions and variations is given.

The stated goals of the Center include an awareness of the local place and conservation of that place. These goals go beyond an EE focus to include time in nature exploring local, non-human neighbors. The Center’s brochure and mission statement were clear about wanting to provide an “outdoor experience” for teachers and their students within the context of NCLB pressures. Their website reads in part:

The mission of the RVOLC is to instill an appreciation for fish, wildlife and our natural resources by giving teachers and students an opportunity to have experiences in an outdoor setting… Students visiting the RVOLC engage in inquiry-based learning while applying math, reading, writing and critical thinking skills as they investigate their natural world. All of our programs and curriculum are aligned with the Washington State Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALR).

In 2010, RVOLC educators, together with RVSD fifth grade teachers, re-examined the Center’s alignment to a new set of science standards. These new standards were to be assessed by the Measurement of Student Progress (MSP) science test to be given to fifth graders across
Washington State in the spring of 2011. Even though quantitative statistics cannot be run comparing test results from the spring of 2011 to any year before that due to different standards being tested (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction email correspondence), scores from the elementary school adjacent to the learning Center jumped from 34.9% passing in 2009-10 to 88.9% passing in 2010-11 after students participated in the newly aligned lessons. This example closely resembles the discussion in the PBE literature regarding the importance of working within the confines of the current educational climate in order to realize PBE as a viable approach in the context of that climate (Gruenewald, 2005; Jennings et al., 2005; Smith, 2007; Stevenson, 2007; Thomas, 2005). As a result of RVOLC educators and RVSD teachers identifying the Center as a potential vehicle for boosting the district’s MSP fifth grade science scores, the re-designed lessons still reflected a PBE approach in how experiential, interdisciplinary and locally grounded they were, but they also represented the hopes of a district in raising science MSP scores.

Like many programs in the PBE and wider EE literature, the RVOLC does not fit into a neat box under one exclusive teaching approach or framework. It can be best described as being firmly situated within PBE in most respects with an EE focus. The Center is an example of PBE because the learning there strives to be rooted in the local place, inquiry and experientially-based, and interdisciplinary. The RVOLC’s practices rely on the local place as the primary source for learning. Local newspaper articles (Howard, 2006; Leaming, 2004) that followed RVOLC students noted connections to classroom learning and commented on how the students’ quests to find certain types rocks brought to life what they had been working on in the classroom for the past month:
This is stuff they see in the classroom, and then all of a sudden they're seeing evidence that it really does exist out here. “No matter how many rocks you bring into the classroom, they really can't see until they get out here,” [the teacher] said.

(Leaming, 2004)

Both of the regular classroom teachers on these fieldtrips shared the RVOLC educators’ urgency in taking the learning out to the local place. The Center’s experiences are particularly place-based when they go beyond forging connections to the classroom and students’ lives, and they help students see the link between their place and larger environmental issues. Environmental sustainability and conservation are often foci, but the staff does not scare students with cataclysmic scenarios or use fear to motivate them to act. The Center and its staff do not profess any social justice goals, but equal access to outdoor spaces and clean water is definitely a subplot of many of their teachings. The learning at the RVOLC can also be considered as having an EE focus because although some reading, writing, math, and art are infused into its curriculum, the majority of the lessons have a strong science base. Students are often asked to conduct experiments, make hypotheses, and draw conclusions. The RVOLC PBE/EE approach strives to create moments for students to interact with learning in a way that encourages them to take a more active role in their learning and their places, what Gruenewald (2003) would refer to as reinhabitation, but falls short of his call to also focus on decolonization.

Within the context of this look at the PBE literature, it becomes clear how this study may contribute to the research in two important ways. First, in nearly all the studies mentioned where PBE student impacts were reported, firsthand student voices are missing. This lack of perspective that comes directly from the student is not uncommon. It seems, in fact, the only times students are heard from are through surveys (Volk & Cheak, 2003) and test scores
(Emekauwa, 2004; SEER, 2000 & 2005; Toth-King & Marcinkowski, 1996; Volk & Cheak, 2003; Von Secker, 2004). The one noteworthy exception that does provide firsthand accounts from the students themselves is Swaminathan’s (2004) study that shares at-risk students’ perspectives on their move to an alternative program. In interviews students acknowledge the importance of having a place of their own and having a community activist component to their learning. The lack of student voice in most of the literature highlights one important need for this study. Because hearing from the students themselves about their learning and their lives is so rare, a case study that focuses on understanding how they experience PBE firsthand has potential to contribute in an important way to the existing literature.

Second, as the synthesis of literature concerned with the structure of PBE programs revealed, studies concerned with pull-out programs where students experience PBE along with other teaching approaches are not represented in the literature. It seems that because a pull-out model may represent a more feasible mode of implementation to administrators, teachers and other stakeholders, exploring the student impacts of such a program may offer an important contribution to the literature.

Taken together, the mission and stated goals of the RVOLC that were rooted in a PBE approach, the physical setting that offered a remarkable opportunity for students to connect with nature, and the arranged visits that ensured all students visited throughout their elementary years, offered a rich environment from which this study can learn.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Educational research must always work to keep in mind that which matters most: the students’ and community’s wellness. Karl Hostetler (2005) has corroborated this by adding, “Good education research is a matter not only of sound procedures but also of beneficial aims and results; our ultimate aim as researchers and educators is to serve people’s well-being” (16). This study concerned itself specifically with the well-being of the RVSD community and in particular, its students. The RVOLC educators and classroom teachers identified four students who they perceived as being positively impacted by the center for this study. By listening to and learning from these four student and their stories about their relationship with the RVOLC, it is hoped RVOLC stakeholders may take away lessons that can help inform practice there. Perhaps even other PBE programs that may be consumers of this research will benefit from this in-depth look into these four students’ lives and a place they have come to care a great deal about.

Multiple voices worked together to build these students’ stories; they included the students themselves, their parents, RVOLC educators, and one student participant’s classroom teacher. The data from the four student participants themselves provided the focal point of the construction of their stories—their interview responses and observations of them grounded their stories in their own perceptions. The RVOLC educators, the students’ parents, and the classroom teacher data provided additional perceptions, sometimes similar to and sometimes different from the students’ own. In the first section of this chapter, the research design will be explored as it is founded upon the study’s purpose. Following this section, subsequent topics will include the researcher’s role, participants and recruitment procedures, data collection, and analysis methods.
Research Design

The purpose of this study was to understand how four upper elementary-aged students experienced and reflected on their PBE experiences at their district’s outdoor learning center. The students’ experience was explored primarily through their own perceptions and secondarily through the educators’ and parents’ perspectives. Merriam (2009) has stated that case study methodology has a distinct advantage over other methods for answering the “how” and “why” questions—especially if the variables reveal themselves through the study and were not readily apparent in the beginning. Case studies are not chosen randomly; they are specifically chosen because their particular characteristics are of great interest to the researcher (Merriam, 2002). Because the RVOLC practiced PBE in a pull-out model that reached the district’s students throughout their elementary years, these fifth and sixth grade students were of particular interest for their ability to collectively contribute understanding about how such an experience impacted their own well-being and how the RVOLC may work better to positively influence future students. This study’s learning was concentrated around four students’ stories—two fifth graders and two sixth graders—who were identified by RVOLC educators’ and classroom teachers’ perceptions as individuals who had been positively impacted by the RVOLC. Taken together, these four students’ perceptions and the educator and parent perceptions offered a detailed account of the students’ experiences at the RVOLC and how those experiences were connected to the place, its curriculum and the people that made it what it was.

Creswell (2007) offers a thorough definition that can further contribute to understanding why case study methodology was chosen for this research:

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed,
in-depth data collection involving *multiple sources of information* (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and cased-based themes. (p. 73, emphasis in original)

The four students in this research interacted with me over a period of several months. The students’ firsthand accounts of their feelings about and relationship with the RVOLC provided the primary source of the data in constructing their stories. Perspectives from RVOLC educators, one student’s classroom teacher, and their parents provided additional perceptions about the students’ experiences. In this way several perspectives and multiple sources of information came together over time to offer a picture of these four students’ stories. Because case studies are “anchored in real-life situations” (Merriam, 2009, p. 51) they provide rich accounts of a phenomenon that is being studied. Strengths of a case study design include the ability of the reader to learn vicariously through another’s situation.

This was a collective case study (Stake, 2005), with information gathered through documents, semi-structured interviews and observations, that was concerned with how four students experienced the RVOLC. Similar to an instrumental case study, the collective case study considers a number of cases that are studied "to investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition" (Stake, 2005, p. 445). Denzin and Lincoln (2007) agree that “researchers may study a number of cases jointly in order to inquire into the phenomenon, population, or general condition” (p. 89). Unlike intrinsic cases which are chosen for the inherent interest in one typical or unique example or case, the four students carefully selected in this study shared their reflections and contributed together to a better understanding of what they all had in common—a bond with the RVOLC. The four students chosen here were not chosen because they were typical or because they were incredibly unique; they were chosen because they offered the best
opportunity from which to learn (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007; Stake, 1995). The RVOLC’s students’ wellness and the community they lived in were the main characters of this story. It is hoped that we may learn from them to help others like them in their district. Further, if lessons can be gleaned for other outdoor learning centers to learn from, that would represent an important contribution to the literature.

**Researcher’s Role**

The researcher makes critical decisions about interviews, observations, participation, timeline, and even presentation of the findings (Stake, 2005). The researcher is the person with whom the buck stops in terms of planning collaboration sessions, data collection efforts, and data analysis designs. For example, the researcher has to decide how much of the findings will be included in a story, how much will be declared to the reader or the reader will infer, how much generalizing will be done and how much this case will be compared to others. The researcher must acknowledge this role and its potential to affect the outcomes of the study. In the description below, I explain the awareness, experiences, and perspectives that defined my role in this study.

As a university researcher I had to be aware that I was an adult outsider in my participants’ worlds, especially my student and parent participants. I took careful steps to learn about the young person being interviewed and I offered relevant pieces of information about myself when it was appropriate. For example, I talked about my young daughter and her love for ballet when one participant mentioned that a younger sibling had just come from a ballet lesson. When the student participants asked how and why I became interested in the RVOLC, I felt it was relevant for me to mention I had been a teacher for many years and that I also have a love
for nature and protecting it. Even with these personal experiences and feelings, I always worked to listen to what the students had to say, not only to that which I wished to hear.

The choice of RVOLC was both purposive in that it offered insight into PBE and also convenient as it was part of a community with which I was already familiar. I knew the district well because as a teacher candidate seeking certification in the mid 1990’s, I chose to complete all of my teaching practicums in a secondary alternative program within it. Additionally, over the past two years, I have been learning from and participating in events the RVOLC hosted. I have established a rapport and friendship with the Center director and its educators. Throughout my time spent at the RVOLC, I hope that I conveyed my genuine interest and appreciation for the work being carried out there.

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) have described an interpretive researcher as someone who “understands that research is an interactive process shaped by his or her own personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting” (p. 8). While I worked hard to learn alongside RVOLC students and educators, I also acknowledged and made use of the personal history that has shaped who I am as an educator and researcher. My eleven years as a secondary English teacher and eight years as an instructor at a local school of education made me an insider in the world of education in many ways. This insider status was a helpful resource at times, but also required me to be mindful of ways it might bias my understanding of student or educator perspectives. My advocacy for students from underserved populations during my K-12 teaching days was also a factor that I remained cognizant of. Perhaps the strongest contributor to the potential for bias, however, rested in the way in which I felt passionately about living a healthy, active and outdoor life that is closely linked to caring about the non-human neighbors that share it.
In an effort to keep researcher bias at bay, I made changes in the study’s research design when I felt a need to do so. For instance, while the first round of student interviews were interesting and provided rich detail toward understanding my first research question well, I felt the young students needed some help with the research questions that wanted to explore RVOLC supports and hindrances. To make sure I did not fill in blanks in any way with my own educator knowledge, I added both the parent focus group interview and one student’s classroom teacher interview to the research design. I also took care to walk the participants, the students especially, through the member check process by meeting with them and bringing hard copies of their first interview transcripts to ensure they knew how to complete the task. The most important factor in fending off potential bias, however, came from the fact that the final research design included data from documents, interviews and observations and perspectives from the students themselves primarily, and also the educators and parents. Through the use of introspection, mindfulness, and my data collection and representation approach, I made every effort to ensure rich results that reflected both my history and the participants’ perspectives.

Participants

Although the focus of this study was students’ stories about how they have been influenced by their time at the RVOLC, many voices contributed data. These voices included the places themselves, the two fifth grade and two sixth grade RVSD student participants, the student participants’ parents, and educators—six from the RVOLC and one of the participant’s classroom teachers.

Place as Participant

The RVOLC site itself deserved special attention as part of the proposed study. van Eijck and Roth (2010) have suggested that place takes on an identity shaped by the experiences people
have and stories they construct with it:

    Place [i]s a living entity- place is not only the multitude of voices and the narratives they
    enact in which the material place comes to be refracted and ideologically reflected. These
    voices collectively represent the place. (p. 881)

The grounds, buildings, trees, streams, and animals of the RVOLC were given special attention
in my study. I spent time in them. I conducted the interviews as much as was possible in them
and I gave the four student participants in particular several opportunities to describe the place
and what it meant to them. In PBE, the physical place that is being experienced, studied, and
preserved, matters. A stated goal of PBE is that the local place provides the curriculum and the
context for students’ learning (Smith, 2002, 2007; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Sobel, 2005). For
example, many times in PBE, students take part and sometimes research, plan, and carry out the
restoration of a place (Senechal, 2007; Tolbert & Theobald, 2006; Volk & Cheak, 2003). Surely
then the place should be considered as a participant in the learning, the transformation, the
research. It, too, has a story to tell.

    Place is not simply a location that we can identify by listening to a single voice, however,
    even if it does belong to the place itself. “It is a location unfolding in time just because people
    inhabit, visit, rebuild, make, enjoy, sorrow [sic], describe, and recount, hence live it, by which it
    is articulated by a multitude of voices” (van Eijck & Roth, 2010, p. 882). Given that the voices
    and perspectives representing one single place can be infinitely complex, care was taken with the
    story of the place because it can be so easily misrepresented. Also, what complicates the
    representation further is the fact that perspectives are constantly in flux. People’s relationships
    with place and the place itself continually evolve; even a representation of the place that includes
    multiple perspectives will never be “correct” or even true.
For consideration in this study the many voices that contributed to the conception of the RVOLC included at the very least: the place itself, the students and educators and I with my bias. At times it also involved community partnerships, curriculum, history, and power structures and effects. An example of one researcher’s layered picture of place offers insight into the depth of perspective possible:

Place can be read in so many different ways. When I look out my work office window I see a cathedral and the museum prominent on the landscape and I can’t help but think of them as instruments of colonization; I see motorways carrying traffic that have been constructed along gullies and over rivers that no longer exist; I see the old sports ground that has been converted into a carpark for university students; and I imagine battles raging over the hilltops—before and after colonization. This was, and continues to be, a place that is contested in many ways—historically, environmentally, geographically.

(Kincheloe et al., 2006, p. 145)

Taking care to listen to the place that was the RVOLC and the many voices that contributed to the dynamic conception of the place was of vital importance in relating the whole story of the Center and these fours students’ experience of it.

The RVOLC

The RVOLC offered a rich site for studying PBE practices. The Center’s surroundings (see Figures 3.1-3.4) provided hands-on opportunities for students learning about local plants, animals, water systems, and Native American history. Lessons there had an environmental bent, but were not focused on catastrophic prophesies. And the learning was local—examining the aquifer, local birds of prey, the effects of a large-scale 2008 community fire, and a nearby
wildlife refuge. RVOLC’s physical grounds and experiences have been well documented in local newspapers:

At RVOLC, students have access to the district’s four-acre campus, which has a nature trail, a footbridge, classroom buildings and a hawk and owl sanctuary. Students in the district also work with biologists and volunteers to track mule deer, map habitat, install barn owl nest boxes and raise hatchery trout. (Leaming, 2004)

Figures 3.1-3.4. River Valley Outdoor Learning Center Photographs. Figure 3.1 is the large wooden sign that greets students at one of the entrances. Figure 3.2 is a student taking data from a RVOLC tree. Figure 3.3 is a wooden footbridge that crosses the stream at the RVOLC. Figure 3.4 is one of hawks who educates the community as part of the Center’s Hawk & Owl Outreach Talks (HOOT) program.
The RVOLC opened its doors in 2001, funded in part by money from a federal grant, which they have received multiple times now. One tenacious public school administrator within the mostly suburban but not affluent district had visions of a nature Center being built on unused grounds adjacent to one of its elementary schools. He went to the Inland Northwest Wildlife Council to garner support. Shortly after, the district superintendent, together with the administrator, wrote the Aquatic Lands Enhancement Account grant. Once they received this major grant, the founding members secured enough additional funds to get the project up and running, and they soon broke ground. Now, three large log cabin-like buildings and a giant Native American Tipi serve as student learning laboratories and homes to all kinds of animals (see Figures 3.5 & 3.6). This wooded area close to the city’s river offered a rich setting for suburban students to get closer to nature.

**Figure 3.5**  
River Valley Outdoor Learning Center Photographs. Figure 3.5 is one of the two log cabin style buildings where the Center’s offices and a large *classroom* are housed. Figure 3.6 is a Native American Tipi located at the Center’s southernmost edge.

**Mountain Peak Learning Center (MPLC) (a pseudonym)**

In addition to WVSD students experiencing PBE lessons at the RVOLC throughout their elementary school years, the Center educators arranged and accompanied all fifth graders in the
district on a three-day, two-night culminating outdoor experience at the MPLC during the month of June one week before the end of the school year. The MPLC facility had a main lodge, including a full-service kitchen and dining hall, and a 100-bed dormitory and campfire area. In total, four big buildings made up the MPLC with wide-open grassy spaces in between and all around them. While all of the main comforts were provided for at this mountain camp facility, the terrain was natural, not overly manicured, and the buildings were functional and were designed to leave as little of an ecological footprint as possible. The facility was situated near the top of a mountain only a few miles from a popular ski resort that is frequented by people from all over Eastern Washington State and the entire Pacific Northwest (see Figures 3.7 & 3.8). In 2003, the state school principals association opened the MPLC to provide outdoor and leadership education programs to students in Eastern Washington.

![Figure 3.7](image1) ![Figure 3.8](image2)

*Figures 3.7 and 3.8. Mountain Peak Learning Center Photographs.* Figure 3.7 is the main building of the learning Center that houses the large dining hall and the Center’s main offices. Just beyond and to the right in the same photograph is the Learning Studio building that has four indoor classrooms, a media Center and library. Figure 3.8 is the open grassy space beyond the dormitories (not pictured). In the distance of the photograph a basketball hoop can be seen which is butted up next to a fire pit that is encircled by wood sitting benches. There is a covered picnic and outdoor cooking area there as well. Most of the trails that lead hikers out to explore the mountain are accessed by walking just beyond this open area.
Over its ten-year history approximately 70-80 percent of MPLC clients have been school groups. The MPLC offered programs which ranged in durations from three hours to three days. On any given day students spent time learning about self-discovery, leadership, personal development, team development, and communication behaviors in addition to experiencing the plant and wildlife that call the mountain home.

**RVOLC Students**

This study used purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2008), which means the participants were chosen intentionally for their potential to offer relevant information in response to the research questions. Four students, two from fifth and two from sixth grade, were chosen for the study. The students from both grade levels were selected based on their continuous enrollment in the district from kindergarten through their current grade. Additionally, students were chosen based on RVOLC educator and classroom teacher recommendations that grew out of asking the educators to think of students who have been “positively affected” by the Center. As explained below, an “RVOLC Study Student Selection Criteria” (See Appendix C) list was developed with the help of RVOLC educators and fifth grade classroom teachers and was emailed to all the relevant teachers in the district who were in a position to make student recommendations.

The reason for the age spread was purposeful. Because RVSD students visited the Center from kindergarten through fifth grade, the hope was to get varied perspectives. The fifth grade participants were interviewed for the first time in the spring of their fifth grade year and one final time after they had participated in the RVOLC culminating experience at MPLC. During their final interview, the fifth grade students knew that their interactions with the Center had reached their formal end. For these students, their final interview offered a time to look back and reflect on something which had just concluded. The sixth grade students have had no required or
formal lessons with the Center during this, their first middle school year. Their interview was not preceded by an observation for this reason. Their perspective offered how they had experienced the RVOLC in elementary school but also how they had been experiencing the RVOLC since they both chose to continue their involvement with it to some degree.

**Student Participants’ Parents**

The parents were included because of their insights and enthusiasm about the Center and their children’s experiences there. The parents’ contributions to research questions two and three about RVOLC supports and hindrances offered an added layer in exploring what the Center was doing well and how it could work toward improvement from the perspective of community members who valued what the Center did for their children. The perceptions they shared about their own children along with their perspective of how the RVOLC had contributed to their children’s learning and wellness at times confirmed what the student participants offered themselves. At other times the parents’ perceptions differed somewhat from what the students said or did. In Robert’s story for example, he valued the Center as a place to be close to and care for the animals, meet new people, and play with friends. His mother saw the RVOLC as a place where he could also find his way into young adulthood by following the example of the educators there who were comfortable in their skin, passionate about what they did, and caring toward Robert.

**RVOLC Educators**

The RVOLC employed five full-time educators, one of whom was the director. Two were full-time para-educators whose salaries were funded by the RVSD and two were full-time AmeriCorps workers who usually stayed at the Center for up to a two-year stretch. I worked closely with the RVOLC director and educators to coordinate with RVSD classroom teachers
and identify student participants. Because one tangible goal of this study was to provide the Center with perspectives that would help to inform future practice, the process of developing research questions was a collaborative venture between me and the RVOLC director initially. Because the RVOLC educators and director knew their students well, and knew three of the four student participants even better as a result of them seeking out extracurricular involvement there, as described in detail below, the perspective that the RVOLC staff focus group interview offered was invaluable. This important interview added another layer to each student’s story. For example, the educators’ perceptions many times aligned closely with the students’ perceptions of their experiences at the Center. For example, in Christopher’s case, he talked of the staff affectionately and noted several times how approachable and knowledgeable they were. He also felt they were always willing to enter in a dialogue with him on any number of topics, but mostly those having to do with the outdoors or animals. The RVOLC educators, in their focus group interview, referenced these conversations or debates they had with Christopher several times in their comments about him. Additionally, the staff contributions to research questions two and three about RVOLC supports and hindrances proved instrumental in that they were the best equipped participants within the study to offer detailed knowledge about the behind-the-scene decisions influencing students’ access to the Center, curriculum choices and extra-curricular programs offered at the Center.

**Data Collection**

Data collection materials for this study included documents, interviews and observations. These three ways of gathering information offered another layer of data that focused on hearing the voices of students, giving them a chance to collectively reveal the impact of the RVOLC. Document summary forms (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were used to help in managing the data.
The study’s research questions informed every piece of this study’s data collection from developing the student selection criteria tool to writing the eight different interview protocols to creating the observation field note templates. Each of the materials is described briefly in turn below then the steps in the data collection process are shared.

**Documents**

Over twenty newspaper articles in locally published papers have been written about the RVOLC since it opened its doors. All were considered for the insight and perspective they offered in relation to the research questions. Additionally, RVOLC’s mission statement presented a look into the intent, teaching methodologies, physical structure, and animal members of the Center. This document, along with the brochure that clarifies the Center’s philosophical and methodological perspectives, provided a comprehensive look at what the Center aimed to achieve.

**Interviews**

In collaboration with the RVOLC director and RVSD classroom teachers, two students from fifth and two students from sixth grade were identified using the “RVOLC Study Student Selection Criteria” (See Appendix C) as a springboard. Two separate first student interview protocols served as a guide, one for the fifth graders and one for the sixth graders (See Appendices D & E). A parent focus group interview and a RVOLC educator focus group interview were conducted after the first-round student interviews (See Appendices F & G). These interviews as well as the fifth grade observations informed the final student interview protocols (See Appendices I-L) as explained below. Additionally, one student participant’s classroom teacher was interviewed (See Appendix H) to provide more depth to that particular student’s story as described below. All interview protocols were semi-structured but were based
on predetermined wording and ordering of questions (Merriam, 2009) as a guide. This meant that I went into all the interviews with a pre-determined list and order of questions to make sure all the research questions were addressed, but I was also open to letting the students especially wander a bit in their descriptions or answers. I wanted to avoid redirecting them too quickly in case their wanderings would provide some particularly special pieces of insight. Probing questions were asked when appropriate to elicit thicker description (Geertz, 1973) when needed. The face-to-face interviews were conducted at a time convenient for the interviewees and in a place comfortable for them. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Each transcription was member checked.

Observations

Observations of the two fifth grade student participants at the RVOLC culminating experience were conducted in an effort to collect data of the RVOLC student participants experiencing PBE learning in the moment. I made sure to do this by creating two templates of field note forms to fill out during my observations. One prompted me to answer questions like:

What is the physical environment like? What is the context? What kinds of behavior is the setting designed for? How is the space allocated? What objects, resources, technologies are in the setting? Who is in the scene? What are their roles? What brings these people together? Who is allowed here? Who is not here who would be expected to be here? What are the relevant characteristics of the participants? What are the ways in which the people in this setting organize themselves?

The other template had a reminder of my research questions and prompts for evidencing data that addressed them and was set up for me to record a chronology of events as they were experienced by my student participant. Each form had a two-column format where I could record
observations on the left and my reflections of them on the right. All notes therefore included both descriptive and reflective points (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) that took into account the physical place as well as the appearances, actions and demeanor of the interviewees. I also audio-recorded segments of the lessons when instructions were given and parts of student participants’ interactions with the learning and their peers when they were particularly relevant to the research questions. Additionally, I photographed the place and the participants during their experiences as a way to provide a visual reminder for analysis.

I wanted to shadow the participants in an effort to also gain added information that was later used to inform the individual student’s final interview. For instance, when one of the fifth grade interviewees was observed reacting in a particularly joyous, boisterous or disengaged way in response to an activity or lesson, I asked a question relating to the specific incident during that participant’s subsequent interview. This data was important because when combined with documents and interviews, and when it was confirmed by the educators’ and parents’ perceptions, it allowed for triangulation. The specific observations of the fifth grade students occurred at MPLC in June; the duration of each of these observations lasted one full day, from 8:30 AM until 4:30 PM.

Procedures

For this study, the following steps leading up to and including data collection occurred. The steps here represent a chronological progression beginning with the development of the criteria list to aid in student participant identification and ending with the final student participant interviews in June.

1. Student participant selection process. I first met with the RVOLC director and one long-time RVOLC educator with the purpose of developing accessible and understandable
criteria to aid classroom teachers in identifying students who have been positively impacted by the RVOLC. The meeting was audio recorded and descriptive notes were taken of main points. The following question that guided the meeting was stated at the beginning and reiterated as needed throughout the conversation: What are some behaviors, characteristics or interests you have seen in students who have been positively affected by a PBE approach to learning here at the RVOLC? Another meeting, this time with fifth grade classroom teachers, took place four days later. As a means of clarifying and not assuming prior knowledge, I explained briefly what a PBE approach was, and then used the same question as above to elicit information. I used these notes and audio recordings to develop the “RVOLC Study Student Selection Criteria” form (See Appendix C). The document was sent as an email attachment from the RVOLC director to all RSVD classroom teachers who were in a position to identify current potential student participants. Working together with the RVOLC director and educators, I began to contact prospective participants, and, when interest was shown, parents were contacted and the assent/parent permission process began. One student declined to take part after I met with her and gave her the parent permission and assent forms to take home. Otherwise, all other participants and parents who were contacted eagerly signed on.

