

Place-based Education: Forcing Hard Questions

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A fledgling movement called place-based education stands out as an enigma, especially to those who have matriculated in the post-No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era, when narrowed curriculum, an emphasis on test scores to gauge student achievement, and increasing rationalization of education practices are pervasive. Yet, to those versed in the writings of John Dewey and like-minded champions of progressive education, place-based education is far from novel: it is what education should be in a healthy democracy. Place-based education is an instructional and curriculum building strategy and it is a deliberate community engagement strategy that has shown promise as an antidote to deeply-rooted social and environmental problems.

As researchers examine place-based education's role in the modern era, a handful of schools—urban and rural, domestic and international—have embraced the concept, and initial results are adding to a growing base of evidence that rooting education in local context boosts student achievement (Sobel, 2005; Smith 2013). More important to place-based advocates, however, are goals relating to holistic student development, connections between school and the broader community, and fostering environmental stewardship.

Even place-based education's most ardent supporters cite the need for additional research and evaluation of the approach. Such research should examine place-based strategies while tying closely related instructional practices (e.g. problem-based learning, service-learning, and environmental education) research to place-based education's research base when appropriate. But place-based education is inherently tied to place, thus presenting challenges for researchers and evaluators attempting to replicate place-based findings and best practices (Smith, 2013).

Discussion of place-based education compels educators and the broader community to ask tough questions about the true aims of

education. Are schools a tool for producing workers and consumers, or should schools be a vehicle for nurturing democracy and community? And are such aims compatible? Forcing such questions might be place-based education's enduring legacy.

Definitions, Theory and Research Base

Place-based Education Defined

Sobel (2005) offered a comprehensive place-based education definition:

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

Azano's (2011) definition of place-based education focused on instruction. "Educational practices that purposely seek to tie the realities of place to instruction, particularly for the purpose of student engagement, are typically referred to as place-based education" (p. 1).

Dr. Dana McCauley, a nationally recognized place-based education practitioner and principal at Crellin Elementary School in rural Maryland, agreed with the definitions from Sobel and Azano, while offering her own definition for place-based education at her award-winning school: "We have removed the walls between the school and

community” (personal communication, April 18, 2013).

Theoretical Background

The theoretical roots of place-based education go back centuries and are familiar to those who study the roots of civil society. Scholars often link place-based education to John Dewey’s emphasis on connecting the student to his or her environment and to much broader theoretical foundations of community and interdependence throughout American and world history, modern and ancient (Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2005; Theobald, 1997; Tolbert & Theobald, 2006). A common thread in place-based advocacy and scholarship is place-based education as an antidote to the alienating nature of the post-industrial revolution landscape when humans are increasingly specialized and isolated. Put in a school context, place-based education connects the realities of daily life with instruction and curriculum (Flynn, Kemp, & Callejo Perez, 2009; Smith, 2002; Theobald, 1997).

Theobald (e.g. 1997), a widely published and often-cited place-based education theorist and advocate, has a progressive (or constructivist) outlook rooted in local empowerment. Theobald’s writing regularly crosses disciplinary boundaries. Such a description is also apt for place-based education as a movement, especially when considering its holistic roots across disciplinary boundaries, both in research and in practice (Smith, 2013; Sobel 2005). Gaither (2010) described Theobald:

Theobald is that rare contemporary academic whose intellectual project crosses disciplines and methodologies to get leverage on big questions. He is something of an anachronism today: a public intellectual, a man of letters, a synthetic thinker in an age that has little use for such vocations. His intellectual bent is similarly unfashionable: he’s an agrarian. (p. 249)

Gruenwald (2003) linked place-based education to the highly political critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire. Critical pedagogy focused on empowerment of the marginalized and social justice

