

**REPURPOSING SPACES IN SCHOOLS TO ENCOURAGE SOCIAL  
INTERACTION AMONGST STUDENTS**

by

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## **Abstract**

Students require spaces within schools, outside of the classroom, to interact with each other.

These communal spaces, including hallways, foyers, entryways, libraries, and outdoor spaces, are informal gathering spaces for school communities. Students need to spend more time interacting in real-life social settings in order to work on their social-emotional skills.

Traditionally built schools are not always designed to support this kind of interaction. Schools with older designs and growing populations mean that educators must begin to explore the potential of the space they are currently in. We wondered if and how educators are repurposing existing spaces in schools to encourage interaction amongst students. We interviewed seven participants in four different school sites and observed the repurposed spaces. We found that educators are making meaningful changes to their school spaces, which lead to an increase in social interaction. We also found that when educational leaders become more aware of the spatiality of their school settings, it is possible that they will be better equipped to enhance the quality of social interaction through repurposing initiatives, which in turn encourage spatial literacy.

## **Preface**

The project described in this thesis was undertaken in collaboration with Dr. Wendy Poole (supervisor), Dr. Marilynne Waithman (supervising committee member). We were responsible for developing the research questions and design, all data collection, transcription of manuscripts and all data analysis. Dr. Poole provided constructive academic criticism and editorial feedback throughout the process.

This study, titled “Repurposing Spaces in Schools to Encourage Social Interaction Amongst Students” was granted approval by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board under the certificate number H17-03375.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	ii
<b>Preface</b> .....	iii
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	iv
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	vi
<b>Chapter One: Introduction</b> .....	1
The Problem .....	1
The Context .....	3
What drew me to this inquiry – Ektaa Singh .....	3
What drew me to this inquiry – Gordon Masi .....	5
Research Aim .....	7
<b>Chapter Two: Literature Review</b> .....	9
The value of space within the school site .....	10
Spatiality “Space is always becoming” .....	12
Gieryn Introduces Building Design Power and Human Agency .....	16
The Power of Building Design .....	18
Human Agency .....	21
The Process of Repurposing space .....	24
Communal Spaces Lead to Interaction .....	25
The Importance of Social and Emotional Learning .....	27
Summary .....	31
Research Questions .....	32
<b>Chapter Three: Research Methods</b> .....	33
Research paradigm and justification .....	33
Research approach within qualitative research and justification .....	34
Setting and Site Selection .....	35
Participant Recruitment and Selection .....	37
Data Collection .....	38
Data Analysis .....	39
Enhancing Trustworthiness .....	40
Ethical Considerations .....	41
Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity .....	42
Limitations .....	43
Sharing Data .....	43
<b>Chapter Four: Findings</b> .....	45
Description of School Sites/Participants .....	45
Spatial Repurposing Projects Involve a Process of Becoming that is Contextual .....	46
Vision and Motivation: The Impetus for Repurposing Spaces in Schools .....	47

The Importance of Vision Makers & Key Players: Leading the Process of Repurposing Spaces .....	51
Enablers: Identifying the People and Resources .....	55
People as enablers .....	56
Repurposing projects often require sizable budgets .....	58
Flexible furniture enables spaces to become .....	60
Challenges .....	62
Repurposing School Spaces Increases Social Interaction .....	64
Learning How to Use Repurposed Spaces Takes Time .....	67
Students Take Ownership of Spaces .....	68
The Softening of Power Relations Through Repurposing Space .....	69
Technology can Enable and Hinder Social Interaction .....	72
Summary .....	75
<b>Chapter Five: Discussion</b> .....	77
The Dynamic Relationship of Theory and Practice: Spatial Theory Inspires Repurposing and Repurposing Encourages Spatial Literacy .....	77
Schools Need Spaces that are Flexible and Equipped to Support Collaboration and Inquiry .....	79
Recommendations .....	81
More Research Needs to be Done in Relation to Connections Between Spatiality and Social-Emotional Learning .....	81
Educational Leaders Need to Develop Spatial Literacy and Learn to Manage the Process of Repurposing School Space .....	82
Educational Leaders Should Continue to Examine Ways in which Spatial Repurposing can be Supported through Creative Use of the Time Table .....	82
Schools Should Consider Using Spatial Projects to Encourage Greater Ownership of the School and a Softening of Power Relations within a School Community .....	84
Schools Should Focus on Learning Commons Initiatives as Examples of Successful Navigation of the Spatial Repurposing Process .....	85
Researcher Reflections .....	85
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	87
Appendices .....	92
A: Interview Guide .....	92
B: Visuals of Franklin Heights Secondary’s Learning Commons .....	93
C: Visuals of Fairdale Secondary’s Learning Commons .....	94
D: Visuals of Middletown Elementary’s Library .....	95
E: Visuals of Grandridge Elementary’s Forest Space .....	96

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### **The Problem**

We are curious about the possibilities for increasing student social interactions within traditionally built schools in the South Fraser School District. We believe traditionally designed schools are inspired by 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas, involving control, organization, and surveillance. They are characterised by long, straight hallways lined with classrooms, often referred to as the ‘egg crate model’. In particular, we wonder if educational leaders can repurpose communal spaces within a traditionally designed school site to encourage this. Furthermore, we believe that by encouraging these social interactions, they could result in positive social and emotional learning situations.

Interaction plays a large role in a student’s overall experience at school. Learning the necessary skills to communicate positively with others requires the opportunities to do so. The school environment provides many of these opportunities within the classroom. Communal spaces in a school, which are used by all members of the community, are spaces that can support the social and emotional aspects of learning as well. Some examples of these communal spaces include hallways, entryways, and foyers. While these spaces are commonly used to pass through on the way to a destination, or purposed as a place to display the culture of a school, we wonder if they could be repurposed for the enhancement of social interaction. As teachers in schools, we have become aware that many spaces outside of classrooms, but within the school site, could be used in creative and innovative ways. The changes made by educators do not need to be permanent or expensive, but functional. Although these changes require resources, they can be low-budget projects that do not require major renovations such as knocking down or putting up walls.

These changes could be emergent in their nature or they could have a very specific purpose planned by educational leaders. Social interaction could occur as a result of buying furniture and positioning it within a hallway nook, repurposing an unused classroom for a breakout space, or organizing an art installation within an underused area of the school site. Regardless of the method, this study hopes to raise the awareness of educational leaders so they can be empowered to act with greater agency in terms of how to approach the designed spaces that surround them and overcome their limitations. It is our hope that these actions could lead to situations in which students can benefit from more opportunity to socially interact, and therefore increase their social and emotional knowledge.

Communal spaces are the shared spaces found outside of traditional classrooms, including foyers, entryways, hallways, courtyards, cafeterias, playgrounds, or any area within a school site that members of the school community can gain access to. These spaces can be found both indoors and outdoors. We believe these spaces, which are sometimes overlooked, provide valuable opportunities for the enhancement of social interaction amongst members of a school community. These spaces are often used to serve other purposes, such as displaying student artwork, since there may not be seating or other amenities provided in the space. We wonder how new ideas in design and architecture could possibly inspire educators to deal with the restrictions found in their older school site designs. We believe that educators within school sites must use their creativity and agency to maximize the potential that traditional school buildings hold. Although educators may not always have enough control or authority to make bigger changes, if they work with administrators and ensure that they adhere to fire codes and health and safety regulations, they may be able to make changes that have a significant impact.

## **The Context**

Our focus is on K-12 level schools in the South Fraser School district. Many of the South Fraser schools are in need of space and could be creating unique spatial environments to meet their needs through repurposing space within the school site. Although rare, some South Fraser schools are experiencing declining enrolment, and have unused spaces that they are using for a variety of purposes. Some older South Fraser schools have received seismic upgrades which focus on improving the building's infrastructure, but have not changed the layout or design. South Fraser is also focusing on newly built schools, which are innovative, modern, and support collaborative learning. With a wide range of building site conditions in South Fraser, the constant is that members of each school community in the district uses the space that they are provided and these spaces are valued by educational leaders.

## **What drew me to this inquiry: Ektaa Singh**

I grew up in Vancouver and attended three different public schools during my K-12 years. During my time in school, I did not pay much attention to the architecture or layout of these buildings, all of which were constructed in the years ranging from 1912 to 1963. Rainy lunch hours meant that students ate lunch inside, either in the hallway, cafeteria, multipurpose room, or any other place they could find. When it was not raining, students were expected to go outside, and I would walk around the school grounds trying to balance my sandwich and juice box since the few picnic tables were often occupied. When I was old enough to, I chose to walk home for lunch and always took a few friends with me, which allowed us to be more comfortable and actually enjoy our meal together. Getting to school early only to find the classroom door closed was disappointing, since we could not enter until the teacher was in the room. Staying in

the school after hours never even crossed my mind, since there was no reason or place to stay behind in. Hallways were lined with bulletin boards with colourful artwork (that was to be seen, not touched) and front foyers were a quiet space for patiently waiting parents. Walking and not talking in the hallway were rules that were emphasized greatly. In high school, I played on sports teams and the cold, uncomfortable floor by my locker became the most practical place to spend my time while waiting for evening practices and games to begin. I was finding space wherever I could instead of using space that had been created with me in mind.

During my second year of teaching, I was assigned to a classroom on the second floor of a building which had three other empty classrooms. This floor of the school had a hallway connecting the classrooms, along with two stairways and two entryways. The school administrators gave me full access to the entire space, and although I used the classrooms as group work spaces, an art area, and places to display student work, I did not understand how to use the space to its full potential. I see now that I could have encouraged the use of this space outside of class time by not only my students, but the whole school. I could have made the space more available for students and other community members to use informally, during rainy days and outside of school hours. I took the space for granted and did not have the time or knowledge of how to use the space to meet its full potential. Rather than just see how the space could be used for the students in my class, I could have used the opportunity to rethink how the space could be used to help students interact. This is why I now want to look at how other educators use school spaces in creative ways in order to meet the needs of their school community. I would particularly like to explore the ways in which educators look at creating spaces for social interaction, which is something that was missing when I was in school. I spent little time using communal spaces in the schools I attended because they were not spaces that I felt welcomed and

comfortable in. I hope that by sharing examples of how spaces are repurposed to encourage student use/ interaction, others will be inspired to work with their own school spaces.

### **What drew me to this inquiry: Gordon Masi**

I grew up in North Delta and attended Sunshine Hills Elementary School, which was opened in 1958. My memories of this school include using an outdoor concrete courtyard to play a game which involved a tennis ball and was a hybrid of road hockey and soccer. One day we returned to school to find that bike racks had been relocated to this courtyard. I am not sure what the original intent of the courtyard had been in the school design, but it was a great place for us to play. I think of this example in light of our research aim as it highlights how creative use of space on a school site can provide opportunities for students to connect. No educators told us what to do, nor was this space designed for any obvious purpose, yet it became something special to a group of children. I often wonder if the educators that decided to relocate the bike racks had taken the time to consider how they were displacing us, or if this even factored into their decision making at the time.

In this same school I was fortunate to have two seventh grade teachers (teaching two classes collaboratively), who ran a pair of memorable projects that depended on the use of repurposed space. The first occurred just before winter vacation. They organized us into partner groups to create store fronts of buildings which would form a medieval town. We created snowflakes by the dozens and many other decorations. The vision was to decorate the hallways outside of our double classroom to transform that portion of the school into a festive medieval town. My memories of it were amazing - in particular to see the younger students wandering down our hall, wide eyed and inspired, while we explained the purpose of our store fronts. At the

time, I did not realize how we were connecting as a school community through repurposing the hallways, but looking back now, I believe it did have this effect.

The second project built on the first as we took our prototype buildings and created stalls made from cardboard boxes and basic wood structures in the school gymnasium. This was to be our springtime medieval fair. Weeks of work resulted in a fantastic fair in which our school and community was encouraged to participate in. Families, teachers, administrators and schoolmates all took part in apple bobbing, feasting, stockades and all the other trappings of a medieval fair. Our teachers demonstrated creativity and flexibility by taking a space intended for physical activity and repurposing it to match their vision. The result was an experience that undoubtedly strengthened our school community by providing the opportunity for people to interact.

As I consider the school in which I teach now, there are many examples of how educators and students repurpose spaces to match their vision. Lord Tweedsmuir Secondary is an overcrowded school site that is supported by two school schedules and 15 portable buildings to manage the 2100 students and 170 staff and support staff members who occupy a building intended for a population of 1400. One of my favourite examples is that we as a Physical Education department plan a holiday “Hoe Down” in the days leading up to winter break. Using speakers from the band and P.E. departments, we build a sound system and microphone into the school cafeteria. On that day, we ask the school custodian to only put tables on the outside of the cafeteria. Administration allows us to extend lunch by a few minutes so that we can run line dancing, square dancing, and other social dance tunes. The result is that nearly two thousand students and staff join together to have a wonderful time dancing and celebrating before the holiday break. It is a favourite tradition at L.T. that has created many memories and helped to bring members of the school community together.

A number of years ago I was building up a strength and conditioning program for our P.E department. A challenge that our class faced was finding an appropriate place to run our sprints. It was important to have a surface that provided a consistent environment as timing these runs was a key to our speed development. The concrete laneway outside the back of the school was all we had to use. The temperature and weather wreaked havoc on our timing consistency. Frustration with this situation led me to look at the spaces that we had available inside the school. The main gym would have been perfect, but the reality of an overcrowded school meant that getting that entire space to run sprints in simply was not feasible. I was able to find a space leading from the gymnasium foyer, through a set of doors, down the fine arts hallway and ending just short of the school cafeteria. This was just long enough to develop an indoor sprint track. For the past 6 years we have used this space to time our sprints successfully. Some safety concerns had to be met before we could run inside the school, but the results have been excellent. One of the small spinoff effects has been the popularity of the “40’s” being run as a spectator event. Students on study blocks in the cafeteria position their chairs and tables to watch the athletes finish their sprints. When we are timing the sprints, there is an energy in this part of the school as a result of this athletic activity. It is performed in a space that was designed as a corridor but has become something very different through a repurposing process using creativity and vision.

### **The Research Aim**

We are interested to see the many ways in which educators use communal spaces in existing school sites of traditionally built schools. This study recognizes that classrooms are specifically designed for students and staff with the purpose of traditional learning. In most cases, classrooms do not serve to include other members of the school community including

parents, families, administrators, and other school staff. Our curiosity is to investigate how indoor and outdoor spaces outside of classrooms are best being used or what potential they may hold to enhance a school's social environment.

This study also recognizes that traditionally built schools in the district of South Fraser are designed structures that have intentions in terms of how communal space is supposed to be used. Although ideas about teaching and learning have changed over time, these buildings were originally designed with a bureaucratic approach to schooling that focused on efficiency, control, and didactic teaching. This architectural notion, combined with the reality that schools and their spatiality are governed by district policies (which are intended to meet fire and safety regulations) creates potential limitations that our research will also explore. This is why we will be looking at how space is repurposed in temporary and semi-permanent ways. We want educators to be able to make changes that do not require large budgets and lengthy processes.

Our hope is that this research will inspire educational leaders to reexamine and become change agents when considering the communal spaces in their schools. If changes are intentionally made within an existing design, can that promote student social interaction which will positively affect the student social and emotional learning? This question is a key focus for our research. We hope there are creative ideas that can be discovered from existing school sites through this research. The unfortunate assumption seems to be that the purpose of communal spaces, such as hallways and entryways, is to simply pass through rather than serve as functional social spaces. The purpose of this study is to see how educators repurpose their communal school spaces to provide opportunities for students to socially and emotionally learn through social interaction.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In the following review of the literature we will briefly describe the significance of interactions within the school environment, and explain the connection between spatiality, building design, agency and social interaction. We will focus on communal space and spatiality in school sites since these are integral to our study of repurposing initiatives in communal spaces in schools. Social interaction will be examined in terms of how it connects to social and emotional learning (SEL) within school sites. The role of outdoor spaces within the school site and their contributions to social interaction and SEL will also be addressed. Finally, we will examine the gaps in the literature and conclude with a presentation of our research questions, which were developed from our review of the literature.