2. Individual meetings between the researcher, student participants and parent(s). Because the IRB requirements of this study included both an assent form from the individual students as well as a parent permission form, I felt it was appropriate to meet face-to-face with each participant family so that the study could be described in detail, the forms could be explained in detail, and any questions could be addressed immediately. I also found this to be a great time to gather contact and other information pertaining to parents and students’ schedules. This was when the first round of interviews also was scheduled.
3. **First round of student participant interviews.** (See Appendices D & E) The first interviews with the two fifth and two sixth graders who were identified through the selection process were conducted at a time and place convenient for the participants and their parents because they took place outside of the normal school day with one exception noted below. All first round interviews with both fifth grade and sixth grade participants took place in one-on-one and face-to-face settings. In the RVSD, sixth graders were in their first year of middle school and no longer actively participated in learning at the RVOLC as a general rule. However, both sixth grade participants involved in this study were students at a place I will refer to as River School, a smaller middle school alternative to the district’s other option that enrolled nearly all sixth graders from its four feeder elementary schools. One of the two sixth grade participants in this study was currently working at the RVOLC four days per week for up to two hours each day during the interview phase of the study. The participant chose to work at the Center as a way of fulfilling part of his middle school coursework. This participant’s interview took place during his work time at the RVOLC. All other interviews took place in one of the two RVOLC buildings or in the elementary school building adjacent to the RVOLC outside of structured class time.

The first-round interviews lasted between 30 minutes on the short end to over 50 minutes with the most talkative of the student participants. All participants consented to being audio recorded and those recordings were transcribed. I conducted member checks of the first round interviews in person with each student using hard copies of the transcriptions. We sat together and I let them know to look for anything they felt was a mistake or anything that may have misrepresented what they meant. I let them know they could take out any information they pleased. I stayed close in case they wanted to ask specific questions, but I gave them as much
time as they needed to go through the lengthy transcripts. For Jason, because his mother let me know he struggled with reading, I read the entire transcripts for both his first and final interviews to him, stopping several times to check if he wanted me to omit or change anything.

4. Observation of fifth graders at MPLC. Early in the month of June the RVOLC took all RVSD fifth graders on a three-day, two-night trip to MPLC located two hours north of the RVOLC. I joined the RVOLC group at MPLC and conducted two full-day observations of the formal lessons, hikes, and team building activities that were facilitated by the RVOLC educators. I stayed as close to the student participants as unobtrusively as possible. Notes were taken on interactions between the teacher and individual students, as well as those that occurred among students, when they could be heard. The main portion of the field notes were concerned with recording the content of the place-based lessons as well as the facial expressions, body language, and spoken language of the fifth grade participants who had agreed to be part of the study. The goal was to capture the student participants’ reactions to the MPLC/RVOLC experience. After the observation I referred to the notes and adapted the two fifth grade final student interview protocols (See Appendices I & J) in an effort to elicit specific details about the students’ observed behavior when it was applicable to the research questions.

5. Parent focus group interview. (See Appendix F) All parents of the four student participants were contacted and invited to participate in the parent focus group interview. All four mothers of the four students took part. Additional consent for their individual participation was secured before conducting the interview. The interview was audio recorded, transcribed, and member checked. This interview produced further data about the individual student participants and their experiences at the RVOLC. It also presented several questions related to research questions two and three about RVOLC supports and constraints. Email addresses were
obtained during this interview so that parent participants could receive the transcription of the interview via a word document attachment for member checking. The process of member checking was explained during this meeting. The mothers were asked to watch for and check the transcription email attachment and get it back to me with any changes over email or phone. Member checking instructions were reiterated in the text of the email message that was sent along with the transcript attachment.

6. RVOLC educator focus group interview. (See Appendix G) All RVOLC educators who knew the four student participants and/or who could contribute relevant data to the research questions were invited to participate in the educator focus group interview. This interview supplied another layer of detail to the student participants’ story of how they experienced the RVOLC. This interview along with the parent focus group interview confirmed much of what the students offered with regards to research question one. These multiple perspectives provided triangulation of the data. The RVOLC educator focus group interview also offered great depth to the data concerned with RVOLC supports and hindrances. As with the parent focus group interview, educators went through the consent process and member checked the transcript.

7. Final round of student participant interviews. (See Appendices I-L) The final round of interviews with the two fifth and two sixth graders were conducted at a time and place convenient for the participants and their parents. All final round student interviews took place in one-on-one and face-to-face settings. The student participants’ first round interviews, and relevant comments from the parent focus group interview, and, in the case of the fifth graders, the observation data and the educator focus group interview informed a more individualized questioning protocol for students during this culminating meeting. For example, one parent noted that her child was in the process of being tested for learning disabilities, specifically
dyslexia. She was anxious about getting him identified before going into middle school where he would have more teachers and more reading to navigate. She felt that the RVOLC offered her son a place to experience success from a different, hands-on type of learning that was not always tied to the literacy skillset her son struggled with. While this participant did mention math and science were his favorite subjects in his first interview, he did not specifically mention the experiential piece of RVOLC lessons as appealing to him. I looked for this while observing him at MPLC, and in our final interview together which took place the week after my observation of him at the MPLC, I asked more probing questions in an effort to get him talking about the difference between PBE learning versus learning that is more closely tied to reading and writing from a textbook (See Appendix J). All four final interviews, like the ones before them, were audio recorded, transcribed and member checked. The final interview member check was conducted by students over email, except with the student who had reading difficulties. For this participant, I met him to read through his final transcript.

8. One student participant’s classroom teacher interview. (See Appendix H)

Because the final interview with the student participant who had reading difficulties left important unanswered questions, I contacted this student’s classroom teacher to see if he would be willing to be interviewed. It became clear that this student’s story, in particular the significant learning struggles that he faced, needed to be pursued further. This additional interview supplied another layer of detail to this one student participant’s story. For example, the teacher offered data in a one-on-one setting that detailed the progression of Jason’s recent learning disability diagnosis. The teacher described in detail when he first noticed Jason struggling, when he and Jason dialogued about his diagnosis, and when he worked to set up accommodations at the middle school Jason would be attending the next year. During this interview, I also gained
further depth to the data concerned with RVOLC supports and constraints. As with the other interviews, this teacher went through the consent process and member checked his transcript via email.

**Data Analysis**

Merriam (2009) has listed eight strategies for supporting conclusions of qualitative research. Three apply to this study: triangulation, audit trail, and rich, thick descriptions (p. 229). To provide triangulation, data from multiple sources—RVOLC documents, interview transcripts, observation notes, pictures, and recordings—were analyzed and compared for emerging themes. An audit trail outlining a detailed account of the data and its analysis procedures was closely organized and monitored. Rich, thick description (Geertz, 1973) was the goal of all data analysis. As Yin (2003) has warned, all good characteristics of a successful case study design and researcher can be negated “if an investigator seeks to use a case study only to substantiate a preconceived position” (p. 61). This study was conducted in such a way to limit the effect of pre-existing biases and preconceptions by examining many different perspectives—the students, their parents and the RVOLC educators. Rich details that included nuances and complexities emerged as layers of data were analyzed in segments. The result was that an in-depth, multi-layered look at these four students’ stories wherein their perceptions of their own learning served as the primary construction of the student stories and the perceptions of the educators and the parents served in some cases to confirm the students’ perceptions, providing triangulation. The stories that emerged about the RVOLC proved to be an efficacious example of a PBE approach that could serve both as a tool for the RVOLC to improve and as an example from which others can learn.
In order to achieve these goals, a constant comparison method (Glaser, 1965; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) provided a framework for the process used in analyzing RVOLC documents, transcribed interviews and observation data for the study. As part of the constant comparison method, data are analyzed inductively in segments (Schwandt, 2007), emerging categories are then compared to other data within the segment for relevance, and then those categories are compared to subsequent segments. This study’s procedures for data collection, as outlined in detail above, worked well with a constant comparison methodological approach by taking advantage of gaps in time between segments of data collection dictated by the RVOLC’s predetermined schedule. For instance, the first round of student interviews took place in March and April—this represented one segment of data. The next segment included the parent and RVOLC educator interviews and the MPLC fifth grade observations. Data from this second segment could then be compared to the first and at the same time be used to inform the final segment—the final student interviews.

In addition to using the constant comparison method as a frame for looking at the data, Creswell’s (2008) six steps of coding provided detailed guidance. The research questions and the place-based and educational landscape theoretical lens helped to narrow the focus of the six-step data analysis coding process. It was an important first step to read through the interview transcripts without making marks in efforts to get a sense of the data as a whole. Upon the second read through, impressions and descriptions were noted, and “first-level” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69) or “open” (Creswell, 2008) coding via mostly summary statements were developed. This practice involved “bracketing text segments and assigning code words or phrases that accurately describe the meaning of the text” (Creswell, 2008, p. 251). Here, during the open coding stage, I assigned research question references in addition to the code words or
phrases of the bracketed text. For instance, when a student participant talked about her connection with OLC curriculum, perhaps noting that she changed her water usage habits at home because of what she learned there, I inserted “RQ1A” to represent that this comment contributed to the first subpart of the first research question. I also noted where this learning seemed to fall in comparison to the literature. In this case, it clearly provided an example of progressive, PBE, experiential learning that lead to the student taking action toward environmental stewardship.

Additionally, as one data collection segment concluded—for instance, the first round of student interviews—I coded all the transcripts, compared the codes within the four pieces of data, then created a first segment pattern code list that was arranged by research question and color coded by participant. I also began a digital parking lot at this point noting links between the interview data and the theoretical frames offered in the literature review. Comments/open codes were compared first within and then between subsequent segments of data sources (Glaser, 1965). Once all the data were collected, codes were grouped into meaningful patterns as indicators, and categories allowed themes to emerge. The next step of the process was where a bit of a deductive turn took place in that codes were taken back to the data to look for contrary examples, missed evidence, and/or better possibilities of representation within existing/emerging themes. Finally, the patterns were altered as data prescribed.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

In this chapter I first consider the participant students’ stories, illustrating each separately in an effort to offer a complete picture of the student. This is done with particular attention being paid to information about the student that was pertinent to Research Question One. Each story begins with an overview of who this young person was as a student, a member of his or her family, and a member of the RVSD and RVOLC communities. This is followed by what the data revealed about each student in relation to four main areas: a) their connections to certain aspects of the RVOLC curriculum, b) their relationship with the place that is the RVOLC, c) their connection to the outdoors, and d) their contentment when learning at the RVOLC. These four sections mirror the four subsections of Research Question One. Within each student illustration pertaining to Research Question One, the perceptions of the students themselves are shared first based on their interview and observation data. After the students’ perceptions come the educator and parent perceptions within each subsection, which comes from the interview data from the RVOLC educator focus group interview, the parent focus group interview, and, in Jason’s story, his classroom teacher’s interview. At the conclusion of each of the four subsections within the student stories a summary of perspectives is offered. After each student story is presented in turn, the findings as they related to research questions two and three are presented.

Robert’s Story

Robert was a fifth grade student at the elementary school just across the parking lot from the RVOLC. He planned to attend RVSD’s large middle school as a sixth grader in the fall with the 600+ other students who came from the three other elementary feeder schools. Robert
revealed bits of his personality to me early in his first interview: “I really enjoy making people laugh a lot. I really love helping people; it makes me feel good about myself and just exploring a lot.” Robert went on to connect these interests to his ability to live them out through his volunteer work at the Center: “When I am usually out there, I just help feed the animals, take them out to get some exercise and help people.” Robert was an articulate, quiet and interesting fifth grade boy with a lot to offer. He performed well in school and loved learning both inside the classroom and out in RVOLC setting. He was eager to meet new people and talk with them if he perceived they were interested in where he was coming from. Both Robert and his mother described how he took it upon himself to seek out the RVOLC director in an effort to set up his volunteer opportunity there. He had been volunteering every Wednesday taking care of the reptiles ever since.

Robert loved being out in nature even though his family was admittedly not the outdoorsy type. He was playful, smart and disciplined in his schoolwork. Robert had an easy way with adults and he exhibited exceptional manners. He seemed comfortable and playful around his peers when I observed him at MPLC. Robert did reveal a poignant piece of his relationship with the Center after I turned off the recording device at the conclusion of our first interview. He left me that day by letting me know that the RVOLC was important to him because when he went there, “and I’m not saying that I am bullied or anything, but, when I go there, it helps me forget about all that type of stuff.” Robert did not elaborate on his bullying comment, but he did make it clear through our talks and my observations of him how special the RVOLC was to him and how comfortable and at home he felt there.

Through my conversations with Robert himself, the RVOLC educators, and his mother, and during my formal observations of Robert at MPLC, a rich picture emerged of this caring
young man. What follows is a closer look at Robert’s connections to certain aspects of the RVOLC curriculum, his relationship with the place, his connection to the outdoors and his contentment when learning at the RVOLC. Within each of these sections Robert’s own words and actions are offered first, which is followed by the educator and parent perceptions of his RVOLC experiences. Each of these sections concludes with a summary of the different perspectives.

Aspects of the RVOLC Curriculum with which Robert Connected

**Robert’s perspective.** When it came to the RVOLC curriculum Robert was most curious about and interested in, the animals topped the list. All the lessons having to do with Earth and physical sciences in general were appealing to him also. He rattled off a short list when I first asked him what the RVOLC was all about: “[It’s about] learning. Just about plants, animals, water cycles. We learned about air once, habitats, all that and sometimes birds. Once in a while we’ll talk about that.” Robert recalled one of his earliest trips to the Center, the one that got him hooked on caring for its animals: “We all feed one animal and I fed Arnold the tortoise and that’s when I found out that I really love working with reptiles.” The allure of being able to be up close and interacting with the animals still captured Robert’s curiosity years after that first visit. He shared with me that being able to watch everyday animal activities was fun and educational for him. He also commented that it was better than seeing animals on a video. He explained:

> Well, the animals, it’s a lot of fun just seeing how they react to stuff, like them fighting over some lettuce instead of [me] just watching a documentary in the classroom of how a turtle eats lettuce. It’s funny to see them both fight over the piece of lettuce instead of just seeing a video.
He recalled how amazed he was to learn about how snakes eat while working at the Center one afternoon:

I learned that snakes—I never knew this before, but they can relocate their jaw after they eat. They have to do that with their muscles. So when I went there with my class and they’re all looking at the snakes, [I said] “Hey, you guys, did you know that they have to relocate their jaw with their muscles after they eat?”

Part of Robert’s excitement came from the fact that he was genuinely enthralled with this reptile fact; another important piece to note was that he gleaned some confidence in knowing things and relating them to his classmates. Robert felt this opportunity to work closely with and take care of the animals was one of the things he loved most about the Center.

In addition to finding joy in caring for the Center’s animals and learning from his volunteer and field trip experiences about them, Robert also appreciated the other science learning that took place with the Center staff. When asked, Robert identified the decomposing tree lesson as the most interesting at MPLC. He commented:

[The most] interesting would be the hikes when we learned about how there are three different stages of bugs and funguses that come into a rotting tree to eat off the tree, and then others come in to eat off the invaders.

Robert did a good job recounting what he and his two friends did during the activity, and what was even more impressive was that he fully understood the purpose behind the lesson:

Well, it’s just to teach us like how decomposed is a tree? There are different stages to it and in each of the stages it’s still getting eaten, but there might be less bugs on one stage because there’s another kind eating those. Like—ants could be eaten by a daddy long legs or something. [I learned] that there are a lot of different insects and funguses that
will invade a decomposing tree. Like what we saw was one mushroom that [our RVOLC leader] told us about. It grows throughout the tree and a little bit outward, and it’s so sturdy you could use it as steps.

Robert delighted in the recall of these facts from his MPLC experience. Even though his final interview took place a full week after his lesson on the stages of a decomposing log, he was able to recall specific details with ease.

While I was at MPLC I observed a similar interest during Robert’s macro invertebrate lesson down at the stream on a different hike. My field notes revealed his understanding of the concept as well as his reaction to the learning activity:

After working on the experiment for about ten minutes, Robert concluded from his study that “this water is pretty healthy.” After his initial conclusion, Robert kept exploring, looking for more bugs in the stream and comparing them to the charts that were provided for identification. At one point shortly after his first conclusion, Robert commented, “This is fun.” Robert was engaged and animated, running from place to place dutifully and joyfully fulfilling his task.

Robert’s connection with the RVOLC animals and the science lessons he learned with Center staff was apparent through his interviews and my observations of him at MPLC.

**Educator and parent perspective.** The Center director reiterated what Robert’s volunteer job entailed and that he found joy in working with the animals at the RVOLC, “So Robert volunteers. He feeds the animals, cleans and takes care of all our education animals, and I think Robert feels safe here and he finds joy.” Robert’s mother confirmed his interest in the Center’s lessons about animals. She recalled that even before his volunteer days whenever Robert would go on a field trip with the RVOLC staff that a memorable dinner conversation
would follow: “I know that fourth grade was a big thing about the owls. I remember that and owl pellets. That was disgusting, but I got to hear all about it at dinner.” Robert’s mother also commented that the toughest part of volunteering at the RVOLC was when he would see sick animals there:

The hardest thing for Robert is when he comes and there’s an animal that is sick, or they bring in a rescued animal that’s really not doing well. So for him to see that, that’s probably the hardest thing for him that he doesn’t like.

He was interested in, cared a great deal for and learned a lot from the animals at the Center, but according to his mother, he did not like seeing the animals when they were sick or in distress.

**Summary of perspectives.** It was clear from Robert’s testimonies and actions that he loved the RVOLC curriculum that was tied to learning about animals. He was also interested in and curious about the planned science lessons he experienced both at the Center and on field trips. He was also aware of and able to articulate the spontaneous learning that occurred from watching the snakes or turtles eat during his volunteer time there. Both the RVOLC director and Robert’s mother confirmed that he enjoyed and was interested in the learning that happened during his volunteer time and his formal lessons with the Center.

**Robert’s Relationship with the Place that is the RVOLC**

**Robert’s perspective.** Robert cared deeply for the RVOLC that represented so much to him. He referred to the animals, landscape and people of the Center in his description of the place. “Lots of plants and animals and lots of people that are nice and beautiful trees in the back.” He talked specifically about the log cabin feel to the buildings and all the animals they house. He also added how he enjoyed the space:
[It] gets me closer to nature, opens up my eyes a little more. I learn stuff all the time here, and even just going out back there, it’s really nice. Me and my friend whenever we’re done, we go out there if we have time and we play a little before it’s time for us to go, because it’s so nice. There are a lot of places to hide and run.

This sentiment hinted at the fact that Robert valued the Center as a place that represented a social outlet for him. He referred here to just enjoying the setting but also being able to play hide-and-seek with his friend. Robert recalled with a smile one of his most recent memories of his time volunteering at the Center when he and a friend were particularly playful:

I [was] working one day with my friend Tristan just our most recent day of doing it and because Cory always did it to me, we had this mister and he would always spray me with it. And Tristan, I decided to spray it on his back and it’s hilarious, just how he gets scared by that. He’s trying to clean out a snake’s cage and I just squirited him and he was like, “Ohhhh!”

The Center was a place where Robert could be carefree and interact with some of his school friends. He noted several times how much fun he had at the Center with these friends. He also commented about being able to meet new people during the time he spent there:

It’s fun meeting people there that I’ve never seen. Sometimes there’ll be someone there that’s working and if I don’t always but if I do, I like to introduce myself. I like to meet people so if someone’s there I’ve never met; I know someone now.

Robert identified the Center as a place where he could be with animals, take in the scenery, play with friends, and meet new people. Perhaps most important to note, however, was that Robert talked of the RVOLC being a place where he could forget about “all that type of stuff” with
regards to his hypothetical bullying reference. For Robert this place also represented a safe haven and place where he could leave other burdens, whatever they may have been, behind.

**Educator and parent perspective.** Kristy, one of the AmeriCorps volunteers, reiterated how much Robert enjoyed just being able to play around with his friend at the Center once they were finished with their work: “And if they get done earlier they’re like ‘Can we go run around outside?’ ‘It’s like, yeah, go ahead, you’re done volunteering, go ahead’ and that’s basically, I think it’s what he likes the most.” In addition to representing a place where Robert could joyfully play with friends, the educators and Robert’s mother felt the Center represented a place where he enjoyed interacting with the adults there and being an important and accepted part of their team. Jeni reflected on how she thought Robert’s time at the Center offered a place where he was accepted for who he was and what he had to offer:

I think he’s trying to fit in with his fifth grade crowd all the time, but when he comes here he doesn’t have to put on any façade. I think he loves coming here because we’re his friends. He feels like he’s very important.

Rick, a long-time educator at the Center who knew Robert throughout his elementary years, reflected similarly:

It seems like he connects with the animals and nature, but it seems like maybe he connects with adults even more, and this is a place where like Jeni said, he doesn’t have to put up a façade. He can be himself and he just gets along with us adults, and maybe it’s because we have shared interests in nature and science as well, so we’re safe people that he can share with.
Robert’s mother echoed this idea that the Center was a safe place where there were people with interests similar to Robert’s. She also noted how the RVOLC educators served as examples for Robert of people who were happy doing what they did in an adult world that held promise:

Robert sees adults that are like him and are role models for him because he’s not super athletic and doesn’t like necessarily all the things the cool kids like. It gives him role models that it’s okay to like this and eventually outside of school, you won’t have that issue. You can be a person.

Robert’s work and curiosity were valued by the people at the RVOLC. His mother added, “I know that Robert really enjoys getting the kudos from Jeni and the staff over there of ‘you’re doing a great job.’”

The perception of the educators and Robert’s mother was also that the RVOLC represented a team that he could be part of wherein, “Robert feels like he finally fits in somewhere and…that he finds a place where he actually is valued and an important member of the team.” According to Jeni and Rick, this team, a place of belonging, was a sanctuary for Robert. Robert’s mother also saw the Center as a place where Robert could envision an adult life of acceptance and enjoyment:

So for him I think it’s seeing that there are people like him out there that are older and okay. “I have a shot; it’s not going to be like this for the rest of my life. I can be with people that like the things that I do and I could be cool with them.”

Rick reflected on the Center’s ability to represent this for many kids:

I was thinking for all of these kids here [in the study] and others too, they are all students that really connect to the Outdoor Learning Center, that even if they keep having a rough
time, like Robert might, they have a sanctuary here where they can be at the top of their game.

The perceptions of the educators and Robert’s mother aligned quite closely when it came to what they felt the center represented for Robert.

**Summary of perspectives.** For Robert, the Center represented a comfortable outdoorsy setting that offered opportunity for playing with friends, meeting new people and being valued by adults who shared similar interests. He found joy there and was able to leave his worries at the door. Two of the educators confirmed that the RVOLC provided a social outlet for him. The focus of the educator and parent impressions, however, was on the fact that they felt the Center represented a place where Robert’s intellect and curiosity were celebrated, where he fit in, where he was part of a team and where he could identify with adults who had the same interests as him.

**Robert’s Connection to the Outdoors**

**Robert’s perspective.** Robert felt the Center, its staff and the trips he took with them “opened his eyes to nature more.” Getting closer to nature may have been the case even more so for Robert because his family did not typically spend time doing outdoorsy activities. When I asked Robert a week after he had returned from MPLC, what his time was like there, he responded, “Well, it’s a little hard to explain. I just made some new friends and got a little closer to nature I guess.” My observation notes from one of our hikes described the setting:

We set out on shaded, soft trails with lots of cushiony brush under our feet for our afternoon trek. This hike only took ten minutes and was mostly downhill through scenic forest and freshwater creeks. Alan, Robert’s RVOLC leader, had students stop for a water break before they crossed the creek, then students gathered around for instructions for the decomposer lesson.
Like Robert, I was moved by the setting of this and all the hikes up on the mountain (see Figures 4.1-4.3). It was particularly interesting that Robert enjoyed this foray into nature given that his family did not spend significant time outdoors. Robert talked enthusiastically throughout the decomposer activity and remarked several times throughout our final interview that his time at

![Figure 4.1](image1.jpg) ![Figure 4.2](image2.jpg) ![Figure 4.3](image3.jpg)

**Figures 4.1-4.3.** Mountain Peak Learning Center Decomposer Lesson Photographs. Figure 4.1 is the stream students had to cross to climb up to the decomposing logs. Figure 4.2 is a path of some of the fallen trees where students mined for bugs and fungus. Figure 4.3 is a colorful fungus that has grown on a decomposed log.

MPLC made a lasting impression on him. When he offered what three days up on a mountain will do to you, he pronounced:

Well, we did learn to kind of open our eyes a little more and look around for wildlife. Like deer or even new kinds of birds I may have never seen before or a snake or something…I guess it would give you some exercise and again open up your eyes to look around for more nature, like you might not have seen a deer or snake, but if you just looked a little harder, you could see it….It will bring you a lot closer to nature than you already are. Even if you think you’re pretty close, you’ll probably grow a lot closer with all the facts that there are to learn.
Robert appreciated this guided tour through mountain trails with knowledgeable adults. He loved having animals and plants pointed out to him. He recognized by being more aware and alert to all that surrounded him in nature, he could become closer to it.

**Educator and parent perspective.** Although the educators did not offer specific data about their perceptions of Robert’s connection to nature and their role in fostering it, his mother had quite a bit to offer on the subject. She talked about how the RVOLC staff worked to get kids excited about going outdoors, “I think that the staff there works great with the kids to get them excited. To get their motivation, because that’s totally what got Robert involved in it.” His mother also noted that Robert spent more time outdoors and has been more aware of his surroundings since becoming more involved with the Center:

Robert has learned that he likes it more than he thought he did…Since he started volunteering there, he spent more time outdoors. Still a lot of time on the computer or video games, but has—I found him weaning himself off of that saying, “Oh, I’m going to go out and look for this,” or “I’m going to go out and do this,” and so yeah I just—I think that he’s learned that he likes it out there.

Both Robert and his mother talked about his aversion to bugs as part of the reason why he did not like being out in wilderness settings. Robert’s mother was also quick to acknowledge that another reason her son did not spend a lot of time in nature was because their family did not regularly explore the outdoors together. She noted how much Robert’s newfound connection to the outdoors has affected their family:

It’s been great for me as a parent. I’m a city girl; I’m not an outdoors girl. I’m from Illinois and I know for me I’ve learned a lot as a parent, and especially from Robert. The
things he’s taught me since he’s started going so I think it’s an asset all the way around for families and adults and everybody in general just for that.

It was clear from Robert’s mother’s perceptions that her son enjoyed the outdoors, and did so much more since he had been involved with the Center.

**Summary of perspectives.** Robert has become more aware of and closer to the natural places that surround him on nearby mountains and in his own backyard from his interactions with the RVOLC. His mother’s comments confirm that her perception and her son’s were closely aligned and that the data that both of them offered supported one conclusion—that Robert’s eyes have become more open to and interested in nature because of his experiences with the Center.

