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INTRODUCTION

Making Room for the Local

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This volume has two major purposes. First, we wish to contribute to the theory and practice of place-based or place-conscious education by collecting instructive and inspiring stories that can serve as exemplars for this exciting, burgeoning field. Second, we want to make the case through these stories of collaboration that place-based education can be viewed as the educational counterpart of a broader movement toward reclaiming the significance of the local in the global age.

This broader social movement, sometimes called "the new localism," has emerged in part as a response to patterns of economic development that disrupt, rather than cultivate, community life. Many communities across the nation and across the globe recognize that economic globalization, however inevitable and beneficial it may be to some, is far from the unconditional good it is often claimed to be (Korten, 2001; Mander & Goldsmith, 1996). As multinational corporations constantly relocate in search of cheaper labor and production costs, communities in the United States are left with high rates of under- and unemployment, a shrinking tax base, and, often, environmental decay. Wal-Mart and other superstores continue to displace local businesses and depress wages; the pressure to keep prices down leads to a downward spiral of more downsizing, outsourcing, and fewer economic opportunities for struggling communities. In short, the new localism recognizes that economic globalization under corporate capitalism is, potentially, economically devastating, culturally homogenizing, and ecologically destructive to

local communities. Efforts to reclaim the local, however, are not based on a blanket rejection of capitalism or of a market economy. Instead, the new localism embraces a kind of place-conscious economic development that will benefit the inhabitants of local communities today and for the long term (Shuman, 1998).

Just as local communities often suffer the negative impacts of globalization, so do children and adults at all levels of schooling. The process of formal education in schools and universities is often totally isolated from the immediate context of community life. Interaction with the wider community and all the learning opportunities these could afford is overlooked in the push for each student to meet prescribed content area standards through decontextualized classroom instruction. Furthermore, education is explicitly linked in policy and practice to the narrative of economic globalization. Today, the seldom-questioned, underlying assumption about the purpose of schooling is to prepare the next generation to compete and succeed in the global economy (For a recent iteration of this position, see Friedman, 2005). In many respects, public education has become the business of training children and youth to enter the global marketplace as consumers and workers. This is not a new story. Since the inception of mass schooling or "industrial education," the central purpose of education in the United States has been to promote nationalism while providing big businesses with a compliant and skilled labor force. However, what is new today is a growing skepticism among diverse constituencies within civil society regarding the intentions of powerful corporations and the impacts of their self-serving actions. Around the country and around the world, citizens are becoming aware of the need to take responsibility for mediating the impacts of globalization on local cultures and ecosystems. Although there is a growing political, economic, and cultural literature describing how reclaiming the local might mitigate against the potentially harmful effects of globalization, little writing exists on the role of education in this process.

Part of the reason that the narrative of globalization remains largely unquestioned in schooling (despite the fact that communities everywhere are beginning to question it) is that the link between corporate capitalism and schooling has never been stronger. Shrinking public expenditures are coupled with a growing corporate presence on public school and university campuses. Programs deemed superfluous to basic skills or job training are being cut, and entire schools are being eliminated as colleges and universities experience the educational equivalent of downsizing. Since

the early 1980s and the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commision on Excellence in Education, 2003), trends toward standardization and accountability have been linked to the perceived need to keep pace with other nations in the global economic competition. More recently, the discourse of standards, accountability, and excellence has been linked to efforts to close the historic achievement gaps between different racial, cultural, and economic groups. Thus, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is invoked at once as legislation aimed at ending inequality of educational opportunity and at strengthening the economic advantage of the entire nation. When the narrative of globalization becomes effectively linked to the narrative of social justice and equity, globalization becomes increasingly difficult to challenge. Meanwhile, efforts to close the achievement gap or the "digital divide" are often sponsored by corporations that bait schools and universities with consumer technologies that only reinforce the narrative of globalization by distracting educators and students from the educational possibilities and needs of local communities (Bowers, 2000).

Contributing to the educational and economic narratives that keep the attention of educators and learners focused away from their own communities is the power of corporate-sponsored media. Few people would argue that first television and now the Internet and their associated technologies and products help to choreograph youth and consumer cultures based on the commercial values that benefit corporate media sponsors. The entertainment-style technology–industrial complex reinforces the narrative of economic globalization by constructing children and youth around the world as hi-tech consumers rather than citizens. A youth culture based on commodification of experience through product identification intensifies alienation from community and from the intergenerational relationships necessary to strengthening community ties. Furthermore, a technologized consumer culture reinforces a brand of competitive individualism familiar now to both school and work environments. Corporate-sponsored media constantly teach that participation in the global economy through the consumption of ever-new products (made from cheap labor in deregulated environments around the globe) is a right as well as a measure of success and self-worth. Thus, in tandem with schooling and the narrative of globalization, corporate media distort what it means to be a person, a learner, and a member of a local community.