(Azano, 2011). Gruenwald (2003) cited critical pedagogy’s neglect of environmental justice issues, which he considered intertwined the social justice issues addressed by critical pedagogy. Gruenwald (2003) also believed that place-based education’s traditionally rural emphasis led to the “neglect” of conflicts in American culture including the oppression of marginalized populations. Such neglect, according to Gruenwald affects perceptions of place between dominant and oppressed groups, and can impact how one or a group views the social construction of place. Gruenwald (2003) attempted to marry critical pedagogy and place-based education, calling it “critical pedagogy of place” (p. 3). Judging by subsequent place-based scholarship (e.g. Smith 2013; Tolbert & Theobald, 2006), it appears that Gruenwald’s joining of critical pedagogy and place-based education was influential, although Theobald’s (1997) work raised similar environmental and social justice concerns, albeit in a context not explicitly linked to Freire’s critical pedagogy.

Research Support for Place-based Education

Smith’s (2013) synthesis of place-based research noted, “place-based education could well provide a way for overcoming the division between the classroom and community [that] Dewey identified over a century ago. In doing so, students, communities, and the environment could all be the beneficiaries” (p. 220). Smith’s conclusions are consistent with findings from Powers’s (2004) cross-program analysis of four place-based programs combined with her review of place-based literature. Powers analyzed place-based programs connected to the Place-Based Education Evaluation Collaborative (PEEC), an organization that fosters place-based evaluation and professional development. PEEC formed in 2002 (Powers, 2004), the year that the place-based moniker first appeared in a major educational publication (Phi Delta Kappan) (Rosenthal, 2008).

Powers (2004), Smith (2013) and Sobel (2005) are among the scholars and practitioners linking research from environmental education and related instructional strategies (e.g. service-learning) to place-based education; doing so strengthens the argument that strategies within

place-based education are supported by a base of high-quality research far greater in scope than the mostly qualitative and anecdotal research base currently undergirding place-based education. In a survey of Vermont teachers, there was little consistency in what teachers thought constituted place-based education, despite state-mandated standards addressing place and sustainability in the curriculum (Jennings, Swidler, & Koliba, 2005). Furthering the difficulties in building a research base, place-based education is often used “interchangeably” with similar terms including service-learning and project-based learning (Powers, 2004).

Conflicts in Place-based Education Research

While a consensus emerges among researchers regarding place-based education working definitions and the distinctness of place-based education (Smith 2013), a disagreement about place-based education’s role in the modern era continues.

Sobel (2005) and Theobald (1997) represent the camp fervently against the rationalization of education (e.g. state and national standards, standardized testing, homogenized curriculum) arguing that standardization undermines place-based education while ushering a long litany of negative consequences, including students who are disconnected from their communities and environment, and schools that are disconnected from communities. Jennings, Swidler, and Koliba (2005) presented a different view. Their survey of teachers using place-based strategies in Vermont offered no evidence that the “standards era” closely linked to NCLB thwarted place-based initiatives and their discussion pointed to the compatibility of the standards movement and place-based strategies, noting that nothing in NCLB prevents place-based strategies in schools. Vermont had inserted place-based standards in its curriculum standards in the late 1990s at the urging of place-based advocates.

When asked about the dispute, McCauley, the award winning place-based practitioner, was resigned to the NCLB era, “Tests are the yardstick that they use to measure us”, she said, then adding, “but they don’t define us” (personal communication, April 18, 2013). She went on to

explain that Crellin—like all other Maryland public schools—is accountable for teaching curriculum mandated by the state and school district, but that schools have leeway in “how” to teach the curriculum. Her primary concern with the standardized tests was that they take away from valuable instruction time. But McCauley does believe that the conflict between place-based learning and the standards era is overstated, especially at Crellin, where the district grants a high level of flexibility in implementing the program. Thus, Crellin’s experience lends credence to place-based researchers who do not associate NCLB and other accountability and uniformity measures (namely standardized tests) as impediments to place-based education.