**Robert’s Contentment When Learning at the RVOLC**

**Robert’s perspective.** Robert enjoyed learning with the Center not only because it got him close to nature, but also because the educators taught in a fun, hands-on and visual way.

Robert recalled one field trip they took to a local waste water treatment plant that was fun:

> Well, when we get there, lots of fun…We got to do a scavenger hunt, but the activities that they have at each place, it, well, it feels a lot of fun…We saw how big pipes were so that only water can go through it—not air, not dirt, only water. It’s—the reason why I like it and remembered this stuff is because of those activities like I said. I can remember it because it’s just fun to do. When it’s fun, I can remember it.

It was no accident that Robert felt this in response to the way the experience was planned. In addition to having fun on the trip, he also understood the concepts and reasoning behind it and commented that the science learning at the RVOLC is usually fun like this:
We went on a field trip to a different place and we learned about water and how it’s renewed and how it has its own cycle of being reused and it’s always really fun learning science with them. They make it a lot more fun.

In addition to the staff planning for it, I observed the fun that happened spontaneously during Robert’s investigations and explorations at MPLC. One good example of this was how Robert experienced learning during the macro invertebrate lesson at the stream. My field notes recorded spurts of play in between the collection and identification of bugs in the water:

Robert declared while on top of a log which crossed the stream, “Who wants to fence me? Alex?” Robert held his turkey baster out as a sword. Robert was comfortable in this outdoor environment. He was playful and he was at ease with these two peers. He was utterly content in this learning setting. Because the overwhelming majority of students were engaged and active during the learning, they were allowed leeway to take part in some off-task behavior. Even when they were off-task, they were usually interacting with the surroundings, exploring nature or participating in creative play.

In addition to being fun, lessons at the Center were often framed in hands-on activities. An illustrative example of this type of hands-on and visual learning happened at MPLC. Alan set the stage for the lesson about decomposition:

All right, so here is what we’re going to do … You guys are all going to get a sheet that looks like this [holds up sheet]. This sheet talks about all the different bugs that you can find in a decomposing log at all the different stages of decomposition, so when a log first falls over you get what are called invaders. An invader is bacteria, fungi, engraver beetles, termites, bark, so these are the guys who come in and first start chomping up on the wood [Alan makes “pacman” hand and chomping noises signifying what these
creatures do]…And you can tell how long the log has been decomposing by the kind of bugs you find in the log.

Next he gave specific directions as to how the students in groups would go about their investigations:

All right, so this is what is going to happen—This right here [holds up the small plastic container with lid] is your bug capturing jar. This is like the jar of adventure right here.

You guys are going split up in your groups and each group is going to get a jar and maybe a couple of spoons and you guys are going to dig through the different rotting logs all around here. And if you find a really cool bug, or a really, really cool piece of fungus…stick it in this jar.

Alan framed this lesson well. Students had clear physical wandering and general behavior boundaries and knew why and what they were doing beyond just looking for bugs. As was noted earlier, this was the camp experience that Robert thought was most interesting. In the following dialogue between Robert and his friend Madison, it was clear that Robert was fully participating in the hands-on learning:

R: What did you find?

M: A beetle.

R: If it’s a beetle it means the tree isn’t decomposed enough- it’s just at the invader stage. It’s being invaded—I’m smart!

This exchange signified that Robert realized why Alan had them doing this lesson. Robert gave himself a pat on the back for being aware of what the presence of certain bugs signified.

**Educator and parent perspective.** Greg, an AmeriCorps volunteer at the Center, commented that one of the strengths of the RVOLC approach was this focus on fun:
I think the Center is really good at making sure that everything is going to be fun…they’re going to learn and they’re also going to have a lot of fun, which you talk to kids about this place and they love it because they came here and they learned stuff, but they also really enjoyed it.

Robert’s mother’s perception of the RVOLC learning was that their hands-on approach helped students and people in general to learn better: “There’s a lot of people out there, not just kids, but people that’s how they learn it’s not a textbook, it’s the visual and hands-on.” His mother reflected on Robert’s time at the Center and the fact that he persisted in taking it upon himself to extend his involvement with the RVOLC because of how much fun he had while working with the Center animals and staff:

[It is the] highlight of his week, but he has also this year become more involved in helping…he helped at the outdoor show, the Big Horn Show, and was signed up for one day and had so much fun that he insisted that I take him back the next day to help.

The educators and Robert’s mother confirmed that lessons there are intentionally planned to be enjoyable for students. They also reiterated that their activities are known for their hands-on focus and framing.

**Summary of perspectives.** Robert and his mother both articulated how much Robert enjoyed learning in this way. The Center’s planned activities that are fun as well as the spontaneous fun that was allowed to happen during learning at the center made an impression on Robert. He demonstrated the Center’s hands-on approach during his time at MPLC. Educator and parent perceptions helped to confirm this was what the Center both aims for and achieves in planning and carrying out their learning activities.
Robert’s Story Summary

Throughout my time learning about Robert and how he experienced the RVOLC, he, his mother, and the RVOLC educators revealed to me a curious, engaged, generous, and exceptionally kind young man who was trying to navigate the social nuances that accompany embarking upon his middle school years. In his quest he was lucky to find a place that was safe, fun and appreciative of the person he was. He valued the RVOLC as a social outlet and even a sanctuary and felt his interactions with it had opened his eyes to nature. He loved the learning there and planned to continue his relationship with the staff and the place even when he would no longer be right next door.

Jason’s Story

Jason was also a fifth grader at the elementary school that shared a large parcel of land with the RVOLC. When I first met Jason he appeared sometimes painfully shy, but he was confident and even quietly excited about being asked to take part in my study. Jason was an active young man involved in organized sports, but soccer was what consumed most of his energy in this respect. When I asked him during his first interview what he liked to do indoors, he replied: “Indoors? I do indoor soccer.”

Jason’s love of the outdoors made him stand out to the RVOLC staff. They referred to him as a “hunter kid” who was at home in the woods. The RVOLC director noted how apparent it was that Jason was in his element in the outdoors, “You get Jason out there and he’s pretty comfortable. You can ask him to sit on the ground without a problem.” During his time at MPLC and throughout his interviews, Jason conveyed that he enjoyed his time outdoors and liked to explore:

   Researcher:   What can you tell me about your time outdoors?
Jason:

Jason: I have fun. Like discovering different things like coyote dens and badger dens.

Jason’s time with the RVOLC including his trip to MPLC provided ample opportunities for him to do that which he was most passionate about. At MPLC I witnessed him hiking on trails, identifying “signs, clues, and tracks” (SCAT); coming upon a sizable intact elk carcass with his hiking group that he enthusiastically examined; donning full camouflage while playing a hunting game in the woods; wading in a freezing fresh water stream while looking for macro invertebrates, and the list goes on. During our first interview Jason attributed at least part of his love for the outdoors to the RVOLC:

I used to stay inside because I never liked to go outside. And then I came to school and then I got to the outdoor learning Center and it got me outdoors, and then my dad—my dad took me outdoors more often.

It was evident when Jason talked about his family that they played a big role in cultivating this outdoor interest as well.

Jason talked fondly about his family, especially his dad with whom he enjoyed several outdoor activities. As part of our conversation about his relationship with nature in his first interview, he shared that his nickname was “Turtle” because, “Oh, I like turtles and stuff and I used to go out by the river and always try to find them.” Jason often talked of his love of the outdoors and a culture within his family that encouraged and embraced this. Jason’s affection for his home and family and love of outdoor recreation was clear. This passion for exploring and learning in nature contributed more than anything to the way Jason experienced and appreciated the RVOLC, but it is important to acknowledge some challenges he faced in other learning settings in order to get a complete picture of who he was as a person and a learner.
When I first met Jason’s mother, she shared that she and Jason had just come from a meeting regarding Jason being tested for a learning disability. She felt that he had been dealing with some form of dyslexia since reading age. She let me know when Jason was out of earshot that he may not always respond promptly or excitedly to me if I asked him to read something.

During my formal interview several weeks later with Jason’s mother, she reaffirmed, “He struggles in school, so I think that’s why it’s not that big of an importance for him to come to school.” Jason’s classroom teacher offered a similar perspective:

I don’t know if he really loves school because it’s tough for him. He likes the social piece. He likes to interact with his peers. He’s very social, but truly struggles with school and that’s why he’s so sensitive about it, because he knows that he...struggles with reading comprehension, math comprehension and that pretty much runs the gamut of content areas.

When I asked Jason’s classroom teacher how these challenges first came to his attention, he explained:

When he would read to me, he would read a sentence and it would be flawless and then all of a sudden he would blink or squint and the next sentence would have the same words like “the”—basic site words, the, was, and, who, those, and he could not say the same word again and I thought what in the world?

Following this discovery, Jason’s classroom teacher moved quickly to communicate with Jason’s mother and help coordinate some testing for Jason so that they all could work together to help him.

After meeting with a specialist, Jason was diagnosed with a vision problem wherein when Jason blinks his eyes one goes out of focus rendering him unable to make out words on a page.
According to Jason’s teacher the specialist recommended intense therapy to correct this problem, but that came at a cost that was not covered by insurance. Because Jason needed to make the transition to middle school in the meantime, his classroom teacher, future middle school teacher, and support staff worked to put accommodations into place in order to help him succeed there. The most significant accommodation was having all of his assessments read aloud to him. Even with this communication and accommodation, Jason’s classroom teacher was worried about how he would do at his new school the following year. He noted:

He’s a smart kid. He’s a good kid. He works well with others, but his self-confidence has continued to go down and will continue to go down the older he gets and the less he makes those gains, especially in reading.

Both Jason’s teacher and the RVOLC director also noted how active and sometimes squirrely Jason could get. His classroom teacher referenced ADD/ADHD somewhat matter-of-fact, noting that Jason had not been formally diagnosed, but he did comment that, “He has real trouble sitting in his seat.” Jason struggled to succeed academically during his fifth grade year. However, because his classroom teacher recognized a compelling acumen whenever Jason learned at the RVOLC, he recommended him for this study. His classroom teacher was emphatic about how great Jason was and how he can learn:

He’s a fantastic kid. He is a—he’s a great kid who’s got a great heart…He can learn.

He’s got the ability. He’s not a kid that doesn’t want to—he’s not lazy. He wants to learn, but there’s an impairment there that really frustrates the heck out of him.

Jason’s teacher felt a bit defeated that he did not help Jason to make further gains in the classroom, but he recognized with enthusiasm that Jason could learn and enjoyed learning in the RVOLC setting.
During my formal interviews with Jason he often gave very brief answers or after periods of silence offered, “I don’t know” or “I can’t remember” as responses. For this reason, the data in Jason’s story is more reliant on my observations of him at MPLC. Additionally, I did broach the subject of Jason’s learning disability with him in his final interview. It was clear that he did not want to dialogue about this and defaulted to silence or one-word answers. This is why I sought out Jason’s classroom teacher for more insight into his learning challenges. Because of this, the educator and parent perceptions of Jason’s experience have the added perspective of his classroom teacher. Throughout my interviews with Jason, his classroom teacher, the RVOLC educators, Jason’s mother, and during my formal observations of Jason at MPLC, it became clear how truly happy, participatory, and inquisitive he was in an outdoor setting. A closer look into Jason’s connections to one particular aspect of the RVOLC curriculum, his relationship with the place, his connection to the outdoors and his contentment when learning at the RVOLC follows. Within each of these sections observations of Jason at MPLC and his own words are offered first, which is followed by the educator and parent perceptions of his RVOLC experiences. A summary of these perceptions concludes each subsection.

**Aspect of the RVOLC Curriculum with which Jason Connected**

**Jason’s perspective.** Jason was most connected to the RVOLC curriculum when it extended his knowledge about animals both at the Center and in their natural setting. In his first interview when he was asked to describe the RVOLC to someone who has never been there before, Jason focused on the animals: “It’s made out of wood like trees. It has animals in it like snakes, turtles, guinea pigs, lizards and it has stuffed animals like bears. It has hawks in it, and turkeys, and eagles.” Jason’s re-telling of his first visit to the Center yielded one of his most enthusiastic reactions:
Ooh, animals and I like animals and I started looking at them and then I don’t know it’s kind of a hard one. You could see all of the animals because I had never seen an iguana they used to have, and we used to watch it move and stuff. It was pretty cool.

When asked what he thought the Center was all about, again, he focused on the animals after he mentioned the outdoors and science in general: “You can learn about science, the outdoors, what kind of animals eat, what animals eat each other. We learn about fish, snakes, turtles.” Jason’s fascination with the animals at the Center and out in the wild was substantiated by my observation of him at MPLC. In his final interview just days after he returned from the trip to the mountain, he commented that coming upon the elk carcass was what stirred his curiosity most:

Researcher: What were you most curious about up at MPLC?

Jason: Like what got the elk carcass or something.

Researcher: Okay, so explain that more to me.

Jason: I wanted to know what kind of animal attacked it.

My field notes described this encounter as it occurred:

Approximately a half an hour into the hike, the lead students on the trail in the group happened upon an almost complete elk carcass. The intact scull and body of the carcass was in one location while one leg was nearby just off the trail. Some students also found there were other parts of the carcass up a five-foot embankment just above the trail. That part of the carcass instead of being just bone was full of hair and still in the process of decomposing. Jason was one of the first students to climb the embankment, ignoring the RVOLC leader’s request not to do so. He was eager to explore. When he came down
from the embankment, Jason remarked, "I've seen this before. I've eaten this before." A female student added, "Me too."

Jason’s ease around animal bones and a decomposing carcass was clear. He was curious and exploratory, wondering right away about what had happened to the elk. That same morning, just a bit farther up the mountain on the same hike, Jason and his group played a game that was designed to reiterate the way certain animals find food. My field notes describe the game:

At 9:57 the entire group stopped at an open space to play a game called "Bat and Moth."

The students circled up. They all acted as if they were trees forming a boundary. One student was blindfolded—he was the bat. One student was the moth. Those two students were inside the circle made out of trees. The bat was charged with the job of relying exclusively on sound to find his food. He would call for the moth and the moth had to respond. He would use the sound of the “moth’s” voice to try and pounce on the source of food.

When I asked Jason to recall this activity and if he understood the animal science concepts behind it, he responded confidently and matter-of-factly:

Jason: To see how bats hunt.

Researcher: And how do they hunt?

Jason: They use like sound location.

Researcher: What does that mean?

Jason: It’s a sound and it bounces off of them. Like it bounces off their food.

Jason’s curiosity and interest in this aspect of the RVOLC curriculum was clear through his descriptions and my observations of him at MPLC.
Educator and parent perspective. Whether at the Center or not, Jason was mesmerized by animals. His experiences at the Center, when they involved getting close to and learning about the animals, were always an inquisitive affair, according to Greg:

[Jason] always seems like the kind of kid that if he doesn’t know the answer, he’ll think out loud with you or ask other questions. He feels totally comfortable asking me questions. I remember standing by the kestrel one time and he asked if it was a falcon and I said, “Yeah, it is a falcon,” so I think he’s very curious about stuff like that. Jason’s connection with the RVOLC curriculum, especially when it involved learning about all kinds of wildlife, represented the highest level of interest for him. He was curious and confident in his learning in these situations. Jason’s classroom teacher reinforced this:

He was talking about SCAT, he was talking about seeing the elk and how it might have gotten killed. And then he talks about all of his past background knowledge with his hunting trips with his dad and how he shot his turkey this year… He doesn’t feel like the dummy because he knows some stuff out here and he can explain—he can talk knowledgeably as opposed to “I don’t know how to do this.”

His mother recalled a level of excitement about the animals whenever he came home from spending time at the RVOLC, “Wasn’t there an owl over here, too? Yeah, he would talk about the owl, them going over and seeing it and stuff, so those are the things I remember him talking about.” His mother added that the fascination for Jason was being able to get close to animals he never would be able to in the wild. She commented:

Getting to actually interact with the animals, to touch them, to see them you know when he goes out in nature, you don’t get to see them that close up. You know you see them all far away you know. The deer and like this week—last weekend we actually saw a bald
Jason, through his comments and actions, conveyed a sincere interest in the RVOLC curriculum that involved animals. It was clear that he understood the concepts that the MPLC games were designed to teach. He was inquisitive, thoughtful and exploratory when it came to observing animals at the Center and in the wild. Jason’s classroom teacher added that this interest in animals and the knowledge he has about them contributes to a feeling of confidence that is attached to his learning there. This is important, according to his classroom teacher, because Jason does not experience this type of success with learning in the classroom. The RVOLC educators added that he was not afraid to be inquisitive when it came to furthering his knowledge. Jason’s mother also reiterated his interest in animals and appreciation for the Center as a place where he could interact with them up close.

**Jason’s Relationship with the Place that is the RVOLC**

*Jason’s perspective.* Jason’s RVOLC experience was marked by his relationship with the Center, which was tied inseparably to the animals there, the RVOLC staff and the realization that in this place, he was confident and knowledgeable. Jason’s love for the outdoors and the place in his school life that represents it—the RVOLC—was apparent. He loved being able to see the Center’s animals and pointed out how much he enjoyed checking in on them over a period of several years:
[You get to] learn new stuff every time. You get to watch the animals grow every year. You can look at the animals and...if you haven’t been here in a long time, you can see how much they have grown and what new animals they have got.

The practice of coming to the RVOLC multiple times over several years was reiterated during his final interview when he discussed six years of RVOLC experiences with animals and the outdoors:

Researcher: Jason, how do you feel about this place?

Jason: It’s a good place to learn about animals and outdoors.

Researcher: Do you think you’re going to miss not having the Center right next to your school next year?

Jason: Yeah.

Researcher: Why?

Jason: It’s—I’ve been coming here since kindergarten.

Both Jason and his mother were aware that the RVOLC staff saw all students from the RVSD’s four elementary schools several times each year. In addition to their DNR and outreach programs to secondary schools and schools from other districts, this added up to thousands of students. Jason was proud that he stood out to the staff. When asked about the RVOLC staff, he identified them by name and was quick to mention that he knew they liked and valued him as a student who loved the outdoors:

Researcher: Tell me about the adults that you come in contact with at the Center.

Jason: Rick and Kristy and Amy and Jeni.

Researcher: What are they like?

Jason: And Greg, and they like how I’m outdoorsy.
Researcher: How does it feel that they know you?

Jason: Good.

Jason recognized and felt good about the RVOLC staff’s acknowledgement of him. Jason was deeply fond of the Center’s animals. He felt honored that the staff sought him out and acknowledged him so readily. Mostly, Jason identified this place with learning about the outdoors and animals: “It’s a great place to learn I think, for people who like going outdoors and I think the animals are pretty cool here.”

Educator and parent perspective. The fact that Jason struggled in the classroom had been revealed very recently at the time of the study to the RVOLC staff. Long-time RVOLC educator, Rick, reacted by being hopeful for Jason and glad that they were there to represent a place of success for him, “He’s struggled through school that entire time, but I feel like the Outdoor Learning Center has given him a place where he doesn’t struggle at all but is actually at the top and really shines.” Rick went further to make a point about how their place signified that this kind of intelligence of the outdoors—of our living and non-living neighbors—had value:

You can also thrive in places like the Outdoor Learning Center. That there’s a place, that you don’t have to just be at home wandering around the woods and you like it, but there’s an actual institution I guess is the best thing that I could think of that’s a value that having that interest or skills are a valuable thing to have as a person.

Jason’s teacher made a similar point about the Center representing a place that exposed him to the possibility of pursuing his passion, one that is valued somewhere, “I think it’s just given him opportunities to see what’s out there. To see what he will be successful, what he can be successful in.” According to his classroom teacher, the Center also represented a place where Jason could build confidence, could be an expert, and could excel in learning situations:
You can definitely tell when he steps in the classroom academically he struggles, but when you put him in an outdoor setting, he flourishes… it makes him look like the expert and so he can kind of be successful. It builds self-confidence in him.

In addition to this place being where Jason was able to celebrate his love of the outdoors and some learning success, it was also a place where he felt valued as an individual who stood out to the RVOLC staff. Jason’s mother explained how special he felt when the staff recognized him during a Saturday open house:

> When we went to the [RVOLC] open house, Jason is one of a million kids that go in there, but they knew who he was when he was there. You know touching the turtles and stuff, and they knew his name and it was like that’s pretty cool. You know for all these kids that come through here that you can remember his name, because he’s not a volunteer, you know but he does go on field trips there, but they could remember his name and Jason thought that was great.

The educators and Jason’s mother felt the RVOLC represented a place where Jason could succeed in a learning setting. His mother also felt it was a place where the staff acknowledged him as someone who stood out among thousands of other students.

**Summary of perspectives.** Although Jason focused on the Center representing a place where he could experience the outdoors and animals, the RVOLC educators and Jason’s classroom teacher felt strongly about it being a place for him to be successful in an academic setting. Jason knew all the RVOLC educators by name and liked that they knew who he was because of his love for and knowledge about the outdoors. Jason’s mother felt the place signified a place where he was known and valued because of what he had to offer. The data in
this section represented different perceptions of Jason’s relationship with the place that is the RVOLC, perhaps all true, but divergent nonetheless.

**Jason’s Connection to the Outdoors**

**Jason’s perspective.** Jason felt the Center helped him to cultivate his passion for the outdoors and he appreciated the opportunities it gave him to learn outside of the classroom setting. He easily related the Center’s message about getting outdoors: “It gets [students] outdoors. Like me, when I came here it got me to go outdoors and stuff, like animals.” He noted that he liked to be outdoors more because he liked the fresh air and not having to sit inside a classroom all day:

Researcher: Describe to me what it was like being in the outdoors for three days.

Jason: Better than being in school.

Researcher: Why?

Jason: Because you get to be outside all day instead of inside.

Researcher: And why is that better?

Jason: Because you get fresh air.

Researcher: Okay. How do you feel about fresh air?

Jason: It feels better than being in the classroom all day.

Jason appreciated the opportunity the RVOLC provided him to be outside in the fresh air and out of his classroom.

One example from MPLC where Jason was clearly enjoying the outdoors was during the macro invertebrate lesson at the freshwater stream. Students were instructed to catch several bugs from the stream. After students caught the bugs they were supposed to transfer them to white tubs, then identify and categorize the macro invertebrates in an effort to evaluate the
quality of the creek’s water. After the activity students were supposed to draw four distinct bugs in their outdoor learning journals (see Figures 4.4 & 4.5), identify the bugs using charts, and then based on the information in the charts, rank the health of the stream’s water. This RVOLC lesson was connected to the outdoors in every way. Students hiked to the stream; they explored the landscape and navigated the terrain; they found and learned about bugs and hypothesized about the water quality.

Figure 4.4. Figure 4.5.

Figures 4.4 and 4.5. Mountain Peak Learning Center Macro Invertebrate Lesson Photographs. Figure 4.4 is the journal document that accompanied the activity wherein students were supposed to draw and identify the bugs they found from the stream. Figure 4.5 is Jason, Jason’s teacher and Kristy, the RVOLC leader, by the stream. They were looking at the tub filled with stream water and the bugs that Jason and his teacher caught.

My field notes reveal further details and observations of the macro invertebrate lesson that paint the picture of how Jason interacted during this outdoor experience:
In Jason's group there were 25 people including the researcher—the group was made up of 18 fifth-grade students, two parent volunteers, two high school volunteers, one aide who shadowed the student in the group who had severe autism, and Jason’s classroom teacher. Jason was clearly at home in the outdoors. Bugs, bushes, trees, rocks and water contributed to Jason’s home element. He was participatory, comfortable, confident and a leader in this setting. Just a couple minutes in, Jason asked Kristy if his group could go downstream a little farther and when given permission, he moved without hesitation along the bank of the stream. Soon Jason and his classroom teacher, who Jason affectionately referred to as “Mr. C” and who had joined the activity, were on their own fresh water stream bug finding adventure. Jason had both feet in the freezing water, submerged up to his mid-calf at times. He had pulled up his track pants, and was hopping gracefully from rock to log, working his way farther downstream. All the students in this group seemed like they were having fun, and Jason was particularly content—he was animated and active and never off-task.

It was a challenge at times for me to keep up with Jason as he was leading his group across the stream and back again in search of bugs that would reveal the quality of the water. It was clear from my observation that looking in a creek for bugs and navigating through fallen logs and huge rocks was both familiar and enjoyable to him.

**Educator and parent perspective.** Jason’s passion and background as a hunter was easily recognizable to the RVOLC staff on trips. In the outdoor setting of RVOLC learning, Jason was the leader of the pack, both figuratively and literally. Kristy, Jason’s leader at MPLC, explained how he stood out:
He was one of the better ones in my first group... he was always one that was right behind me and just talking to me, talking about stuff and you could just tell... he just loves being outside and he loves being in the outdoors.

Similar to Greg’s earlier comment about Jason being inquisitive and talkative about the kestrel, Kristy’s perception of Jason was one of a student who was interested, curious and actively participating in the outdoor adventure. Jason’s mother explained his appreciation for the RVOLC because of how it offers a vehicle for him to do his favorite activity during school time: “He enjoys coming to the Outdoor Learning Center. He really loves the outdoors. He loves to hunt, that’s his all-time favorite. If he could do that every day that would be what he does.”

Jason’s classroom teacher also pointed out the fact that the outdoor aspect of the Center provided Jason with motivation because of this intersection of interests:

He’s an avid hunter... He knows what a turkey looks like; he can—just the outdoor aspect of being in the wilderness, being a hunter, and being a woodsman I guess, is extremely motivating for Jason. He loves it.

The educators’ and Jason’s mother’s perception of his connection with the outdoors was that it represented a deep passion for him and the RVOLC provided him an opportunity to explore that passion.

**Summary of perspectives.** According to Jason, the Center was at least partially responsible for sparking his interest in the outdoors. He said that after he started coming there and his dad started taking him out in nature more, he found that he really enjoyed the outdoors. My observations of Jason in the outdoor elements confirmed how much he loved learning there. Being outdoors felt like home to him. The educators’ perceptions on Jason’s connection with nature confirmed that he was content, inquisitive, and participatory in activities that were tied to
the outdoors. Jason’s mother also commented about the fact that he loved the outdoors and enjoyed coming to the RVOLC because it took him there.

**Jason’s Contentment When Learning at the RVOLC**

**Jason’s perspective.** Jason was happy, content and enthusiastic during RVOLC learning because it was active, hands-on, and exploratory. Playing the game “Thicket” while up at MPLC was a good example of this active learning, and a favorite activity for Jason. He explained the premise behind it during our final interview:

- **Jason:** You have a hawk and his prey was mice, and then the hawk would count and he couldn’t leave his nest to find the mice, and we would hide and then if you found it, you would say your name or describe what you were wearing and then Kristy would have the hawk close his eyes and say, “mice, move forward,” and then we would move and then she said, “mice, make a noise,” and we made a noise and then the hawk found us.

- **Researcher:** Okay, what did you learn from playing Thicket?

- **Jason:** That it’s hard to be a hawk to find their prey.

- **Researcher:** How did you feel when you played Thicket?

- **Jason:** It was fun.

- **Researcher:** What was fun about it?

- **Jason:** I was wearing all camouflage.

- **Researcher:** So you were wearing all camouflage. How did that make it more fun?

- **Jason:** Because I was blending into the trees and the hawk couldn’t see me.

