Why Place Matters: Environment, Culture, and Education
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Introduction

Why place? Much educational research and scholarship in the social foundations of education focuses on the concept of "culture" in examining the role of cultural difference in the production of knowledge and in the reproduction of privilege and oppression. "Culturally-responsive teaching" is often promoted as an antidote to systems of education that have failed particular groups and communities because of a lack of responsiveness to differences in race, class, gender, and other categories of "otherness." One of the problematic questions suggested by the discourse of culturally-responsive teaching is, to what in culture should one be responsive? What exactly is the relationship between culture and education? What should it be?

The concept of place, or more precisely the experience of places, can help concretize the abstract notion of culture in the everyday lives of people in their diverse and unique environments. A focus on place can also help expand anthropocentric views of culture and experience to include territory most often neglected in cultural study: that is, "the land," "the natural environment," or what David Abram (1996) called "the more-than-human world." In our era of human-induced climate change and myriad other tensions between humans and the environment, it is vital that the landscape of cultural study be expanded to include the earth, the air, the oceans, land, water, and all the ecological interactions that make life possible. Place matters to education because it provides researchers, practitioners, and all learners with a local or nearby focus for cultural study, and because it expands a cultural landscape to include related ecosystems, bioregions, and all the place-specific interactions between the human and the more-than-human world.

A simple definition of place-based education is using places, environments, and communities (mainly those nearby but also those far away) as living contexts for experience and curriculum development and enrichment. Before the institutionalization of formal schooling in the U.S. (really not so long ago), most education was place-based; that is, most teaching and learning was contextualized and made relevant to local living. Local and regional culture and geography were the contexts and the "texts" through which people learned who they were, and what they needed to know to live. Modernization and industrialization radically changed how and what people learn. The common schools of the 19th century were part of a larger project of nation building. The primary mission of the public school was, and remains, to prepare young Americans for their economic, social, and political roles as citizens of the United States. A common curriculum was introduced that focused on common subjects, skills, and dispositions. Scientific management of schools translated into increased efficiency, regulation, and standardization. Although local governance over school decision making has remained a feature of public schools, the content of the curriculum gradually drifted far away from the local contexts in which people actually live. The primary aim of place-based education is to reacquaint people with their own local and regional cultural and natural
environments by studying these places first hand, and becoming curious about them through action-oriented, interdisciplinary inquiry.

That people need to be reacquainted with their own environments is perhaps the greatest single critique of schooling implied by place-based education. Neglecting place, schools produce a profound illiteracy of both nature and culture. Neglecting place, schools take their being for granted instead of teaching the historical, political, and cultural processes that work to shape what places become. Place-based education is thus a response to some of the shortcomings of schooling, especially standardized schooling. A fundamental problem with standardized schooling—one that gets overlooked—is that it works against the uniqueness and diversity of particular communities and particular places. Again, this is not a new phenomenon. Ever since the introduction of textbooks in the one-room schoolhouse, the curriculum that most students experience and are asked to master is designed by people with little or no knowledge of what life is like in a particular place. An unintended result of over a century of standardization and regulation is that, with few exceptions, students are not expected to learn much of anything about their own local environment and communities. Place-based educators, who go by many other names, believe that quality education and engaged citizenship are impossible without connecting the process of learning to everyday life in real communities. Thus, place-based educators seek to connect learning to the unique history, culture, environment, and economy of a particular place. The local environment and local community provide relevant contexts for learning and inquiry, student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in teaching and learning.

Many teachers and schools have developed place-based approaches to teaching but call these by other names, such as service learning, civic education, environmental education, community-based education, or context or project-based learning. Place-based education can be thought of as an umbrella term for these and other approaches. What follows is an annotated “top ten” list of reasons for adopting the language of “place” in conversations about culture and education. The list is meant to be suggestive, not definitive, and is offered as an invitation to talk more about the ways in which places matter to culturally-responsive education.