Benefits of Place-based Education Strategies

Special Needs

McCauley’s (personal communication, April 18, 2013) observation that place-based education engages hard-to-engage and special needs students is consistent with findings from Powers (2004) who noted place-based education’s observed benefits for special needs populations in her evaluation of four place-based education programs. Specifically, Powers mentioned observations from teachers and support personnel that showed the positive impact of place-based learning on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder students, English language learners, and those with developmental delays. A common thread across Powers’s (2004) discussion and McCauley’s observations is that place-based programs engage children physically and in an applied way that utilizes skill sets of students who do not thrive in a traditional classroom. Specifically, McCauley observed that “squirrely” and very active students who cannot concentrate in classrooms often become leaders in outdoor activities where high energy levels and the ability to multi-task are necessary. McCauley offered a decade of personal observations (especially of transfer students) in a place-based setting combined with her school’s state-leading test scores as evidence to support her claim, while also noting the need for additional place-based research

to confirm her observations and place them in a larger research-based context.

Powers's (2004) claims of place-based education's potential positive impact on special needs students should be placed in a broader context. Throughout her evaluation of four place-based education programs, Powers noted the preliminary nature of her work combined with the need to establish a research base for place-based education. Powers was careful to note the anecdotal nature of the claims (though compelling and consistent) regarding special needs students while calling for additional research and evaluation to determine if place-based education can reduce special education costs and/or offer additional benefits for special needs students.

School Support

America's population pyramid growing top-heavy with aging baby-boomers presents problems for supporters of public education. The health care and retirement costs of baby-boomers are projected to consume a growing portion of both government and private budgets, which will leave less for other priorities including education. Additionally, older adults' minimal or limited ties to youth are generally less inclined to support education funding (Fowler, 2013).

Against the backdrop of fading support for public education, place-based education can increase school and community bonds (Azano, 2011; Gliner, 2012; Sobel, 2005). Gliner's (2012) "Schools that Change Communities" documentary, which aired on hundreds of PBS stations, offered powerful anecdotes of schools—urban and rural—that built bonds across generations in communities via place-based education. Such bonds represent the interdependence of school and community as described in Theobald's (1997) description of a "place conscious classroom" (p. 132).

Student Empowerment

Theobald (1997) decried the modern educational system's viewing of children as trainees for a corporate world instead of as citizens who can impact their communities at any age.

When schooling is reduced to the provision of human resources for the economic market, the moral dimension of education is reduced in significance, if not eliminated altogether. Our cultural deification of the successful extends so far as to make heroes out of wealthy individuals, despite the fact, and in some cases because of the fact, that they broke laws or ruined lives on the climb to the top. (p. 121)

Tying closely to the theory undergirding service-learning, engaging students via learning opportunities in their communities as part of a comprehensive strategy aligned with curriculum and coupled with reflection offers a powerful method for meaningful civic engagement (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999). Such engagement also promotes real-world problem-solving skills while tying students to community economic and civic life (Smith, 2002).

Environmental Awareness

Louv (2005) coined the "nature deficit disorder" term to describe the effects of the increasing isolation of children from nature. These effects include obesity, attention-deficit disorder, and disconnection from the natural world. By "disconnection" from the natural world, Louv is referring in part to the fear of outdoors and the likelihood that students not exposed to nature and the outdoors will be less inclined to support conservation and environmental initiatives. The disconnect between children and nature is manifest in fewer visits to historic sites, a loss of regional identity, and increased societal fragmentation (Center for Place-based Learning and Community Engagement, n.d.)

Place-based education's tying of education to local landscape is a powerful counter to the nature deficit disorder described by Louv. Sobel (2005) contended that modern schooling's emphasis of task, recess on asphalt and field trips to synthetic environments are counter to the needs of children in developing ecological awareness. He proposed—citing examples of successes—tying local geography and topography to curriculum as a launching point for heightened environmental awareness. Otherwise, he argued, students are

unable to make connections between macro environmental problems (e.g. rainforest destruction or climate change) and their own lives.