I observed Jason during this game. He was crouching behind trees, moving swiftly and gingerly between them and rocks or bushes that could keep him hidden from the hawk’s view. What is
important to note, however, is that Jason was also well aware of what the game represented in the RVOLC curriculum—the concept of the food web and how hawks find their prey. In addition to much of the RVOLC lessons being active, they were almost all hands-on, allowing the students to learn by touching and doing. Jason reiterated this theme of learning-by-doing as important to his own success in the following exchange:

Jason: Because it’s easier to learn, because they actually show you stuff instead of looking through books.

Researcher: Do you enjoy one type of learning more than the other?

Jason: Yeah.

Researcher: Which one?

Jason: The RVOLC one.

Finally, for Jason, he was content learning with the RVOLC because he had the freedom to explore. I observed this as being the case when his hiking group came upon the elk carcass and when he was looking for and then identifying bugs in the stream during the macro invertebrate lesson.

**Educator and parent perspective.** Jason’s mother articulated that she felt forms of learning other than having students sit at their desks reading and writing all day was a good thing. She commented that “not all kids learn well from that” and “that’s why he likes this place so much- he’s up and moving around and exploring the animals here.” The RVOLC director added to what Jason’s mother offered in her interview by acknowledging that, “[His classroom teacher] and I decided that traditional classroom is kind of difficult for Jason, because he is kind of always moving around, but he definitely feels at home in the woods.” It was apparent that the RVOLC director and Jason’s classroom teacher had discussed Jason and his learning in detail
before recommending him for the study. Jason’s teacher, in his interview, went further to give his perspective on the difference in learning for Jason between the classroom setting and the RVOLC:

He’s a boy and he’s so active. And I don’t know if there’s ADD or ADHD there. I don’t know, but he needs to be moving constantly...And just being able to be active and not restrained to a chair where he has to sit and the teacher—you know there’s movement.

Jason’s RVOLC leader recognized how much fun he had playing the active Thicket game that simulated birds of prey behavior in the wild. She commented:

We played a game of Thicket and he had full camouflage that his teacher loaned him and he was just running through the woods in his camouflage. And no one could see him; he was just this monster in the woods running around, but you could just tell he loved it.

Even with a group of 25, Jason’s RVOLC leader identified him as sticking out in her mind really enjoying the active game in the woods.

In addition to the learning being active, it was also hands-on. Jason’s mother recognized the value this approach has for her son, “I think for Jason the hands-on is what makes him learn. You give him a book he’s not going to do it.” This was particularly true in light of the fact that Jason had just been diagnosed with significant vision problems that made it difficult for him to read anything off the page. His mother went on to explain similar hands-on, high interest learning that Jason just participated in during his hunter’s education course:

It’s not the text work that makes him learn, it’s the hands-on you know, he took hunter’s ed. this year and he—it was a 72-question quiz and he only got three wrong. You give him a test like that in school, he could never do it, but it was the hands-on of going to class every single night and learning how to respect what you’re doing out there and how
to climb over a fence with a rifle and all that stuff and that’s what the learning Center is all about. It’s all hands-on and it teaches them all that stuff.

Jason’s classroom teacher commented about his learning and performance in his hunter’s education course and was similarly impressed. He was the first to admit that Jason did not do well when the learning was based on getting decontextualized information from a page:

He hates being in class when I have to read to him, you know if he can do hands-on, outdoor learning activities and we can read stories that are—more of an all-encompassing kind around that theme, I think it would be beneficial for Jason and Jason would really, really truly enjoy it… he thrives in drawing inferences based on because I’ve touched—I’m able to touch it. I’m able to see it as opposed to reading a story and say, “Okay, well, what conclusions can you draw?”

The RVOLC educators agreed that they saw nearly all students benefitting from a more hands-on, experiential approach, not only those who struggled in the classroom. Kristy compared the RVOLC approach to learning from texts, “[We are] more hands-on and take them outside and show them kind of more real-life versions of what they are learning as opposed to just what they are reading out of a book.”

Finally, for Jason, he was content learning with the RVOLC because he had the freedom to explore. Jason’s classroom teacher offered that for Jason this approach was not only crucial for his learning but also his life:

[He loves] hands-on, climbing the creek, you obviously saw him. We can’t keep him out of the creek and so he was allowed to go in and just kind of be himself and be a boy and get hands-on and get excited about seeing different creatures. And I think that would be
a perfect—I could see him as a marine biologist or some kind of wildlife expert working for the Soil Conservation Service or somebody like that.

Jason’s classroom teacher added that if he could learn in this setting every day, he would probably experience joy, success and progress:

I think the [experiential learning] is a big piece that’s important and so beneficial about the Outdoor Learning Center is that for—and there are those kids that don’t—something doesn’t click, but when they go there, it’s like their happy place.

The educators and Jason’s mother agreed that the RVOLC active, hands-on, and exploratory approach to learning contributed to Jason’s contentment in this setting.

**Summary of perspectives.** It was clear in observing Jason that he loved learning in an outdoor setting by being active and getting his hands dirty in the water of the stream or the mud behind a camouflaging tree. He articulated during one of his interviews that he preferred learning by touching and seeing something firsthand rather than looking at something in a book. The educators’ and his mother’s perceptions corroborated Jason’s own views, and they offered more evidence of his contentment in learning with the Center. Kristy, Jason’s classroom teacher and his mother all contrasted the active, hands-on learning at the Center with learning that happens through books and in classrooms.

**Jason’s Story Summary**

It was clear to me through my talks with Jason, his mother, his teacher and the RVOLC staff, that the Center truly did represent Jason’s happy place. For Jason, being outdoors meant everything to him. He was at home in nature, and he identified the RVOLC as a vehicle through which he could experience it instead of sitting in a classroom. Even though Jason had a strong bond and deep admiration for his classroom teacher, he did not like being in the classroom.
Jason found a place in the RVOLC where learning was fun and he was good at it and actively involved in it. The RVOLC not only represented a happy place. It also represented a place, unlike his classroom, where he could learn.

**Vicki’s Story**

When Vicki arrived for her first interview, I noticed her bright pink crocheted hat that was adorned with a big blue crocheted flower atop her long, pony-tailed hair. I asked her about her hat immediately, commenting that my four-year-old daughter would love it. She smiled and shyly offered that she had made it herself. Vicki was a smart, articulate, creative young lady with diverse interests including reading, drawing, filming, and playing with animals. Vicki was a warm, energetic and friendly sixth grader who also attended elementary school at the building that shared property with the RVOLC. In the RVSD, sixth graders were in their first year of middle school. RVSD students entering middle school had two choices. They could either attend the large, traditional middle school with 600+ students that the district’s four elementary buildings fed into or they could choose to attend the other middle school, which I will refer to as River School. River School was a fraction of the size of the traditional middle school and offered an alternative approach that focused on students choosing “jobs” or curricular areas that represented high interest to them. River School students had to apply for these jobs, and they were held accountable to perform to a certain standard at the job site. The RVOLC was one such job site where River School students spent time.

When I first met Vicki she had not been visiting the RVOLC regularly within the past few months because she had since moved on to a different job at the trimester change. She explained the extent of her involvement at the Center when she used to work at her River School/DNR job there:
Well I was visiting pretty much every day up until before Christmas because I worked in DNR and they came here every day to care for the raptors and other animals. We came pretty much every day of the week or school week, so five days a week usually. We helped—we cared for the animals.

Many sixth graders at River School were aware of the close connection between River School and the RVOLC. For this reason, I asked Vicki why she chose to attend River School:

Vicki: I chose River School because I thought it was really cool how we had jobs and we got to see what it was like having a job, and I thought it was cool that there wasn’t too many kids and I think it’s just a really good environment. And everyone is really nice.

Researcher: Are you happy with your decision to go to River School?

Vicki: I am because I feel like I’m getting a good education and I get to work with animals. And I have a lot of my friends there and everyone seems really nice and I’ve never been bullied or seen anyone be bullied there.

Through these comments it was apparent that Vicki had crafted a learning environment for herself that represented high interest, comfortable peer interactions, and safety to her.

One of the most vivid moments of Vicki’s first interview with me was when she spoke of the series of books about wolves that she was reading, “[My favorite book is] ‘Wolves of the Beyond.’ I love wolves. They’re my favorite animal and it’s by Katherine Lasky and it’s really good and it’s interesting.” She went on to give a detailed description about what the wolf characters faced in Lasky’s series. This was my first clue about her passion for animals. Vicki also shared that she filmed movies using her American Girl dolls and she loved to draw—mostly animals of course. Vicki enjoyed reenacting the Hunger Games in her backyard with friends and
playing with her Schleich© animals, “building them habitats out of dirt, leaves, grass and sticks.” She enjoyed being outside when the weather was nice, and she was creative and playful with her time. More than anything, however, Vicki was deeply interested in and concerned about animals and the Earth. She mentioned the animals at the RVOLC and animals in general more than anything else during our time together. She read about them, wrote about them, cared for them, and someday she hoped to be a voice for and protect them. As I was first getting to know Vicki, I was a bit worried that she was saying more what she thought I wanted to hear instead of just what she felt. I thought this because her responses to my questions were so directly linked to sustainability and a general awareness for taking care of the Earth, but as I listened further, I came to understand that her love of animals and interest in making Earth-conscious decisions was an ongoing, sincere emphasis in her life. Throughout our time together, Vicki articulated several aspects about her RVOLC experience.

During the RVOLC educator focus group interview, the director and the one long-time teacher there who also taught at River School knew Vicki well and could recall specific details about her and her time at the Center. The other four RVOLC educators could not easily recall who she was even though I provided a description and recent digital image of her. The RVOLC director felt the staff’s inability to remember her was due to the fact that Vicki was the type of student who quietly went about her duties at the RVOLC and rarely needed guidance or redirection. Another contributing factor could have been that Vicki was not currently working on a daily basis at the Center. As was stated earlier, her River School job there had concluded at the semester break before the winter holidays. For this reason, the educator perspective data in Vicki’s story is limited. What follows is a closer look at Vicki’s connections to a certain aspect of the RVOLC curriculum, her relationship with the place, her connection to the outdoors and
her contentment when learning at the RVOLC. Within each of these sections Vicki’s own words are offered first, which is followed by the educator and parent perceptions of her RVOLC experiences. Each of these subsections concludes with a summary of the different perspectives.

**Aspect of the RVOLC Curriculum with which Vicki Connected**

**Vicki’s perspective.** Vicki would be the first to tell you how passionate she was about what the Center did and taught. Learning about being a steward for the Earth was deeply important to her, but much of that passion to protect came from her avid curiosity about the animals there. During our time together, her remarks always circled back to the Center’s animals. Vicki recalled her first time at the Center as a time of awe:

I kind of remember just being all excited and amazed that there were all these animals and I was just—everyone was really excited. It’s really cool how they have a lot of animals. They have turtles, they have frogs, they have leopard geckos, snakes, they have raptors, birds, fish, a bearded dragon, and then they have some animals like that have been donated to them that have like been stuffed for display. And they have other wildlife like big beehives and little animals in jars to kind of show kids when they come for some of the activities that they do.

Over the years this interest in the Center’s animals never waned. When asked what she liked most about coming to the Center, she replied:

Well probably the animals the most. I was always really interested in like I never saw, besides Stan, I never saw any of the other birds in the other building until I worked with DNR. But I was always really interested in the birds in here that they have and so I would always be looking at them when they said we could kind of look around and stuff. Just because I thought they were really cool and they used to have another bird that
actually I think it’s Tilt, but I don’t know if he still does it. And so you would make a clicking sound and he would click back. And so I remember everyone would try to do that or I would try to just kind of like observe the birds and the other animals.

Vicki credited these experiences and others like for having an impact on her decisions about the future career paths she was considering:

I would like to train animals, like probably injured animals, because I wouldn’t want to take animals out of their natural habitat unless they are actually injured or they have a good reason to be taken out of it. And so the Outdoor Learning Center I think, I mean they have their birds, and they’re not like trained, trained, but they’re sort of trained. They’re not like mean or anything, because like some of them you can hold and stuff.

It was clear through Vicki’s comments in our initial meeting and her more in-depth final interview that the aspect of the RVOLC curriculum that appealed most to her was the animals. She was interested in and cared for them so much that she sought out extended involvement with them at the Center during her sixth grade year—when she otherwise would not have had a planned school trip to the RVOLC at all—to work with them five days a week.

**Educator and parent perspective.** RVOLC educator Amy explained how students’ curiosity with the RVOLC curriculum could hopefully lead to them becoming more involved:

I think there is a lot of excitement and I think there’s a lot of curiosity with what we do and I think that leads into, they just want to know more a lot of the time. They get—it’s involvement, they want to become involved.

This was certainly the case with Vicki, and her intense curiosity about and interest in any RVOLC curriculum having to do with animals. The Center’s birds of prey in particular prompted Vicki’s desire to someday devote her life to animals in some capacity. Her mother
explained, “This is what she wants to do. She wants to do something with animals or be an activist or something like that with the animals.” Vicki’s mother had even helped to look into special colleges that offer the type of education her daughter would need to pursue her animal saving or training career. Vicki’s obvious connection and curiosity for the RVOLC curriculum, especially when it had anything to do with the animals, made a deep and lasting impression on her, so much so, that, according to her mother, she started to figure out who she was in the process. Her mother commented: “Vicki doesn’t care if she’s, you know, out running around with the cool kids. She sees this learning experience and everything that she’s doing related to later in life.” Vicki’s mother confirmed her daughter’s comments about how much she loved learning about the animals at the RVOLC.

**Summary of perspectives.** It was clear through Vicki’s interviews and her mother’s comments as part of the parent focus group interview that Vicki had a special connection with this one aspect of the Center’s curriculum in particular. Her love of being close to, observing, learning about, and caring for the Center’s animals were apparent through her recollections about specific animals and RVOLC lessons. Both Vicki and her mother attributed her interest in pursuing a career in some type of animal protection, rescue, or training capacity to her experiences at the Center. It was evident from both perspectives that the animals were what drew Vicki in and kept her coming back to the RVOLC.

**Vicki’s Relationship with the Place that is the RVOLC**

**Vicki’s perspective.** Vicki was clear about her love of the place that was the RVOLC mostly because of the animals, “Well, I really like the animals and I like that they have little paw prints and animal prints painted all over the floors and walls, and I like the animals mostly.” Vicki added that the overwhelming draw for her to this place were the birds of prey in particular.
She appreciated how the Center doubled as a place where kids learn, but also where animals were saved from almost certain death. When I asked Vicki to elaborate on the Center’s history of rescuing animals, she easily offered:

A lot of their animals have been rescued. Like people have brought their birds in that they can no longer take care of or they don’t really want. The raptors, they’ve been saved from being euthanized, because a lot of them—or all of them have some kind of disability. One of them has a missing eye, and a few of them have only one wing, or they can’t fly very good and they’re here to be taken care of so they don’t get euthanized; otherwise, because if they weren’t here, then they—I mean there’s probably other organizations that do that, but there could be a possibility that they would die if they weren’t here. And they are very well taken care of.

Vicki’s awareness of the Center serving as a place of education but also as a place of sanctuary for discarded and disabled animals contributed to her affection for the Center.

She also respected the RVOLC staff and came to recognize the Center as a place where adults were there because they wanted to be and because they cared about the same things she cared about. When asked how she felt about the RVOLC staff, she commented:

Well, they make me feel happy. I think they’re really nice and I can tell that they are passionate about their jobs. They care about what they are doing. They are not acting like they are just stuck here doing something they hate, which I think is important if you want to teach students and people about something you care about. I think if you care about it, then people will be more interested and they may start learning about the subject or they may actually start caring about it as opposed to if you didn’t care about it, then they would lose interest.
Both the animals and the caring, passionate RVOLC staff contributed to Vicki’s relationship to the place that was the Center for her.

**Educator and parent perspective.** Vicki’s mother also talked about how intertwined her daughter’s awareness as the Center as a sanctuary was with Vicki’s relationship to the place. Her mother recalled the first time she learned about the RVOLC being a safe haven for these birds from her excited young daughter:

I definitely remember early on, like second grade her talking about the birds. She was fascinated with the owls and there is a bird over there with one eye. Vicki loves that bird. And the reptiles too—she’s fascinated with reptiles, but the birds definitely—there was something about that that was really unique. Just the whole fact that she was learning that a lot of these birds were rescued from other facilities or I’m not really sure, private people, but how we acquired them, but she just thought that was really cool how we saved these birds that would have otherwise died out in the wild.

Also according to her mother, in addition to loving that the RVOLC was a sanctuary for animals, Vicki felt that she was privileged and lucky to have had the RVOLC share the same physical property with her elementary school. Her mother shared this sentiment:

I think it’s really cool to be able to have the Center right outside the elementary school so that throughout the years while they are here they can go out and look forward to something that’s not quite you know out in the woods, but they get to explore nature, they get to learn about habitats, about different animals and the environment and it’s just something that the kids have to look forward to. Sort of a special treat.
Vicki’s mother also commented that there was a sense of pride attached to Vicki “coming back” to her old elementary school when she started working at the RVOLC as part of her River School job:

When she went to River School and got the opportunity to actually work [at the RVOLC], I think she gained even more respect for that facility and how unique it was to [her former elementary] school, because she would talk to other kids. A lot of other kids that did not go to [her elementary school] had no idea that we had anything like this. So, yeah, she really, she really enjoyed it, and it was a big deal for her to get to come over here to her old school.

Vicki’s mother was well aware of how much the animals, particularly the sanctuary for the birds of prey, contributed to Vicki’s relationship to the place that was the RVOLC. Her mother also felt Vicki recognized that she was lucky to have the Center so close to her during her elementary years.

**Summary of perspectives.** It was evident from her comments how much Vicki appreciated and came to love this place. She shared with her mother and extended family members how much she learned from and enjoyed the Center. The connection she felt with the place was undoubtedly influenced by its animals in general, but the rescued animals and their sanctuary there in particular. Vicki’s mother confirmed that this aspect of the RVOLC really solidified her daughter’s relationship with the place. Vicki’s mother also felt Vicki’s love for the place was at least partially tied to the fact that it was near to her elementary school and she enjoyed “coming back” to it during her first middle school year.
Vicki’s Connection to the Outdoors

Vicki’s perspective. Vicki has made it her mission to be mindful of her own and others’ behaviors as they affect the Earth and all the creatures on it. It was clear throughout our conversations that being a steward for the environment and animals became an integral part of Vicki’s life. She articulately built upon the Center’s purpose of merely getting students out in nature and teaching them about the outdoors by verbalizing its purpose in helping students to understand their role in protecting nature:

When I was pretty little and I didn’t know really anything about nature and stuff I just knew, “Oh, that’s a tree, that’s a bush, that’s the ground.” Things like that and so this has taught me a lot that you can’t just litter wherever you go or you have to take care of the planet and be nice to nature. So it just makes me want to get outdoors more and try to make sure it stays, the air and water and all that is clean and I just want to do more activities outside instead of wasting energy inside or driving around when you don’t need to you could just ride a bike somewhere.

When I asked what got her thinking about this, she identified the Center as one of her main influences, “Coming here to the Outdoor Learning Center got me started probably, because they talked about things about Earth that we—or that people will do to pollute the Earth and so probably this got me started.”

Vicki appreciated this approached as she felt a very personal connection to local birds of prey because of the animals at the Center. Toward the end of our first interview when I asked her what she thought the main purpose of the Center was, she said:

I think the Outdoor Learning Center [is] trying to educate kids about animals and the Earth and how to help it in a way that kids will be interested in it. So they won’t be just
like telling them about something and then the kids will be like, “Yeah, yeah, okay, can we go home now?” I think they want to make it fun for the kids so then they can go home and think, “Oh yeah, I really want to do this.”

Vicki’s connection to the outdoors was strengthened by her experiences at the RVOLC. Not only did Vicki connect with the outdoors, but her comments indicated that through their lessons, approach and through their example, that she had grown passionate about protecting it as well.

**Educator and parent perspective.** The RVOLC staff was quick to make sure it was known that they did not teach about conservation in a preachy way. Instead, they helped facilitate conversations about how humans could impact the environment in both good and bad ways. They gave the students all the information and hoped they would make decisions that would have positive impacts. Amy, one of the long-time RVOLC educators, explained it this way:

I think a lot of our stuff has kind of the conservation underlying foundation. Like if you think of our HOOT shows we talk about our birds of prey and they’re all from around here and you know it gets kids thinking about, “Oh well, these are things that I could do to help them—to help their habitats, to help them stay alive to make everything better, to provide a balance.” And I think that quite a few of our lessons are, actually a lot of the stuff that we do have that underlying theme of conservation without telling them that.

Vicki’s mother identified this focus on stewardship as the one main value she felt her daughter took away from her time at the Center:

I would say that Vicki has learned how to respect nature more, because she knows a lot more about the habitats and what the animals need to thrive and so she has gotten into even more being environmentally friendly. No cigarettes because the birds could eat
them or the animals in the ocean could swallow them. This whole circle of us ruining the Earth and the animals are the ones that really suffer. And so I think she’s really—she picked up on it the last few years at elementary and definitely now at middle school.

The RVOLC educators’ approach to teaching for stewardship and Vicki’s mother’s confirmation that this approach was well received by her daughter, speak to how the Center has helped to strengthen Vicki’s connection with the outdoors.

**Summary of perspectives.** As a result of the Center’s conservation approach Vicki had certainly started to work as a young advocate herself. She told others about the fact that we all must be mindful of how we affect animal habitats and the outdoors in general. Vicki’s mother corroborated this by sharing that Vicki had been vocal about bad habits that affect the environment or animal habitats. Vicki’s connection with the outdoors was closely linked to her developing passion about being a steward of her place.

**Vicki’s Contentment When Learning at the RVOLC**

**Vicki’s perspective.** This strong feeling for advocacy contributed to Vicki’s contentment when learning there. Throughout our conversations she was able to recall several RVOLC lessons in detail and she was knowledgeable about the reasons why the RVOLC spent time teaching about such topics as the water cycle, habitats and Native American history. She attributed these lasting impressions to the way in which learning happened at the Center. She agreed the Center staff worked hard to make learning fun, but she also labeled the learning there as hands-on. She was eager to share how much she appreciated this approach. In one example she recalled a RVOLC lesson about the digestive process of a quail and how learning it this way made a difference:
They showed us a quail they had already dissected and they were showing us its gizzard and how they eat rocks to crush up their food. And so they gave us, I can’t remember what it was. They gave us some things or some pebbles and we would each have either big rocks or pebbles and we would have to shake the bags and try to crush them with what else was in our bags to see how quails digest their food. It was really cool, because it was a hands-on kind of experience and I think that’s better than reading in a book that “quails eat rocks to crush up their food.”

While the quail lesson did not directly relate to stewardship for animals or the Earth, Vicki was well aware of the RVOLC mission behind lessons like these. She explained her general awareness of why the Center educators conducted lessons the way they did:

They try to make it fun for kids, but also educate them about something and so they want to make sure that kids are learning about ways like we can’t just litter and it’ll all just disappear and be perfect. And they want to tell kids that this is what will happen when you do something but they’ll make it with like a hands-on activity so the kids are interested and are like, “Wow, what’s that?”

Vicki was also able to recall a trip she took with the RVOLC to the local aquifer in third grade. Her class walked just up the road from her elementary school. She shared:

I learned about how or what the aquifer was because I had no idea where our water came from. I just thought you turn the faucet on and it appeared. And I also learned that we have to keep our water clean that it matters to keep our water clean and not to throw trash in it and poisons and fertilizer, chemicals, things like that.

She added that this experience of actually going to a physical place where she could see the aquifer and get a sense of its existence and size helped her to really understand the concept. She
compared this to seeing a commercial on television about protecting the aquifer: “Well, I remember seeing a commercial on ’protect the aquifer,’ [and thinking] ‘Oh, that’s stupid,’ but when I actually learned about it, I’m like well, this actually matters.” She appreciated this type of experiential and hands-on learning, and was quick to point out, too, that she loved the real-world applicability of everything they taught. She also noted that it did not hurt that she was passionate about all of the Center’s subject matter, “And so I think that the outdoor learning Center provides more hands-on activities and for me at least more interesting activities.”

**Educator and parent perspective.** The RVOLC director knew Vicki well. Jeni described Vicki as someone who loved learning, especially when it had to do with animals or taking care of the Earth. The director also noted that Vicki was a hard worker when it came to her time at the Center and with all of her studies:

She goes above and beyond [and she is] super excited when she’s here. You never have to get on her, make sure she’s doing her job or anything and she always has kind of the certain joy look on her face that she’s enjoying what she does…I know teachers think she’s a great kid.

Jeni commented about how much Vicki quietly went about her work at the RVOLC while also clearly enjoying it. Rick, who occasionally taught at River School as well as at RVOLC, commented that Vicki might not necessarily be noticeable to other RVOLC staff because she was not boisterous and she rarely needed direction. Rick’s ability to see her in both educational settings offered an added perspective. He commented that “she does really well in school and so she thrives in school, and at the Outdoor Learning Center.” Vicki’s mother commented that she was particularly content while learning when it involved what she was passionate about and when it allowed her to be hands-on with the animals:
She loves wolves, reptiles, horses, she loves to be with animals, hands-on, so anything that she’s able to touch and learn about. I think Vicki, it was just fun for her to get away and do something hands-on with animals. I know that the only thing that she wished that she got to do more was actually touch the animals, but she did get to a point where she realized that that was just not going to happen every day.

Vicki’s mother also added that the RVOLC’s approach to teaching science may have made the subject more appealing to her daughter:

I also think it gave her a lot of knowledge that she wouldn’t have gotten. I think she likes science a lot more than she would have if she didn’t get that kind of experience, because it was so hands-on with the curriculum during elementary school.

The educators and Vicki’s mother perceived that Vicki was a successful student in a variety of school settings, and that she especially loved learning at the Center because of being able to experience the animals up close and participate in hands-on learning.

**Summary of perspectives.** Vicki was exceptionally articulate when it came to recalling RVOLC lessons and the fact that the educators there worked to make them interesting, hands-on, and connected to the real world. She described several lessons and the impact they had on her own decision making. The educators acknowledged that Vicki was a strong student and a quiet learner with a smile on her face when she was at the Center. Vicki’s mother was quick to point out the hands-on approach to learning and the fact that Vicki was able to get up close to the animals contributed to her contentment while learning at the RVOLC.

**Vicki’s Story Summary**

It was clear that Vicki was thoughtful and reflective beyond her years in many ways. She was a conscientious student and hard worker who thrived in the school setting she had chosen for
herself. Because of the RVOLC and because she had a supportive family and an especially involved and caring mother, she was lucky to identify and pursue several of her passions very early in life. One RVOLC educator remarked on how joyful Vicki was during her time at the Center, “I can’t think of any time that she was here where her face didn’t look bright and shiny with a smile, her eyes kind of sparkling.” Vicki respected the place that was the RVOLC because of what it did for animals and taught her about animals. She felt the Center was responsible for starting her on the path to be a steward of the Earth and a protector of animal habitats in particular, and she felt deeply connected to the RVOLC’s animal curriculum and bird sanctuary. Finally, she appreciated hands-on learning situations, especially when they had real-world applications that she was passionate about.

Christopher’s Story

Christopher was a fast-talking yet articulate, cerebral sixth grader who, like Vicki, also chose to attend River School, RVSD’s non-traditional middle school. He made it clear in his first interview why he made this decision:

Well because [the other middle school], I mean it has 600 kids and I’ve heard some things, good things about it, but I also heard some bad things about it, so I wanted to try River School because also I like small groups, not HUGE groups.