Considering the South Fraser school district and its growing population, many schools are struggling to find space for their students in which to interact, develop and learn. It is an interesting time to see how educators are managing spaces in existing facilities. Finding and then sharing some of the specific ways in which school communities are using their school site spaces in innovative ways is what we hope to contribute to this field of research. It is our intention to share this knowledge with school districts in the hope that it can inspire educators to reexamine the spaces within their schools for the purpose of enhancing student's social and emotional learning.

Our study will look at how communal spaces are repurposed in schools to encourage interaction amongst students. As children spend more time on devices, they are missing out on face-to-face interactions. While technology provides opportunities for children to interact online via cyberspace, through our observations, they spend less time in real-life social settings socially and emotionally learning and developing. If educational leaders become more aware of the

spatiality of their school settings it is possible that they will be better equipped to enhance the quality of social interaction through repurposing initiatives.

### **The Value of Space within the School Site**

Educators spend a great deal of time in their school sites. In his study, Roch (2013) claims that educators have a “sense of permanence,” (p. 2) inhabiting their space in schools rather than occupying it. School sites and their spaces can be imagined in many different ways. Hatch defines organizational space as “a physical entity possessing territorial extent on multiple geographic and temporal scales, comprising a layout of workstations, furniture, equipment and the human bodies of members who produce endless interpretations of what it all means” (p. 223). Wright (2004) addresses the school organization as “more than a building - it’s a community. It’s a place where individuals can learn, feel safe, share a common vision, be respected” (p. 42). Although schools can hold different meanings to different people, a constant is the reality that space is a defining factor in any school building and contributes to the conditions and meanings within.

Conversations about the value of space in the school produce much discussion in venues ranging from staff committee meetings to the usual water cooler chatter. We agree with Roch that the concept of space, and the many ways teachers tend to describe it, discuss it, and work within it, is one of the predominant topics of conversation in schools (2013, p. 5). School spaces are significant to the people who inhabit and use them and the manner in which a building’s physical spaces are utilized is important to the daily affairs of a school. McGregor (2004) refers to schools as being a “physical container for social life” in that they function as an intense place involving social interaction. It is important to recognize the effect that building spaces have on

human interactions within the school site. Schools undeniably operate as social spaces. Massey (2004) supports this notion, reminding us that the majority of interactions occur within a school building, and that space is integral to the construction of the relations between organizational members. Based on our professional experience we believe members of schools speak together, read each other's writing, gesture to one another, and model different types of behaviour within the building and school grounds. In this sense interaction is “the mainstay of a school’s operation” (Roch, 2013, p. 5). Students are the focal point of much of this interaction. They learn and develop within the design of the school space.

Considering the significance of social interaction in school sites we can begin to see how space has an impact on the day-to-day lives of those who inhabit the building. What is clear is that physical space is important because it is a part of the human experience. For educators, the connection becomes the school site which forms their organizational backdrop. “Organizational affairs occur within the building, and its spaces are a salient part of a teacher’s daily work life. Teachers work within school spaces” (Roch, 2013 p. 36).

Surprisingly, there is little research directly examining the relationship between a school’s physical environment and the social interactions therein (McGregor, 2004). This study looks at the significance of school sites as a spatial experience. In particular, we are interested in the manner in which people interact with space. What is particularly interesting is how this becomes a reproductive dynamic between social interactions which are produced in space, and the space itself being reproduced by the actions of the individuals within it. “Space makes a difference. Exploring the built environment and what it tells us about education and schooling is crucial” (McGregor, 2004, p. 2).

## **Spatiality “Space is always becoming...”**

Consider how to think about school sites and the spaces within them. Are these passive structures awaiting humanity before they show signs of life? Are school sites, its rooms, corridors, and other spaces just simple rigid structures that serve as props to our comings and goings? Is the physical school environment affecting the behaviours of those who occupy the site? Could the occupants be affecting the spaces within the site? Could a simultaneous process of human action in combination with the physical structures humans inhabit produce spatial meaning? Can space be imagined without the order of time? These questions are important theoretical starting points when considering spatial repurposing initiatives in schools.

In 1966 Gutman introduced the theory that buildings actually influence behaviour. For “him a built space does not simply satisfy a need, but influences the beliefs, norms, and values of those within. Because human behaviour is heavily influenced by cultural, organizational, and societal norms, the buildings that people and groups inhabit become influential in shaping such behaviour” (Roch 2013, p. 6). Gutman allows us to see that buildings can be thought of as influential toward behaviour and could even determine behavioural patterns.

In 1974 Lefebvre challenged this model in his work *La production l'espace* (The production of space). In this work, it is claimed that “space is socially produced, engineered and constructed, and that social relations are always constituted relative to space” (Gulson & Symes, p. 101). Lefebvre uses Mediterranean geography to illustrate his point. He claims that it is possible to describe the region in terms of its physical features like climate or topography, but that there is “another Mediterranean that is constructed within these features; this is a socially produced *Mediterranean*, one form of which is the Mediterranean as a leisure space, which was created for northern Europeans to holiday and to convalesce, and which relates to the political

economy of contemporary life” (Lefebvre as quoted by Gulson & Symes, p. 101). Lefebvre’s work is significant in that it challenges the unidirectional theory between physical space and social relations. This establishes a new paradigm in which space becomes an active construct of social activity. Once this is understood, space can no longer be considered a stage waiting for activity, but must be viewed as another actor.

Massey (1999) builds on this idea of spatial influence by contributing to what is considered the “spatial turn” in linking the concepts of space with time to arrive in a position where one could consider spatiality as being open and active. With her roots in Human Geography, Massey encouraged the conversation of spatiality with other social sciences, including the field of education. She believed that “thinking spatially means recognizing the integral spatiality of things and processes and recognizing too the difference that spatiality may make” (Massey 2004, p. 1). She went on to state that “[i]f space is a product and precondition of all of our practices and engagements, then it is integral to the construction of the relations between us and for new futures that we are constantly laying down (p. 1). Massey’s pursuit was to bring space alive through the “liberation of space from the order of time” (Massey 1999, p. 271). The intention was to eliminate the timeline (and its controlling nature) with the hope that we could see multiple narratives and trajectories at play (p. 271). In terms of our study, this point is especially significant. When we eliminate the construct of time, or at least diminish its dominance, we can literally open up space for many new possibilities. This conceptually dovetails with our beliefs about repurposing space in school sites. Consider the power of the school timetable and how it controls many aspects of a school site. This construct is an example of 19th century scientific approaches and how they continue to influence our modern school systems. Now imagine what could happen within a school site if this construct did not exist.

Arguably something would have to take its place to create a sense of organization, but conceptually an evolutionary dialogue could now begin. Space then could be “imagined as the sphere of the existence of multiplicity, of the possibility of the existence of difference” (p. 274). Massey believed that “space is not static, not a cross section through time; it is disruptive, active and generative. It is... constantly being made” (p. 274). Massey believes that there is more than a single dominant narrative at play and how we choose to derive meaning from space can help reveal all that is conceptually possible. Therefore, spatiality can be considered a means to understanding the possibilities that exist within the school sites that educators inhabit. Massey’s theoretical contributions to spatiality serve to establish an entire platform from which to consider change within school spaces. It shows that educators can move beyond traditional school designs and bell schedules and evolve towards new structures. Furthermore, her contributions help to recreate the dominant linear narratives in favour of revealing the explosion of social activity as it can be conceived within any school site. A school yearbook no longer depends on the address from the principal to establish the story of the school. There are many narratives at play, the stories exploding like fireworks any of which can be documented and presented with equal value.

Gulson & Symes (2007) helped to develop the theories of spatiality and relate these to schools through a number of theoretical lenses including postmodernism, deconstructionism, along with neoliberalism and globalization. They remind the reader that the history of school architecture has largely been treated “as a mere background phenomenon, with limited power dimensions” or as an unoffending ascetic fabric intended for the benefit of education (p. 105). They consider spatial educational theory as being a journey for scholars “to consider the life within the school” that is being produced. To move beyond the notion of fixed space toward one

where “educational spaces are fluid and ephemeral, as ever being re-written and re-inscribed, formed and deformed as each pedagogic moment is transformed into another and as they are acted out in time, with a determined repertoire of behaviour” (p. 105). They conclude by encouraging educational researchers to employ “concepts of space: as a catalyst, providing possibilities for disruption...” (p. 106).

McGregor is inspired by Massey’s ideas and adopts the lens of spatiality to further investigate educational concepts. McGregor points out that space within school sites is “not static self-contained entities but institutions continually being produced by interconnecting relationships and practices which extend in space and time (2003, p. 353). She believes that “space is literally made through our interactions” (p. 354). This is an important point as McGregor adds to Massey’s theories by specifying that spatiality involves the continuous interplay between the spatial and the social, it is the product of complex ongoing relations (2003). She encourages us to understand “that schools are particular configurations of socio-spatial relations, we see that they are also therefore being continually remade. An understanding of this openness is crucial in imagining possibilities...” (2004, p.4). We continuously interact within space therefore we continually recreate the very spaces we occupy with our behaviours and activity. This concept is key to understanding what goes on in schools and provides an important link between spatiality and social interaction - interaction is essentially the maker of space within spatiality. Roch builds on McGregor’s idea, claiming that “teachers have a relationship with the spaces in which they work, and thereby derive meaning from them. Humans interact within the spaces they occupy, thereby constructing and reconstructing what the physical and social space means to them. A space may be constructed one way, and then reconstructed differently at a different time, through changing social interactions” (p.10).

Spatiality is draped in meanings that are constantly being constructed through the social and the spatial. The meanings are occurring as a multiplicity of narratives occurring simultaneously. McGregor (2003) uses the concept of topology to map out the spatial possibilities within a school site. For example, a school time table is interpreted as a powerful device that spatially locates all staff, students and curricula, ordered through time. Simultaneously, a hallway corner is transformed to become ‘the place’ where the cool kids hang out, or the ‘smoke pit’ is transformed into a place where students are resisting the order of the school, or the gymnasium may serve as space where an individual is tracking her athletic progress. School site space essentially is a constant production running beyond the linear, toward a schematic which spreads out in many conceivable directions and planes extending beyond the boundaries of the school site across space and through time (McGregor, 2003).

‘Spatial literacy’ can have liberating effects in terms of contributing to an understanding of building design and the possibility of recreating the use of space within them through agency. The concept of spatiality underpins our study of school repurposing of communal spaces and provides the theoretical framework for our inquiry. The reality is that any educator can begin to reimagine the spaces in which they work and thereby take some control of the production of space through a repurposing initiative. Spatial awareness may prove to be a catalyst of positive change in any school site. The next three sections will show how spatiality, human agency and building design interplay help to develop spatial awareness.

### **Gieryn Introduces Building Design Power and Human Agency**

In his influential sociological work “What Buildings Do,” Thomas Gieryn (2002) compares the work of sociologists Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu, “focusing on the

significance each attaches to built-environments” (p.36). Gieryn argues that Giddens locates himself in a position in which he is “assigning theoretical privilege to human agency, as buildings become what people actively do with them.” In contrast, Bourdieu “veers the other way, seeing buildings merely as external and autonomous forces structuring social practices with no obvious or necessary involvement of knowledgeable agents” (p. 37). In essence Gieryn feels that Giddens doesn’t give enough credit to the influence of buildings and Bourdieu doesn’t give enough credit to the power of human agency.

Gieryn settles the discrepancy by making the claim that

a complete sociology of buildings requires Giddens plus Bourdieu. Analysis must respect the reality of buildings structuring agency, but never beyond the potential restructuring by human agents... in which buildings become the focus of conscious negotiation and interpretation” (p. 41).

This is the idea that the concept ‘spatiality’ conveys. In fact, Gieryn claims his study is based on Durkheim’s idea that “structure itself is encountered in becoming, and one cannot illustrate it except by pursuing this process of becoming. It forms and dissolves continually; it is life arrived at a certain message of consolidation” (p. 36 Gieryn quotes Durkheim). This sounds very much like the work of Massey and demonstrates how Gieryn ties spatiality to the concepts of building design and human agency.

Gieryn demonstrates this interplay between design and agency as he describes the three stages (design stage, construction, and occupation) of a biotechnology building at Cornell University in order to illustrate his theory that both aspects are necessary and intermingle from the creation to the occupation of a building. Gieryn concluded that human agency was dominant during the design phase in that the vision and voice of those who wanted this building to exist

had to guide the process. Once constructed, the building itself became dominant as it exercised its influence as an emergent entity. The early occupants found themselves controlled by its design, adapting their behaviour to its boundaries. Then, after occupancy, the physical structure began to give way again to agency in that the humans began to reconfigure their surroundings and reshape the design of the building to their needs. Our study also recognizes that building design and agency are dependent on each other and exist within a spectrum of spatiality. In the sections below, we examine this dynamic in greater detail.

### **The Power of Building Design**

Bissell claims “embedded in the public mind and school architectural design is a deeply rooted image..., established well over a century ago” (2004, p. 28). McGregor states “schools as workplaces for learning appear to remain peculiarly static. The majority of schools exhibit physical, organizational and social arrangements that have changed relatively little in the last 150 years” (2004, p. 13).

McGregor also claims that

in a historical analysis of the role of space in school as social production it is demonstrated how space in 19th-century industrial schools was organized to produce hierarchical relations based on strong ideologies of religion, order, surveillance, discipline, hierarchy and competition... structures created in this way have been reproduced without question over the last two centuries” (2003, p. 359).

Fisher explains that

the hegemony of the design professions who excise spatiality from the domain of teachers and students within schools, increase their sense of spatial helplessness and disembodiment... which is coupled with the apparent societal perception that school should be carceral and egg-crate like, as this is how society has always understood that schooling should be physically represented (2004, p. 36).

The fact that school buildings have changed so little since the 19th century demonstrates the power of building design. Initially, 19th century industrial schools were “designed to produce the docile bodies required for factory working” (McGregor, 2004 p. 17). Schools are now built to facilitate the power of the timetable and the curriculum, and through doing so, shape the behaviour of the population that inhabits the site. The point is that the buildings of 19th century and the buildings of the 21st century are both intended to shape, and arguably control, the behaviour of those who inhabit the buildings.

The physical structure of organizations is significant in that “behaviour is shaped by the physical structures they occupy, humans cannot walk through walls or see through floors” (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013, p. 201). This can also be described as structuralism (p. 217). This theory demonstrates that physical structures can both enable and constrain behaviours (p. 201). Structuralism, as it is claimed by Bourdieu, reminds us that regardless of the power of agency, built structures, necessarily do influence us. In this sense, the building design is undeniably powerful as it will define much of what can occur. “Buildings insist on certain paths and structured social relations. If buildings silently steer us into associations or away from them, we hardly notice how...” (Gieryn, 2002, p. 61). “The structuring force of built-environments comes from the spatial and architectural routinization of everyday interactions: the design of familiar places evokes and steers patterned behavioural responses” (p. 37). Building design is a key to

understanding how this dual shaping occurs. The layout, landscaping, proximities and architectural design of a school site are intended. Building design is perceived by some scholars to be a means of control (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). “The critical postmodern assumption (is) that all buildings breed control” (p. 201). Hatch goes on to comment that “physical structure encodes power in a spatial language that speaks unobtrusively” (p. 205). In this regard, the school building itself could be considered a form of curriculum or a map of power (McGregor, 2003). Fisher believes that space is “a fundamental and all pervasive source of power... power is structured by architecture and architecture celebrates and monumentalises the structural networks of power” (2004, p. 36). The essence of this power comes from the ability of buildings to “normalize power relations by fixing them in stone, so to speak” (Hatch, 2013 p. 220).