In fact, in many places, a case can be made that the process of schooling actually encourages many youth to reject their home communities and to look elsewhere for the good life depicted by media advertisers

and the entertainment industry. For many people, the ability to earn a decent living means having to move great distances from their families, and to move again and again as directed by the job market. This pattern of uprooting means that many people simply do not live long enough in one place to develop intimate relationships to places. Instead of what Orr (1992) calls "inhabiting" a place, many people only "reside" where they live, and develop no particular connection to their human and nonhuman environments. This phenomenon of "placelessness" is associated with alienation from others and a lack of participation in the social and political life of communities. However, many people, families, and communities are resisting the experience and cultural trends of alienation and rootlessness by consciously deciding to stay put, dig in, and become long-term inhabitants of a place. The new localism is not only about creating the economic conditions that make staying put possible; it is also about conserving and creating patterns of connectedness and mutuality that are the foundation of community well-being.

PLACE-BASED PRACTICES IN DIVERSE CONTEXTS

Just as the new localism can be understood as diverse acts of resistance against the ravages of globalization and rootlessness, place-based education can be understood as a community-based effort to reconnect the process of education, enculturation, and human development to the well-being of community life. Place-based or place-conscious education introduces children and youth to the skills and dispositions needed to regenerate and sustain communities. It achieves this end by drawing on local phenomena as the source of at least a share of children's learning experiences, helping them to understand the processes that underlie the health of natural and social systems essential to human welfare. In contrast to conventional schooling with its focus on distant events and standardized knowledge, education conscious of place systematically inducts students into the knowledge and patterns of behavior associated with responsible community engagement. What does this look like?

High school students in the coastal community of Seaside, Oregon, have played a central role in the collection and presentation of data associated with the writing of an urban renewal grant sought by the city to purchase and restore a former mill site only a few blocks from the city's central business district. The city hoped to turn this site into a park and nature center at which local residents and tourists can enjoy both recreational and educational experiences. At the outset, students in science classes helped catalog natural features and gathered information

required by the grant application. After the grant was awarded, other students went on to conduct more specific inventories of habitat used by birds, mammals, and fish in an effort to determine where buildings, paths, and other developments could be introduced with a minimum effect on the site's nonhuman inhabitants. In this process they learned how to use global positioning technologies to develop finely detailed maps that could then be used by the city's planners. Throughout this project, students served as intellectual resources for their community, gathering and processing data that would have been prohibitively expensive for public employees to collect. Their labor contributed significantly to a successful outcome for the city and its residents. This experience demonstrated to young people the way that collective action can lead to desired results.

Students in another coastal community on the opposite side of the continent encountered a similar lesson, in this case one about economic development. Lubec, Maine, is located on Cobscook Bay just south of the Canadian border (Hynes, 2003). Once home to a community of north Atlantic fishermen and their families, it has experienced the severe economic repercussions associated with the decline of this region's ocean fisheries. Parents are painfully aware that a way of life that had supported people for generations is now threatened. Like families in many rural communities dependent on extractive industries, they had resigned themselves to the exodus of their sons and daughters, forced to leave in pursuit of viable economic opportunities elsewhere. A young science teacher at the local high school decided to take on this issue and explore the possibilities of aquaculture. If the resource could no longer be found in the oceans, perhaps people could farm the sea in ways that would provide living wages for those who wished to remain in Lubec. With help from the community and a handful of external funders, this teacher and her students began a pilot project raising mussels, trout, tilapia, and sea urchins whose roe is considered a delicacy by the Japanese. Students have contributed their physical labor to the construction of a dock and the retrofitting of a water treatment facility for mussel and tilapia farming. They have contributed their intellectual labor to an investigation of the kinds of feed most likely to result in roe of the color most desired in Japan. Like their counterparts in Seaside, students in Lubec have become intellectual resources for their town, engaged in learning activities that promise to benefit both themselves and their elders. Together, they are collectively creating a future for themselves that otherwise would not exist.

A few hundred miles south in Boston, students at the Greater Egleston Community High School are helping to regenerate an urban environment. Their work is described at length by Elaine Senechal later in this volume. As young people in Seaside are restoring a former mill site and those in Lubec a decimated economy, adolescents in this Roxbury neighborhood are attempting to restore the quality of the air. Roxbury is crossed by a number of major thoroughfares and is the site of the bus lot for the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority; the result is high levels of air pollution and rates of asthma among its primarily ethnically diverse, poor, and working-class residents. In conjunction with Alternatives for Community & Environment (ACE), a nonprofit organization committed to addressing instances of environmental injustice, students have been instrumental in pressuring local public health agencies to monitor air quality with a level of attentiveness that did not exist before they became involved. They have also taken the lead in presenting this issue to the public, developing a system utilizing different flags to alert their neighbors about air quality, lobbying state officials to pass legislation guaranteeing to people the same protections as endangered species, and encouraging the enforcement of state anti-idling regulations. Through their work to enhance the physical environment in which they and their relatives and neighbors live, students at the Greater Egleston Community High School are learning leadership and negotiation skills essential to community organizing and development.