Like River School, the RVOLC offered an experience for Christopher that involved small groups—only 6–10 students that came as part of the DNR class that worked at the RVOLC four days a week as part of their River School curriculum. I first met Christopher at the RVOLC during one of his work days there. He was busy attending to the tasks of his job, cleaning out cages and tanks and watering the snakes. He was small in stature and had boundless energy, moving quickly from outside to inside and from room to room within the main RVOLC building.
Christopher was tenacious and he voiced some of his strong opinions when he talked of his love of technology during our first interview. I was curious about how a student could be a self-proclaimed technology enthusiast and still be so interested in nature and aware of his outdoor surroundings. My answer came when he explained the degree to which he was aware of the ills of social networking. He commented that he made sure his time spent on computers was not elevated to the silly habit of isolation that had plagued many of his peers:

Christopher: Like social networking sites I hate seeing those and I hate—

Researcher: Why?

Christopher: I mean they’re fun—I mean connecting with family that’s okay, but kids they’re just on there all the time being like—“Oh, hi.”—when they say they’re just right down the street. I’ve seen people do that before. Like seriously, if they were just down the street I would want to go down and see them instead of saying, “Oh yeah, chilling in my room, really bored, you should come over.” “Sorry, can’t, it’s only 49 degrees outside.”

“Dude, you’re only two houses away from me.”

Christopher’s curiosities, willingness to engage with the RVOLC staff, and genuine joy in being at the Center made him stand out in the staff’s minds. Their affinity for him was clear. When asked what he thought the main value of the RVOLC was for him, Christopher replied, “to feel more connected to the staff and learn more about the animals.”

Christopher’s interest in the Center’s animals was clearly established in the first few minutes of his first interview. He described seeing some of the reptiles and the birds of prey for the first time and attributed the animals with “grabbing him in” to want to work at the RVOLC:
Well that’s why I wanted to start working with animals because [the veiled chameleon] fascinated me. I’m fascinated with him because I just think he’s so cool and everything so I wanted to start working with animals…And also we have birds here too, so that’s, I like seeing them but here. Also we have snakes which I personally love snakes so that was another—I don’t know winner or grabber thing that grabbed me in.

Throughout my informal observations of Christopher, my interview with the RVOLC staff and the parent focus group interview where his mother participated, and my structured interviews with Christopher himself, several features about his RVOLC experience became clear. A closer look into Christopher’s connections to aspects of the RVOLC curriculum, his relationship with the place, his connection to the outdoors and his contentment when learning at the RVOLC follows. Within each of these subsections Christopher’s own words are offered first, which is followed by the educator and parent perceptions of his RVOLC experiences. A summary of these perceptions concludes each subsection.

**Aspects of the RVOLC Curriculum with which Christopher Connected**

**Christopher’s perspective.** Christopher understood one of the main reasons for the Center was “to educate [kids], so their purpose of coming would be so they learn about the environment and say whatever they’re learning about that day, they know more about it and they know the basics of it.” He appreciated this purpose and connected with this piece of the RVOLC curriculum on a personal level. Christopher was passionate about the outdoors and readily made connections between what he saw, learned, and experienced at the Center with his experiences away from the Center. He shared this example of exploring weeds in his backyard as an illustration of this:
I’m like, “Okay, that tree, I know what that is. I saw that at the Outdoor Learning Center.”…We have a bunch of weeds behind our house, and I’m like, “Okay, you know what, I feel like finding this because I’m bored. So I’m going to go back there and find it.” Two minutes later—“Ooh, found it, yeah.”

The way he took what he learned at the Center and applied it to his summertime experiences at his grandmother’s cabin on a nearby mountain lake was further evidence of this:

One thing that I love doing is when I learn about something here, I will try and go find it at my cabin. Like some things I’ve actually learned from the cabin like a cedar tree and all that. I know those things by heart. I love those trees. But you can learn lots about trees. I like trying to find plants and then go try to find them. Also, sometimes it has helped me identify like different species of animals like say deer.

This love of nature and the connection with the RVOLC curriculum about the physical environment were not the only features that drew Christopher to the Center. It could be argued that what Christopher was most interested and curious about at the Center were its animals. Christopher used the word fascinated when he referred to his memorable first visit to the Center. He explained his attraction to one animal in particular:

My earliest memory? I love this, I have always remembered this. This is the first time I came here. They had a chameleon here where the trout currently are. That chameleon was so cool. There was this veiled chameleon; I think it was a veiled. He was amazing. I was so fascinated by him.

In his typical fashion, Christopher also exuded enthusiasm about his unique opportunity to get so close to large reptiles. He described how it felt to handle the snakes:
When you first put a snake on you, like around your neck or something I mean that sounds sort of dangerous for people who are hearing this, but it’s just—it just feels so weird like a sensation you’ve never felt before. I mean—muscles because you can feel the muscles moving, it’s sort of weird, but interesting.

Christopher connected most with the RVOLC curriculum that explored local plant and animal species. He would take the knowledge that he learned at the RVOLC and apply it to plants or trees in his backyard or at his grandmother’s lake cabin. He was most curious and invested in RVOLC curriculum that had to do with the animals at the Center, especially the reptiles.

**Educator and parent perspective.** The educators and Christopher’s mother shared a great deal about Christopher’s connection with the animals at the Center. One RVOLC educator, Kristy, gave an example of what it was like to have Christopher at the Center when he worked cleaning out the cage of one of the reptiles named Wally:

He has a lot of character in his whole kind of personality and I just think of him with Wally and having to clean Wally’s cage. He’s, “Ah!” when he walks in. “Wally!”

Those extra high decibels that he talks in; he is, he’s just funny.

Kristy’s comment was perhaps more about Christopher’s personality, but it shed light on the way in which he interacted with the animals he worked with. Christopher’s mother recalled the same level of excitement when he came home one night and talked about the Center’s birds of prey many years earlier:

When Christopher was younger and the elementary class was talking about the birds of prey. It fascinated him. I thought that was so cool and you could sit there and I remember him one time saying, “The bird’s almost as tall as I am. He’s huge!”
She acknowledged and appreciated how much her son loved seeing the Center’s animals. His mother also found it sometimes hard to fathom how easily Christopher handled the snakes:

I just can’t believe how comfortable he is with handling snakes and all of that now. I mean he has no fear whatsoever…He never would have picked up a snake before I don’t think and now he sits in there with a boa wrapped all around him and is totally fine.

It is one thing to point out how much looking at the animals and handling the snakes fascinated Christopher, but his mother was the first to acknowledge that learning about these and other animals and their habitats was clearly taking place as well: “He’s learned a lot just about how habitats, what animals need to survive the different habitats for each animal and like you were saying he’s come home and he’s told us so much and the birds of prey too.” It was clear to the RVOLC educators and Christopher’s mother how interested and animated he was when it came to learning about the curriculum that had to do with the Center’s animals.

Summary of perspectives. Christopher’s connection with and curiosity about the RVOLC’s plant and animal life curriculum was clear. Although Christopher made many comments about how he loved observing and knowing about local plant life, the educators and his mother commented mostly about how he loved learning more about animals at the center. Christopher’s level of interest in these two areas of the RVOLC curriculum contributed to his deep sense of connection to the place.

Christopher’s Relationship with the Place that is the RVOLC

Christopher’s perspective. Christopher made it clear how deeply he cared about the place that is the RVOLC. He commented at length about how much he appreciated the Center’s outdoor landscape:
I love the landscape that they have. Personally I think it’s the most amazing landscape…even though people might say, “Oh, it’s just plants scattered around.” It’s so fun though, well for some people. Some people are like, “Oh, nature, ticks—I hate nature.” I don’t like those people, sorry, sorry if people are listening to that, but get out in nature—it’s amazing. It’s amazing!

Christopher noted that the cottonwood trees at the Center wreaked havoc with his seasonal allergies, but other than that, his knowledge about and appreciation for the physical space was apparent. He credited the place with introducing students to nature and inspiring them to get closer to it.

They have this wonderful area that they have with lots of trees that you—well they’re all native. I’m pretty sure, yeah and then they have these little creeks that of course are not like natural but they’re artificial which they are really, really cool to see in action.

Christopher also mentioned a huge Native American tipi on the grounds as contributing to the place that was the Center. He conveyed that he felt a level of comfort and degree of freedom at the Center: “I like to come here because it’s just so awesome! Because they have all the bushes and it’s a great place to play hide and seek, you have no idea.”

The people that work at the learning Center also contributed to how Christopher felt about the place: “When I come here one thing that I get to do is I get to build relationships I guess with the people here who they’re all amazing.” He looked up to the staff and valued their knowledge. He knew them all and referred to them casually by their first names. He commented on how the staff was always willing and able to engage and dialogue with him often:

The staff. They’re extremely nice and courteous. They will help you with questions and also say if you have a question that you haven’t been able to get answered anywhere...They
Christopher was outspoken when it came to how much he cared for the place, its landscape and what it offered students. He welcomed and enjoyed the interaction with the staff members on a daily basis and looked up to them as experts.

**Educator and parent perspective.** Several of the RVOLC staff agreed that Christopher was both comfortable and in his element at the Center, and that he was also challenged to think by the Center staff at the same time. This overlapped with what Christopher offered about dialoguing with the “nice and courteous” staff. One RVOLC educator, Amy, offered her perspective of such conversations with Christopher:

“We challenge him and it’s not necessarily with the jobs that we give him, but just in conversations that I’ve had with him. I’ve challenged him on things and if it’s something that he is curious to know more about it and he’ll come ask you or he’ll voice his opinion and that’s something where he’s being challenged on his values and his point of view, and he’s not afraid to share them and to keep his foot where it’s at.

Christopher’s tenacity was clear again from this exchange. Another Center educator, Kristy, also made it clear how much Christopher enjoyed the staff and working with them at the RVOLC Saturday open houses. She shared that he would often put in seven-hour shifts:

“He’s always talking about the open houses and even though you say “Okay, pick a 1 1/2–2 hour shift,” he’s there all seven hours. You can’t get him to leave even if you try. You can’t. It’s just like, “All right, here’s your shift,” and [he] comes an hour early and stays until it [the open house, not just his shift] ends—he always wants to be here.
Christopher’s mother reiterated that he loved being involved with the Center and looked forward to his time at the RVOLC. “He’s not looking forward to summer vacation, because he won’t be seeing everybody and won’t be at the Outdoor Learning Center.” It was clear Christopher had a passion for being involved in any RVOLC opportunity, and had a strong relationship with the place and the people there.

**Summary of perspectives.** Christopher’s relationship with the place that was the RVOLC was deeply rooted in the physical surroundings that made up the place and his interactions with the people there. He was able to articulate share both dimensions in clear detail. The staff and Christopher’s mother confirmed how much he loved interacting with the staff and being at the place that is the RVOLC in general.

**Christopher’s Connection to the Outdoors**

**Christopher’s perspective.** Christopher’s love of the outdoors was obvious and he was eager to share that the RVOLC had an influence on how he felt about nature: “It’s made my life better…I definitely enjoy [and prefer] being in nature a lot more…now that I’ve been here.”

In Christopher’s first interview he indicated that he would like to talk more in his final interview about how the RVOLC “affected” students. When I asked him his own question during his final interview, Christopher’s response was focused on how the Center introduced students to nature. He explained a situation where the RVOLC impacted the hypothetical student who went on the first field trip knowing nothing about nature:

> So basically you say a student, they go on the first field trip there and they know nothing about nature. I mean maybe they have gone and hiked before and not really liked it because, “It’s wet. It’s rainy. I didn’t like it. I don’t like it!”…So maybe you go in first grade and you learn about this cycle called the water cycle
and you’re just amazed, you’re like, “Whoah!” And it becomes invisible—the water becomes invisible and goes up into the sky and then maybe you learn about all that and then let’s just say you go there a lot more until you get into fifth grade, then you even go there in high school, because I believe there are high school trips. Then you become like an environmental biologist in real life so it could maybe change your point of view and make you become—or not make you but inspire you to become—do something in the wildlife outdoors field of work.

This hypothetical scenario of a student coming to love nature and pursue a career in the outdoors signifies that Christopher believed the RVOLC had the potential to impact students in a positive and life-changing way. He confirmed that he had become closer to nature himself as a result of being involved with the Center even though his family enjoyed the outdoors regularly.

**Educator and parent perspective.** The Center staff represented a group of people with similar interests who enjoyed talking with Christopher about outdoorsy topics that he was passionate about. The interactions and perspectives he gained from them may have helped to contribute to his connection with the outdoors. For instance, Amy recalled debating about the wild wolf population with Christopher at the RVOLC:

I get into debates with him and when can you ever debate legitimately with a sixth grader? We’ve debated about wolves, it was two polar opposites and you know the fact that he’s knowledgeable about these topics and is curious about it…

She was clearly impressed with Christopher’s fervor and knowledge about the wolves and she noted that he worked to engage staff often in such topics. She described further:
He’s one of those kids that walks around with his iPod and is like looking up the answer to something if we can’t figure it out for him. He finds it and it’s—I think that we provide that challenge for him.

In addition to the staff contributing to his conversations about the outdoors, Christopher enjoyed the outdoors with his family all the time. His mother noted it was nice that the RVOLC reinforced what he learned and experienced with his parents. She commented:

I love the outdoors, I’m trying to teach my kid everything I can about them, but I love that somebody else is too, because they’re going to have a different point of view than I am and he’s picking up a lot more from them, because he doesn’t listen to me.

His mother was quick to note, however, that not all students who come to the RVOLC were exposed to the outdoors with their family. For this experience, she felt the RVSD school district patrons were particularly lucky. “I think a lot of it too is to get people who generally would never go outdoors to learn about any of that because they weren’t maybe brought up that way or whatever. It opens that door for kids.” For Christopher, that door had already been wide open, but his mother also acknowledged that the RVOLC represented a place where he could enthusiastically share the experiences he has had outside the Center:

And he loves—we are very outdoorsy and we do a lot of hunting, fishing and there are many experiences that we have done that he’s got to tell them about and share with them that have interacted with what they have going on there, so it’s kind of cool for him to see the whole circle.

The educators and his mother both talked about Christopher’s connection with the outdoors being strengthened by his interactions at the center, particularly in his sixth grade year, through talks with the RVOLC staff during his DNR work at the Center.
Summary of perspectives. According to Christopher, the RVOLC pushed his appreciation for nature to new heights. He shared that he felt the Center had impacted him and had the potential to impact other students in a way that they would become lovers of the outdoors when they may otherwise would not. His mother shared a similar view when she talked about the Center opening up doors for students who may not normally spend a lot of time in nature. Christopher’s experiences in nature with his family were reinforced and appreciated by the RVOLC staff. His experiences on RVOLC trips and his conversations with Center staff had, by his own admission, made his love of the outdoors even stronger.

Christopher’s Contentment When Learning at the RVOLC

Christopher’s perspective. Christopher appreciated the RVOLC staff’s effort to frame learning in experience:

We go down to [a creek]…But it’s this guy who lent his land for educational purposes and he just wants it to stay how it is nothing like destroyed on it or anything happens to it. He just wanted it to stay in its natural state, because it’s actually very nice down there. But yeah and we get to use – one of the activities is we get to use a big net and someone who’s standing in the creek with waders and like rubbing up some of the rocks and flipping them over and then we try to catch like little isopod things.

When I asked Christopher why the Center took students on this particular trip, he was quick to respond with what he learned, “I learned that there are actually little tiny creatures on the bottom of creeks. I learned that some of them are very delicate and some of them are very important to our ecosystem, too.” The Center organized this particular trip to model and teach the scientific method but also to teach its students how to test a creek’s water quality. As Christopher and I
kept talking about this particular field trip, he was able to reflect on how much he enjoyed this type of learning. He compared it to learning similar content from a book:

> I liked it because it was hands-on and instead of just reading from a textbook, “Okay kids, turn to page 139, this right here is a picture of a two dimensional bug. It does nothing because it is printed on a piece of paper. So just ignore it, you won’t like it.”

But you actually get to go out and actually see the bug and maybe touch it. They actually let us touch the bugs and sometimes like we’ll find really long bugs, really large ones like stone flies we found before and everyone was just like crowded around the one little tub, because we put them in tubs. And everyone was just crowded around it, looking at it. Everyone just thought it was amazing.

Christopher’s example shed further light on his dynamic personality and his eagerness to share, in a detailed way, what he felt about learning at the RVOLC.

**Educator and parent perspective.** Rick, the RVOLC educator who also taught at River School, was able to compare what he observed of Christopher at River School versus when he was learning at the RVOLC, “I see him doing homework and working on math, doing things like that at River School, and I think he does pretty well at those things, but he’s not exuberant about it.” This contrasts somewhat dramatically with the staff’s descriptions of Christopher’s animated, loud, and participatory involvement when he was at the Center. In the same RVOLC educator focus group interview Rick and Kristy were trying to figure out why Christopher seemed so different between the two school settings:

Rick: And that might be part of what he likes here. He gets individualized attention versus at River School I think it’s pretty good attention, but it’s not quite as—
Kristy: And it’s all about what he likes, too. It’s also just on his interests opposed to everything they have to talk about.

Rick and Kristy thought Christopher’s excitement while at the Center had to do partly with the high interest level for him and individualized attention, and Christopher’s mother attributed how much he loved learning there to the hands-on focus of the lessons. She remembered Christopher’s recollections of his early field trips with the Center:

I just liked it because I knew it was a hands-on, touch, feel all this, learn about it and he was very excited when he came home and he told me all about what they did and it just—it’s a great thing that they have going.

The staff felt Christopher was enthusiastic and even joyful while learning at the Center. This was evidenced by his animation and his active engagement in inquiry about anything having to do with nature. Christopher’s mother attributed his love for learning at the RVOLC to its hands-on approach.

**Summary of perspectives.** Both Christopher and his mother were quick to point out how much Christopher appreciated the hands-on approach to learning at the Center. He loved to learn by seeing, experimenting, and doing things in real life. The staff also felt that the individualized aspect of the experience at the Center coupled with the high interest topics attributed to how “exuberant” he was while learning there.

**Christopher’s Story Summary**

Christopher’s sense of humor, passion and appreciation of so many things in life was impressive and was likely to have supported him in finding ways to enjoy learning. More importantly perhaps, the RVOLC provided him with a place and people that excited his interests and challenged him to discover and think through his views. He valued the physical
surroundings that made up the Center, and he felt the Center helped him to appreciate nature more. He loved learning about and caring for the animals there; he appreciated the hands-on learning situations, and he identified the Center as a place where he could be himself with the staff and where he could have fun.

**Student Stories Summary**

The four students in this study were gracious with their time and were articulate about what they experienced at the RVOLC. The two fifth grade boys also demonstrated their engagement and true joy while learning with the RVOLC when I observed them firsthand at MPLC. Taken together, data from the four participants, their mothers and the educators offered rich details and a full story in response to the first research question in this study—**How do these students experience the RVOLC?** Now the discussion of the results turns to the second and third research questions—**What has supported these and other students’ experiences at the RVOLC?** and **What has hindered these and other students’ experiences at the RVOLC?** The findings in response to each question are presented next in turn.

**River Valley Outdoor Learning Center Supports**

With respect to the study’s second research question—**What has supported these and other students’ experiences at the RVOLC?**—data analysis revealed over twenty different yet interrelated responses from multiple sources and eleven key participants. The five supports listed below were referenced most frequently and by multiple sources. For example, 24 references were made regarding the positive support of staff dispositions. Moreover, every single participant mentioned the staff contributing to the center’s success in some form or another. Over the course of this section of the results that discusses research question two, five supports are reported. These supports include the staff, the lessons, the center’s community
outreach, parent involvement with the center, and the center director. Each of these supports is discussed below.

**Staff Dispositions and Background**

The most commonly identified support for the RVOLC student experiences was the staff, who were seen as bringing about the center successes. They brought a wealth of practical experience and formal education to the learners of all ages who visited the center. Their teaching dispositions and positive approach to experiential learning were what helped to generate that excitement in kids when they were told they would be visiting the center.

**Staff experience and education.** Robert’s mother noted how important the staff was in her son’s experience, “I think that the staff there works great with the kids to get them excited. To get their motivation, because that’s totally what got Robert involved in it.” The RVOLC staff was not only passionate and motivating in what they did, but they offered a wealth of knowledge through experience and education. Five full-time educators made up the RVOLC teaching core. Jeni, the RVOLC director, had a degree in Environmental Education; Rick, one of full-time educators who had been there the longest, had his degree in Environmental Studies and Elementary Education; Amy, the other full-time educator who had been at the center almost as long as Rick, had a degree in Park and Resource Management with an emphasis in Environmental Education. The two AmeriCorps workers who were at the center full-time and even throughout the summer, planned, taught and coordinated with Jeni, Rick and Amy. Kristy had her degree in Wildlife Ecology and Greg’s college background was in finance, but he left that field and:

…moved back to [the RVOLC area] and wanted a job in Environmental Education or teaching… I had taught and coached skiing for 9 years and I was working as an
economist and I got really tired of it and I wanted to teach kids in the outdoors again. So I looked on the AmeriCorps website and found this job and that’s how I ended up here. Other part-time educators who helped out during extended trips with big groups like the week at MPLC supplemented this staff when needed. Alan, Robert’s camp leader at MPLC, was one of these part-time educators. Though not a full-time employee at the center, Alan had been involved with RVOLC trips and outreach, and worked up at MPLC leading two full groups for both of their three-day stints.

Jason’s classroom teacher was well aware of what the RVOLC educators brought to his students when they visited:

[There is a lot of] knowledge that’s there at the center as far as those people over there—[they] like to be outdoors. It’s just a good fit for them. That’s their personality—they truly have a great deal of knowledge about outdoor learning.

Christopher noticed the RVOLC loved with they did and did it well. He remarked, “We actually got to go out and hike around and we weren’t learning from a textbook; we weren’t in the classroom; we were out in the great outdoors just learning from people who have actually done this from experience.” It appealed to Christopher that he was learning from people who walked the walk, who had experienced nature and were eager to share it with students.

Positive redirection of behavior and learning. Christopher’s mother was in the RVSD often volunteering and subbing in classrooms on occasion. She had seen all different teaching styles and appreciated this one for her son. She offered how the RVOLC educators worked with students in a way that allowed students to experience the learning for themselves:

I like the staff; they are excellent. I like how they’re—not that judgment would come into anything, but just how they interact with the kids when they are handling animals,
they are not like “no, don’t hold them like that.” They let them learn. They let them understand and maybe make a little mistake here and there. And it’s—that’s the best way to learn I think.

Rick commented during the educator interview that he has received a good amount of feedback from people who visit the center about how positive the staff is with kids, “Instead of us reprimanding kids, we do a lot of redirecting… we are really good at refocusing [squirrely kids’] energy into something positive.” I observed this in Robert’s camp group in particular. The staff member for Robert’s group was Alan, who had an easy way and obvious care for kids in his group, and that had positive effects. Students responded immediately to Alan’s direction.

During a debrief of the macro invertebrate lesson that tested the health of the stream water, Robert made a slight misstep by concluding that the stream could be a little bit unhealthy because other categories of bugs were found in addition to the intolerant ones. Alan was careful not to openly pass judgment or condemn Robert’s line of thinking here. Instead, Alan complimented him for thinking in this way and Alan built on this saying, “I’m glad you brought that up, Robert.” Alan then explained that just because there are more tolerant bugs in the stream as well, that does not mean the stream is less healthy because, “Those guys we can find most everywhere. It’s the presence of the intolerant ones that is the key to figuring out the water’s health.” Alan could have easily squelched Robert’s contribution and labeled it as wrong or inaccurate in front of the entire group. Instead, he acknowledged and affirmed Robert for thinking through the investigation.

**Relationships over time.** Three of the five full-time educators had been at the center long enough to remember when both fifth grade participants in the study were in first or second grade. The RVOLC staff reminisced fondly on how much they have enjoyed these students over
the years, speaking to the fact that some pretty powerful relationships can be made over time. As an example of this focus on relationships, Amy described how much she valued being able to mentor students over many years:

You watch them come out of their shell and I think that we as a staff are really good at fostering their curiosity and we encourage them and we encourage them to be who they are and to grow into a young adult and to you know we’ve had kids come through when they’ve stuck with us through high school and it’s neat to see that kind of stuff happen and have them go in the direction that they go in their life and know that we were a part of it in some way, like whether it was big or small. If we were like that one little thing that helped them figure that out, then that’s where they’re headed and I think that that’s important.

This connection with the staff over the years was important to the parents of the students in the study. Robert’s mother reiterated that the staff for her was the single most important factor in supporting her son’s experiences there, “The staff that have been there, I can’t thank them enough for taking the time and investing it in my child to bring out something in him that I never knew.”

**Consistent Learning Experiences That Were Fun, Hands-on, Customized, Standards-based, and Coordinated with Safety in Mind**

The reliability of the engaging place-based lessons that were fun and adapted to students’ level of development was something classroom teachers, parents and students alike have identified with the center.

**The learning was fun.** Greg commented that the center staff was always aware that an important part of their job was to make sure the learning had an element of fun in it:
I think the center is really good at making sure that everything is going to be fun, like not just like they’re going to learn and they’re also going to have a lot of fun, which you talk to kids about this place and they love it because they came here and they learned stuff, but they also really enjoyed it.

Up at camp I observed this mixture of fun and learning firsthand. In both sessions with both RVOLC teachers students were given ample time to explore and were given quite a bit of latitude to be silly or have fun or experience play and nature a bit off the main directed activity. Games like “Thicket,” “Bear, Salmon, Mosquito,” and “Bat and Moth” were interspersed throughout the long hikes on the mountain.

The learning was hands-on, experiential, active, and place-based. Jason’s classroom teacher was one of the most outspoken proponents of the RVOLC lessons’ value for their active and experiential qualities because he recognized how hard it was for him to provide a similar experience for Jason in the classroom setting. He recalled one of Jason’s experiences at MPLC:

And just being able to be active and not restrained to a chair where he has to sit and the teacher—you know there’s movement, hands-on, climbing the creek, you obviously saw him. We can’t keep him out of the creek and so he was allowed to go in and just kind of be himself and be a boy and get hands-on and get excited about seeing different creatures.

Jason was also in the group when they came upon an almost fully intact elk carcass in the middle of the trail. The sight of this carcass (see Figure 4.6) made an impression on the students. They were mesmerized with the bones on the trail that outlined where a huge creature used to be. Several students also climbed a five-foot embankment to look at the other part of the carcass that was not yet as ravaged and cleaned to the bone as the one on the trail. During this discovery no one was required to look up close, and other than Kristy requesting students not to touch it, no
structured teaching or lesson or lecture happened there. Students were allowed to explore as much or as little as they wanted.

Figure 4.6. Elk Carcass Photograph on Mountain Peak. Figure 4.6 is a picture of the large animal carcass, believed to be either an Elk or Moose, that Jason’s group happened upon early during his first hike of day two at camp. Three pairs of student feet can be seen at the top of the picture. Many students stood above the bones hypothesizing how the animal had died and what had killed it while more students examined other parts of the carcass up on a nearby embankment.