Wright (2004) argues that school buildings can either hinder or enhance student learning: “at its worst, the built environment can undermine the learning process, inhibit pupil attainment and damage pupil and staff well-being...good design has the capacity to enhance the educational experience and transform the school as a learning organization and workplace” (p. 41). To view building design through a postmodern or structuralist lens that focuses only on the controlling power, only tells part of the narrative. We believe that if an individual possesses ‘spatial literacy’ or an understanding of the space they occupy that there can be a liberation of sorts within any building. Good design, whether it comes in the form of the agency of the architect, or through a repurposing project is born from understanding the structure and its possibilities. Hatch claims that theory can “go beyond deconstructions of power and dominance as naturalized and hidden expressions of physical structures to demand that we learn to control or resist these influences and thereby free ourselves...” (p. 221). Hatch takes this concept one step further claiming that “the postmodern critique of architecture can itself be overturned by denial of its central premise

(architecture is control), thereby liberating architecture for further creative development” (p. 222).

There is strong evidence of the interconnections between human agency, building design and the concept of spatiality. This notion is captured by Gieryn who quotes Winston Churchill “We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us” (2002, p. 35). If given the chance, it is conceivable that Gieryn would tell Churchill that the following step in this order might be human agency influencing building design after occupation, and that this process of spatiality continues as long as the building stands.

### **Human Agency**

Roch quotes Bandura (2001) to state that “agency can be defined as an individual’s capacity to make choices independently and to act freely” (2013, p. 14). Human agency plays a significant role in the redefinition of spaces within a school site as there is a bidirectional influence between those who occupy a building and the building itself (Giddens, 1987). This interplay between the building and the actor is significant for our study in that most educators work within a built structure that was designed before they came to inhabit the space. They may not feel comfortable making changes to a space that they have not spent a lot of time in, or they may perceive predesigned space as static, and decide to leave the space as is instead of repurposing for improvement. In his work, Roch “seeks to provide educators with the knowledge necessary to change the way space is conceived and experienced so as to improve working and learning conditions in schools” (2013, p. 3).

Bissell (2004) points out that teachers in classroom settings employ “drastic and often desperate modifications... to the constraints that the physical environment place[s] on teachers”

(p. 29). Examples of this include setting up special racks to display equipment in shop areas so students can anticipate what they are doing for that day or creating permanent shelving units to store student work and technology. Teachers have added walls or removed walls depending on their perceived needs.

This demonstrates the notion that, regardless of the intention of the architect and the school design, educators can and do employ their agency to repurpose the built structure. As pointed out in the prior section, educators commonly inhabit school sites that are traditional in design. Teachers who have been inspired by buildings that are characterized by 21st century design may be inspired to consider how to change their physical environment. 21st century building design often includes spaces for collaboration, including learning commons and breakout spaces throughout the building. These examples provides the inspiration for repurposing projects in traditionally built schools. Bissell's final thought is a powerful one "architects and others involved in the planning and design of school buildings do not create learning environments. Teachers create learning environments" (p. 32).

To build on Bissell's ideas about building constraints and agency, Hatch and Cunliffe (2013) claim "buildings are never perfectly designed, and once constructed, do not long remain the same" (2013, p. 210). They discuss the concept of emergent features of living architecture as "spontaneous response to the unplanned effects" of design. This reinforces the notion that human agency comes into play when the built structures surrounding the subject demonstrate their limits and cause the individual to take action to improve the situation.

Hatch and Cunliffe (2013) describe how a postmodern lens emphasizes "reading built spaces like texts and deconstructing them to reveal the power relations they materialize..." (p. 219). This encourages the use of agency to analyze one's surroundings to reveal the possibilities

beyond the power of physical arrangements. To be active in understanding the architecture and design of the school site will lead to a level of spatial literacy that can lead to new spatial possibilities led by educators.

Fisher is interested in “how an active engagement with space and place within schools can demonstrate resistant and emancipatory possibilities...” (2004, p. 36). He promotes the idea of a grass roots ‘architecture of resistance’ in which students and staff collaborate with the ambition of re-engaging students with learning through spatial repurposing projects, claiming that “such an approach might also demonstrate a liberatory teachers’ practice by engaging with students in ways that would be both transformative and sustainable” (p. 36). Fisher feels educators “should be exploring the interactivity between the built environment and learning through action-learning projects which engage students and teachers in architecture... it is only through living, controlling and shaping learning spaces and places that they will become real and not simply experienced as passive containers for learning” (p. 37). Particular to the aims of our study, Fisher concludes his article by observing, “a collaborative rebuilding process will ensure that teachers...will become much more fluent in matters architectural. Such small restorative projects are manageable in the time frames and within the curriculum constraints of a term, semester or year and can realistically be achieved within limited refurbishment budgets” (p. 38).

Fisher’s (2004) ideas help to inspire educator agency as it can be employed from the school site level to make important changes to building design, even if the projects are modest ones. Through our study we strive to help educators understand their agency by encouraging interpretation of building design with the aim of finding spaces which can be repurposed, thus gaining some sense of control of the environment regardless of the design constraints.

## Process of Repurposing Spaces

Our study focuses specifically on the use of communal space in schools. There are many members of a school community that use the communal spaces within the school site. Changing how this space is used can be difficult, since there are various opinions on how it should and should not be used. For example, students, educators, and custodial staff could all have different ideas on how a hallway should function; students might want to see more seating in hallways, educators might see the possible safety concerns of overcrowding in the space, and custodians might have concerns about students hanging out after hours when they need to clean the space. With different needs and interests in school settings, the repurposing of space can be challenging.

Some research finds that involving people who use new schools is time-wasting, expensive and ineffective (Woolner, 2015, p. 123). “Once a new building is built, nobody (not the taxpayers, not the politicians) wants to hear about revised facility needs for the life of the building,” (Lockner, 2005, p. 1), however, it is inevitable that school spaces require changes based on the changing needs of the school community, including student enrolment and school initiatives (Lockner, 2005). Building new schools and renovating older schools requires time and money. In our research, we will be interested in whether existing spaces are being repurposed in a shorter period of time and at minimal expense. Repurposing existing communal spaces in schools may not require district approvals and may be inexpensive since they may use existing materials and furniture. As Fisher (2004) discusses in the previous section, it is possible to get input from others and try out different uses of space without investing a lot of time and money to change the design completely. Fisher also encourages collaborations involving students as they are the primary users of communal spaces. It makes sense that they should be involved in the

process of deciding how spaces are used. Although we will be looking at how educators rethink existing spaces, we will inquire as to what inspired these changes and if students participated.

### **Communal Spaces Lead to Interaction**

In classrooms, students are given the opportunity to interact through formal learning, but students also have important interactions outside of the classroom during unstructured times (i.e.: before class, after class, recess, lunch, breaks between classes, etc.). This is where students socialize with students who they do not encounter in their classes and who may be different ages and have different interests. Students are aware of the actions of their peers and take note through repeating similar behaviour, whether positive and negative. Roch claims that “schools are indeed social spaces... that interaction, be it verbal, written, gestural or communication through symbols or other means is the mainstay of a school’s operation” (2013, p. 6). A great deal of this interaction occurs in communal space within the school site.

In our research, we will be looking at how communal spaces are repurposed to stimulate interaction amongst students. Examples of how this may be done is by creating, or improving current, gathering spaces with improved seating or creating standing tables in the front foyer of a school for students to congregate. If communal spaces are intentionally repurposed to support interaction, they are more likely to do just that.

Roch (2013) points out that “the physical environment of school space can be manipulated, through design, to encourage social values and norms, such as sharing, and cooperative learning” (p. 34). He believes that educators need to understand the importance of school spaces in terms of its social nature (2013). As discussed earlier, McGregor (2004)

demonstrates how space and social interaction are inseparable.

The way in which spaces outside of the classroom are set-up can encourage interaction. There is “evidence that the physical features of entryways, hallways, and foyers play a role in how children and adults interact, engage, and feel in schools” (Ogden et al., 2010, p. 151). Garibaldi (2015) points out, “when the school design resembles the home, students are more likely to transition to places that encourage social interaction” (p. 1590). For example, if a communal school space, such as a corner in a hallway, is designed as an inviting reading corner with comfortable seating and warm lighting, students may be encouraged to use it. During this time, they may interact with a student from a different grade level who also shares the same love of books. This previously unused space could lead to student interaction based on the students’ shared interest in reading, or some other, unintended purpose.

Garibaldi (2015) discusses the need for schools to have more built environments to meet the affective needs of the people who use them. He points out that “[t]raditional conceptions of affective system designs, such as amusement parks, casinos, and museums, involve physical attributes such as the space, layout, or objects in the environment that are planned to encourage social, emotional, behavioral, or cognitive responses toward a designated goal of the system, such as thrill, gambling, or learning” (p. 1588). The attributes of space, crowding, layout, and safety and security have an effect on how students socialize. Crowding “is the degree of perceived social density within school or classroom spaces” (p. 1591) such as entrances, hallways, pathways, etc. A school’s layout “with ease of access, movement, and visibility of public spaces influence[s] higher rates of social interactions among students” (p. 1591). Safety is also an important consideration when working with school spaces and changes need to be well thought out before being implemented. It is clear that a school’s built environment affects how

students socialize, and in our research, we will focus on how this environment has been repurposed to improve interactions.

Garibaldi claims that “the challenge for schools is to create environments that enable students to develop the requisite skills and capacities to perform in school and beyond. Evidence to date suggests that there is a relationship between the built environment, the social and emotional conditions for learning and students’ academic and developmental outcomes” (p. 1592). We explore this theme in the next section.

### **The Importance of Social Emotional Learning**

Our reasons for focusing on repurposing spaces that foster interaction in schools is based on the importance of SEL for students. SEL is defined by Elias (1997) as “the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one’s life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development” (p. 2). Children who have developed SEL skills “are able to calm themselves when angry, make friends, resolve conflicts respectfully, and make ethical and safe choices” (Garibaldi, 1588). Although learning goals are always changing, the kind of people we hope our students will be stays the same. All schools “play an essential role in preparing our children to become knowledgeable, responsible, caring adults” (p. 1). In order for children to become knowledgeable, responsible, and caring, special attention must be paid to their SEL.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is an organization that focuses on integrating SEL into the education system from the preschool to high school years. CASEL’s five competencies include self-awareness, self-management,

responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Competencies Wheel. From CASEL, 2017, <http://www.casel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/CASEL-Wheel.png>

Developing self-awareness is “the ability to recognize one’s own feelings, interests and strengths” (Yoder, p. 3, 2014). Along with understanding an accurate level of self-efficacy, students also need to understand what others are feeling. These skills can be developed through social interaction.

As McCraty et. al (1999) discuss, “the social and emotional environments in which many children are raised, the self- management skills required to effectively deal with stress and conflict are frequently not learned at all” (p. 248). Self-management for students involves skills for controlling their own learning, managing their stress levels, and dealing with their anxiety, anger, and depression (Shanker, 2014, p. 2). How students feel in a space can have an effect on their emotions, and as a result, how they deal with others. If the space is warm and welcoming, this may encourage positive SEL behaviours.

The classroom is a place that educators can monitor the decisions students make. They can make suggestions or intervene when students have opportunities to make better decisions. When making decisions, there are several factors involved, including ethics, standards, respect,

and safety concerns (Yoder, 2014, p. 3). When students interact outside of the classroom, they are not usually under close supervision, and this gives them opportunities to practice their social skills with minimal supervision.

The fourth competency, relationship skills, includes the “ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed” (CASEL, 2017). This SEL competency is also especially important during the secondary school years, in which social pressures grow and teenagers benefit from getting the help from the right people. Relationship skills can only be practiced through interactions with others over time.

Shanker (2014) describes being socially aware as understanding the perspectives of others, predicting others’ feelings/ reactions, and recognizing emotional cues of others (p. 3). While formal teaching of SEL is becoming more common in schools, Shanker points to the “interactions that take place [not only] in the classroom, [but also] in the halls, on the playground, and in the cafeteria (p. 7). Communal spaces in schools are important in schools because they are some of the most influential places where interactions leading to the development of student social awareness takes place.

There has been significant research done on the effects of social emotional learning (SEL) on academic achievement in students (Denham, 2010; Elias, 2006; Schonert-Reichl, 2009; Zins, 2004). As Denham (2010) explains, “it is becoming ever clearer that SEL must be given the attention required to maximize not only children’s success in social relations and personal well-being but also their broader school/classroom adjustment and academic success” (p. 652). Children who have the skills to regulate emotions, behaviours and make good decisions, have a more positive experience at school, leading to greater academic success (p. 653).

Because of the connection between SEL and academic success, programs have been integrated into schools to help build SEL skills. This has been supported by research which shows that school-based SEL programs can make a difference in a student's well-being (Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). Incorporating social, emotional, and academic learning programs within classrooms can be effective, but having the space to practice interaction with others in a less formal environment is perhaps even more important.

Considerable research has been conducted on spatiality in the context of early childhood education (McClelland, 2017; Zinsser, 2013; Epstein, 2009). While the influence of family is central during the early years of a child's life, as they grow into the middle school years, children "are increasingly engaged in other environments and may be influenced by teachers, school environments, and peer groups" (Schonert-Reichl, 2009, p 6). As children move into middle childhood, their interactions with peers change as they now deal with inclusion and acceptance from others (Denham, 2010, p. 654). We will be looking at elementary and secondary schools in our study. We chose to look at this age range not only because these are the groups that we teach, but also because these years are when children face new social contexts, including less supervision by adults, changes in peer groups, and more intense emotions. Students will face new situations in which "they will be called upon often to work in groups and in partnerships with [others]" (Elias, 1997, p. 21). Effective SEL can improve a child's experience in these school years (Yeager, 2017).

Both indoor and outdoor spaces can influence interaction among students. Schools in the Lower Mainland are increasingly focusing on outdoor education as more research is being done in this area. By introducing more adaptable outdoors spaces and adding in more seating areas, students may have more opportunities to socialize (Wagner, 2000, p. 3). In a study looking at the

use of outdoor spaces in four schools in South Wales, the focus was on teachers' views about how the space was and could be used (Maynard, 2007). The interviews with teachers revealed that although the outdoor spaces were full of potential, there were also challenges present. These included weather, safety concerns, and opinions of parents. Some parents may take issue with their children being outside in the wet and/or cold weather. Some families might also consider outdoor spaces to be unsafe. Outdoor spaces may be more susceptible to vandalism, possibly needing costly repairs and upkeep. These concerns could discourage teachers from repurposing outdoor spaces for student use. For schools that have taken steps to rethink outdoor spaces, it will be important to find out about possible concerns that have come up within the school community and how these matters are handled.