1. Place-based education can help revive and unify threatened educational traditions.
2. Places are everywhere and they are both simple and complex.
3. Place-consciousness contextualizes learning and engages learners.
4. Place-consciousness supports individual development.
5. Place-consciousness fosters strong democracy.
6. Place can help to reframe the problem of accountability.
7. Places are the geographical nexus of culture, environment, and time.
8. Globalization can only be understood as interactions between places.
9. Decolonization and rehabilitation depend on place-consciousness.
10. Everyone can develop educative and satisfying practices of place.

This “top ten” list is not presented in a hierarchy of importance; each of the items is related to the others, and each has profound implications for understanding culture and
enacting education. The unifying theme that holds the ideas together is the fact that places are pedagogical. That is, whether we are aware of it or not, we are learning from places all the time; places shape us, even as we shape them. In *Wisdom Sits in Places*, anthropologist Keith Basso (1996) wrote, “Selfhood and placehood are completely intertwined” (p. 7). Although Basso was referring to his ethnographic work with the Western Apache, the pedagogical force of places—that is, what places teach us through the meanings we ascribe to them—impacts people everywhere, everyday. And incredibly, what we learn from places through our direct experience with them—indeed, what we learn from experience itself—is almost completely ignored in schooling. Modern education has invested a lot of time and energy into constructing the classroom as the primary space of essential learning. This has come at the cost of disinvesting the significance of learners’ direct experience with places outside the classroom door.

1. Place-based education can help revive and unify threatened educational traditions. The opportunity costs of standards-based reform and regulation are far reaching, unnoticed, and uncounted. In a school culture obsessed with accountability, it is ironic that few people are carefully paying attention to, and keeping track of, the alarming quantities of educational experiences, theories, and practices that are being excluded from the conversation. One fundamental opportunity cost is the increasingly endangered status of critical and alternative educational traditions—those traditions that are not narrowly focused on a reductionist view of student learning measured and legitimated by standardized tests alone. Experiential education, environmental education, citizenship education, holistic education, contextual education, problem-posing education, Indigenous education, critical pedagogy, community-based education—all of these powerful teaching and learning traditions are threatened, endangered, or even extinct from many people’s experience of schooling, including educators themselves. The fractured nature of these traditions has meant that each vies for survival within a homogenous system that forces conformity to certain rules or routines: play by the rules of the standards and tests—or else.

I believe that “place-based education” or “community-based education” can be viewed as umbrella terms for many traditions concerned with learners experiencing, learning from, and contributing to local, community, and regional contexts. Developing a coherent way of naming the traditions we are committed to is an act of intellectual and strategic resistance; to me, it is nothing less than a struggle for life in a schooling environment that is squeezing the life out of learning. Articulating and demonstrating the merits—in a coordinated effort—of a wide verity of place-based approaches can help remind researchers, practitioners, and policy makers that there are other ways of conceiving of schooling beyond what schools have become under the culture of accountability. These other ways of teaching and learning can help to engage and motivate learners in ways that a standardized curriculum fails to do (see e.g., Melaville, Berg, & Blank, 2006).

Many educators and learners at all levels are frustrated with standardized schooling. Place-based or community-based education are ways of naming other pathways that draw on a host of intellectual and practical traditions that are seriously in danger of being extirpated from the contemporary educational landscape.
2. Places are everywhere and they are both simple and endlessly complex. Small children have special places, youth and adults have favorite places, cultures have sacred places, contested places, and profane places. Everything we or anyone does is placed, and places are always right at hand. Everyone knows what a place is because everyone experiences relationships with places. Place, then, is a concept that every learner can relate to, yet it is also one that extends beyond each of us to countless relationships with diverse others (human and and non-human). Poet philosopher Gary Snyder (1990) wrote, "The world is places." In other words, to know anything about the world is to know its places.

Yet as philosopher of place Edward Casey (1997) has noted, it may be the ubiquitous and everyday presence of places that causes us to neglect them, to stop paying attention to the ground the holds all our earthbound experience. Thousands of books and articles, and the number is growing, describe the complex ways that people inhabit places. Place-based education as a movement has only begun to draw on this rich reservoir of place-conscious scholarship, art, and politics flowing out of and in between every discipline and from every region on earth. Everywhere people are rediscovering the power of paying attention to places. For a good introduction to the diverse ways that people everywhere are paying attention to place, access Philosopher Bruce Janz’s (2006) website, Research on Place and Space. Without delving into the nuances between place and space in the vast literature freely available on Janz’s site, I want to generalize about two intellectual traditions from the growing literature on place that I believe are most germane to the development of place-based education. These traditions are critical geography and bioregionalism. In naming them as key traditions, I intend for their meanings to transcend the narrow limits of specialization that often accompanies labeling.