Christopher described similarly engaging, albeit not out-in-the-wild lessons that he had a front row seat for while he worked with his DNR group. He related one particular lesson he observed that impressed him. This lesson included Wally, the center’s Bearded Dragon, as part of an active first grade states-of-matter learning activity that gave young students a chance to see the RVOLC’s favorite animals up close while developing some foundational science understandings:

There was a first grade class once and they went around [and] everyone had done their stations already, so [the RVOLC staff] gave them worksheets and they went around and everything and it was just like different things saying, “Am I a solid, liquid or gas?” And
then they would write down, well there would be little things on there that said “Wally’s water” on Wally’s cage thing and they would be like “liquid” if they thought it was liquid. “Gas, solid,” but yeah, I saw them doing that once and I actually thought that was a pretty cool idea. So you actually got to walk around instead of just sitting and they’re showing you something up on the screen, and you’re like “solid.”

In addition to many of the lessons being active and experiential, most of them were also place-based. Rick shared that place-based pedagogy underscored all they did and taught at the center, “It’s all about place-based education and learning about the…natural areas [of this place]…the natural phenomenon.” Jeni, the RVOLC director, offered an example of this grounding learning in the local:

We’re getting kids excited about places in their backyard. We’ve studied and second graders have studied deserts and we talk about the Sonoran Desert and it’s like okay I’m a kid that’s from inner city and I’m never going to go to the Sonoran Desert. Why not talk about the shrub step that they really potentially could go to within a half an hour you know. So getting kids excited about not faraway places but naturally curious and getting their families to go there too with them.

Vicki recalled one such place-based lesson that took place in the RVOLC’s tipi that made an impression on her:

The tipi is like an actually—well it’s kind of like an Indian kind of tipi and so they had some little logs in there that we could sit on and some pelts of some animals. Probably deer and stuff, and they explained to us what the Native Americans did, and how they lived and survived. We also learned where our fruit came from and how to find where they came from so you look at the sticker on them and that would tell you if they came
from California or Washington or somewhere like that. And they told us that the closer they came from the better because then it would use less gas to get here and they would be fresher, tastier most likely.

Rick and Amy in particular warned that during lessons like this the RVOLC staff were careful not to unload catastrophic environmental crises on students. They did not want to be overbearing about it—instead they preferred to rely on providing the students with all the needed information. The learning was active, hands-on, place-based, and activities were constantly being adapted to visitors’ diverse needs.

**The learning was adapted to meet students’ interests and their preference for active learning and to meet the teachers’ high-stakes testing curriculum needs.** Amy explained this customization well:

I think we do hands-on, experiential education really well. I think that all of our lessons like these guys said they are really tailored to kids and their interests as well as what they are doing in the classroom. We can bring it here and have them learn it in a different way than they traditionally would.

Rick added that another dimension to making sure lessons fit the patrons was crucial:

I think what we do particularly well is we focus on what works for kids developmentally and what’s going to spark their interest and curiosity, because if it’s going to be boring or not fun for the kids, we just don’t do it and we have that luxury of being able to teach that way and so I would say that’s my favorite thing about Outdoor Learning Center. It’s all about doing what works well for kids and will spark their curiosity.

**The learning was tied to standards.** Although teachers, students, or parent groups can ask the center educators to design lessons related to a particular topic, state standards are
foremost in the director’s mind as she works with classroom teachers to host RVSD elementary class. Jeni explained how this constant monitoring and adapting to meet changing standards is a key to the center’s longevity:

Being able to tie it in with what the state mandates we teach and so whatever we teach is supporting what the state requires, which is going to make sure that we’re around for long periods of time. We can’t be on this little island and be totally separate from what the state mandates, and so because of that, we make sure that we tie it all in and highlight that.

Jeni referred specifically to the state standards, but added that the center was aware of all standards facing district teachers and administrators, especially in the elementary grades. She noted how not just science, but many other content area standards were taken into consideration when the center developed their lessons:

Okay, so I said that because looking at language arts, mathematics, social studies and science across the curriculum, the state mandates are tied to what’s either best or required for students. So the state has already decided in those curricular areas what each kid at each age should know and that since all of our programs are tied into the state standards we’re really good at meeting those.

For example, Jeni was well aware of the transition to Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that would soon affect state classrooms and assessments.

The learning activities were well planned and coordinated with safety in mind.

Many participants commented that the center’s consistently engaging, active, and place-based lessons that were tied to state standards were well planned and coordinated. Christopher noticed this:
Well they were very organized and planned and whenever we got there everything was always set up and ready to go. So when we go there everything was set up and we got there and they introduced themselves and they were like, “Okay so we’re going to maybe split you up into 4 groups,” and they split you up and they just get right on instead of saying, “Sit down and wait while we set everything up for 2,000 hours.”

Jason’s classroom teacher was in a good position to comment about this aspect of their organization as well, “the way they organize the activities, and the knowledge of the staff there. And how they go about setting it up so everybody has an opportunity to participate in the activities, and the learning activities are very helpful and beneficial.” I saw this level of constant coordination that was crucial up at MPLC. Campers’ meals and time were planned from 8 AM until 9 PM every day. Students were outdoors the entire time with exception of meals and sleep. Each RVOLC leader had a backpack with extra water, a first aid kit, and all of his/her teaching materials for the hike. All the RVOLC teachers discussed where they would like to take their group for that particular session so that groups were evenly spaced among the different trails. Some student campers were also grouped purposefully with a specific leader. For example, during the second session, four students identified as autistic were placed in Rick’s group because he had experience with and knowledge about working in outdoor settings with students with autism. One of the boy’s fathers and an experienced, certificated aide also accompanied that group.

Safety was always a consideration in RVOLC planning. This was true at the center in town with all the animals, and even more apparent at MPLC. Rules were stated clearly. For instance, the RVOLC leader was supposed to remain at the front of the group. All members were supposed to stay behind him/her. Every student was assigned a particular number and the
group counted off with their individually assigned numbers periodically as a check to make sure that everyone was accounted for. The rules were designed for safety, and students were reminded why the rules were put in place. Safety measures were built in to the games as well; for instance, when playing “Bat and Moth” on the side of the mountain with one blindfolded student acting as a bat trying to find his moth by sound, the remaining students in the group stood as a large circle barrier and were “trees,” shouting “tree, tree, tree” when the blind bat got close to the boundary. While getting kids out into the wilderness and encouraging them to explore were core to the RVOLC’s mission, it was clear both at the center and on the mountain that there were several safety structures put in place to make sure everyone had a good experience.

**Outreach, Open Houses, School Partnerships, and an Open-door Policy**

The center’s community outreach programs included the mobile HOOT shows and the RVOLC display at the Big Horn Show where staff took some of the center’s birds of prey out to groups for the purpose of educating people about the animals’ characteristics, behaviors and natural habitats. In addition to outreach, the center increased its exposure in the community by offering regular Saturday open houses. Christopher described and even made an effort to encourage people to come to the RVOLC open houses:

One thing we do have open houses, so one thing maybe if you drive by here, say they usually happen on Saturdays so say maybe if you drive by here every Saturday and you see an open house sign, stop by maybe. We accept donations.

The RVOLC director had an intentional purpose for the open houses; she noted they were pivotal to sparking further community involvement and even deeper involvement on the part of the students who already visit. She explained that the open houses got, “kids wanting to come and
do more things with their families here.” Jeni noted that a series of questions from students often ensued when they came to the open houses, such as “When are [more] open houses? How can I volunteer?” It is important to note that the center reached out to learners of all ages during HOOT shows and open houses, not just current RVSD students. Rick pointed out that he had observed just as much excitement from the non-student community members:

We get a lot of parents or adults, grandparents, teachers that have a lot of—I noticed a lot with the birds and owls and things like they have seen them or heard them out in the wild and then they’re excited as adults to get to see these creatures up close and learn more about them here.

The student participants, the parents and the RVOLC educators alike identified the center’s outreach and open houses and the support they garner as crucial to the center’s survival.

The collaboration with River School and DNR was an important support especially to middle school students in the district as well. This partnership provided an extended opportunity for RVSD students to spend time learning at the center after their scheduled elementary visits came to an end. Vicki explained her experience with the River School/DNR group:

Well I was visiting pretty much every day up until before Christmas because I worked in DNR and they came here every day to care for the raptors and other animals. We came pretty much every day of the week or school week, so five days a week usually. And so we helped—we cared for the animals.

RVSD students who found a niche at the center were able to keep coming if they chose to attend River School. Finally, The RVOLC was also known as a place with a general open-door policy; students or community members were welcomed outside of formal events as long as a staff member was available to receive and talk with them. Robert recalled that he was able to set up
his volunteering time at the center by simply approaching the RVOLC director one day, “When I started helping—that’s how I starting working at the outdoor learning center. One day I went over there and asked Jeni if she needed help and that’s how I also became a volunteer.” Kristy, the RVOLC educator who had Jason in her group at camp, hoped that Jason would continue his connection with the center even though he would not attend River School. She predicted, “I see Jason as a kid who comes back in high school to help out too because he loves it.”

**Parent Involvement and Impact**

Parent awareness and involvement with the RVOLC helped sustain its programs. Parents who sought outdoor experiences as well as ones who did not spend much time in nature appreciated the center for different reasons. Robert’s mother loved the fact that her son was exposed to something he never would have gotten from home:

> It’s been great for me as a parent. I’m a city girl; I’m not an outdoors girl. I’m from Illinois and I know for me I’ve learned a lot as a parent, and especially from Robert. The things he’s taught me since he’s started going so I think it’s an asset all the way around for families and adults and everybody in general just for that.

Christopher’s parents supported him and the center just as much or more because they were a family whose fun revolves around the outdoors. Amy noticed Christopher’s parents’ influence, “He comes from that kind of family that values the outdoors and they value the experiences that their kids are having and they encourage it.” His parents were the first thing Christopher credited when I asked what has supported him spending so much time at the center, “Well, my parents of course, because they encourage me to do anything I want—well not anything, but they encourage me in the options that I choose and they’re like yeah you could do this.” Jason acknowledged that his mother donating extra supplies from her workplace helped him to spend
more time at the center as well. Jason’s teacher also credited his family for encouraging Jason’s connection with the center.

The RVOLC Director

This list of supporting factors to the center’s success would not be complete, however, without mention of the center director who has been there since its inception. Recognition of how Jeni’s hard work, passion and expertise around outdoor, experiential and place-based learning support the center was a common theme among all the participants. Rick talked about Jeni:

Jeni doesn’t give herself, or she doesn’t get enough credit for how much she, how hard she works at making it happen for students, because if she wasn’t working on it all the time over these years even through the really rough patches and things that she has to deal with as far as keeping the center going. She is the biggest advocate for the center and for students participating I would say.

Jason’s classroom teacher was quick to acknowledge how Jeni has been the constant and most integral support to the center as well:

Jeni specifically has been so good at writing grants and finding monies for the Outdoor Learning Center to take these kinds of field trips, to take—you know for the learning opportunities like the ones that we have been able to go on. That’s been a big support; she’s done a great job over there.

Over the nearly two years that I learned at the center, Jeni was the one constant and fearless advocate for keeping the center afloat. She made sure that the learning remained engaging, important and relevant to teachers, administrators and standards.
Jeni had an easy-going way with her staff and with the students that modeled respect and care for each other, for animals and for our non-living neighbors. Jeni did not micro-manage her educators. At MPLC the RVOLC activities were planned well enough so that everyone had a thorough understanding of what the experience should entail for campers. Jeni rarely told the RVOLC leaders what to do. She collaborated with staff on planning, but it was an equal and collaborative effort, not a top-down teaching hierarchy.

Students recognized Jeni as being synonymous with the center. When she spoke, students listened. It was as simple as that. Her knowledge about the outdoors, about how to manage big groups in a no-nonsense, yet respectful manner was obvious to adults and students alike. As the longest member of the RVOLC teaching team other than Jeni, Rick was perhaps in the best position to acknowledge the challenges she navigates. In response to one of my questions about challenges the center faces, Rick replied:

Jeni deals with this one the most which is why I should say she should get more [accolades] for keeping us going and getting students to—or making it so students can participate because without her advocacy there are a lot of road blocks I think that we don’t even know about because of the system that we work within. That’s one of our strengths is that we’ve gotten really good with working in the system, but the system, and I mean public school system in general and then larger society and bigger, there are road blocks that those systems put out for a program like ours that isn’t streamlined with that way of thinking.

Rick’s remarks here about keeping an outdoor learning center going in the face of various systems that inherently if not intentionally oppose its goals are crucial in considering all the supports the center and its students do have going for them. Taken together, the staff and their

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background as well as teaching approaches, the consistently solid learning experiences, the outreach activities and partnerships, the parent involvement, and the RVOLC director, have helped the RVOLC to thrive under often less-than-ideal circumstances. In this description, the five most commonly identified sustaining factors have been discussed. However, they are not the only sustaining factors. Study participants also gave credit to other factors, such as classroom teachers, partnering organizations like the Bureau of Land Management, the city joint aquifer board, the county water resources center, and the RVSD.

**River Valley Outdoor Learning Center Constraints**

With respect to the study’s third research question—What has hindered these and other students’ experiences at the RVOLC?—data analysis revealed ten different responses. Two constraining factors came only from the student participants and the other eight from multiple sources of data and participants. The four hindrances listed below were referenced most frequently and by multiple sources. While overall it was far more difficult to get responses from the participants about challenges facing the center than the factors that supported the center, the leading offender, lack of funding, garnered seven references from five different participants. Over the course of this section of the results that discusses research question three, four constraints are reported. These supports include lack of funding, classroom teachers, lack of enough planned RVOLC experiences, and lack of advertising or exposure. Each of these supports is discussed below.

**Lack of Funding**

First and foremost, data revealed that lack of funding constantly hindered the center and its staff from being able to extend its programs to the community. The RVOLC operated as a learning community within the RVSD. One of the elementary school principals in the district
was the administrator on record and coordinated with Jeni to oversee the RVOLC. The RVSD paid for Jeni’s, Rick’s and Amy’s salaries. Greg and Kristy were AmeriCorps workers who were paid by that organization. As has been stated before as part of developing the context of the research site and also as part of the data, Jeni and other administrators had written and received various grants to fund or supplement the funding of many of the activities and excursions the RVOLC planned for students. Within this structure, however, money always served as a constraining factor in the staff’s ability to extend its programs, especially to the broader community outside RVSD. Kristy acknowledged this problem:

Definitely money I think is always kind of a factor just because I mean our programs, for how many kids we see, aren’t really that expensive, but there are a lot of schools out there that they can’t afford it. It’s just not possible for them to do it.

Christopher’s mother was aware of the funding hurdles, and her line of thinking was that if other schools came to use the center, perhaps that would provide an influx of funds:

I know a lot of times they may have a hard time with funding and such so you know fundraisers for it or whatever. It’s a great facility and more of the town needs to know about it, because I mean that could really—other school districts could come and utilize it, and maybe that would help it.

She was aware that the center faced a constant fight for limited funds, and she was eager to brainstorm possible solutions.

A concrete example of lack of funding for a specific program offered by the RVOLC was revealed during the RVOLC educator interview. Greg voiced his frustrations about a hiking club that has limited attendance because there was not enough funding for it:
We do the hiking club and [the teacher] only has funding for 12 kids—12 kids a week to come and it’s like we got three teachers here, why can we not have 45 kids? And I mean I always thought it was because only that many kids were signing up, but it’s a lot of kids want to do it. Why can’t it happen? There’s just no funding for it. It’s like well you’ve got three people volunteering their time here, can’t somebody find some way to make it happen?

One small piece of the funding picture needed to sustain the center and its activities became clear to me when I saw the piles of materials needed for camp. By the fourth day at MPLC while I was shadowing Robert’s group, tools for both the macro invertebrate and the decomposer investigations were scarce as they were fragile and many were broken from previously being mishandled. Two such piles of tools are pictured below (see Figures 4.7 & 4.8).

Jeni was responsible for making the center work with the monies available. And while she was restrained with her contributions to the conversation about funding during the RVOLC educator interview, she offered:

Costs, money is number one, the biggest limiting factor that we have…I would like to go to an administrative team meeting or have a budgetary meeting and not have to be worried about where all of our money is coming in all the time. It’s just a stomachache for me. Yes, just making ends meet [is a challenge]. Yeah, yeah, and anytime there’s a levy that doesn’t pass or anything, we’re the first thing. I mean Rick’s and Amy’s positions are constantly being threatened.
Classroom Teachers

Classroom teachers were referenced by five different study participants as negatively affecting the students experiencing the center. A conversation between Christopher’s mother and Vicki’s mother was particularly illuminating: teachers could choose if they wanted to take their students to the center:

Christopher’s Mother: For some reason in Christopher’s class…they only went once to the Outdoor Learning Center in the fourth and fifth [grades]. He wasn’t as involved with it.

Vicki’s Mother: Yeah, I remember Vicki said last year in Mrs. Wilson’s class that she was really disappointed that they didn’t get to go to the Outdoor Learning Center. That was something that she really enjoyed in the earlier parts of school.
Christopher’s Mother: If it’s like a teacher preference or you know maybe they’re just not into that sort of thing so they don’t bring that into their curriculum type thing.

This hunch that teachers could easily choose not to offer the experience to their students was reinforced by the RVOLC staff. Kristy commented on how this could be potentially devastating to some kids who so look forward to the experience:

You get those kids like Robert and Jason who thrive in the outdoors and they love it and I feel like sometimes they’re kind of depending on their teacher. I mean obviously not [Jason’s teacher], because he can be found outside all the time, but depending on their teacher, they may be like “No, let’s not, that’s not okay.”

One reason for teachers’ choices to use or not use the RVOLC may have depended on their awareness of its benefits. Jeni voiced her frustration about sometimes having to sell the classroom teachers on the experience for their students:

I think teachers are a limiting factor sometimes. I think a lot of teachers want to come but then there are some you have to talk into coming and that’s not so much River Valley. There’s a few that would probably stay back with their kids.

Jason’s teacher offered his perspective as a classroom teacher. He was amazed that some teachers do in fact opt out:

I would say that the teachers should take advantage of the Outdoor Learning Center more, especially in this school district—especially in this school where we’ve got the Outdoor Learning Center right across the street—we don’t take advantage of them enough. We don’t use them as much as we should.
Because he taught in the elementary school that was right next door and shared a parking lot with the center, he thought it was particularly interesting that some teachers did not take their classes over more. It is important to note that classroom teachers were mentioned by two participants as being integral to the center’s success as well. For instance, Jason’s teacher was mentioned by name in the RVOLC educator interview as someone who had purposely integrated and sought out center curriculum to supplement what he did in the classroom. The RVOLC director also mentioned that many classroom teachers both within and outside the RVSD contacted the RVOLC every year to arrange their students’ visit.

**Infrequency of Regular Visits**

Another factor that was closely linked with some classroom teachers choosing not to take their classes to the center was the fact that for some students who loved and anticipated every RVOLC experience, they just did not get to go enough. This was the most prominent constraint mentioned among the student participants. Vicki noted that the infrequency of visits was the only thing she did not like, “I guess I don’t like that we didn’t come much. We probably went once or twice a year.” Echoing what his mother offered in her interview, Christopher commented, “Well, I sort of wish we did have more visits, because in 4th and 5th grade we only went here once each year, but I mean they take in a lot of kids.” The center does take in a lot of students; they interact with thousands of students from inside and outside their own district every year.

**Lack of Advertising or Exposure**

Finally, the general lack of knowledge about the RVOLC both inside and outside the RVSD community was referenced several times as a factor that limited student or community
involvement. Robert’s mother offered that if perhaps more people and businesses knew about it, more financial support might be a positive outcome:

I wish more people in the community knew about it. I wish more businesses knew about it to help them keep their progress going. That’s the only thing that I can think of because they do a fabulous job with everything that they have and everything that they do. So I just wish that more knew about it.

Jason’s mother commented that when she goes to work outside of the school district boundaries and local community, no one knows about the center:

And I will go to work and talk about it to the girls at work and they’re like what are you talking about? You know and we have extra things at work that we’re getting rid of. Can I take those and donate them to the Outdoor Learning Center? Well, what Outdoor Learning Center? You know and then I will tell them it’s attached to [the elementary school], it’s not the school’s, but it is in their parking lot.

The comments quickly turned into a problem solving session by the mothers who care so much for the center. Christopher’s mother added:

If we could figure out or do some advertising better for when they do the open houses. Some of them are, you have a pretty fair amount [of people]—I’ve got family out by [east of the city] and they have never even heard about it, and there are so many kids in this town that would love to do that on a rainy Saturday afternoon or something like that.

Jason’s classroom teacher agreed that communication or advertising the programs and events that the center does offer would be a good thing:
Maybe that communication piece on what—I don’t know what things they have—resources they have that are available to teachers to kind of do—assist and help with what they’re already teaching in the classroom.

Taken together, the lack of funding, some classroom teachers opting out, the infrequency of RVSD student visits and lack of advertising or exposure, have presented some significant barriers for the RVOLC to overcome. In addition to the four constraining factors described in detail here, organized athletics, administrators, misbehaving students, and secondary schools’ block schedules were named as negatively impacting the RVOLC experience in some way.

Regardless of these challenges, this study has shown the center did continue to affect students in powerful ways. And while it is unlikely any of these constraints will ever fully disappear, the center had much supporting its perseverance.

The data from these four students’ stories about how they experienced the RVOLC came together to reveal a great deal about their interactions with a place that has become very special to all of them in different ways. Each of them connected with some part of the RVOLC curriculum, be it learning about the animals, local vegetation, the water cycle or Native American history. They all loved learning in the experiential, hands-on, active and highly participatory way the center carried out its lessons. Also, regardless of the vastly different backgrounds the students brought— one had never camped or hiked before, two had earned their hunter’s education certificates and one had begun to research future careers in animal rescue and training—they each felt incredible joy in their interactions with the RVOLC. The detail and enthusiasm with which they recalled specific memories of activities or interactions were evidence of this joy and general contentment.
Perspectives from the parents and RVOLC staff offered numerous and substantial supports that have helped the center become a fixed and much appreciated member of the RVSD if not the larger River Valley community. The staff’s dedication, background and approach topped the list of supports that included parents, wider community partnerships and the development of opportunities beyond the planned in-district visits. Finally, data revealed the RVOLC was not immune to many constraints that impeded its progress and expansion beyond the River Valley community boarders. Lack of constant, plentiful and assured financial support was the most prominent hurdle that seemed to always threaten the survival of the program. This hindrance to students’ access overshadowed almost all the others revealed, but the infrequency of visits was the program flaw the student participants named more than any other. What becomes clear when the data are taken as a whole is that these four students were deeply impacted by their interactions with the RVOLC even though they felt earlier in their elementary years they did not get enough time at the center. They all sought extra involvement, and they all felt engaged and part of what was happening in the place that was the RVOLC for them.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This study’s conclusions were reached by analyzing data that were multi-layered on two levels—one, because multiple voices contributed multiple perceptions, and two, because data represented individual and focus group interviews, field observations and documents. I found that the RVOLC staff provided place-based experiences that were experiential and situated in a context of the local natural surroundings, and that students’ experiences there were closely related to this attention to how learning was designed and carried out. The four students in this study experienced great joy in their learning and love for the place, so much so that they sought to extend their interactions beyond the pull-out model. Data also revealed that even with much to support it, the Center faced formidable challenges. This chapter has five sections. First, a review of the research problem, the purpose of the study, and the research questions are offered. Following this is an in-depth section dedicated to discussing the data as it relates to the research questions and the literature. The final three sections include the implications of study findings, limitations of the study and recommendations for further research.

Review of Research Problem, Purpose and Questions

The problem addressed by this study is a complex one with many contributing factors. The essence of it concentrates on the fact that today’s students face a very different school experience since the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has shifted the focus to a high-stakes accountability scenario for administrators, teachers, and students alike. Instruction has been reduced to focus disproportionately on content which is tested (Berliner, 2010; Hannaway & Hamilton, 2008; Ladd, & Zelli, 2002; Pedulla, Abrams, Madaus, Russell, Ramos, & Miao, 2003). Because of this many times classes in the arts and physical education
have been cut for the sake of test preparation (Berliner, 2010; Hannaway & Hamilton, 2008; Ladd, & Zelli, 2002; Pedulla et al., 2003). These issues and the exorbitant amount of school hours occupied with testing (Fleisher, 2011; Reist, 2012; Wiseley, 2012) have all contributed to a cultural shift away from joy and contentment in learning. This less-than-ideal picture of a modern-day student’s life is sometimes exacerbated by a parallel culture shift that finds students choosing unhealthy activities outside of school time. Research shows students are staying inside (Louv, 2008) and becoming more physically unhealthy than ever before (http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/obesity/facts.htm). This scenario suggests a new focus on the health and well-being of our students may pay dividends, a contention that is raised in much of the extant PBE literature (Bishop, 2004; Sorensen, 2007; Swayze, 2009; Tolbert & Theobald, 2006).

The context in which this problem was addressed in this study was at the RVOLC where a PBE pedagogy overlapped with an outdoor environmental learning approach. By listening to and learning from four RVOLC students who were identified by Center educators’ and classroom teachers’ perceptions as being positively affected by the RVOLC, insight was gained about these students’ experiences at the Center. Over time a picture developed revealing how their interactions with the Center contributed to their learning, their relationship with the place, and their relationship with the outdoors—in short, it was revealed how the RVOLC contributed to these four students’ wellness in many ways.

**Study Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore how two fifth and two sixth grade RVSD students experienced the RVOLC. The research questions that guided this case study included:
1) What are the students’, the educators’, and the parents’ perceptions of these students’ experiences of the RVOLC’s pull-out, place-based program?

With particular attention paid to:

- students’ connection with and curiosity about RVOLC curriculum
- students’ relationship with the place that is the RVOLC
- students’ connection with the outdoors
- students’ perception of their own contentment when learning at the RVOLC

2) What has supported these and other students’ experiences at the RVOLC?

3) What has hindered these and other students’ experiences at the RVOLC?

The first research question was primarily concerned with listening to the personal experiences of the four participants with relation to their connection with the RVOLC. The first two subparts helped to focus the stories and guide interview protocols so that students shared their interest in particular RVOLC lessons and their relationship with everything that represented the place that was the RVOLC to them. The third subpart focused on the students’ relationships with the outdoors—how much time they spent in nature, what they did during that time, and how much or little their interactions with the RVOLC influenced their time in nature. The final subpart of the first research question explored the four students’ own assessment of how much they enjoyed their time engaged in RVOLC learning. The second research question was concerned with taking a deeper look into what supported the Center to help it thrive and therefore help these and other students succeed in that setting. I was interested specifically in what led these students to care about the RVOLC and seek out more time there. The third research question explored
constraints that got in the way of the Center introducing these and other students to their natural local places, engaging curriculum, and a joyful learning experience.

Discussion of the Data

Data from the RVOLC answered the research questions guiding this study by illustrating how four students learned at and felt about the Center and the outdoors in general and by demonstrating the conditions of supportive and threatening factors at play at the Center. In this discussion of the data I first offer some general impressions about what I anticipated in relation to the first research question, which was focused on students and their RVOLC experiences. An in-depth discussion of the specific findings in response to each research question follows these impressions.