### **Summary**

When we started this literature review we had difficulty finding anything that specifically commented on repurposing communal spaces in schools. For that matter, it appeared that the entire notion of the utilization of space within school sites for any purpose had been under researched. McGregor makes the observation “considering that it is almost axiomatic that space as the physical environment of a school will affect the teaching and learning within it, there has been surprisingly little research on this...” (2004, p. 2). Roch makes a similar claim commenting that “surprisingly, there is little research directly examining the relationship between a school’s physical environment and the social interactions therein” (2013, p. 6). Garibaldi believes that there is evidence to suggest there are important connections between the built environment and interaction but “further exploration of this relationship would improve our understanding” (p. 1592). Fisher points out that “literally hundreds of studies on educational architecture” have

taken place “most of these, however are quantitative studies which attempt to link student test scores to the condition of school buildings, with little attention paid to qualitative perceptions of students and teachers about their learning environment” (2004, p. 37).

As we read diverse work related to spatiality, design, agency, interaction and SEL, we were reassured that our study is well grounded in existing research. In particular, our review of the literature has demonstrated that the physical environment of the school site can be repurposed through understanding the design and gaining a sense of ‘spatial literacy’. Furthermore, the literature review demonstrates that school spatial repurposing projects can increase social interactions with the outcome being an improvement in social emotional learning for students. These readings helped us to define our inquiry into repurposing space within school sites. We feel we can contribute additional depth and perspective in the area of spatiality and social interaction within schools and this gives us the confidence to address our main research questions, which will guide our study.

### **Research Questions**

1. What inspires and/or limits educators to repurpose communal spaces in traditionally designed schools (constructed between 1960 and 2017)?
2. From the perspective of educators, in what ways do communal spaces in traditionally designed schools (constructed between 1960 and 2017) enable and hinder social interaction among students?
3. In what ways, if any, are educators in traditionally designed schools repurposing communal space as a means to increase or improve social interaction among students?

## Chapter 3: Research Methods

### **Research paradigm and justification**

This study examines the ways in which educators repurpose existing communal spaces in school sites to create increased opportunities for students to interact. We chose qualitative research methods because they gave us insight into the experiences of educators who have dealt with spatial repurposing projects within their school sites. The quality of our study depended on our interviews in which we discovered the processes, contexts, interpretations, meanings and understandings which were gained through inductive reasoning (Yilmaz, p. 313). We aimed to “understand the phenomenon studied by capturing and communicating participants’ experiences in their own words via observation and interview” (Yilmaz pg. 313). This put us into a position where we could develop some understanding about what repurposing of spaces in school sites means to those involved. We discovered what this process is actually like within its natural setting (school sites) and the ways it may be affecting the environment (social interaction/SEL). Our interviews illuminated the processes involved without any need for “statistical procedure or other means of quantification” (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 311).

This study is in line with what is described by Lunenberg, Ponte, & Van De Ven as practitioner research (2007). We agree that “research and teaching are closely related activities” and we too wanted “to define practice based research as a method of obtaining critical insight into a problem experienced in the real world” (p. 15). In this case, it was not pedagogical practice that we wondered about, it was spatial theory, and specifically, the potential of the structures that we inhabit that ignited our interest in social interaction as it is connected to social-emotional learning.

Our approach was grounded in the understanding that knowledge is, in its essence, a

social construction. In this way of thinking scholarship becomes subjective and relative to our own realities (Lunenburg et al 2007). This leads to a consideration of personal experience and values. In this sense, our notions that led us to this study are rooted in the beliefs that social interaction can lead to positive outcomes, as well as, that we inhabit spaces in schools that can be affected and influenced. Again, our literature review has legitimized these notions of belief into a structure that we are able use towards our research. These beliefs served as our starting point, and we were seeking to discover more evidence with the hope of drawing some general conclusions in terms of how repurposing communal spaces in school sites can increase social interactions. In this process, we used inductive reasoning. Through this research process, we were able to make some discoveries and connections that will be useful for educational leaders in improving their own school sites.

### **Research approach within qualitative research and justification**

Although we were interested in the stories that can be told, and we were aware that a main focus of our study was to understand experiences that can be encouraged through the repurposing of space, our study was neither narrative nor phenomenological in its nature. In our case, we would fall into the category of researchers which Creswell describes as those who “do not identify any specific approach to qualitative research... perhaps the methods section is short and simply limited to the collection of face-to-face interviews” (2013, p. 69). It was our intention to develop themes and categories based on face-to-face interviews to help organize our analysis of this study.

We depended on educational leaders and their interpretations and experiences of repurposing spaces within the school sites to share their experiences with us. This lent some

credibility to our study as they were the ones most informed about the repurposing projects. In this sense, we looked to Moore's critical realism as the theory underpinning theory our approach these interviews (p. 343). We were not searching for a particular truth within these interviews, rather we were seeking "the potential for what *could* happen; the realm of 'the actual' is that of those things that *actually* happen in nature within the space-time parameters" (p. 344). In this sense, our judgement as researchers became significant. We needed to critically interpret and question the data as it emerged through our series of interviews with the hope that we could judge what might be meaningful knowledge. Furthermore, we needed to believe that "openness to the possibility of being judged wrong is more important than the ways in which we might claim to be right" (p. 345). In this sense, we were truly seeking expertise and practical experience in the matters of repurposing space with the hope of ourselves becoming the knowers (p. 345).

### **Setting and Site Selection**

We examined repurposing initiatives in four different elementary and secondary schools in South Fraser, British Columbia. Although many schools in South Fraser have been rebuilt and reopened with considerable architectural overhauls, we were most interested in schools of a traditional design. We focused on schools that had been constructed or rebuilt within the 1960 to 2017 time-period. We found participants who were willing to share their observations and experience with communal spaces within their school sites that had been repurposed to potentially encourage social interaction amongst students.

The South Fraser School District was founded in 1906. The district has the largest student enrolment in the lower mainland, with 69,433 students (as of 2016) in 120 K-12 level

schools. South Fraser is a very diverse district made up of six distinctive communities. It's northernmost communities and can be characterized by middle to lower income families with suburban and urban environments. The developing downtown core of the city has resulted in the urbanization of the area including high immigration rates, increased crime and poverty. The center-west community of South Fraser is suburban with lower middle-class families and some business districts. The center-east area of the district is in transition, developing toward a suburban middle class neighbourhood, but still maintains strong ties to its agricultural past as evidenced by its large farms being repurposed into housing developments. Two other neighbourhoods in the city are considered affluent, with rapidly developing upper middle class, and middle class suburban areas.

The physical size of the district is noteworthy, as it is contained within a 316.41 km squared area stretching from the Pacific Ocean north to the Fraser River. The diversity of South Fraser is also noteworthy as major portions of the city population do not use English as their first language and many identify as recently immigrated. In particular, South Fraser is home to a very large South Asian community with Indo-Canadians and Filipino-Canadians making up the majority of residents. Punjabi and Tagalog are the second and third most spoken languages after English.

As one of the only districts with a growing population in the province of British Columbia, South Fraser is facing the need to provide more space for students. The district is doing this through building new schools and redesigning existing ones. South Fraser has the potential to provide examples of creative spatial usage that falls in line with our study. Consisting of 120 school sites, we believe that South Fraser is an outstanding choice for potential study as the majority of these sites fit within our research parameters.

The South Fraser School District has four interrelated priority practices that are key aspects for school development. They are curriculum design, quality assessment, instructional strategies and social and emotional learning, and the latter is an important concept within our study. The district supports these priority practices by holding inquiry-focused school planning. This increases the likelihood that we will find schools that are repurposing space as a means of improving the SEL of students.

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

To gain a better understanding of our research questions, we interviewed those educators chiefly responsible for the repurposing initiative at each of four school sites. Educators in schools can include teachers, administrators, or specialist teachers, who have played a role in repurposing communal spaces.

Upon UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board's issuance of a research certificate and the approval of the South Fraser School District Research Department to conduct the study, we submitted a letter of invitation to the Research and Evaluation department of the South Fraser School district. The district paired us with an assistant superintendent, who acted as a liaison and guided us to potential school sites.

The criteria for individuals to participate in the study, which was included in the invitation letter, is as follows:

- being an educator in an elementary or secondary school in the South Fraser School District
- working within a school site built or substantially renovated between 1960 and 2017

- leading the repurposing of existing indoor/outdoor communal spaces in a temporary/semi-permanent way
- willing to allow us to come in to observe and document the space(s) after school hours
- willing to participate in an interview

Seven willing interview participants were selected, with at least one from each site, and they were able to contact us directly through the district Outlook email service.

### **Data Collection**

Our methods to collect data included two parts, both of which occurred at each of the school sites. After the initial greeting and debriefing, the researchers and the participant walked through the communal spaces that had been repurposed, which took approximately 20 minutes. This gave us a chance to see the space and photograph it while the participant described what changes were made. While no students were using the areas while we were there, we were able to ask questions to help form a better understanding of its spatiality. Following the walk-through, we conducted a person-to-person interview with the participant. The interviews were semi-structured, which allowed us to ask questions based on our literature review, but also allowed us to use questions flexibly. The interview took approximately 45 minutes and our total school visit took no more than 65 minutes of the participant's time. We used audio recording equipment to capture the interview for future processing. Following each interview, the audiotapes were transcribed verbatim and transcripts were sent to the participants to be checked for clarity and accuracy. The total amount of time required from the participant did not exceed 90 minutes.

## Data Analysis

When processing the data gathered through our interviews, we were most interested in interpreting the accounts of repurposing initiatives and evaluating their qualities in relation to what we had learned through our literature review. We were also interested to see how these accounts might illuminate areas we had not considered. The hope was to discover new meanings as they related to our research questions. Our analysis depended on emphasizing “the necessity for grasping the actors’ viewpoints for understanding interaction, process, and social change” (Strauss, 1987/1990 as cited in Agee, 2009, p. 432). If our analysis did this, our point of view would necessarily evolve, as we “[reflected] an increased understanding of the problem” (Agee, 2009, p. 432).

Yilmaz characterizes what we were attempting to do in our analysis as “an emergent, inductive, interpretive and naturalistic approach to the study of people...and social situations and processes in their natural settings” (2013, p. 312). Our data analysis was based on the research design that “knowledge is not independent of the knower, but is socially constructed... there are multiple interpretations or perspectives on any event or situation” (p. 316). The interview was a technique to collect data within qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdale, p. 107). Once we had transcribed the interviews into raw data, we needed to organize it. In each of our interviews, we were seeking to extract an individual account about how the repurposing initiative occurred, including the observations of the repurposed space and any effects on the school environment. We used Bowen’s (2009) document analysis method, which “involves a careful, more focused re-reading and review of the data” (p. 32) when reviewing transcripts. Because of the kinds of questions we asked in our interview guide, we anticipated themes that would help us analyze our data. These themes included perceived need, persons involved, vision, enablers, limitations,

resistance, and future projects. As we read and reread the interview transcripts, we noticed these themes repeating themselves. We identified them as common themes and used them to organize and analyze the data.

### **Enhancing Trustworthiness**

“The concept of validity in quantitative study corresponds to the concept of credibility, trustworthiness, and authenticity in qualitative study” (Yilmaz, p. 319). What this means is that the researchers, the interviewees and the readers of the study are the determinants when it comes to its trustworthiness - the study must ‘ring true’ to be credible (p. 319). Our study strived to be trustworthy as we noted alignments with our literature review (prior or emergent theories) along with findings from our interviews to explore new spaces of understanding or identify areas of uncertainty (p. 319). We also enhanced credibility by asking participants to read over interview transcripts to see “if they find the results of the study true and credible” (p. 320). In order to achieve dependability, we applied coding checks to ensure that they show adequate agreements. Finally, we were seeking to provide a great deal of description of the research sites, the repurposed spaces at the school sites, and the initiatives to repurpose them. We also provided detailed descriptions of our data collection and data analysis procedures. We aimed to put effort into analyzing the data to provide the richest descriptions possible to highlight “an accurate picture of the empirical social world as it exists to those under investigation” without dealing with trivialities or seeking to fulfil our own imaginations (p. 321). We tried to avoid bringing our own expectations and bias into the interviews by posing the same basic set of questions to each of the interviewees, recording and transcribing our interviews, and sending the interviewees the

transcripts to review. These procedures enhanced the trustworthiness of the research findings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Our study involved consenting adult professionals. Participation was completely voluntary. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, to refuse to answer any question, and to withdraw particular information from use in the study. This study was considered low risk, as no greater harm was incurred by the participants than what they normally encounter as educators in their daily work. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and received an interview guide in advance of the interview to allow them to have a clear understanding of what we would be asking. We used pseudonyms for the names of schools, the school district, and interviewees. We did our best to maintain confidentiality of interviewees but since we would be photographing school spaces, there was a possibility that the schools, the school district, and even the participants, might be identifiable by those familiar with the school. We informed participants of this potential in the consent form and prior to the interviews. We experienced an ethical tension of trying to protect the identity of the participants, schools, and school district while also providing rich descriptions of the school spaces.

Data was kept on password-protected computers throughout data collection and analysis. Only the research supervisor and the co-investigators had access to the data. A copy of the data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the research supervisor's office for five years following the completion of the study. The co-investigators have completed a master's level research-methods course as well as the on-line Tri-Council Ethics tutorial.

## **Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity**

As educators who value the role of space in our practice, we may see the need to repurpose spaces in a biased light. We are both coaches who are actively involved in our respective school communities outside of the classroom. We use communal spaces in the school site to run extracurricular activities. In this sense, we may see possibilities in our communal spaces where educators, who spend the majority of time in their classrooms, prep rooms, and staff rooms may not.

Also, we both remember our school days as students participating in extracurricular activities. We remember using many spaces outside of the classroom and through this experience we saw the importance and potential of communal space. Spending longer hours in these spaces and having the opportunities to utilize them during after school activities gives us a different perspective than those who did not have similar experiences while growing up in their school sites.

While repurposing space is seen as positive from our perspective, it may not be so for some other members of our educational community, such members with disabilities or conditions who may have trouble navigating or using a repurposed space. We are both individuals who do not face any significant physical restrictions or limitations. Educators from different religious backgrounds might want to use the space in specific ways, such as repurposing a front foyer in the wintertime to include a Christmas tree, or repurposing a space into a prayer room. Some students may not feel as comfortable eating in front of other people, which may also be a cultural difference. As educators who have grown up and worked in diverse cultural settings, we understand that certain uses of space might be beneficial to some members of the school community, but we believe that communal space should not be purposed in ways

that regularly excludes large segments of the student body.

Gender may also have an effect on how communal spaces are used in schools. For example, if a space is more inviting for groups of males to use, females may feel uncomfortable using the space. The intersectionality between gender and culture can also play a role in how people use space. Male and female students from some cultures may not be comfortable interacting with each other in an informal communal setting. Although we may not have experienced this kind of discomfort ourselves, it is important for researchers to keep an open mind about how these issues might influence how communal space is used in schools.

While we acknowledge that our positionality and professional experiences may have influenced on our interpretation and analysis of the interview data, we took steps to reduce our bias. We chose both elementary and secondary schools, and since we each teach in one of these settings, this led to a process of questioning the data and critically reflecting on how to interpret it.

### **Limitations**

Students' perspectives are not included in our study. We are also not able to observe students' interactions in repurposed spaces at the school sites since we work full time as educators. Future research in this area should include student perspectives and observations of student interaction.

### **Sharing Data**

We will ask the Research and Evaluation Department in the school district for assistance in distributing a summary of the research findings to the educational community. If educators see new possibilities for existing spaces in the work that we make available, they may feel inspired

to create change in their own school sites.

## Chapter 4: Findings

Chapter 4 presents the findings of our study. The findings come from interviews with participants and photos that we took during observations of the spaces. The chapter begins with a description of the school sites/participants, followed by our findings which are organized under three main themes. These themes include the process of repurposing the spaces, the challenges associated with repurposing projects, and how repurposing spaces encourages interaction amongst students from adults' perspectives.