In each of these three communities—urban, rural, White, and non-White—students are encountering learning experiences that arise from local contexts. They are, furthermore, learning that they have the capacity to use their minds and energy to make contributions to their communities that are valued by others and that promise to improve people's lives. Formal education in these circumstances becomes meaningful and a source of communal connection. Too often high school education, in particular, can act as a source of alienation, especially for students who may not be academically inclined. When course work is conjoined to the life of the broader community in the way it has been in Seaside, Lubec, and Egleston, students grasp the power that comes when knowledge and collective endeavors are linked in this way. In such settings students do not need to ask why they are learning; they know the answer to that question as they work on tasks that benefit others.

In the face of the economic, social, and environmental dilemmas associated with the globalization of industrial civilization, the lessons these students encounter may well be essential. Much of the success of

the human species can be ascribed to our adaptability, a characteristic predicated on people's ability to respond collectively and over time to the conditions encountered in specific places. Diverse cultures across the planet have arisen because of this capacity. Human adaptability, however, is being diminished, and traditions of successful adaptation are being disrupted and destroyed, by the imposition of a single set of understandings and a single way of life on all people everywhere. Patterns of self- and community-reliance have been replaced by dependence on increasingly centralized institutions that have diminished the importance of more localized responses as they impose the logic and efficiencies of a market economy. This process is unraveling both the natural and social systems that underlie our species' health and security. If not altered, the severe environmental breakdown, political instability, and human misery encountered in places like Haiti could become the norm rather than an unfortunate exception.

CORE THEMES IN PLACE-BASED EDUCATION

In *Becoming Native to a Place*, Jackson (1994) argues that either all places are holy, or none of them are. All places, in other words, are deserving of our attention, respect, and care. The questions that lie at the core of this volume are: What educational forms promote care for places? What does it take to conserve, restore, and create ways of being that serve people and places? What does it take to transform those ways of being that harm people and places? Given the degree to which global elites benefit from current institutional arrangements, it seems unlikely that more than a few of the privileged members of industrial and postindustrial societies will sponsor the needed initiatives. The international impasse over carbon emissions is indicative of the dilemma faced by those who hope to marshal change at this level. Globally, however, initiatives at the local level are now demonstrating the real possibility of change. Suzuki and Dressel's 2003 volume, *Good News for a Change*, describes efforts set in motion by ordinary people across the planet. Committed to particular places, individuals and groups of individuals have embarked on projects that are protecting natural resources, creating sustainable economic opportunities, and preserving the integrity of established human communities despite the stasis encountered in most transnational organizations. As Esteva and Prakash (1998) assert in *Grassroots Postmodernism*, it may be with these people on the margins of industrial society that the foundation for a hopeful and humane future is being laid. The stories told in the following pages illustrate the

widespread growth of grassroots movements, and the vitality of those who live and work in the margins.

We believe that an education that orients children and adults to the values and opportunities that inhere in the places where they live could provide the dispositions, understandings, and skills required to restore and democratize humanity's adaptive capabilities in ways undreamed of by the insulated elites who populate emerging global cities like Chicago or Mumbai or Tokyo. That education must first lead children to recognize the assets found in the human and natural environments closest to them, including understandings drawn from traditional cultural practices that emphasize restraint in the use of natural resources and support for social practices informed by mutuality (Bowers, 2005). At its most fundamental level, place-based education must overcome the traditional isolation of schooling from community life. The walls of the school must become more permeable, and local collaboratives and support structures must be built and maintained so that education truly becomes a larger community effort. This education in connection to place must also inspire in learners an appreciation of beauty and wonder, for it is through the experience of beauty and wonder that we risk opening ourselves to others and the world. By connecting to and appreciating places, children and youth begin to understand and question the forces that shape places; they develop a readiness for social action, and, with the proper adult guidance, the skills needed for effective democratic participation.