Evaluating Place-based Education

Logic models, a tool of program evaluators, offer a way to ameliorate the difficulties of evaluating place-based programs which are, of course, anchored to locality (Smith, 2013). Schorr's (2012) attempt to mediate the ongoing dispute between experimentalists and inclusionists (proxies, in part, for the quantitative vs. qualitative disputes) in evaluation research is especially salient for those seeking to further place-based education research while placing it in a context of broader research and evaluation questions and models. Schorr's assertion that some programs—especially ones similar in scope and breadth to place-based education strategies—are not suited for traditional experimental design, but that they are worthy of study and funding, is particularly compelling. Additionally, Schorr's work gives credence to concerns raised by Jennings, Widler, and Koliba (2005) and Powers (2004) when they noted the difficulty of defining elements of place-based education into measurable components while simultaneously tying the concept to closely related educational strategies. Essentially, the breadth, numerous working definitions, and newness of place-based education to education evaluation and research discourse make it difficult to fit place-based education into existing parameters. Powers (2004) noted the still-formative nature of building a theory for place-based education evaluation, while referring to a similar web of concepts (e.g. social capital, healthy communities, civic engagement) that Schorr (2012) highlighted for difficulty in quantifying.

The federal government and foundations increasingly seek evidence-based experimental evaluations with control groups to determine whether a project is a “prudent” investment (Schorr, 2012, p. 50). Such focus on experimental evaluations coinciding with the NCLB era challenged sprouts of place-education practice, research, and evaluation that had emerged in the 1990s (Smith, 2013). Yet, Schorr underscored arguments from what she deemed the “inclusionist”

camp that “evidence based” in fields ranging from health to social services to education can and should be expanded to include high-quality evidence collected from methods beyond experimental evaluation, and that “evidence based does not have to mean experiment-based” (p. 50). Considering the dearth of quantitative research undergirding place-based education (Powers, 2004; Smith 2013), Schorr's work has clear implications for place-based stakeholders.

Schorr (2012) contended that randomized experiments are useful for “neatly circumscribed” interventions with clear causal relations, citing the utility of randomized experiments in medical research as an example (p. 53). Then, she described the value of non-experimental evaluation methods in circumstances especially relevant to place-based.

Non-experimental evaluation methods, on the other hand, help us learn about the effectiveness of interventions that are complex, place-based, evolving, and aimed at populations, rather than individuals and that include too many variables and too few units (for example, communities) to make randomization a reasonable choice. (p. 53)

Schorr (2012) also suggested the importance of identifying core components of successful programs, whether contextual or at the implementation stage, emphasizing that “this information can be applied to the design of new programs and can strengthen existing programs when they adopt more of the elements that successful programs share” (p. 54). Such is the reasoning undergirding Smith's (2013) discussion of program evaluation logic models as tools to gauge the effectiveness of place-based education when research dollars are scarce.

Schorr (2012) concluded her commentary by finding common ground between the often sparring quantitative and qualitative research and evaluation camps. She urged both groups to “develop coherent measures to compensate for the scarcity of neighborhood and community-level indicators” contending that such new tools could be used effectively by both experimentalists and inclusionists (p. 55). Analyzing school-community partnerships in Australia, rural-focused researchers

developed twelve indicators of effective school-community partnerships that are akin to the measures sought by Schorr, and indicative of the possibilities when education researchers build bridges with community-centered research (Kilpatrick, Johns, Mulford, Falk, & Prescott, 2002).

Place-based In Action: Case Study

Approximately 90 students comprise Crellin Elementary, which serves grades K-5. The school is so small that the principal, Dr. Dana McCauley, spends half of each day teaching math, in an effort to maximize resources. Crellin Elementary is part of the Garrett County, MD, school district, which has eight elementary schools, three middle schools, and two high schools. Crellin is a Title I school; nearly 90% of its students are eligible for free or reduced lunch (D. McCauley, personal communication April 18, 2013). Garrett County is an Appalachian community with abundant natural resources and physical beauty that have not translated into material wealth for the vast majority of the county's residents (Wheeler, 2011).