### **Description of School Sites/Participants**

There were four schools in the South Fraser School District that participated in the study - two elementary schools and two secondary schools. All of these schools were opened between 1968 and 1999. We interviewed seven people; four were interviewed individually and three were interviewed as a group (at the request of the participants). The names of the school district, schools and interviewees are pseudonyms.

Franklin Heights (see Appendix B for visual representations of the project) is a public secondary (grades 8-12) school located in the central part of the school district which was opened in the early 1970's. One of the school goals is to improve the involvement of and the interactions between students, parents, staff and the community. The repurposed space that we studied at this school was the front foyer, which was turned into a space known as the "Hub" in 2016. We interviewed Grace Su, the former principal, who continued the repurposing vision inherited from prior administrations and Mark Smithe, the current principal, who is carrying out the vision.

Fairdale Secondary (see Appendix C) is a public school located in the northwestern part of the district which enrolls grade 8-12 students. One of the school goals is to continue developing the students' sense of ownership toward the school community. The space, which was a library and turned into a learning commons in 2013, was repurposed by Anne Martins, the school librarian. A learning commons is a flexible, learner-centered space designed for collaboration.

Middletown Elementary (see Appendix D) is a public school (grades K-7) located in the central part of the city. The school focuses on creating a safe and nurturing environment for students and supports personal and social responsibility. We interviewed Tina Silva (school principal), Darlene Edwards (vice-principal/part-time teacher), and Madison Simmons (librarian/prep-coverage teacher) for our study. They inherited the repurposed library space when they arrived at the school in 2017.

Grandridge Elementary (see Appendix E) is a public school which is located in the central part of the school district. It has a goal of improving students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills along with social-emotional learning and an outdoor program. We interviewed Samantha Miles, who is a kindergarten teacher, about how she and other primary teachers, in 2015, began using a nearby forest as a space to foster SEL in students.

### **Spatial Repurposing Projects Involve a Process of Becoming that is Contextual**

As demonstrated in the literature review, social science and educational theorists believe that space is always becoming (Massey, 2003; McGregor 1999). Although a school site is a relatively permanent structure, the spaces within the school buildings and in connection with the school grounds can always be considered to be in the process of becoming something different.

Our findings confirm this. What we have learned in this study is that spaces in school sites can be reimagined and repurposed if a need to do so can be envisioned and if there are willing participants to carry out the work. In order for a repurposing project to begin, and for the space to become something new, our findings indicate that purpose and vision work cohesively when developing repurposing projects. A major finding in this study is that spatial repurposing projects are ongoing processes which involve a myriad of contributing factors and enablers to move toward fruition. Therefore, every process will reflect the context in which they have occurred. Each of the four sites we investigated are unique and have varying perceived needs that provide a distinct rationale for moving forward with their repurposing project. These sub-themes are discussed in the following sections.

### **Vision and Motivation: The Impetus for Repurposing Spaces in Schools**

Vision is key in reading the changing needs of a school community and revealing the key reasons why a school space may need to be repurposed for the purpose of improvement.

In the case of Franklin Heights, an aging and aesthetically challenged school site in a lower socioeconomic neighbourhood, the former school principal, Grace, believed: “that kids deserve better than what this building looks like... it’s an inner-city school and it looks awful and it, it decreases their feeling toward their school and their pride toward their school.” Grace continues to describe the vision for the repurposing project by stating that:

the main goal was, I think for kids, when kids talked to me about it, they wanted to feel proud of their school. They wanted to feel like you walk in, and when their friends come to a basketball game, or their family comes to a basketball game, that it looks cool like other schools. When they go to visit other schools, they see what they have. And they didn’t have that at [Franklin Heights].

This goal and vision was seconded by current principal Mark who claimed:

[Grace's] vision of it, she wanted a place, I think she'd tell you, that kids could feel proud of, it's an old building, that they would meet and have some space that they could call their own... and whatever they did with it, is okay... and that's our philosophy as well...

The purpose the Hub project was to improve the feeling of pride for the school buildings and surrounding community and to give the students an inviting place to learn and socialize.

At Fairdale Secondary, the newly appointed teacher librarian Anne envisioned a repurposing of the traditional library space that was in operation when she took over:

The librarian that was here before me was a very, very traditional librarian...it was always very, very quiet and there was rarely anybody in here, there was rarely any classes even in here and so I guess I just didn't realize it, but she was very traditional, like there was no talking allowed in the library, even if a class was in here, there was like no talking allowed. It is somewhat radical to consider the move toward an active, busy, noisy space rather than a traditional library in which there is quiet and individual study.

Anne was a trailblazer in the district as she envisioned the first repurposing of a library into a learning commons:

in 2009 at UBC, they were talking about learning commons...they were talking about collaborative spaces. So, spaces where people could get together and talk and discuss and create... I came out of UBC and I was a rookie librarian but... I had all the latest ideas, right? And so, I told my principal that I was going to turn the library into a learning commons and he didn't even know what that meant and nobody in the district knew what that meant...

Anne visualized the Fairdale learning commons as having an energetic vibe. She saw this communal library space as developing a stimulating energy similar to what one could find in a coffee shop:

You watch people in coffee shops or restaurants, and especially coffee shops, there are people with laptops, and all that kind of stuff, it's noisy, I mean, but they want to be there. I mean, they could be at home in their kitchen... but they wanna be somewhere that's social and that they can people watch, but they can still get some work done.

Middletown Elementary also repurposed their traditional library into a learning commons. This repurposing project was inherited by the new administration and new teacher librarian this past September (2017). The staff at Middletown are firm believers in collaboration as a progressive educational method and as a result, need a communal space in which to work together. The principal, Tina, comments:

We inherited [the] learning commons...But we also knew that because learning commons was an interest of the school that we were inheriting, we all talked about what we would like the model to look like... So, we thought, collaboration. And this is the space... So that's really where the learning commons, I think, comes to life in our story.

The incoming administration team worked with the existing vision and added a collaboration piece, which works very well in a learning commons space.

Tina believes that the project occurred because the school district is now funding the learning commons projects (as inspired by Anne's original vision at Fairdale) as well as a shift in educational methodology toward flexible learning and a need for a supportive communal space to exist within Middletown. These methods are encouraged by British Columbia's new curriculum:

I think that this repurposing happened for two reasons. One is because the district had time and resources to put toward learning commons in the district, so that was one thing. But I think the other reason why...I nearly feel like it was the other way around - people's mindsets led to well, clearly, we need to have a different learning commons... like we're already in the mindset of flexible seating and flexible work spacing, and uh, small group work and large group work...so... we need to have something that matches that.

Middletown's educational methods had already been shifting toward collaboration and flexible approaches, this trend dovetailed nicely with the district grant money allowing for the move toward a learning commons to take place.

Samantha describes the vision for utilizing an outdoor learning space, involving the park and woods that surround the Grandridge Elementary school site, which would eventually lead to an outdoor learning program. Samantha is a proponent for the positive effect that nature can have on humans in general, but in particular for students who are becoming increasingly immersed in technology and may have issues such as anxiety that could be soothed by time spent in the outdoors.

[W]e basically started thinking we wanted to use that space, and that was when everybody started talking about social emotional learning...there is a book – “The Lost Children”? Oh gosh, it's about children not getting outside enough in nature. Yeah, it's something about the last children in the woods. It's about children not connecting and how it's affecting them and in terms of like, electronics and how society's been coming...how it's changing for children and how they're developing all these issues and anxiety... and so we thought it would be good...we were finding that we were seeing a lot more children with anxiety in the schools and other issues. A lot more problems from

home being brought to school and we thought that this would be a good place for the children to kind of connect with themselves and kind of be free of some of these anxieties and worries from home.

It is inspiring that such natural educational influences are so accessible to students who are in contact with outdoor programs because teachers view these spaces as educational opportunities.

Samantha describes a number of magical moments that she and her students spent in the outdoors. Samantha and her colleagues, armed only with their imagination and a wagon filled with plastic bags (sit-upons), marking cones and a few other simple tools, head into the forest to bring an educational and social experience to the students of Grandridge. Each time they head outside, they have a unique experience. Samantha describes “just two weeks ago, they saw a hummingbird...about three of my kids only truly saw it and they were describing it and they described it in a lot of detail and the kids ever since have been trying to be quieter over here and be more in tune...” The encounter with the bird is an example of an unplanned experience that was created by the space, this helps demonstrate the value of the outdoor experience.

### **The Importance of Vision Makers & Key Players: Leading the Process of Repurposing Spaces**

Educator agency is a central idea in our findings. This study has shown that even if a specific individual is responsible for the initial idea that sparks the vision for the repurposing project, it takes a coordinated leadership effort to bring the repurposing project to actualization. There are those who are involved in the planning and consulting stages, there are those who enable projects to get off the ground, and often it is the vision and leadership which emanates from a key individual that ensures the project will become a success. What remains consistent is

the reality that spatial repurposing projects are processes that take a great deal of organization by committed educators. Leadership is key to this process.

In the case of Middletown Elementary the administration and new teacher librarian had all joined the staff this past September inheriting both the vision and a repurposing project that was in the midway process of completion. Their task became consulting and cooperating with the school community, staff and district to continue the process of repurposing the library toward a learning commons. “We...knew that because learning commons was an interest of the school that we were inheriting, we all talked about what we would like the model to look like...” The new leadership group realized they needed to understand the narrative of the school they were joining in order to successfully complete the repurposing project that had been started by the prior administration.

Anne at Fairdale Secondary is the most significant agent in the repurposing of the library to learning commons project. When analyzing the process, it is clear that Anne’s vision required a great deal of help in each stage of the project. Consultations with students, teachers, continued support from administration, grants from the school district, along with money from the Parent Advisory Council all contributed to this repurposing project.

So, we formed a little committee of teachers and I also formed a little student advisory group

kind of thing. So, the student advisory group...they had worked with the former librarian and you know, they were working with me. And so, we formed this little advisory group and I kind of explained the vision to them and basically that’s where it started and that’s where it went...

Okay, so who was involved in the initial grant was the principal, and myself... The V.P who's in charge of learning resources was involved and then we had... 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, teachers.

And then we also had the tech facilitator involved...

So, it took - I wanna say about a two-year process. And the former principal was involved in a lot of the process. And then the district bought in... [by providing the annual district grant]"

The vision that developed for the learning commons project at Fairdale was stated as the following in the district grant application:

The [Fairdale's] learning commons will be a learning space that belongs to all members of our school community that is both physical and virtual...a place where students, teachers, and other members of the school community will meet to collaborate, experiment, discover, practice, celebrate, learn, share, work, and create.

The outdoor program at Grandridge came about after a collaborative group of five primary teachers, mostly from Kindergarten classes, decided that they wanted to enhance their teaching methods and provide valuable SEL experiences for their students. Inspired by the book *The Last Child in the Woods* these vision makers converted their ideas into practice by utilizing the woods and parkland that surrounds the Grandridge school site to provide their students with a connection to nature. In describing how this actually came about, Samantha states: "we basically started thinking we wanted to use that space, and that was when everybody started talking about social emotional learning..." This demonstrates how in the case of Grandridge, the curricular evolution connected with the vision developed by the primary teachers.

Samantha describes involvement from the City of South Fraser to help develop the outdoor program:

[W]e did have a pro-d day, I think, a year and a half ago? ...people from the city of South Fraser came to show things that we could do with the kids in the forest, and that was for the whole school. So, it's starting to catch and more people are walking.

In terms of support from the administration Samantha describes the following:

[H]e's always been positive about it. I mean, I think, like, he does yoga and he's really into anything to calm and relax kids. I think he sees a lot of value in it. He was very excited when we did our school walk. And he's, he's always trying to get other teachers to go outside. So, he is 100%, in support of our outdoor program.

The vision making for Franklin Heights' "Hub" began before Grace arrived as the school principal starting with a parent's concern about Franklin Heights presented at a public-school board meeting: "So this parent had advocated to the school board, that [Franklin Heights'] kids deserve better than what this building looks like." A parent taking action and showing leadership from the community got the ball rolling on the repurposing of the "Hub." Former administrations and the school district had been involved in putting together a plan to help improve the school aesthetics and functionality. Grace recalls when she became principal consulting with her students to establish a vision for the "Hub":

I remember talking to kids...through lunch meetings where kids were invited to have lunch with the principal, and I just asked them what did they see that they needed in the school...also through student council asking their opinion about what could we do if we had some money.

The students helped develop the final vision:

I can remember sitting and meeting with students and then we got a design from the artist

and I showed it to them and they...brought the perspective of...whatever it is, can it be a little bit more calming... sensory-wise...so, their advice was make it more muted and make it so that you feel like you're coming into a place that you can relax.

In planning the project, Grace encountered an issue that had the potential to end it.

There was, a tree built to honour an EA who had passed away...so it had some emotional connections to it for some of the staff members who were really close to this EA, and he had died on the way to work. We wanted to be sensitive to the fact that this was something that they were doing in honour and in memory of a staff member...and go and talk to them.

Grace needed to navigate a delicate topic, and did so through involving staff members who were concerned about potential a potential negative impact of the project on a memorial that had been established in a courtyard adjacent to the hub.

Grace also depended on her fellow administrators and teaching staff to form the team that actually put in for the Ministry of Education grant: “so all of that ended in the vice principals and I putting in a proposal for AFG funds, and it’s a special grant from the Ministry for improving educational place.”

Grace’s leadership style demonstrates how to be the glue that brings a project together, while remaining subtle and understated. She demonstrates the value of building capacity at every level with those who become involved.

The data collected from our interviews shows that collaborative leadership is necessary in order to conduct spatial repurposing projects in traditionally built schools.

### **Enablers: Identifying the People and Resources Allowing the Processes to Become**

The process of reimagining spaces in schools that were previously built requires multiple enablers. Our study shows that these processes are contextual, each site possessing a unique set

of resources and the authority to allocate resources that are required in order to get the projects up and going. In some cases, these enablers are similar, in other cases there are completely unique situations that have enabled these projects to take place.

We have found that empowering factors, such as individuals in managing positions, and resources, such as grant money and modular furniture (often controlled by administration or senior managers in a school district), all contribute to bringing a repurposing project toward what it will become.

### **People as enablers**

Vision makers need to collaborate with various gatekeepers in order to bring repurposing projects to actuality. Our data demonstrates examples of teachers working with their principals, administration working with senior management at the district level, as well as administration teams ensuring that projects continue to work successfully.

Samantha at Grandridge Elementary credits her principal for allowing and encouraging their outdoor program to build towards what it has become “[the principal’s] always been positive about it. I mean. I think he sees a lot of value in it. He’s always trying to get other teachers to go outside. So, he is 100%.” The power of the gatekeeper is demonstrated by Samantha’s concerns that the outdoor program could be halted if a change in administration occurs.

I think he probably will have one more year. I’m really concerned because I went to some pro-d days about [outdoor education] and some of their principals won’t let them do this.

And they’re pretty upset. I don’t know what I would do.”

This shows that projects of any type can be drastically affected by a change in leadership.

Anne at Fairdale Secondary had established a level of trust with her school principal that was key when bringing her vision of a learning commons to light:

I just told the principal that I was turning the library into a learning commons and that he needed to buy me a smart board... and I was talking about that I'm gonna get rid of like stacks and stacks of books you know... and he was like, "Yeah, okay." But he trusted me. I was the Languages department head here for a long time. And my principal... trusted me. And so, he bought me the smartboard right away and I said, "This is going to be process."