When I initiated this study, I anticipated that the four student participants who were identified by the perceptions of educators as positively affected by the RVOLC would have quite a lot in common. I expected overlaps in their personal characteristics, behaviors, and RVOLC experiences. In reality, the four students were very different from one another: they brought different personal backgrounds to their experiences at the Center, and they took away different lessons and impressions from their interactions there. What follows is a brief look at these first impressions of student characteristics and student outcomes.

Student Characteristics

Robert enjoyed school and performed well on assessments in the classroom setting. He had recently discovered a passion for animals and the outdoors even though he had never camped or hiked with his family before. He credited this passion entirely to his interactions at the RVOLC. Robert found solace and playfulness at the RVOLC.
Jason was an athlete who was socially respected by his peers, and who was experiencing significant struggles in school because of his recently diagnosed learning disability, but who had just passed a 72-question, pen-and-paper test for his hunter’s education certificate. Jason could probably survive in the outdoors on his own for several days and nights and maybe quite a bit longer if he had to. His favorite activity was to be outdoors doing almost anything, but he preferred to be camping, hiking, hunting, or exploring. He experienced profound joy when RVOLC trips or lessons provided a break from classroom learning.

Vicki was creative, bright, and sometimes shy. She excelled in the classroom, loved making her own movies, and was already a fearless advocate for animals and for trying to change others’ behaviors when they negatively impacted the environment. She credited the Center with giving her the knowledge about animal habitats and our local water resources and the impetus to want to protect them. She started researching possible future careers in caring for rescued animal and training animals for educational or film purposes.

Christopher was articulate, outspoken, and good at school. He was passionate about both technology and nature and was reflective about something as seemingly obscure to most 12-yr-old boys as the ills of social networking. He too was a hunter and came from a family who spent a great deal of time in the outdoors. He commented several times about how his interactions at the Center brought him closer to nature. He enjoyed being challenged by and debating with the Center educators on a daily basis.

**Student Outcomes**

I also anticipated that the four students who had all been identified by educator perceptions as being positively affected by the RVOLC would get very similar things out of their experiences there. While there were some overlaps, in reality, each student took something very
different away. Robert enjoyed interacting in a place where he liked meeting people, safely playing with friends, and learning about animals. Jason relished in the opportunity to be out in nature during school time and to be an active and successful participant in high-interest learning when with the RVOLC staff. Vicki valued being introduced to the idea of more Earth-conscious living and cherished her time being close to and learning about the Center’s birds of prey. Christopher appreciated learning in a more experiential and exploratory way about the local region’s plant and animal and being around people who engaged him in challenging thought and dialogue.

In addition to these unexpected variations among the four students and their stories of experiencing the RVOLC, I found that there was a close connection between how the lessons were designed and students’ experience of them. This data was closely connected to Research Question One. For this reason, I preface discussion of students’ experiences with descriptions and analysis of the RVOLC lesson purpose and design. Additionally, data related to Research Question Two revealed ample and varied support for the Center and its students. Despite this broad support, data related to Research Question Three revealed tough constraints the Center faced. Three sections—lesson design and effect, RVOLC supports, and RVOLC constraints—illustrate these findings in turn and how they relate to the literature next.

Lesson Design and Effect

In addressing Research Question One regarding students’ experience of the RVOLC program, I found there was a close connection between the design of RVOLC activities and students’ experience of them. In discussing this finding I highlight the theoretical links of the Center’s approach and illustrate the design and purpose of RVOLC activities. I do this using the
context of a particular lesson. This is followed by a discussion of what students took away from Center interactions.

**Lesson purpose and design.** RVOLC lessons were designed to be experiential, situated in outdoor and social contexts that would have a high interest for students, and closely connected to environmental and place-based approaches. These findings illustrated that the Center’s pedagogies were firmly fixed within the progressive orientation on the educational landscape lens considered in this study.

**Experiential education influence.** RVOLC lessons showed a clear connection to experiential education, including learning through action and direct experience with a local agent (Dewey, 1938). Dewey’s plea for teachers to ground students’ learning in content and activities that have relevance for them and that are connected to their local surroundings was well met in RVOLC lessons. For example, Robert offered details about the activities students took part in while at the wastewater treatment plant:

> We went on a field trip to [the wastewater treatment plant] and we learned about water and how it’s renewed and how it has its own cycle of being reused and it’s always really fun learning science with them. They make it a lot more fun…When we went there they had rotations of scavenger hunts…They had two iPads and two games on each of them, “How Much Water Do You Use Every Day?” and “How Much Do You Know About Water?” So I played “How Much Do You Know about Water?”…I learned a lot from that one game there like how [many] gallons of water are used to make an iPad. What’s the percentage of water in the world that you can drink?

Rick, commented about how this particular field trip made an impression on students in a distasteful but real way:
Kids feel connected [to the learning] and the example [that comes to] my mind was we would tell them at the water resources facility that that’s where their poop goes, or that’s where [something goes] when they put something down a drain. You can see it on their face that that they feel connected to that.

This is an example, albeit a distasteful one, of Dewey’s call to frame learning around what students experience every day. Both Christopher and Jason also recalled this trip and related the lessons they took away from it, mainly that what you flush down the toilet does not just disappear into the universe and that flushing anything other than toilet paper down is harmful to the renewal process.

This is just one example of how the lessons designed at the Center were experiential, but findings revealed endless other similar activities including students identifying states-of-matter using examples throughout the Center, determining the health of water by catching macro invertebrates in the stream, understanding how a quail digests its food by replicating the action using a small bag and tiny pebbles, and learning about how to be more mindful of where their food comes by checking out grocery story stickers on fruit.

**Situated learning influence.** Situated learning theorists (Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Lave, 1996; Putnam & Borko, 2000) demonstrate critical links between learning contexts and outcomes. For this reason, physical settings and social interactions serve as important layers of activities. Further, Putnam & Borko (2000) speak to the importance in situated learning about meeting students with activities that represent the real world and the thinking required to solve its problems. The RVOLC offered many of these layers as part of nearly all learning there. The outdoor setting, the animals and the highly participatory design all contributed to these layers of activity. In the example of the water resources plant, students saw where the water they relied on
every day was treated and recycled—they experienced this real-world realization that water is a precious resource. They engaged in exploration of the plant, went on scavenger hunts to learn more about it, and played games with other students testing their understanding of water coming into the experience. Vygotsky’s main assertion of constructivism, which feeds closely into situated learning theory, that learning happens through social and cultural interactions, was omnipresent in this and other RVOLC activities as well. The learning was always abuzz with students actively exploring, writing, observing, watching, or doing together. This type of learning met students where they were and honored their backgrounds while also helping them engage with content that was inseparable from how they function on a daily basis—in this particular example, their use of and dependence on water. Beyond this specific example, the RVOLC experience for these four students was always situated in the local natural environment, either at the RVOLC or on trips to local natural settings, and the students related how their learning was tied to the staff there and the highly participatory nature of the lessons.

**Place-based and environmental education approaches.** Place-based education has close ties to experiential and situated learning. Similar to the experiential lessons Dewey advocated, a PBE approach has students start with that which is closest to them and surrounds them daily (Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2005; Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000). The hope in PBE is that through learning about their place, students will come to care about it and advocate for it. The questions *What happened here?* and *What should be happening here?* should always be present in place-based learning and were evident in all RVOLC learning. Knapp (1996) explained that with environmental and outdoor education, the main purpose is to offer meaningful experiences in a variety of settings that expand on what is taught in the classroom. Environmental education and PBE pedagogy philosophy worked hand-in-hand at the RVOLC in this sense. While RVOLC
educators always worked to open up local places to their students, they stopped short of campaigning for students to go home and profess environmental doom, an oft-criticized focus of EE in the PBE literature (Sobel, 2005; Smith, 2002; Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000). Rick offered this explanation of how the Center focused on giving its patrons all the information:

I would say we’re good at not being preachy about it. It’s giving them…trying to teach understanding and awareness of natural systems and so they are more informed citizens and can make better decisions. I think we are pretty good at that. We’re not telling them how or what they should do, but giving them background knowledge so they can make decisions.

Center educators preferred a more organic approach wherein students came to care about and want to protect their local places on their own once they were given all the needed information from the RVOLC staff to do so. For example, this approach was evident in the water resources trip. This trip was arranged to help fifth graders develop a better understanding of local water resources and management. Following this trip and a similar trip to the local aquifer, Vicki came home and told her family all about what she had learned. She also shared during her first interview her understanding of how fertilizers can pollute aquifers.

Although the RVOLC does not outwardly espouse a mission to educate for social change—the orientation most progressive on the educational landscape considered in this study—it was clear students were not the docile listeners Freire (2000) warned about in the traditional teacher-student relationship. Instead, they set to work at the tasks at hand and were encouraged to come to their own conclusions. But more than that, especially in Christopher and Vicki’s cases, they engaged in dialogue and thought in a deep way about social and environmental issues—Christopher in his dialogues with the RVOLC staff about controversial
and environmentally-related debates about the wolf population, and Vicki in her quest to protect animals and their habitats. Additionally, in a variety of ways, these four students challenged their traditional classroom experience by supplementing their education in seeking further involvement with the Center. Jason attended Saturday RVOLC open houses, and, according to his classroom teacher’s perception, was substantially more involved and inquisitive in an outdoor learning setting versus in the classroom. Vicki and Christopher both chose to spend a significant amount of time every school day at the RVOLC as part of their River School curriculum.

**Lesson effect.** The effects of the program on students were evident in three ways: their recollections of learning from particular activities, their description of the joy they experienced there, and their discussion of particular memories that stood out for them. The second and fourth subparts of Research Question One—students’ relationship with the place that is the RVOLC, and students’ perception of their own contentment when learning at RVOLC are addressed here in particular. Each of these effects is described below.

**Students’ recollections of learning from particular activities.** The four students in this study offered detailed accounts of specific lessons that took place throughout their time at the Center. One memorable instance of this was when all three boys in the study talked about the trip to the local water resources facility. In the vein of Rick’s remark that this particular learning was directly connected to students’ everyday lives, all boys recounted some degree of how water gets renewed and how what is flushed affects that. Robert and Jason both recalled their favorite lessons from MPLC: for Robert, it was the decomposer lesson where he found bugs in rotting logs, identified them, and was able to tell what state of decomposition the log was in based on the bugs currently inhabiting it. Even though Robert had a deep aversion to bugs, he thought this was the most interesting lesson at MPLC. He recalled this learning experience with great detail,
explaining the names of the different stages of decomposition, listing the names of specific bugs, and describing the different fungi he and his friends found. Jason remembered the “Thicket” game from camp most vividly. He talked in detail about how it was played and what it was meant to represent with regards to learning about how birds of prey hunt. For Robert and Jason it may have been easy for them to recall details from MPLC as they had just returned from that experience at the time. However, both of them also recalled other specific lessons from years before as well. Similarly, Christopher recalled going to a local creek and doing the macro invertebrate lesson there in detail, relating the story behind the land’s owner and the fact that many Native Americans had been killed at that site. Vicki talked in detail about her lesson in the RVOLC tipi about local Native American history, and she remembered with fondness seeing and learning about the Center’s rescued birds for the first time.

Students’ description of the joy they experienced there. Building on this picture of students relating detailed accounts of specific lessons, it is interesting to note that while talking about these and other experiences, all four students used words like “fun,” “excited,” “fascinated,” and “amazing.” These words cropped up frequently when they explained how they felt when they found out they were coming to the Center, during the lessons there, when they were able to see the animals, and when they went on trips to local natural places. The four students also used these words to describe the landscape and animals at the Center. Robert, during his first interview, was enthralled with how cool it was that snakes relocate their jaws to eat, and Christopher in particular went on about how the setting inspired him to get closer to nature. These descriptions were not limited to the students’ perceptions of how they responded to the Center and its learning. The parents and Jason’s classroom teacher used these same words
to describe how their students anticipated, experienced, and recalled their time there. Jason’s teacher described the Center as Jason’s “happy place.”

**Students’ discussion of particular memories that stood out for them.** There was something in those early visits that made such an impression on both the students and their families that it became an important part of not only their schooling but their lives. Here, Robert, a student who had limited exposure to outdoor and wild animal experiences before going to the RVOLC, related one of his earliest memories:

> Our first field trip I think and we walk in there and I loved it all. It was really nice all those snakes. It all stood out to me. It was the best part of the year. [It was the] highlight of my year. I walk in there and I see the snakes, I see the tortoises, I see the turtles, I see all of that and I hope that one day I might work there—which happened. So it was a lot of fun. I just ran everywhere the whole time trying to take it all in.

Jason and Vicki offered similar excitement with their first memories, while Christopher’s comment focused on fascination. Christopher talked of how he was “grabbed” in by the early experiences and connections to the place, yet over his elementary school years, he visited the Center on planned trips fewer than five times. For all of the students in the study, those relatively infrequent, yet memorable first experiences were enough to ignite or extend a passion they had. Much was learned from listening to the experiences and unique stories of this study’s four student participants. The Center met these students where they were and allowed them to meet the place as it was during their early elementary years.

**RVOLC Supports**

The finding that various and significant supports worked at the RVOLC to draw in and keep the interest of students and community members addresses Research Question Two—What
supported these and other students’ experiences at the RVOLC? Participants named many factors that were helpful in making the Center experience accessible and engaging for the students including classroom teacher support, community partnerships, parent involvement and the Center’s multiple opportunities for students to extend their RVOLC interactions. The Center’s outreach and extended in-house programs along with its open-door policy encouraged the four students in this study to get and stay involved. Robert volunteered every Wednesday, Jason attended Saturday open houses, and both Vicki and Christopher spent an hour and a half of every school day there as part of their DNR job for their middle school.

In addition to these supports, the data overwhelmingly pointed to the RVOLC director and her staff as having the most significant positive impact on the Center’s success. In an effort to continue its success and perhaps even extend its reach, the Center’s students were supported most by the strong, cohesive, well-educated staff who shared a common vision of how to facilitate learning. Students, parents and teachers often responded positively to the staff’s consistently engaging lessons that were adapted to the audience and intended purpose. This finding that the staff and its leadership supplied the core support for the program is similar to other programs described in PBE literature (e.g., Emekauwa, 2004; Howley et al., 2011). Further, this finding aligns with the existing PBE literature, which identifies strong administrative and educator leadership as a prerequisite for any place-based approach to survive (Emekauwa, 2004; Gruenewald, 2005; Howley et al., 2011; Jennings et al., 2005; Powers, 2004; Sobel, 2005; Sorensen, 2007; Smith, 2007).

**RVOLC Constraints**

The finding that the Center faced formidable challenges even though it had much to support it, addresses Research Question Three—What hindered these and other students’
experiences at the RVOLC? Even with the support of staff, engaging lesson design, outreach, and in-house programs, and her own leadership, Jeni dealt with many constraints. Participants noted that even though some classroom teachers were the Center’s biggest cheerleaders, others turned down the Center’s offer to provide students with experiential lessons that supplemented their curriculum. This barrier was closely linked to the biggest student participant complaint that they simply did not get to go to the Center enough during their elementary years. If, at the beginning of the year, students were assigned to a classroom where the teacher opted out of the RVOLC experience, students would miss that year’s planned visits. This happened to Vicki when her fifth grade teacher decided not to take her class that particular year. Similarly, Christopher saw his RVOLC interactions decline in number when he was in a special, mixed-age classroom from third through fifth grade with teachers who did not partake in all the trips. Jeni commented about another challenge when she noted that as students got into middle and high school, secondary block schedules, test schedules, and extra-curricular programs contributed to students’ full plates. Because of this, the RVOLC often faced a nonexistent window of opportunity for students to experience the Center, and the staff often missed out on keeping connections going with high school aged students in particular. Several participants also noted that the wider community could benefit from being more aware of what the Center had to offer. More advertising, exposure, and outreach was recommended in an effort to gain broader support.

One hindrance was mentioned by nearly all the adults who took part in the study. The most overwhelming threat to the RVOLC’s very survival was the omnipresent challenge of having to fight for proper funding during the recent years of lean budgets. Jeni related that any time the district faced a shortfall or needed to look for something to cut, reduced funding for the RVOLC and two of its full-time educators was among the first to be considered. This threat to
place-based, community-based, and environmental or outdoor education program sustainability is nothing new in the PBE literature (Gruenewald, 2003, 2007; Jennings et al., 2005; Senechal, 2007; Smith, 2007; Smith & Sobel, 2010), and the RVOLC director’s need for the Center to remain viable within the public school system was very real. Rick acknowledged that even in the face of these challenges, the Center had to recognize that for an outdoor learning program like theirs, working within the system—which he identified as the public school system as well as the broader system represented by society—was key to its survival.

This idea of PBE programs needing to work within existing systems to stay alive and succeed is well documented in the PBE literature (Gruenewald, 2005; Jennings et al., 2005; Smith, 2007). Smith (2007) and Gruenewald (2005) confirm Jeni’s funding challenge in their descriptions of program barriers, but both note that if a program can offer something of value within the high-stakes accountability culture while working within existing bell schedules and prescribed curriculum demands, it will have a fighting chance. Jeni engaged in making sure the RVOLC had something to offer. She constantly sought collaboration with classroom teachers to align curriculum to state standards. She also served on a district committee that developed a strategic focus that served to guide learning experiences. The result was a line in the district’s strategic focus document that read, “We will engage community partners to focus resources and instruction on environmental sustainability.” The lack of funding challenge facing many place and community-based programs will no doubt remain something Jeni and her staff have to face for years to come.

Smith and Sobel (2010) note this has become the reality for place and community-based programs as education funding has become scarcer.
Implications

Although this study cannot lead to broader generalizations within the larger educational community or even within the PBE community because of the small and purposive sample, it does offer insight into how these four students experienced the Center and how the RVOLC served this particular community. It does this in five ways. This study shows that: a) the RVOLC program succeeded in providing PBE/EE lessons when it worked within existing school systems and was supported in doing so, b) this program helped the four student participants become more connected to nature, c) this program provided one of the student participants with a setting in which he could be successful even when he could not make academic progress in the classroom, d) the RVOLC pull-out model of a PBE/EE program had lasting impacts on the four student participants, and e) the student participants’ voices offered deep and valuable input regarding their own educative interactions and feelings. An extended discussion of each of these insights is discussed next in turn. This discussion is followed by a critique of the Center.

RVOLC Study Insights

**PBE/EE program survival.** This collective case study confirms that with sufficient support and a focus on working within existing public school systems, the RVOLC has been able to stay open and stay fully staffed even during lean budget years. It has succeed in providing outdoor learning experiences to thousands of students both inside and outside the RVSD. Jason’s classroom teacher talked passionately about what the RVOLC offered students that he could not: “That to me is a big part of education…just kind of exploring, learning through hands-on experiences that you can’t get anywhere else. You can’t get in a classroom, you know what I mean?” The RVOLC tapped into this need teachers had, aligned its curriculum to state standards, and worked with teachers from all over the district to help supplement what they were
already doing in their classrooms. RVOLC staff worked within the existing system of students being assigned to a teacher at the elementary level, and they offered their expertise and experiences as a way of helping teachers to meet standards. Although some teachers still chose to go it alone, many were appreciative of what the RVOLC did for them and their students. With this collaborative approach to student learning and with all the supports the Center celebrated, they were able to survive some lean budget years, and they succeeded in facilitating PBE/EE lessons for thousands of students every year.

**Connection to nature.** The four students in this study contributed that on the whole they were more connected to, aware of, and healthfully engaged in their natural outdoor surroundings because of the Center. Robert felt the Center had “opened his eyes to nature more,” perhaps especially since his family time did not typically involve activities outdoors. Jason attributed the Center to getting him started on a path to spend every possible moment outside. Christopher talked at length about how he would take what he learned about local plants and animals to his backyard and grandmother’s lake cabin and spend time exploring and applying his knowledge. Vicki credited her time at the Center with starting her on a path to becoming a more Earth-conscious advocate of the environment and disabled wild animals. It was abundantly clear in these four students’ stories that the Center offered experiences that ignited interest in or further developed their relationships with the outdoors and all its living and non-living neighbors.

**Jason’s success at RVOLC.** Jason was a student who was struggling with nearly every aspect of his traditional learning environment even though it was clear he enjoyed and respected his classroom teacher. According to both his classroom teacher and his mother, Jason could not read fluently because of a recently diagnosed vision problem, and he struggled to sit for lengths of time in the classroom. His classroom teacher noted that any lesson or assessment that had to
do with needing to distinguish written words or numbers on a page caused significant problems for Jason. His teacher indicated that Jason made little if any academic gains during the school year, but he noticed how much Jason learned by doing and observing in the RVOLC setting. A similar realization that students who struggle for a variety of reasons in the traditional classroom but excel in a PBE setting is documented in the PBE literature (Emekauwa, 2004; Powers, 2004; Smith, 2007; Volk & Cheak, 2003). Further, some (Powers, 2004; Volk & Cheak, 2003) note this finding surprised the researchers. In the context of this study, when Jason was able to go outdoors, he was participatory, animated, and inquisitive. He excelled in every way. His RVOLC leader described him as her best and most inquisitive student, “He was one to always kind of, if no one else was talking or I would ask a question and no one else was answering, he would raise his hand and give his opinion because usually he had one.” Jason struggled to describe this stark difference articulately in his own interviews, but his involvement in his own learning was evident in his actions at MPLC. He did share his perspective in his final interview when he described what learning was like for him with the RVOLC. He clearly liked learning with the RVOLC better than his classroom experiences, but he also said he liked learning there better, “Because it’s easier to learn.” He went on to add that being able to see and do things for himself instead of learning from “looking through books” proved much more enjoyable and successful for him.

PBE/EE pull-out program impacts. This study also offers that this pull-out program that only tangentially affected existing classroom curriculum had lasting and significant impacts on these students. All four students could easily recall early and even first memories of walking into the RVOLC. Although they did not go more than three times per school year, this proved enough to make a lasting impact on Robert, Jason, Vicki, and Christopher. Perhaps their ability
to recall the experience was attributable to the fact that it was novel at first, but they were also able to recall states-of-matter lessons, quail digestion lessons, aquifer lessons, and lessons about Native American history at the RVOLC that spanned the years of their elementary experiences there. Robert’s mother noted that her son was always animated with dialogue at the dinner table after enjoying the special treat of visiting the Center that day. She also commented that these experiences sparked interests in her son that he never would have been exposed to if it were not for the Center:

I’m one of those that we’re not an outdoorsy family—we don’t hunt, we don’t camp or anything like that and by working with him and getting him interested and talking to him, it made him realize that that’s an interest for him, that he would have never gotten from us.

Although Jason, Vicki, and Christopher all had varying degrees of background experiences more firmly rooted in the outdoors than Robert, they too were absorbed enough in the Center experiences that they found ways to spend more time there. For these four students and for this suburban but not affluent school district, data from this study indicated that this pull-out model was as viable, effective option when full immersion was not.

Although comprehensive programs that involve an intensive, school-wide focus are what is most represented in the PBE literature (Emekauwa, 2004; Powers, 2004; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Volk & Cheak, 2003; Von Secker, 2004), it is wise to realize that constraints abound for all programs, not just place-based ones, and a pull-out model was a more viable option in this particular district. At the RVOLC, the staff had all the expertise that was needed to offer the four student participants in this study this experience. The classroom teachers accompanied their students and learned alongside them. This pull-out model worked well for the four selected
students because the director and her staff were well acquainted with the local places. They had strong, long-standing community partnerships in place and their site offered a centralized location with all the needed supplies and teaching tools. The perceptions of the impacts of this pull-out model were significant and long lasting for the four student participants. The four students in this study became closer to nature, but Robert also found a sanctuary, Jason found a place where he loved and excelled at learning, and Vicki and Christopher found a place where they could interact with adults who shared their interests and challenged them in their thinking.

**Student voice.** Finally, this collective case study offers that these four positively affected students were not only legitimate but crucial resources that deserved a voice in research considering educational issues. Perhaps the most compelling instance of this was Jason’s story because, as was mentioned before, his needs were met much more successfully in the RVOLC setting. Vicky also presented her voice when it came to the way she liked learning best:

> I think it’s better to do something hands-on and actually get to see and feel and touch and usually not, but sometimes taste what is going on or what things do and how they work. And so I think that’s a better experience than sometimes in a classroom where we just read from a section of the book or paragraph or something.

Three of the four students in the study were able to talk at length about how they felt about the RVOLC lessons and the people and animals there. They provided invaluable firsthand accounts of their experiences and connections. This insight may indicate that PBE research needs to expand the presence of student voice in all educational studies, but in particular, for studies like this one which was concerned with issues of student wellness. In advocating for the health of students, it would serve educational researchers to start paying attention to what students can contribute to the conversation about their own well-being. After all, they know better than
anyone how they respond to and enjoy or dislike their educative experiences. Because students are the ones who are affected so profoundly by decisions made every day about their education, perhaps it is time to lend them more of a voice in those decisions.

This can begin easily by inviting them to talk more about what they like and what they do in school settings. The current PBE literature represents educators and administrators’ voices far more often than first-hand student accounts (Jennings et al., 2005; Powers, 2004; Volk & Cheak, 2003). In this study each student offered a wealth of information from which all educators could learn. One example of this was when Christopher summed up his perception of how he felt when learning at the Center in the following way:

But, yeah, because it’s hands-on, that’s why I liked it. We actually got to go out and hike around and we weren’t learning from a textbook; we weren’t in the classroom; we were out in the great outdoors just learning from people who have actually done this from experience.

For this reason, and because students’ wellness is at the forefront of the problem presented in the introduction of this work, students should, through their actions, their words, and their demeanor, add their voice to the discussion about what is best for them.

**RVOLC Critique**

It is important in research to report what is revealed through the data. It may be just as important, however, to dedicate attention to notable pieces of the RVOLC experience that seemed to be missing. The RVOLC represented a solid example of a PBE/EE pull-out program that reached thousands of students, most of them within the RVSD. Center educators taught curriculum aligned to state standards and learning goals in many subject content areas but in science in particular, and the Center represented a program that was concerned with its students
cultivating healthy relationships with the local places they inhabited. This interdisciplinary approach that focused on local places and gave students the information they needed to care for and eventually protect those places was clear. This was evidenced most obviously through Vicki’s story. According to David Greenwood’s (2003, 2009) conception of a CPP, however, the RVOLC came up short in the area of merging a critical pedagogy with an ecological PBE focus.

Greenwood (2003) would most certainly agree that the Center was a place that paid attention to the goals of ecological PBE, that its educators worked to get students to care for their local places and even advocate for it. His conception of CPP suggests that equal attention must also be paid to examining and challenging the social justice issues that are part of that place’s local history and current practice, however. The data in this study did not provide any examples of the RVOLC doing this. Perhaps the pull-out model that represented intermittent and relatively infrequent contact with students limited the Center in this regard. For example, if the RVOLC served a smaller number of students in a fully-immersed program where students spent all their days every day there, deeper connections could be made, more curriculum could focus on the stories of the land, more dialogue could revolve around social justice issues and how that has affected colonizing practices. At this particular center using this pull-out model, students were not exposed to ideas or influenced to engage in discussions around social justice issues.