Democracy has always been a struggle for meaning and for change, and place-based education must demonstrate to students the challenges and potentialities of collective effort. For most people living today, the promise of individual economic mobility is a cruel illusion; their wealth and security must instead be found in the care and imagination of others close to home. Only as members of mutually supportive social groups have human beings, for all but the past half millennium, been able to assure their own survival. Current population trends and declining natural resources including water, land, and fish as well as easily extractable fossil fuel suggest that even with the benefits of science, future circumstances will not be that different from those faced by our ancestors in earlier eras. The ability to work with others toward commonly defined and enacted goals will be essential. Rather than relying on distant rulers to make things right at the local level, people need to learn how to make things right on their own. Individually, this will almost certainly prove to be impossible. A review of the achievements of past and present preindustrial societies, however, provides ample proof of what small

groups of people acting collectively can accomplish. This should not be interpreted as a rejection of the benefits of science and technology but rather a reassertion of our species' remarkable capabilities even when stripped of the powers afforded us by modernity.

An education in place must also acquaint students with the way that their own health and security are codependent on the health and security of everyone and everything around them. This knowledge of interdependence must have emerged over time through painful experiences for our predecessors and remains embedded in the language and culture of Native peoples on all continents. Knowledge of interdependence, now reemerging in societies across the globe, must come to inform all human decisions if people currently alive hope to pass down to their offspring places worthy of inhabitation. Interdependence is not an abstract idea, but a lived experience of all people in all places, best understood though the study of the commons that we share with human and nonhuman others. Bowers (2005) describes *the commons* as those relationships and systems that contribute to the well-being of a community and that have not been commodified by the capitalist–industrial system. These include natural systems such as air, water, and forests; cultural systems such as public spaces and the legal protections that keep them public; and civic associations found in mentoring and intergenerational relationships. Through an education in place that connects teachers and learners to the life of the wider community, these ecological and cultural commons must be identified, conserved, and restored.

In addition, an education in place must not be tuned to nostalgic or homogenous images of the local, but to local diversity, the diversity within places and the diversity between places. Place-conscious education challenges conventional notions of diversity in education, of multiculturalism or culturally responsive teaching, which too often take for granted the legitimacy and value of an education that disregards places in all their particularity and uniqueness. Critical issues of race, class, gender, and other aspects of culture can become abstractions unless these issues are grounded in concrete experience, experience that always takes place somewhere. Place-consciousness toward diversity and multiculturalism means reconnecting these themes with the rooted experience of people in their total environments, including the ecological. This rooted experience has both a spatial and temporal dimension; place-consciousness, therefore, must also include consciousness of the historical memory of a place, and the traditions that emerged there, whether these have been disrupted or conserved.

Finally, an education in place must be an education in ethics. People need to be aware of that which fosters wholeness and life and that which fosters division and harm. As the Amish make decisions about which technologies to accept or reject on the basis of their communal consequences, so do all people need to begin accepting or rejecting the products of human imagination and inventiveness according to their impact on the welfare of other humans and other beings and the vast natural systems that support life. Grounded in such understanding, children will be in a better position to determine which of the aspects of the emerging global civilization are worth preserving and which would be best to abandon.

AN EDUCATION FOR THE FUTURE OF PLACES

From its inception, one of the driving forces behind modernity has been the desire on the part of human beings to gain and assert increasing control over phenomena that affect their lives. To some extent, humanity's growing understanding of the natural world has allowed people to believe that such control is indeed achievable. One of the central flaws in the drive to globalize the economy and culture, however, lies in the illusion that the economic and political managers of the massive, centralized systems that now govern the lives of most people are in fact able to predict and control events outside their immediate domain. The political chaos in Iraq following U.S. military intervention and growing climate instability linked to the burning of fossil fuels demonstrate the degree to which both social and natural forces defy the will of even the most powerful human beings.

The beginning years of the 21st century are serving as an object lesson in humility and the dangers of hubris. The complexities of the planet and humanity in all its diversity will elude our species' capacity to understand and manage; furthermore, any effort to assert human will on this scale will almost certainly have results not dissimilar from what is occurring in the Middle East and the skies above us. Margaret Thatcher's assertion that there is no alternative to globalization must be replaced by a reinvestment of faith and energy in the capacity of people in local and regional settings to make decisions and adapt to changing conditions in ways that will benefit both them and their descendants over the long term.

Place-conscious education provides one strategy for developing in people the capacity to reclaim the inventiveness, imagination, and courage that over millennia allowed our predecessors to make use of the possibilities provided by the planet wherever they found themselves. They

aligned themselves with no universal ideology or set of understandings. They instead relied on their own intelligence and ability to collaborate with others to create cultures and social conditions that allowed for their survival and enough security to pass down their understandings and traditions from one generation to the next. They were able to do this not by controlling phenomena but by interacting with the world around them in ways that truly fit the conditions they encountered. This is what our ancestors throughout time have done to make this planet their home. It is what we and our descendants must do, as well.

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