This demonstrates how the power of collegiality can contribute to establishing a successful repurposing process. Educators who work together for longer periods of time develop trust which enables many things to take place within schools. Throughout the project Anne has managed to maintain administrative support: "the principal was totally on board. Both. Like [former principal] started the process and [current principal] finished it. And both of them were so keen on it. And were so open to it."

These data demonstrate the considerable value of consistent collaborative leadership when in the process of bringing a repurposing project to fruition. Initially the Franklin Heights administration team and the school district managers worked together to establish the vision.

Well when we saw it... we had a meeting with the architect and before they even did the drawings, so there was ten from the school district and there was, I think [Ron] joined me and I was there... And told them what we wanted. We wanted a space for kids to feel comfortable and safe in the front of the school where they could just hang out.

The "Hub" project had its setbacks and the school district proved to be an important gatekeeper. The project was originally delayed and the scope was scaled back.

...this was [the school district] working with us to try to have that happen so... the architect had to scale back what they had originally planned. It was too much money.

And so, we scaled down what we were going to do originally... we were happy cause we thought it still achieved the results. And the kids were okay, the parents were okay, and understood that it needed to be delayed again...

Grace consistently acknowledged the support of the school district in enabling the “Hub” repurposing project to come together: “And the district has tried, really, really tried to accommodate what we needed to have done, they’ve been really good.”

### **Repurposing projects often require sizable budgets**

At the inception of this project we believed that spatial repurposing projects could be handled within a school site by a motivated educator within a relatively short period of time and a reasonable budget. Although we are still of the mindset that this is certainly possible, our study indicates that many repurposing projects require sizable budgets. Grandridge Elementary’s project was the exception within our study. The walking paths in the forest and the parkland were already in existence and so no budget was required to gain access to nature.

The major costs of repurposing projects tend to be reconstruction, redecorating, furniture and technology. Three out of four of the repurposing projects that we examined were expensive projects to complete, two of which restructured the original space by eliminating walls or beams, adding windows, and finishing wood. Three of the repurposed spaces were filled with modular furniture, which was incredibly flexible and functional, but comes at a cost. Technology was a significant part the three larger budgets, including tower computers, laptops, digital projectors, iPads, and speakers. In the MakerSpace alone at Fairdale Secondary there were all of the above

mentioned technological items along with: a green screen and video cameras, a 3D printer, video editing computer station and software to support, along with a complete sound booth, keyboard and audio recording equipment. The library at Fairdale also had a smart board. This study demonstrates that spatial repurposing projects can call for sizable budgets funded through provincial grants, local school district grants, PAC money and school operating funds.

Tina at Middletown Elementary acknowledges that the possibility of the learning commons depended on school district support: “I think that this repurposing happened...because the district had time and resources to put toward learning commons in the district.” At Franklin heights Grace’s administration team took advantage of a provincial grant, the annual facilities grant, to finance the “Hub” project call the annual facilities grant.

Anne, at Fairdale Secondary, described how she was able to gain access to funding through her school operating grant controlled by the principal. It is important to note that her effort and vision also inspired an annual grant that the school district would award to various school sites every year for improvement to libraries “then teacher librarians could apply for the grant and they would get a certain amount of money for furniture, a certain amount for technology...it evolved to the point where the teacher librarian could decide what equipment they needed in their school community.” Finally, she describes her ability to gain access to funding from the Fairdale parent advisory council she claims: “the parents have been very supportive. So, I would say they, the PAC has facilitated a lot of it...this year they didn’t have the amount of money that I wanted because I wanted an outdoor classroom (laughs).”

The final statement of this portion of the interview highlights the fact that Anne’s vision for the Fairdale Secondary Learning Common’s is an ongoing process that is constantly becoming

something new, this data also demonstrates that repurposing projects are successful when they can be well supported financially.

### **Flexible furniture enables spaces to become**

Repurposing projects require suitable resources to enable the vision to be realized. The examples of modular furniture that we saw during our visits to school sites were impressive. The spaces included different kinds of seating, tables, carpets, and bookshelves, and often, this furniture was flexibly used and proved to be very functional. Furniture was easily movable, and in most cases, students had the ability to move the pieces themselves, which contributed to a sense of student ownership within the repurposed spaces.

Mark described Franklin Heights' space as having a "fluidity of furniture." He coined this term while describing the space which has examples of easily movable furniture. There are L-shaped blocks with cushions, and "racetrack" tables, which can be moved to different positions and locations in The Hub. It is the students that move these pieces to different arrangements.

Mark describes how the students know that

they have the autonomy. We've told them in assemblies - to use it as you see fit, meaning, you can move it. Now it took a long time to get them to do that. You would've thought that [the furniture was] bolted to the floor. But then once it started to happen..., that room changes more in a week than anything you've ever seen. You come back in a week from now, it won't look anything like it. The racetracks [tables] will be at the other end, opposite, say the dining tables. The only thing that doesn't move is the dining tables. Although it took some time, the fact that students eventually began moving the furniture around demonstrates that the space is theirs – they have developed a sense of ownership of the space.

At Fairdale, although the modular furniture inside the learning commons is flexible, functional and used and moved around by the students, it is the furniture used in the outdoor space has inspired future projects. Anne, the school librarian, describes:

So, and it'd be cool. So, in the spring months, and the early fall, so I would say May and June and September, part of October, we do have this door open and I do have summer furniture that goes out here and they are allowed to take books out here and I just trust them. Magazines, books, they're allowed to take out here. And, so, I just wanted it to be a step more than that where a teacher could bring a whole class and there would be a seating area here and they could do different things.

Placing the summer furniture in the space right outside the learning commons is a practical way to use the otherwise unused space. Although funding is needed to make the space more permanent year-round, having the summer furniture there opens up choice for students to use it.

Although Middletown's students are younger than those at Franklin Heights, students have taken the same ownership of the repurposed space--moving the furniture around in the library. Madison, the school librarian, explained how this happens.

We have one class in here that is about 45 kids --its two divisions together - and they will come in here and move whatever they need to move, like they will come in here right away and make enough space for themselves because there [are] so many kids. They'll grab the chairs, they'll pull the table apart. Like, it's their place.

The triangular tables in the library are on wheels, making them very easy to move around the space. There are stools for seating, which students arrange in ways that work for them, and carpets with large cushions on them for students to be more comfortable on. Tina, the school's principal, described the choice given to students as fitting their "spectrum of need." They will

make choices depending on how much they want to interact with other students or the kind of work they are doing.

Grandridge Elementary's space does not use conventional furniture, but uses natural pieces in their outdoor space in ways that are flexible and spontaneous. Students sit on logs to eat their snacks; move branches, sticks and leaves around during imaginary play; and use big rocks to climb up on. During winter, they used the icy ground to slide on, treating it as a skating rink. Susan, the classroom teacher, takes materials outside in a wagon each day. She uses cones to section off areas at times, but allows students to use the space in different ways each day. Durable plastic bags are used as "sit-upons," which the students can move easily in order to sit in different places. These natural pieces and materials that are brought out in the wagon are used by kindergarten students, showing how children at any age can use furniture in flexible and useful ways.

Much of the data analyzed in this section highlights concepts such as the sense of ownership and belonging that is felt within a school; and how power relations can be influenced by spatial repurposing projects. More will be said about power relations in the Social Interaction section found later in this chapter.

## **Challenges**

We found that there were some challenges during the process of repurposing spaces. These challenges include maintenance of the space by support staff, lack of funding, safety concerns, noise, changing perceptions, and users of the space having different needs. Each of the educators that we interviewed managed these challenges as best they could in their contexts, but they still changed the way in which the spaces were repurposed and used. At Franklin Heights,

there was some confusion over which custodial staff (day or night shift) would be responsible taking care of moving modular furniture and putting it back to its original state at the end of the day. Lack of funding has become an issue at Fairdale, as more money is needed to continue the process of the learning commons, but other school staff are wanting a more balanced allocation of funds for all departments. Safety concerns, related to fire code violations, were something that participants reported has been a deterrent in using certain kinds of furniture in spaces. If furniture is too large or not secured to the ground, in some cases, it is not approved by the fire marshal. Noise is a challenge in changing a space from a library to a learning commons, as a traditionally quieter space now becomes louder due to collaboration. A common challenge in each of the spaces we visited related to changing the perceptions of the staff at the schools. Getting school staff to buy in to using space differently, or at all, was a something that all four school sites had to work toward.

A challenge that stands out in our study is the idea that users of the spaces have different needs. While educators repurpose spaces with the hope of improving user experience, it is difficult to meet the needs of all users. For example, some students may require a quiet learning space and others may enjoy the “buzz” described in the learning commons at Fairdale. Some students may be introverts and learn and work better on their own. Some others may not work well with a high degree of flexibility and need the structure, routine and stability that traditional classrooms provide. When spaces are created to meet the needs of children, especially younger children who require lower desks, smaller chairs, and so on, they may be ignoring the needs of adults using the space. Not all changes are necessarily positive ones for all users of the space and the needs of a range of different users should be taken into consideration. All members of the

school community should be a part of a strong communicative process beginning with consultation and leading to dialogue, negotiation and compromise.

### **Repurposing School Spaces Increases Social Interaction**

A main goal of our study was to find out if and how communal spaces affected social interaction amongst students. In visiting the four school sites, we found that although repurposed spaces in schools do increase interaction, it takes time for students to learn how to act in socially acceptable ways in these spaces. We also found that along with students interacting with each other, there is a noteworthy softening of power relations amongst staff and students in spaces that have been repurposed. This finding connects with the notion that repurposed space encourages a feeling of student ownership. Finally, the presence of technology plays a role in both enabling and hindering interaction amongst students. We examine each of these findings as follows.

In each of the four schools, there are examples of how the space has increased student interaction. There has also been evidence of students from different age groups interacting with each other just by being in the space together. Mark saw this taking place at Franklin Heights:

That, I can honestly say, and I'm not sure why, it is absolutely non-grade, denominational, in any given moment of, throughout the day, before school, like say even off hours, you will find pockets of kids comfortably hanging out, chilling, working - [grade] 8's with seniors.

Similar multi-grade interaction takes place at Fairdale Secondary, as Anne describes:

So that inter-grade stuff happens. Like, you know, the grade 12's are on a study block in here and there's a grade 8 class in here and the grade 8's are really shy or whatever, but they're sometimes sitting at the same tables and so there's social interaction between

grades a lot more than there would be in any classroom. Because grade 8's never sit at a table with grade 12's, right? ... but there's a lot of inter, inter-grade socialization that never happens in classrooms cause they're never... once in a while you get a split class, or, or you know, a, a grade 11 student is taking a grade 12 course or whatever, but that doesn't happen a lot. In this space, it does. It has to. Like you know, kids are working like, at the print station together, or at the student supply center together. So, there's a lot of that kind of interaction between grades. Which is really nice to see because the younger grades really look up to the grade 12's.

Rather than being separated into different rooms based on grade level, both spaces invite students from any age group to interact with each other. At the elementary schools, we saw the same kind of openness to children using the space. When the students at Middletown Elementary used their library to present arcade games, Tina, the school's principal, explained how they ended up inviting all the rest of the classes in for our arcade. So, there was older kids, younger kids, it was teachers in here, they were all circulating through, and participating together, so that was sort of the first, I think, part of creating the atmosphere in here, where it is all about collaboration...

At Grandridge Elementary, Samantha has seen how students "get along better. They have learned to cooperate and help each other." She has seen more caring interactions between them as a result of using the outdoor space on a regular basis.

There are examples from every space which display how students interact in the form of being helpful. At Franklin Heights, Mark has been "seeing some natural mentoring happening, completely unsolicited." He shared an example of how a grade 12 student, who was waiting for her younger sister to finish volleyball practice, helped a small group of grade 8 students with

their math homework. At Fairdale, Anne has also noticed that students have been doing more than just interacting: “Okay, so there is a lot of socializing but I wouldn’t say that all they’re doing is socializing. They’re sitting there with their books all open, and you know, all the, you know, and they’re helping each other. But they’re socializing at the same time.” Even at the elementary level, Darlene shared an experience of Middletown’s students acting in a nurturing manner when working with younger students.

So, the big kids created arcades for the little kids [for] Caine’s Arcade... But, so we had big kids and little kids, and the big kids are like, you know, “You can do it! You can do it!” And the little kid would try to throw the ball and they’d be like, “You know what? This is, this is the line!” They’d like, make up a new line. “This is the line for grade 2’s!” And like, “Come to this line.” “Oh, okay.” And then there would be, you know, “Good job!” and “You did it!” and the kid would maybe throw it ten times and get it in all ten times, they’re like, “Yeah!” Right and, so there was this sense of big kids just encouraging our littles. Like it was just like, incredible.

This experience of students being helpful in boosting the self-esteem of younger students had a domino effect and led to one of the younger boys who visited the arcade act on what he saw.

Darlene continued to explain how this happened:

I have a little boy in my class who has some issues with regulation and was really struggling in the beginning of the year but he got very excited about this arcade, and he’s a little guy who doesn’t have a lot of strengths academically, not yet anyways. He hasn’t found his jibe. Anyways, he went home and made an arcade game. And came back to school with prizes. And set it up in my classroom and used the language that those big kids had modeled for him in here. “You can do it. Great job. Come to this...” They were

all lined up. And if they didn't make it in, "Come to this line. You can come closer." And this is a, this is a child who at that point, really had no friends. And then [Tina] walked in and they said "Ohh, he's sooo nice!" like, "Look, I got this candy," or whatever he gave them, "He gave me a prize even when I [didn't] get it in!" (laughter) Which is what the [older kids] did, for him. And I just think that is, that's the power of this space.

The older kids, although seemingly unknowingly, modelled positive interactions and leadership skills for the younger students. The communal library space provided a platform for this to take place. Even in a kindergarten class, Samantha shared that the students get along better and "have learned to cooperate and help each other." Being in an outdoor space, there are many students who trip and fall, but "the moment somebody falls and hurts themselves, there's a pack of kids around them, patting their back," showing the empathy that students feel for each other. Many interactions go beyond just being social and become, as Darlene described, powerful.

### **Learning How to Use Repurposed Spaces Takes Time**

One of the common themes that emerged during our research is the idea that the users of a space need to be given the time to know how to use it. Especially with a change in things like furniture and noise level, students need time to adjust their behaviours to match the expectations of the space. At Franklin Heights, the students did not rearrange the modular furniture for some time. They needed to become used to the idea that they could do so. Anne shared how students at Fairdale, who previously were not allowed to enter the library when another class was using it, had to become more socially aware, which is one of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (2017) SEL competencies. She explains how the students had to learn that "if a teacher's up here teaching, the kids in the rest of the library know that they have to be quiet until that teacher's finished." Respecting another class' space is an important part of making the

switch in making the library a more flexible communal space. She also described the ways in which students are learning how to read each other and understanding the social cues in order to distinguish between someone wanting to have a conversation or get work done.

Although collaboration is a goal of repurposing communal spaces in schools, this collaboration can sometimes lead to conflict. Developing relationship skills as a part of SEL is an important part of learning to use spaces. Margaret, Middletown's librarian, explained how students work on this skill.

Well, older kids and younger kids for sure, different abilities working together. People supporting each other. There were certain times when they would start to have conflicts, because in collaboration, you're trying to make decisions and they would have conflicts, but then it would, they would work it out. Right? Because they could see other groups working as well, and then that group, "Okay, they've tried this..." and then... To see each other in the space helps as well. It triggers other ideas, I find. With [James] and, and me working together, I think we often bounce ideas off each other and I think the kids see that as well. So, we're modeling that the whole time. So, some- and, and because they're used to working collaboratively now, if there are certain kids that need more help, [James] and I can pull those kids aside, and the other kids are fine. Like it's not about management anymore, because they're used to that routine.