Very briefly, critical geographers (e.g., Harvey, 1996; Massey, 1995; Soja, 1989) describe a way of viewing places and material spaces as expressions of ideologically-laden power relationships. A key concept in critical geography is the reciprocal nature of human relationships with places: places shape people (identities and cultures); and people shape places. The form of this shaping greatly depends on how power flows through places, and critical geographers, in the tradition of critical theory, often focus on the cultural politics of capitalism. The globalized capitalist economy and its military industrial complex (and their predecessors, global imperialism and global colonialism) have shaped the spaces in which our lives currently unfold. This is not to reduce the complexity of people and places to market relationships, nor is it to diminish the power of people to resist exploitation and oppression. However, especially in the context of education in the U.S., I believe we need to acknowledge and scrutinize the place and people-shaping power of global industrialism and capitalism as these forces continue to commodify both landscape and mindscape (see Gruenewald, 2003c).

The other key place-conscious tradition is bioregionalism. Bioregionalists, who may or may not claim the label, are culturally grounded ecological thinkers. They seek to revive, preserve, and develop cultural patterns in specific bioregions that are suited to the climate, life zones, landforms, and resources of those regions. Thus, unlike most critical geographers or culturally-responsive educators, bioregionalists first of all recognize that life, culture—even identity—are not possible without life-sustaining eco-regions. Beyond learning about the natural history of places, bioregionalists propose that cultural
practices should be aligned with the ecological limits and features of places. Whether one finds this precept sensible or naïve, it suggests that educators and citizens ought to pay attention to what those limits are. Bioregionalists, by insisting that human cultures must learn to live within the natural limits of their bioregions, pose a huge challenge to cultural and educational theories and practices that refuse to acknowledge the existence of ecological limits and the significance of ecological well-being (see Gruenewald, 2003b).

Places are simple and complex: to study them is to know more about our own experience, the experience of others, and to know more, ecologically and culturally, about the world we actually live in.

3. Place-consciousness contextualizes learning and engages learners. Recent research shows that as many as 40-60 percent of all secondary schools students are chronically disengaged from school (Melaville, Berg, & Blank, 2006). It has become a commonplace that schools are places where young people go to learn—under the threat of all kinds of punishments and degradations—fragmented bits of decontextualized knowledge and skills. While decontextualized classroom learning may work for those who rise to the top of the competition for grades, many learners begin to tune out early, and many drop out. Even those who succeed in the testing game that school has become mock the culture of seat-work and testing. My undergraduate students, those students who were very successful in the K-12 world, regularly report that they were successful simply because they learned how to take tests. They are also, understandably, a little angry when they realize that they remember little of what they supposedly mastered.

Under the culture of standards and testing, we all know that this fire in the belly of teaching and learning is suffocating. I myself left the classroom because it too restricted my sense of being alive in the world. Like my mentors Thoreau and Whitman, I found it hard to breathe without ready access to the open air. As Dewey and others have always known, when learning is connected to direct experience with the world, learners become more engaged. It is always startling to me to contemplate the fact that most schools seem oblivious to this truism. The process of learning is enlivened when it is rooted in places—places such as the vacant lot, the woods, field, or wetland at the edge of the school grounds, the city street or park—and the living context allows for a depth of learning and that is difficult to simulate in the classroom alone. The heightened engagement and depth of learning reported by place-based teachers and learners also means that learning sinks in and sticks. It is the kind of learning that is experienced by the whole body, the kind that generates authentic curiosity and long-term inquiry. It is the kind of learning with immediate concrete answers to the excellent question, “Why are we learning this?” Place-based education can rekindle a passion for teaching and learning by reengaging teaching and learning in direct, relevant experience (for a summary of the research on increased engagement through place-based education, see Melaville, Berg, & Blank, 2006 and Sobel, 2004).