Coinciding with McCauley's arrival in 2002, Crellin Elementary instituted a place-based learning strategy in an effort to engage low-performing students, increase community and parent involvement, and combat the physical deterioration of the school and surrounding grounds (personal communication, April 19, 2013). McCauley (personal communication, April 18, 2013) described what has gone on at Crellin since her arrival: "Crellin Elementary no longer exists only within our walls. Our entire community has become our classroom".

Since 2003, the school has transformed physically, in its test scores, and in its relationship to the community and environment. In 2010, the school was the top performer among Maryland's 874 public elementary schools in the Maryland School Assessment (Bowie, 2010). Yet, the school is prouder of achievements that are "harder to measure", according to McCauley. She cites massive turnouts at school events from parents, grandparents and community members and the longer term problem solving and life skills the Crellin students gain via the school's place-based approach, which emphasizes critical thinking,

inquiry, and authentic learning (personal communication, April 18, 2013).

A small sampling of Crellin's activities include school/community collaborations that built a 5-acre local history themed playground, constructed a large outdoor classroom that is part of a \$100,000 environmental remediation project that includes a sledding hill and an amphitheater, numerous oral history projects, and an ongoing reliance on local experts for student instruction (D. McCauley, personal communication, April 18, 2013).

Crellin's success with place-based learning has garnered national recognition. "Schools that Change Communities", a 2012 documentary airing on hundreds of PBS stations, featured Crellin and four other schools in its examination of place-based learning. During April, 2013, Edutopia filmed a "What Works" segment at the school (D. McCauley, personal communication, April 18, 2013). McCauley has received a handful of high-profile state and national awards and several teachers have earned recognition for their commitment to environmental education. Among the most recent awards, Crellin Elementary was named a 2011 "School of Distinction" by INTEL. The award included \$10,000 along with \$100,000 in in-kind donations. Yet, such monetary rewards pale in comparison to the daily reminders of an engaged community, that despite its economic hardships, does everything possible to support its school (D. McCauley, personal communication, April 18, 2013).

Concluding Discussion

The most effective place-based education strategies in schools and communities inherently blur lines between disciplines and break down walls between institutions. The most meaningful research of such strategies will occur when researchers and program evaluators examine place-based education with a lens as wide as place-based education's targeted impact. Those who appreciate the full scope of place-based education's lofty aims are best-prepared to analyze its impact at every level.

Educators would be well advised to work closely with colleagues and fields in other

disciplines and fields to measure the school, community, and ecological impact of place-based education. Specifically, researchers in the fields of community development and rural sociology are equipped to measure the increases in school and community “social capital” as described by Byun, Meece, Irvin and Hutchins (2012).

Going forward against the backdrop of the common-core curriculum standards, which have been adopted by forty-five states (Common Core, n.d.), place-based advocates are at a crossroads. Do they want to join those fighting Common Core as a federal intrusion on local autonomy, or do they view the Common Core’s emphasis on critical thinking as an endorsement for problem-based learning and other strategies within place-based education?

Since the term first appeared in mainstream education literature in 2002, place-based education now appears with some regularity in education journals (Rosenthal, 2008). But the pillars of the field (i.e. Smith, Theobald, and Gruenwald) still anchor much of the literature. Perhaps this is a sign of their work’s enduring quality. However, as place-based education matures, new voices, building on the seasoned, may add perspective and diversity while challenging long-held assumptions, and thus strengthen the research base. Further, those who have guided successful place-based programs, such as McCauley, the principal at Crellin elementary, are particularly well-placed to continue building connections between K-12 educators and researchers of place-based education. The field is fortunate that McCauley and her school’s stakeholders have opened their school and intertwined community to outside observation and evaluation.

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