Seeing other students, and even other staff members, modeling how to cooperate with each other allows students to learn how to use the collaborative space in a more positive way.

### **Students Take Ownership of Spaces**

Prior to the start of our research, one challenge that we thought schools would face was

students respecting the spaces and materials in them. In our first interview with Mark, he described how in the Hub, a space known for having no security cameras, “there was an iPod or an iPhone sitting on one of those tables, for 2 blocks. No one touched it. And then someone, a little grade 8, turned it in the office. I was like wow.” He could not explain why students decided not to steal the device, but it was an interesting addition to our data. Mark also shared that

some other feedback that [they’ve] gotten from students is that they really get really upset when either other students or adults even abuse the space. So, they’re not comfortable with that at all. And it’s, believe it or not, probably our most trafficked 400 ft., or however long it is, but one of the cleanest in the school. Kids are picking up after themselves. They don’t like to see a mess, left. When someone spills a coke on a table, they, they run to the office and say, “Get Rory!” Rory’s our custodian. “We’ve got a spill! We’ve got a spill in the [Hub].” That goes back to ownership, right?

In the same way, students at Fairdale took ownership of creating the learning commons. Anne asked a group of students who frequented the library to become part of an advisory committee and provide input into what the space should be. By allowing students to have their voices be part of the visioning process, it created an easier transition from a library to a learning center.

### **The Softening of Power Relations Through Repurposing Space**

Although we came across writings in the literature that referred to the redefinition of space opening up the possibility of establishing new power relationships within a school community, we did not include it in our review of the literature. Jane McGregor (2004) makes the claim that traditionally organized schools depend in part on a hierarchical power relationship. Familiar to most; the principal is the top figure in a school working downward toward the

youngest students. McGregor challenges this notion in her work, *Space, Power and the Classroom* claiming that “where the significance of space was recognized and acted upon, ‘within’ and ‘beyond’ the classroom, relationships were in some cases transformed.” She goes on to recommend that educators should “thus develop a ‘critical spatial literacy’ with which to challenge and transform unequal and undemocratic relations” (McGregor, 2004, p. 17). Our data confirm that the flattening of power relations within a school do seem to result from spatial repurposing projects. If educators use the space in the same ways that students do, it can soften power relations. They can get out of their offices and prep rooms and spend more time in less formal environments with students, but this does require them to relinquish some of the power. By spending more time in repurposed spaces and softening power relations, educators may feel more connected to students and possibly develop better relationships with them.

As we conducted our interviews it became clear that repurposed spaces can help to influence power relations in schools by encouraging a more democratic feeling in the building. These power relations begin to redefine themselves in new ways Mark explains how he works in the Hub alongside the students.

And I try to model that as well. I get in there with my laptop and I’ll sit at all kinds of tables and I’m just some guy working and they’ll be like, “[Smithe], what’re you doing?” and I’m like “Oh, well, check this out – like, look at all these emails I got answered, it’s crazy” and we’re working again, and they’re just working with this guy, this bald guy.. it’s awesome!

Mark further demonstrates this conceptualization of power that seems to be much more in line with ‘power with’, rather than ‘power over’ in the following description:

It's flattened everything out and the staff are owning it, the kids are owning it, and I'm a participant now... you know, I'm not dire- It's so cool! I help by getting the money, or the whatever. The paint.. which is really neat. So, when you get admin participating at the same level...

All members of Franklin Heights are encouraged to use the space. The office staff have lunch in the repurposed foyer, alongside students. Mark also explained how there is also not one particular group taking over the space and owning it – “it's used by so many different people at so many different times and you get what you get.”

In the same way that Mark uses the space to get his work done, Anne describes how some teachers at Fairdale work in the learning commons along with the students, especially when their preps and study blocks align.

I can think of times where if that grade 12 student's not there, the teacher will go, “Hey! Where's [student] today?” like, “You know, I used to sit with [student].” ... Or the student would say, “Is Mr. [John] away today? Cause he usually sits with me.” Or you know, sometimes it even gets to the point where they're like, “Oh, would you like a coffee? I'm going to get Starbucks, do you want Starbucks?” So, that's really cool. Like, teachers that sit in their prep room don't experience that as often, right? They experience it in their classroom, I'm sure they have great relationships with the students as well, but it's a different kind of relationship, you know, you're not teaching me, I'm not your student right now, you know, like, that kind of thing?

The learning commons provides a space in which students and teachers are at the same level working alongside each other rather than one for another.

This softening of power is also evident in the elementary school spaces we visited. Margaret and Darlene shared how sitting with children in the space has allowed them to “shift the conversation when [they] are a group together and [they] can see each other and how important it is that we need to see each other.” Middletown also replaced a taller, adult-size circulation desk in their library with a shorter, child-friendly one. Margaret, the school’s librarian, explained how she is never even behind the desk to begin with. Students run the circulation of books and it needed to be a space for them rather than an adult.

Samantha also explains using the outdoor space has allowed students to open up to her and share things that they otherwise might not feel comfortable sharing. This is the same kind of softening of power relations that Anne shared, in which it is a break from the teacher-student relationship.

### **Technology can Enable and Hinder Social Interaction**

Another one of our study’s findings is that technology can either enable or hinder social interaction amongst students. In a changing world where the use of technology is becoming more apparent, schools are also changing the way in which they use devices. At Franklin Heights, having Wi-Fi connectivity was underestimated at first and seen as having possible negative results in the space.

Feedback early on – interesting – love the space, no Wi-Fi. You wanna torture a kid?  
(laughs) So, they’re hanging by the window trying to get the neighbor’s Wi-Fi, it’s very interesting and when we got it in finally, they brought the [connection] in, there was like this pandemonius cheer. And, I would’ve thought it would be more screen time for this (pretends to be texting on cell phone), what it was though, was more laptops, more iPads;

it was interesting. Like, they wanted to use the space and the Wi-Fi was actually didn't even think about it, negating any sort of purposeful use that way. Yeah, they could have their textbooks out, but you know, a lot of kids are bringing laptops, MacBooks to school. So, that encouraged more educational, academic use.

In practice, the internet connection turned out to have more positive results, with students actually using their devices to finish schoolwork. Anne at Fairdale had a similar experience, describing the way in which students use technology as having a "coffee-shop vibe."

Lots of kids will listen, will use headphones when they want, when they don't want to be part of it. But they do still want to be in with what's going on. You watch people in coffee shops or restaurants, and especially coffee shops, there are people with laptops, and all that kind of stuff. It's noisy, I mean, but they want to be there. I mean, they could be at home in their kitchen, or they could be at home you know, but they wanna be somewhere that's social and that they can people watch, but they can still get some work done.

Especially in secondary schools, where students have devices that they bring to school, having a space that allows them to use technology in positive ways that help with their social interaction skills is important. The MakerSpace at Fairdale is also an effective use of technology.

Laptop/iPad carts were used at all of the school sites we visited, allowing students to use the devices in a portable and more flexible way for group work.

While the above experiences with technology are positive, there are also examples of how technology can be a hindrance to social interaction. At Fairdale, for example, Anne describes grappling with the challenge of the distractions of technology:

This trend, this talk about social media, and how it is just way too distracting, and there is this trend about no more smart phones in schools. France has now banned phones in schools, like now, it's like the monster who created it all like, people like [corporations] Google and Apple, are now asking their employees not to be on social media while they are at work and they are only allowed to check their email once an hour. Right? And we are allowing a classroom full of students to have smartphones in their hands and that kinda stuff... it is just way too distracting for kids, and let's face it not just kids...

Because of this distraction, she describes the debate about a possible need to limit or eliminate access to social media within the school site. Anne shared how the changing trends of how students use technology can be a challenge to handle, with some students streaming videos for long periods of time using the school's Wi-Fi connection or to play video games:

Initially I tried not to limit what kids were doing on the computers, the school district has firewalls, but for the first four or five years there was a lot of playing of video games on the computer... Minecraft was really big and I personally thought it was educational. My son is... a kid that was into Minecraft, so I thought it was educational what they were doing...The thing is that if there was kid waiting for a computer to do a project or schoolwork - schoolwork always came first, and usually this was after school so these might have been kids who couldn't go online at home... this trend has dropped off [since] kids don't play video games online as much anymore...you know what my problems is now? And it takes up a lot of our bandwidth - Netflix! You'll have kids sitting at a computer watching an entire Breaking Bad episode. If kids are using up our Internet data, maybe the school district should firewall Netflix.

It can be difficult to monitor how students are using technology and the purpose for which they are using it. It seems to be clear that educators need to set limits of what is acceptable in terms of access to technology and social media, but it is very difficult to try to strike a balance between creating a comfortable, inviting place for students while abiding by the rules of the school and school district. Some ways that schools can set limits is by using firewalls, setting out technology guidelines, and supporting students in developing their critical digital literacy.

There are ways for schools to incorporate technology into their school spaces to increase interaction. Students can also learn how to navigate the use of technology without isolating themselves from others. Samantha used an outdoor space to allow her students to disconnect from technology for several hours each day. This example of escaping technology by using the outdoors may be a possible solution for schools that are trying to find the right balance. Although a difficult decision to make, understanding whether or not technology can help or hinder student interaction is an important one to address when repurposing spaces in schools.

### **Summary**

Before beginning this study, we believed that communal spaces in schools were important. After completing this study, we now know that not only are these spaces significant, but that repurposing spaces for school improvement depends on a complex process that is based on each individual school context. Each of the four school sites that we visited had their own context, including a vision and motivation. This allowed each site to understand their needs and the reasoning behind repurposing a space. Then there are the people who help lead the process of repurposing spaces. In our study, these leaders included educators, parents, students, community members, the district, and other school staff who coordinated with others to make the

repurposing happen. Enablers, including people, funding, and flexible furniture, also play a role in the process. Along with these enablers come the challenges associated with the repurposing process, such as maintenance of the space by support staff, lack of funding, safety concerns, noise, changing perceptions, and users of the space having different needs.

We have found that repurposed spaces do increase social interaction and meet the needs of evolving schools, but it takes time to learn how to use these spaces. Once they learn how to use the repurposed space, students begin to take more ownership of it. There can also be a softening of power relations as students and educators use the communal space together. Lastly, we found that although technology enables social interaction, it can also be a hindrance. Overall, the examples of interaction provided by our interviewees during our research confirmed that this is indeed an important topic that can continue to be studied.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

In closing, we wish to bring attention to the importance of developing spatial literacy among educators, particularly among educational leaders. We also want to point out how changing approaches to curriculum and learning are supported by the repurposing of space in schools. Actually, there is a dynamic relationship between spatial literacy, repurposing of space in schools, and changing pedagogical approaches as we discuss below. We then present a series of recommendations related to spatial literacy and repurposing of school space. We conclude with reflections about our role as researchers.

### **The Dynamic Relationship of Theory and Practice: Spatial Theory Inspires Repurposing and Repurposing Encourages Spatial Literacy**

As stated in both the literature review and the beginning of chapter four, the theory behind repurposing spaces in schools can be linked to Doreen Massey's (1999) notion that space is always becoming. When connecting this theory with the reality that educators can lead the improvement of spaces within schools, it opens many possibilities for repurposing. Our findings suggest that spatial repurposing encourages a sense of spatial literacy that inspires a greater understanding of space and its potential. Repurposing projects, such as take-a-book/leave-a-book stations, board game tables, and adding seating in hallways, fuel additional projects in a dynamic manner. For example, at Franklin Heights Mark demonstrated a growing sense of spatial literacy as he reflected upon spatial projects that were inspired by the "Hub". In particular he has his eyes on areas near the stairwells: "it's actually a place. And, so it's kinda cool. So, it's inspired us to start thinking of our little spaces that we can't change, in terms of physically, into something." Mark sees the potential of spaces that prior to the foyer's repurposing, he had not seen as

warranting any change. He now understands that there are things that can be done with spaces, such as adding seating in the landings near stairwells.

Similarly, Anne's repurposing of Fairdale Secondary's library into a learning commons/MakerSpace served as inspiration for a major addition to the school called the Community Learning Centre (CLC). This is a major construction project that includes two double classrooms and a communal space that supports the area. It is filled with technology and modular furniture. The CLC, a big, open-concept space, said Anne, "was certainly inspired by the whole learning commons mentality." Anne believes that repurposing spaces is "about a philosophy and an attitude as well." New theories and concepts related to spatiality can help to inspire imagination and set the table for significant spatial changes in school sites.

The administration team at Middletown Elementary school described the inspiration for their library space coming from a prior addition on their school, which had a significant impact on the mentality of the staff and school. Darlene, the school's vice-principal, shared how the addition included classrooms which were organized into pods. She explained how these pod areas act as breakout spaces in which students "spill out into the middle of" and how "at every moment of every day, [there is] somebody out there doing something." This previous addition to the school helped the school community learn to work in flexible spaces. This is an excellent example of the development of spatial literacy. These walls and doors have been added in to create more classroom spaces, moving away from shared spaces. We need to change our way of thinking with changing spaces and learn how to use these new spaces through professional development and collaboration. Tina comments further, explaining that a spatial mindset is key to working within new spaces: "But the mind shift has gotta go with that, the space. Space can't define the shift in the way you think. If you bring the old way of thinking to the space, it's just

going to rattle.” Without a change in mindset on the part of educators, repurposed spaces cannot meet their full potential. Her comments illustrate the point that concepts, theories and ideas help to inspire the practice of repurposing of spaces, and in return, the continued practice of working with space in imaginative ways contributes to the growth and understanding of ideas and theory.

### **Schools Need Spaces that are Flexible and Equipped to Support Collaboration and Inquiry**

The repurposing of spaces in older schools makes them more amenable to the kinds of learning associated with British Columbia’s recently redesigned curriculum. Educators are moving toward inquiry-based learning and away from traditional methods. Rather than using stand-and-deliver methods of instruction, educators are being encouraged to focus on more hands-on and project based learning by allowing students to choose topics based on their own interests. This curriculum enables students to be in more control of their learning. Key aspects of the curriculum are collaborative learning and flexible choice for students. Changes to spaces in schools that encourage and enable social interaction will support the transition to this new way of learning. Changing the spaces in which educational activity occurs facilitates progressive techniques. Our study has shown that evolving methods in curriculum, teaching and policy and the repurposing of spaces in traditionally built schools are mutually supportive.

The spaces we visited provide examples of changes that support new learning styles. At Franklin Heights, a narrow foyer was turned into a multipurpose space. Through the repurposing initiative the "Hub" has become a space utilized for learning and socializing. We found examples where the change to a flexible communal space has allowed Franklin Heights to meet the needs of a changing curriculum. Collaborative learning projects serve as a defining example.

Anne began repurposing the traditional library at Fairdale into a learning commons before the implementation of the redesigned curriculum, putting the school ahead of the curve. The library went from a quiet space to work individually to a lively communal space with break out spaces including a technology based MakerSpace. Students use the MakerSpace to record music, podcasts, collaborate on projects, or work individually. Anne describes how “assessment has changed what happens during... the end of semester,” which is also due to the redesigned curriculum. With projects replacing exams, there are many more students working collaboratively in the learning commons. Having an “open door policy,” in which students can come and go from the library freely has also enabled this space to support the new curriculum.