The data did present a solid case of the Center being mindful of its students’ authentic narratives. This was evidenced through three different examples of this study’s methodological process: a) during the creation of the student selection criteria when I met with RVOLC educators and they referenced so many of their individual participants over many years by name, b) during the fifth grade participant observations at MPLC when it was clear both of the RVOLC
leaders constantly adjusted their instruction and management to the individual needs of their students, and c) during the RVOLC focus group interview when the educators talked at length about the four student participants involved in the study and referenced many other students to provide anecdotal evidence. Much can be learned from a program that focused on building on the strengths and interests of its students. These four students were clearly content in their learning there. They frequently got caught up in the learning enough to seek out further interactions with the Center. Perhaps this had to do at least in part to the educators’ awareness and acknowledgement of its students’ stories.

At a time when students in American classrooms are being increasingly stifled by an ever-broadening testing culture that has become synonymous with public schooling, it is like a view at the end of a long, satisfying hike on a hot day to take in the realization that there are places where some students and educators still find tremendous joy in learning actively together. One piece that all educators can take away from the four students in this study is that high-interest, hands-on learning that got them out of the walls of the classroom and into their local community, thereby experiencing that which was closest to them, had immense value for the health of the these four students and the places they inhabited. Basing learning around what kids see and touch and want to learn more about is empowering for teachers and students alike (Asfeldt, Urberg & Henderson, 2009; Cutter-Mackenzie, 2009; Senechal, 2007; Sorensen, 2007; Tolbert & Theobald, 2006; Volk & Cheak, 2003). Perhaps students do not have to be part of an elaborate, fully-immersed PBE program. Perhaps they do not even need an outdoor learning Center next to their school, although this would be nice. Perhaps little steps in a similar direction at the classroom or grade or content area level can represent baby hikes to that refreshing view.
Limitations

This collective case study was limited in the sense that it looked closely at the lives of only four individual students in one city and attending one school district’s outdoor learning center at a particular time. The students were purposely chosen because they were identified by the perceptions of RVOLC staff and classroom teachers as having been positively impacted by the Center. Three of the four students volunteered in some capacity at the Center and had established relationships with the staff there. This study did not offer a representation of what all RVOLC students felt about their experiences at the Center. It offered instead a snapshot of understanding about these four students in a specific place and time. It does not represent the perceptions of students who were not impacted or were negatively impacted, assuming such students exist.

This study relied heavily on student interviews and observations. The study was designed to focus predominantly on student voice, with secondary evidence from educators and parents. However, in at least one case, the emphasis on student voice presented a challenge. In some cases, elementary students may or may not be forthcoming with all the insights we might like to know about in the time frame we have with them. Because my time was limited with this student during the final data segment, I needed to rely more heavily on parent and teacher contributions to parts of his story. A more extended period of time working with this participant in particular could have garnered better insight from his perspective.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study’s focus on four student stories provided illustrations about how they have been positively affected by their involvement with the RVOLC. However, the findings also indicate that while the students spoke confidently about how much they loved the people and the place
that was the RVOLC and about how much they loved and cared for the outdoors, the two fifth graders struggled to talk in detail about some aspects of their learning. For example, Robert offered that he “remembered” better when he could see a real representation of an animal, for instance, instead of seeing its picture in a book, but he also commented that he liked all modes of learning, in the classroom from books and teachers as well as in the outdoor setting. It seemed like “learning” to Robert was synonymous with “remembering.” As I tried to get him to talk more about what he took away from lessons in both places, he kept going back to and mentioning that he remembered things better instead of learned things better. When I observed Robert at MPLC, however, it was clear that he fully understood or learned what happened to a log during the stages of decomposition for instance. He could “remember” the bugs and stages, but he also applied these concepts as he noted they were happening.

It could be the case that the sixth graders, Vicki and Christopher, were just older enough than the fifth graders that they could more knowledgeably reflect on their own leaning experiences. In their remarks both of them talked in great detail about how they learned better and were more involved and interested in their learning when they were active and engaged in hands-on activities while doing it. Both Christopher and Vicki mentioned that they transferred the knowledge that they learned to their settings at home, or in Christopher’s case, to his grandmother’s lake cabin. While data from all four students did reveal how much they enjoyed learning at the Center, it raised questions that were not explored in this study but may be worth exploring in others about how students perceive and are able to talk about their own learning.

If I were to continue this research, I would spend even more time looking at the nuances of the differences between the student participants’ perspectives and that of their parents and educators. Much more could be learned by collecting more data from the three perspectives then.
focusing just on where the stories overlap and where they diverge. Contrasting the student viewpoints with the parent and teacher viewpoints could offer further insight about how parents and educators think students learn best versus how the students think they learn best, what parents and educators think they enjoy most versus what the students actually enjoy.

Directions for further research may focus on exploring questions having to do with this articulation of what it means to learn and how they feel when they learn best. Valuable further research that focuses more attention on cognition in PBE curriculum and program development could help existing and developing programs alike. Research concerned with how students learn within these contexts could help programs to go beyond just teaching particular skills or limiting pedagogy to certain strategies that are easiest for educators and most fun for students.
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Appendix A

List of Acronyms

The following is a list of commonly used acronyms and what they stand for. They appear here in
the order they occurred in the dissertation. The page number indicates where the acronym was
first mentioned in the text.

Page

NCLB- No Child Left Behind.................................................................1

PBE- Place-based Education.............................................................5

RVSD*- River Valley School District...............................................6

RVOLC*- River Valley Outdoor Learning Center..............................7

DNR-Department of Natural Resources...........................................20

EE- Environmental Education.........................................................22

CPP- Critical Pedagogy of Place......................................................23

EALR- Essential Academic Learning Requirement..........................28

MSP- Measurement of Student Progress.........................................28

HOOT- Hawk & Owl Outreach Talks.............................................40

MPLC*- Mountain Peak Learning Center.....................................41

*Indicates this acronym was a pseudonym.
Appendix B

List of Study Participants

The following is a list of the ten named study participants and their associations. These ten participants are referred to often in the body of the text. All names are pseudonyms.

**Student Participants:**

Robert- RVSD fifth grade student

Jason- RVSD fifth grade student

Vicki- RVSD sixth grade student

Christopher- RVSD sixth grade student

**RVOLC Educators:**

Jeni- director

Rick- full-time certificated teacher, RVSD employee

Amy- full-time para-educator, RVSD employee

Greg- full-time AmeriCorps employee

Kristy- full-time AmeriCorps employee

Alan- part-time educator
Appendix C
RVOLC Student Selection Criteria

Thank you for your help with our study interested in looking at the impacts of the RVOLC experience. At this point we are looking to identify 3-4 fifth grade students who have been enrolled in the RV school district since kindergarten and have been “profoundly positively affected” by their time at the RVOLC. Based on fifth grade classroom and RVOLC educator feedback, the following list of behaviors, characteristics, and/or interests has been compiled to describe students who have been impacted or even transformed by their time and experiences at the RVOLC. Please use this list as a guide to help you in identifying any current fifth grade student you may have who you believe would be a good candidate for our study, and pass any names along to Jeni or myself via email or phone.

According to these educators, this student may…

- Like to be outdoors (but also may be a student who has not been exposed to many outdoor settings other than RVOLC experiences)
- Be partial to hands-on or experiential learning
- Be partial to “natural” and relevant learning
- Be creative
- Be inquisitive
- Have an emotional connection with animals
- Be a student looking to build independence
- Be a student looking to assume accountability
- Be generally knowledgeable (may know a lot of facts, especially about plants or animals)
- Value learning as important
- Be a student who likes to read independently (but also may not be a student who learns best from class-chosen texts)
- Be quiet (but also may be a student who seems overactive or inattentive in a classroom setting)
- Be introverted (but also may appear more extroverted in the RVOLC setting)
- Be socially awkward
- Assume a leadership role in the RVOLC setting

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me. Thank you for your time and consideration.

-Doreen Keller
doreen.keller@email.wsu.edu or (509) 701-3586
Appendix D

Robert & Jason First Interview Protocol

1. Have you been at the same school since kindergarten?

2. Please tell me a little bit about yourself.
   - How do you like school?
   - What do you like doing in your free time?
   - What is your family like?
   - What is your absolute favorite thing to do?

3. Describe the last time you played outside other than during recess or PE at school.
   - Do you do this often?
   - How do you feel when you are outside?

4. What is your best school subject? Why do you think you are so good at it?

5. Tell me how you feel about science?
   - How do you like it as a school subject?
   - How do you like doing science at the RVOLC?

6. Do you feel ready for the science MSP test coming this spring? Why or why not?

7. How often do you visit the RVOLC?

8. Describe what the RVOLC looks like as if you were telling someone who has not seen it.

9. Tell me what you think the Outdoor Learning Center is all about?
   - What do you do when you are there?
   - How does it serve students?
   - How does it serve teachers?
   - What do you think its purpose is?

10. How do you feel when your teacher tells your class you’ll be going to the RVOLC?

11. What do you like about coming to the RVOLC? What do you not like about it?

12. Please describe your earliest memory of coming to the RVOLC.
   - Do you remember the very first time you visited it?
13. Tell me about a more recent memory.

14. What else would you like to share about the RVOLC today?

15. What would YOU like me to ask you or what would you like to talk more specifically about next time we talk?
Appendix E

Vicki & Christopher First Interview Protocol

1. What schools have you attended since kindergarten?

2. Describe to me in detail why you chose to attend City School.

3. Are you happy with your decision to go to City School? Why or why not?

4. Please tell me a little bit about yourself.
   - How do you like school?
   - What do you like doing in your free time?
   - What is your family like?
   - What is your absolute favorite thing to do?

5. Describe the last time you played outside other than during recess or PE at school.
   - Do you do this often?
   - How do you feel when you are outside?

6. What is your best school subject? Why do you think you are so good at it?

7. Tell me how you feel about science.
   - How do you like it as a school subject?
   - How does learning science at City School differ from or resemble learning science at the RVOLC?

8. How often do you visit the RVOLC now (since you are no longer in elementary school)?

9. Describe what the RVOLC looks like as if you were telling someone who has not seen it.

10. Please describe your earliest memory of coming to the RVOLC.
    - Try to recall the very first time you visited it.

11. Tell me about a more recent memory.

12. What do you learn about when you are at the RVOLC?

13. What did you learn about when you used to go on trips with RVOLC staff or visit the Center as part of your classroom activities?

14. What other things or school subjects do you learn from being at the RVOLC?
15. What do the things you learn about at the RVOLC have to do with your life at home?

16. Tell me what you think the Outdoor Learning Center is all about.

- What do you do when you are there?
- What are you most interested in or curious about at the RVOLC?
- How does it serve students?
- How does it serve teachers?
- What do you think its purpose is?

17. What do you like about the RVOLC?

18. What have you learned about the outdoors or nature from being at the RVOLC?

19. Would you say you like nature more, less, or the same since coming to the RVOLC?

20. What do you not like about it?

21. What advice would you give the RVOLC people to make it better?

22. If you described how you feel about the Center in one word, what word would you use?

23. What else would you like to share about the RVOLC today?

24. What would YOU like me to ask you or what would you like to talk more specifically about if we meet again?
Appendix F

Parent Focus Group Interview Protocol

1. Please clearly state your name, and tell us how long your child has been a student in the River Valley School District.

2. Please share a little about your child—(prompt only if necessary: what is his/her favorite subject in school, what does he/she like doing during free time, how does he/she like school?).

3. What is your child’s absolute favorite thing to do?

4. Describe the last time your child played outside besides at school.

5. Please share the extent of your child’s involvement with the Center. (If needed: For instance, does he volunteer weekly or does she visit daily as part of her school classes?)

6. Please share any memories you have from your child talking with you about the Center.

7. To the best of your knowledge, what does your child do while at the Center?

8. To the best of your knowledge, what school subjects does your child learn about when he/she is at the Center or on trips with Center staff?

9. Are there other things you feel your child learns from being at the Center? What are they?

10. Do the things your child learns about at the Center have anything to do with his/her life at home? How do they or don’t they?

11. To the best of your knowledge, how do you think your child feels about his/her experiences at the Center?

12. What do you think your child likes most about coming to the Center?

13. What does your child like least about coming to the Center?

14. What has your child learned about the outdoors or nature from being at the Center?

15. Would you say your child spends more time, less time or the same amount of time outdoors since coming to the Center?

16. Tell me what you think the Center is all about. (If needed: What do you think the Center is all about? How does it serve students? Parents? The community?)
17. What do you think is done particularly well at the Center?
18. What advice would you give to make the Center better?
19. What do you see as the main value of the Center experience for your child?
20. What has supported or encouraged your child’s experiences at the Center?
21. What (if anything) has gotten in the way of your child’s experiences at the Center?
22. How do you feel the Center has impacted your child’s life?
23. What else would you like to share about the Center today?
Appendix G

RVOLC Educator Focus Group Interview Protocol

1. Please clearly state your name, and explain your role and what you do here at the outdoor learning Center.

2. Tell me what brought you to work here at the outdoor learning Center.

3. Tell me what you think the Center is all about.

4. First, please share a little about Robert (5th grader) and how you see him experiencing the RVOLC.
   - What does he do here?
   - How does he connect to and feel about this place?
   - What do you think he is most curious about here?
   - What does he like best about coming here?
   - What does he learn about here?
   - What do you see as the main value of the RVOLC experience for him?

5. Now share a little about Jason (5th grader) and how you see him experiencing the RVOLC.

6. Please share a little about Vicki (River School 6th grade) and how you see her experiencing the RVOLC.

7. Finally, let’s talk about Christopher (River School 6th grade) and how you see him experiencing the RVOLC.

8. Tell us about one specific memory you’ve yet to share that involves one of these students.

9. What do you think is done particularly well at the Center?

10. What areas of improvement, if attended to, do you think would make the Center better?

11. Place-based education (PBE) has been defined as “the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum.” Please share how you feel experiences at the RVOLC are place-based or how they are not.

12. How do you think students in the study and students in general respond to place-based lessons at the RVOLC? (What do the students look, act and sound like?)

13. How do the things students learn about at the Center have to do with their lives at home?

14. What do students learn about the outdoors or nature from being at the Center?
15. What has supported or encouraged the student participants’ experiences at the Center?

16. What (if anything) has gotten in the way of student participants’ experiences at the Center?

17. What else would you like to share about these students or the RVOLC in general and how you think it impacts kids?
Appendix H

Jason’s Classroom Teacher Interview Protocol

1. Please state your name, your role or professional title, and tell me how long you have known Jason.

2. Please share a little about Jason—
   - What is his favorite subject in school?
   - What does he like doing in his free time?
   - How does he like school?
   - How does he interact with his peers?

3. It has come to my attention that Jason has recently been diagnosed with a learning disability. Please share the story behind Jason’s challenges and your work to support him.

4. You recommended Jason for this study about the RVOLC. Why did you choose Jason and his story as an important one to share?

5. What do you see as the main value of the RVOLC experience for Jason?

6. Please share any memories you have of Jason experiencing the RVOLC or being on trips with the RVOLC.

7. To the best of your knowledge, how do you think Jason feels about his experiences at the Center?

8. Please compare how Jason acts and learns in a typical classroom setting to when he is at the RVOLC or on trips with the RVOLC.

9. What do you think Jason likes most about the RVOLC?

10. How content do you think Jason is while learning at the RVOLC?

11. What do you think is done particularly well at the Center?

12. What advice would you give to make the Center better?

13. What do you think has supported or encouraged Jason’s experiences at the Center?

14. What (if anything) do you think has gotten in the way of Jason’s experiences at the Center?

15. How do you feel the Center has impacted Jason’s life?

16. What final thing is most important for everyone to know about Jason?
17. What final thing is most important for everyone to know about the RVOLC?
Appendix I
Robert Final Interview Protocol

1. First, please tell me about your experiences at MPLC last week.

2. When did you have the most fun?

3. What was the most interesting thing you did?

4. What were you most curious about?

5. What did you not like about camp?

6. Describe the macro invertebrate lesson in detail.

7. What did you learn from it?

8. How did you feel about that experience?

9. What does that lesson have to do with your life?

10. Describe the “camouflage” game in detail.

11. What did you learn from playing camouflage?

12. How did you feel about that experience?

13. What does that lesson have to do with your life?

14. Describe when you played the “bear, salmon, mosquito” game.

15. What did you learn from it?

16. How did you feel about playing bear, salmon, mosquito?

17. What does that game have to do with your life?

18. Tell me everything you remember about doing the decomposer lesson on the trail with the downed trees.

19. What did you learn from it?

20. How did you feel about that experience?

21. What does that lesson have to do with your life?
22. Describe the hikes up at MPLC.

23. What did you learn from them?

24. How did you feel about those hikes?

25. What do those hikes have to do with your life?

26. Please describe in detail how learning activities were carried out (taught and experienced) at MPLC. (Alternate wording: How did your RVOLC leader go about teaching things at MPLC?)

27. What else did you learn that you haven’t mentioned already?

28. How did you like learning in that way?

29. Please compare learning at MPLC with something you would do on a normal school day back in the classroom.

30. How do you feel about learning with the RVOLC staff versus back in the classroom?

31. Do you enjoy one type of learning more than the other? Why?

32. How did anything you did at MPLC with the RVOLC staff relate to your life back at home?

33. Describe to me what it was like being in the outdoors those three days.

34. If it weren’t for MPLC or the RVOLC in general, do you think you would spend this much time outdoors? Why or why not?

35. Why do you think your school district and the RVOLC invite all fifth graders to go to CPLC?

36. What else would you like to share about your time at MPLC?

37. My study is about you, but it’s also about a way of teaching and learning called place-based education. Place-based education is a way of learning that uses the local community and environment as a starting point to teach language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects. Please tell me about how your experiences at MPLC and here at the RVOLC are like this or how they are not.

38. How do you like learning in this way versus learning in a classroom?

39. What else would you like to share about the RVOLC and your local and environment-focused learning experiences here?
40. At the end of your first interview you shared that you would like to talk more about the field trips you’ve taken with the learning Center staff. Describe some of those trips to me.

41. How have those field trips and interaction with the Center staff affected your life?

42. Now recall one specific field trip and describe it in greater detail.

43. What all did you learn from this particular field trip?

44. Why do you think the RVOLC staff had you and your classmates go on that trip?

45. How did you like learning in that way?

46. Please compare one of these RVOLC learning trips to something you would do on a normal school day in the classroom.

47. How content are you learning up at MPLC or at the RVOLC versus learning in the classroom?

48. How has interaction with the outdoors and with the RVOLC changed your life?

49. What is your most memorable time being outdoors with the RVOLC staff?

50. Please describe in detail how learning activities were carried out (taught and experienced) whenever you visited the RVOLC with your classes.

51. Do you enjoy this type of learning? How or why?

52. What Center lessons have you been most curious about or engaged in?

53. A stated mission of the Center is that it works to “provide educational, experiential and therapeutic opportunities for students.” What do you think this means?

54. What has supported or encouraged your experiences at the Center?

55. What (if anything) has gotten in the way of your experiences at the Center?

56. How do you feel about this place, the RVOLC?

57. Have you thought about continuing to volunteer at the RVOLC next year even though you’ll be in middle school? Why or why not?

58. What will next year be like, not having the RVOLC right next to your school?

59. How would elementary school have been different for you had the RVOLC not been part of your experience?
60. What have you thought about doing as a profession when you are an adult?
61. Tell me about the adults that you come in contact with at the Center.
62. What do you think they do particularly well at the Center?
63. What advice would you give them to make the Center better?
64. How do you feel the Center has impacted your life?
65. What final thing is most important for everyone to know about you, Robert?
66. What final thing is most important for everyone to know about the RVOLC?
Appendix J
Jason Final Interview Protocol

1) First, please describe in detail everything you can remember about your time at Mountain Peak Learning Center (MPLC) last week.

2) When did you have the most fun?

3) What was the most interesting thing you did?

4) What were you most curious about?

5) **Tell the story of when you saw the carcass in the middle of the trail.**

6) What did you learn from it?

7) How did you feel about that experience?

8) What does that lesson have to do with your life?

9) **Describe when you played the “bat and moth” game.**

10) What did you learn from it?

11) How did you feel about that experience?

12) What does that lesson have to do with your life?

13) **Tell me everything you remember about doing the macro invertebrate lesson down at the stream.**

14) What did you learn from it?

15) How did you feel about that experience?

16) What does that lesson have to do with your life?

17) **Describe the “thicket” game in detail.**

18) What did you learn from playing thicket?

19) How did you feel about playing thicket?

20) What does playing thicket have to do with your life?

21) **Describe the hikes up at MPLC.**
22) What did you learn from them?

23) How did you feel about them?

24) What do those hikes have to do with your life?

25) Kristy let me know that you helped direct the group where to go on your final day of hiking. Describe how that came about and what that was like.

26) What did you learn from it?

27) How did you feel about that experience?

28) What do think that experience has to do with your life?

29) How did your RVOLC leader go about teaching things at MPLC?

30) What did you learn at MPLC that you haven’t mentioned already?

31) How did you like learning in that way?

32) Please compare learning at MPLC with something you would do on a normal school day back in the classroom.

33) How do you feel about learning in this way versus back in the classroom?

34) Do you enjoy one type of learning more than the other? Why?

35) How did anything you did at MPLC with the RVOLC staff relate to your life back at home?

36) Describe to me what it was like being in the outdoors those three days.

37) Why do you think your school district and the RVOLC invite all fifth graders to go to MPLC?

38) What else would you like to share about your time at MPLC?

39) My study is about you, but it’s also about a way of teaching and learning that uses the local community and environment as a starting point to teach language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum. Please tell me about how your experiences at MPLC and here at the RVOLC are like this or how they are not.

40) How do you like learning in this way versus learning by reading something in a book?
41) What else would you like to share about the RVOLC and your local, outdoor and environment-focused learning experiences here?

42) Your mom and teachers have shared with me that reading doesn’t come easily for you. Please tell me about that.
   Prompts if necessary:
   How long has this been tough for you?
   How do you feel when you have big reading assignments?
   What has your classroom teacher done this year to help you with reading?
   What have you found out about how your eyes and brain work while you try to read?

43) How content are you learning at MPLC or at the RVOLC versus learning from reading?

44) At the end of your first interview you shared that you would like to talk more about the outdoors. What can you tell me about your time outdoors and the RVOLC that you haven’t already shared?

45) How has interaction with the outdoors and with the RVOLC changed your life?

46) What was your most memorable time being outdoors with the RVOLC staff?

47) What all did you learn from this experience?

48) How did you like learning in that way?

49) Please compare this type of learning with something you did on a normal school day back in the classroom.

50) How do you feel about learning one way over the other?

51) Please describe in detail how learning activities were carried out (taught and experienced) when you visited the RVOLC.

52) Do you enjoy this type of learning? How or why?

53) What Center lessons have you been most curious about or engaged in?

54) A stated mission of the Center is that it works to “provide educational, experiential and therapeutic opportunities for students.” What do you think this means?

55) What has supported or encouraged your experiences at the Center?

56) What (if anything) has gotten in the way of your experiences at the Center?

57) How do you feel about this place, the RVOLC?
58) Do you think you are going to miss not having it right next to your school next year? Why or why not?

59) Have you ever thought about volunteering to work at the RVOLC? Why or why not?

60) How would elementary school have been different for you had the RVOLC not been part of your experience?

61) What have you thought about doing as a profession when you are an adult?

62) Tell me about the adults that you come in contact with at the Center.

63) What do you think they do particularly well at the Center?

64) What advice would you give them to make the Center better?

65) How do you feel the Center has impacted your life?

66) What final thing is most important for everyone to know about you?

67) What final thing is most important for everyone to know about the RVOLC?
Appendix K

Vicki Final Interview Protocol

1) At the end of your first interview you shared that you would like to talk more about the animals at the learning Center. What can you tell me about the animals that you haven’t already shared?

2) How has interaction with the Center animals affected your life?

3) How do you feel about this place?

4) In your first interview you described several lessons (quail digestion, Sprite concoction, teepee lesson) that took place at the Center itself. Now please recall for me in detail a time that you took a field trip with the Center staff.

5) What all did you learn from this particular field trip?

6) Why do you think the RVOLC staff had you and your classmates go on that trip?

7) How did you like learning in that way?

8) Please compare this type of learning with something you did on a normal school day back in elementary school.

9) How do you feel about learning one way over the other?

10) Please describe in detail how learning activities were carried out (taught and experienced) when you visited the RVOLC in elementary school.

11) Do you enjoy this type of learning? How or why?

12) What Center lessons have you been most curious about or engaged in?

13) A stated mission of the Center is that it works to “provide educational, experiential and therapeutic opportunities for students.” What do you think this means? (Confucius quote if needed for the experiential part- “Tell me and I’ll forget. Show me and I’ll remember. Involve me and I’ll understand.”)

14) My study is about you and the RVOLC, but it’s also about a way of teaching and learning called place-based education. Place-based education has been defined as “the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum.” Please tell me about how your experiences at the Center are place-based or how they are not.

15) How do you like learning in this way?
16) What else would you like to share about the Center and students’ place-based experiences here?

17) Have you thought about applying to come back and work at the RVOLC again next year? Why or why not?

18) What have you thought about doing as a profession when you are an adult?

19) Your mom shared in her interview that you used to have a snake and still have a lizard and some cats at your home as pets. What have you learned at the Center that helps you care for your animals at home?

20) What have you learned about personal responsibility while working at the Center?

21) Tell me about the adults that you come in contact with at the Center.

22) What do you think they do particularly well at the Center?

23) What advice would you give them to make the Center better?

24) What has supported or encouraged your experiences at the Center?

25) What (if anything) has gotten in the way of your experiences at the Center?

26) How do you feel the Center has impacted your life?

27) What else would you like to share about the Center today?
Appendix L
Christopher Final Interview Protocol

1) At the end of your first interview you shared that you would like to talk more about how the learning Center can affect people. Tell me more about that.

2) In your first interview you described a time when you went on a trip with the RVOLC to Latah Creek and used nets to fish isopods out of the water there. What did you learn by doing this lesson?

3) Why do you think the RVOLC staff had you and your classmates look at the creatures in that water?

4) How did you like learning in that way?

5) Please compare this type of learning activity with an activity that happened during science in your elementary school.

6) How are they alike?

7) How are they different?

8) Compare how you feel about learning one way over the other.

9) Please describe how learning activities were carried out (taught and experienced) when you visited the RVOLC in elementary school.

10) Do you enjoy this type of learning? How or why?

11) What Center lessons have you been most curious about or engaged in?

12) A stated mission of the Center is that it works to “provide educational, experiential and therapeutic opportunities for students.” What do you think this means? (Confucius quote if needed for the experiential part- “Tell me and I’ll forget. Show me and I’ll remember. Involve me and I’ll understand.”)

13) How do you think the Center does this?

14) My study is about you and the RVOLC, but it’s also about a way of teaching and learning called place-based education. Place-based education has been defined as “the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum.” Please tell me about how your experiences at the Center are place-based or how they are not.

15) How do you like learning in this way?
16) What else would you like to share about the Center and students’ place-based experiences there?

17) What did you learn from working with the RVOLC staff at the Bighorn Show?

18) What do you see as the main value of the Center experience for you?

19) What do you see as the main value of the Center experience for other students?

20) What have you learned about personal responsibility while working at the Center?

21) What do you think is done particularly well at the Center?

22) What advice would you give to make the Center better?

23) What has supported or encouraged your experiences at the Center?

24) What (if anything) has gotten in the way of your experiences at the Center?

25) How do you feel the Center has impacted your life?

26) What else would you like to share about the Center today?