Middletown Elementary uses their library in a similar way to Fairdale Secondary and is mindful of the changing needs of student learning. One example is the way in which the library has been used for collaboration. ADST (Applied Design Skills and Technology) projects, in which the students build arcade games to create an interactive fair, are examples of this collaboration. The goal of ADST is for students to acquire skills that they will be able to apply in practical ways and the focus is to give students the opportunity to participate in hands-on activities. The students are able to use the space for creating and presenting their arcade games. This project demonstrates the key to the learning commons curricular evolution, large flexible spaces, with pleasant aesthetics, functional modular furniture which allow for many possibilities beyond education; including interaction and social emotional learning.

The outdoor space that Samantha uses at Grandridge Elementary is one that aligns with inquiry, something that is part of the redesigned curriculum. Encouraging students to be in nature also incorporates the aboriginal educational perspective. Having students learn through their own curiosities by asking questions is something that the outdoors provides. Samantha has

experienced moments of things coming up spontaneously, which she describes as being “quite in line with the new curriculum.” This approach is one that is supported by the space, as things are constantly changing and in many ways, unplanned.

It is clear from this study that schools in British Columbia need spaces that are flexible and equipped to support collaboration and inquiry as well as to support social-emotional learning.

### **Recommendations**

#### **More Research Needs to be Done in Relation to Connections Between Spatiality and Social-Emotional Learning**

When we began our study on the connection between SEL and communal spaces in schools we found literature on each subject area individually, but we did not find significant research supporting the connection between the two. Initially, this was discouraging as we felt strongly about the potential of our study. After we began to collect data, we found there are important things happening in this area. Educators are making changes to spaces in order to foster social interaction and collaboration. We believe there is a lack of awareness in these areas. While our study makes an important contribution to knowledge about the relationship between spatiality and social-emotional learning, we recommend that an intensification of research be done in this area to encourage connections that will help move traditionally built schools toward becoming places that promote social interaction in conjunction with cognitive activity.

## **Educational Leaders Need to Develop Spatial Literacy and Learn to Manage the Process of Repurposing School Space**

21st century schools are designed to be open, flexible, airy, and filled with natural light. The newer designs are built for collaboration, have planned break out spaces, and are intended to serve the school community's social as well as cognitive needs. These beautiful new buildings have been designed for increased opportunities for interaction, which encourages social-emotional learning. One of the challenges that British Columbia's education system faces is that not every student, nor every educator, has an opportunity to work and learn in these spaces. Therefore, we need educational leadership that can manage the process of repurposing spaces in traditionally built schools with the intention of meeting the needs of evolving curriculum, as well as for social interaction. Currently, spatial repurposing knowledge is not something that has been included in educational leadership programs, but should certainly be considered at the provincial, district and post-secondary levels. Our study has found that repurposing is a process and we believe the nuances of this process can be shared and spread throughout the province.

## **Educational Leaders Should Continue to Examine Ways in which Spatial Repurposing can be Supported through Creative Use of the Time Table**

Our data revealed an important connection between the space within schools and the time table. Repurposed spaces are dovetailing with the intentional creation of flexible time and collaborative time. These scheduled periods of collaborative time require some space outside of the classroom to accommodate the needs of the school community. Our study has some convincing examples.

In order to use the learning commons for students to work in, the administrators at Middletown had to be creative in the ways they proposed using teacher preparation time. Staff had to be open and willing to adapt to the new schedule. This demonstrates how schools can be flexible and creative in their approach toward using the time table in combination with communal space to explore evolving educational methods like collaboration.

At Franklin Heights and Fairdale Secondary, the schools have integrated a “flex” period into its schedule. Students and staff make decisions on how to utilize this 40-minute period of time, each day of the week, in ways that support their learning and teaching. Choices include going to see a teacher for help, working on an assignment or project. The “Hub” and the learning commons have become a key to this new structure as it provides a place for the school community to collaborate or work on inquiry or simply focus on their own interests.

Teachers have also worked within the flex time and created a “flex-flop,” which allows educators to swap rooms in order to teach in different spaces. For example, a drama teacher might give up her studio space for a humanities class to come in to work on presenting, while she goes up to the classroom to deliver a lesson on theory. Without this time and space, the school community would not be able to function in this way. This flexibility of time and space gives educators and students alike opportunities to collaborate and harness school space to their advantage. We believe that educational leadership should continue to focus on creative ways to pair communal spaces with innovative timetabling to meet the needs of the evolving British Columbia curriculum.

## **Schools Should Consider Using Spatial Projects to Encourage Greater Ownership of the School and a Softening of Power Relations within a School Community**

In her article *Space, Power and the Classroom* (2004), Jane McGregor states, “Schools are filled with experts on teaching and learning and are thence places where staff and pupils can engage through investigations of spatiality as part of their work (p. 18).” Her belief is that spatial projects could allow understandings to develop “with which to challenge and transform unequal and undemocratic relations (p. 18)” within a school. As discussed in our findings chapter, we found evidence that certainly suggests that repurposed spaces do encourage a softening of power relations and promote a democratic feeling. We need to consider the possibility of schools using spatial repurposing projects to not only improve space but to also draw a school community closer together through the process of the project.

We believe this could be a worthy aspiration for an administration team: to lead their school community in analyzing school space, decide on a vision and work cooperatively on the process of repurposing space within their school community. Along with McGregor, we believe engaging in such projects could provide benefits beyond the improved spaces, such as an improved sense of ownership of the school for staff and students which in turn could encourage a greater feeling of democracy within the building. Therefore, we recommend that educational leaders consider employing spatial projects to promote the feeling of ownership and democracy within their buildings.

## **Schools Should Focus on Learning Commons Initiatives as Examples of Successful Navigation of the Spatial Repurposing Process**

Our study has shown how the process of repurposing communal spaces in traditionally built schools is exemplified by the library to learning commons projects. Many of these initiatives can serve as fine examples of what is entailed in the repurposing process. These repurposing projects have been taking place in British Columbia for over a decade and they can provide inspiration for educational leaders and communities who are forming their visions for repurposed spaces within school sites.

Two of the four spaces in our study, Fairdale Secondary and Middletown Elementary, had made changes to their library to move away from a traditional library toward a learning center. While Fairdale referred to their space as a learning commons, Middletown chose to continue calling it a library. Franklin Heights has a traditional library, but Mark expressed how he hoped the transition toward a learning commons approach would take place soon. Therefore, we recommend that educational leaders focus on prior successes in repurposing libraries to learning commons. In terms of developing communal spaces in schools, libraries provide the necessary inspiration for others to draw from and begin their own repurposing projects.

### **Researcher Reflections**

As we reflect on our experience as researchers, we realize that we did not actually find what we were expecting to find. At the start of this project we believed we were searching for smaller scale projects that could be handled at the school site level by individual educators demonstrating some imagination and agency with minimal budgets or resources. We still believe this to be true and feel that small spatial repurposing projects at the school site level could have significant

potential for meeting the changing needs of the curriculum as well as promoting social interaction within the school communities. What we were exposed to through our interview process were projects that took multiple years to complete, involved large budgets and in some cases renovations and construction. The exception, of course, was the outdoor program at Grandridge Elementary which in many ways, came the closest to meeting our expectations when we designed our research questions. It is possible that the school district and the assistant superintendent who was our liaison believed that the larger scale repurposing projects were of the most interest to our study.

While working on our research, we have realized that the school spaces that we teach in have great potential. Regardless of grade level, whether the school is old or new, the space big or small, dim or bright, narrow or wide, with tall ceilings or low ceilings, we learned that spaces can become something more than what we think they are in the moment. We began to see our own school spaces differently. We started conversations with colleagues focused on what purpose current spaces have and how they can be repurposed to better meet the needs of our communities. We have developed the confidence needed to make changes, from something as small as purchasing bean bag pillows for students to use in the classroom, to bigger changes such as leading colleagues in professional development on spatial literacy or proposing an outdoor learning space for students. We now see space, not as static, but as something that we can continue to create. Space is always becoming.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

- Tell us about the school's initiatives to repurpose space.
- How did this initiative of repurposing of space start? What was the impetus?
- Who were the people involved in the initiative to repurpose the space? How did they become involved?
- What was the vision for repurposing the space? Has the vision changed in any way since the space was originally repurposed?
- Has the redesign (in this repurposing project) affected social interaction? If so, in what ways?
- What challenges did you face in undertaking this initiative?
- What enabled the initiative to move forward?
- What feedback has been received from students or other users of the space?
- Would you deem this project to be a success? Why or why not? If it is a success, in what ways is it a success? If not, in what ways is it not successful?
- Has there been any resistance from school community members (other educators, students, parents, custodians, district policies) to how the space is being used?
- Are any new spatial projects being discussed or are any in development? If so, what are they? Why are they being discussed or developed?

### Spatial Values

- To what degree are spatial issues important to the staff at this school?
- How often do staff at this school wonder about the design of their school?

## Appendix B: The “Hub” in Franklin Heights

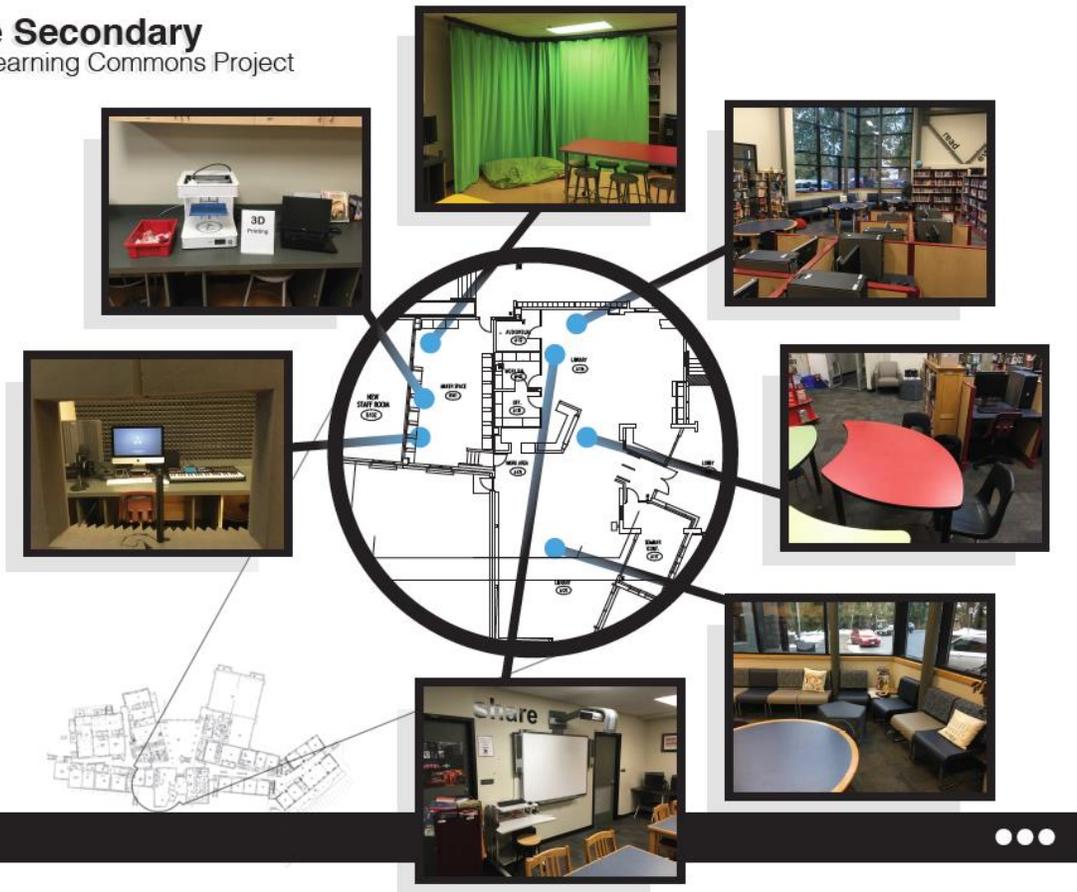
### Franklin Heights

The “Hub” Repurposing Project



## Appendix C: The Learning Commons in Fairdale

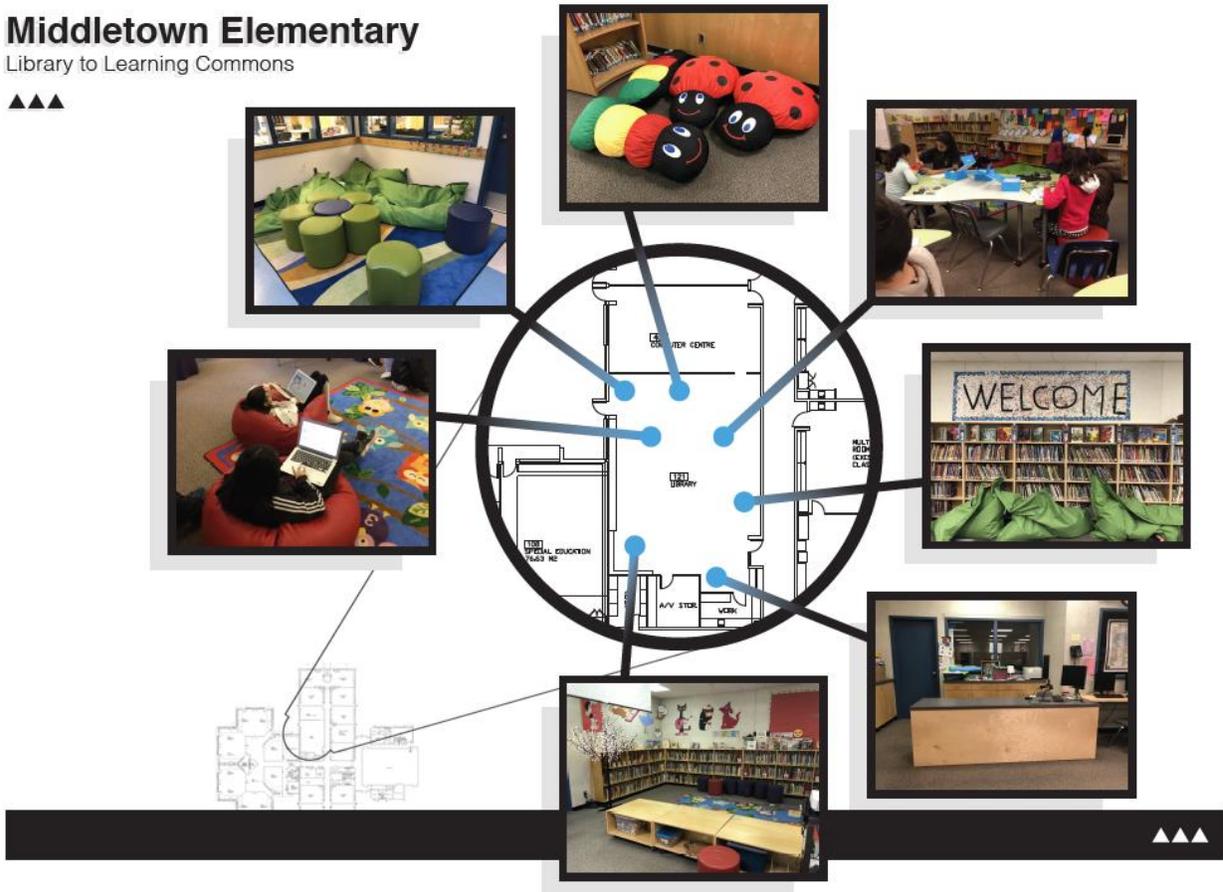
### Fairdale Secondary Library to Learning Commons Project



## Appendix D: The Library in Middletown

### Middletown Elementary

Library to Learning Commons



# Appendix E: The Forest at Grandridge

## Grandridge Elementary

Outdoor Learning Project