4. Place-consciousness supports individual development. Most educators I know believe in public education as something more than a training ground for service in the global market; most philosophies of education name individual development as one of the chief purposes of education. Yet I believe that schools generally fail miserably at developing the potential of unique individuals. This is not just because public education,
like most government institutions, is guided by the logic of economism. It also has to do with the hegemony of the classroom, the isolation of sterile, classroom learning from the diversity of community life outside the school’s policed boundaries. Ironically, despite decades of emphasis on diversity in schools, schools remain one of the least diverse places imaginable. Students rarely even see other adults besides teachers charged with managing their thoughts and actions. More rare still are meaningful interactions with younger children, older children, seniors, elders, babies, community members, and even more rare are deep reflective experiences with plants, animals, city streets and parks, places of commerce and politics, and all of the living environments that simply are not part of the classroom-based school curriculum.

As a regulatory technology of person-shaping, schools, if not teachers themselves, daily enact a program of spatial and cognitive ordering. The control of space and thought in most schools in unabashedly standardized and homogenizing, as well as what David Sobel (2004) has called “experience poor.” Natural history writer Robert Michael Pyle (2001) coined the phrase “the extinction of experience” to describe the culturally and educationally-constructed demise of direct experience with outdoor places. In a recent essay advocating “nature literacy as a radical act,” Pyle (2008) parodies the No Child Left Behind Act with the title, “No Child Left Inside.” Schools limit and define worthwhile experience, perhaps more through the spatially impoverished hidden curriculum than through the official curriculum of standardized content. Because children, even when not in school, spend more time indoors than ever, many observers worry about what human individuals (and communities) are losing as immersion in diverse natural environments becomes more and more rare. Richard Louv’s (2005) recent book, Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder, documents the increased isolation and alienation of youth from outdoor places. Writing in the tradition of ecological and environmental education, Pyle and Louv describe the losses to self that may accompany culturally-constructed alienation from the more-than-human world (see Abram, 1996; Gruenewald, 2003a; Shepard, 1982). Similarly, a growing number of culturally-responsive educators are looking for ways to bring students into direct contact with the human community outside the school. Without such contact with diverse environments, any talk of diversity in schools is hollow, “experience poor” rhetoric.

It is way past time to recognize that forced isolation of children and youth from the human and natural community simply does not serve the needs of developing human beings. The spatial, epistemological, and experiential homogeneity common to standardized schools serves other ends. These ends, such as the construction of a politically disengaged labor force, need to be critically questioned. In questioning the limitations of the classroom as a technology of alienation and control, place-conscious education is opening up conversations and structures that have for too long been closed. Through schooling, we may actually be losing the ability to pay attention to places, even as they, and we, become more commodified and enclosed.

5. Place-consciousness fosters strong democracy. Another commonly held purpose of public schooling is to contribute to building democratic societies. Schools are often defended as public institutions dedicated to promoting the public good. As I hope
this chapter makes clear, whatever the public good actually is cannot be understood apart from the material spaces and places outside of schools that make public life possible.

Currently, too many educators (myself included) take democracy for granted. Under the pressures of program accountability, we generally fail to discuss the question of what kind of learning best nurtures future citizens in the skills and dispositions of democratic participation. Many educators and academics have simply abandoned the democratic and civic mission of schooling. As mentioned earlier, the accountability movement, and its associated regimes of regulation, have endangered a great many significant educational traditions. Democratic education could top the list. The word democracy is alarmingly absent even from the rhetoric of accountability. For many critical observers, this is not a surprising lapse considering what our nation has become. Since I entered the field of education, for example, the U.S. has twice waged war on the people and places of Iraq, and remains there killing and being killed now (against the will of the people) all in the name of democracy. It’s pretty easy for the governing plutocracy to claim that militarism is democracy when the educated public is uneducated, miseducated, and rarely invited through public schooling to engage in meaningful democratic action and reflection. True participatory democracy, what is sometimes called direct, radical, or strong democracy (Barber, 2003), is simply not possible without attention to places. Places may be the best way to engage young citizens in the complex arts of democratic action and reflection.

Simply put, people are placemakers, and the quality and character of the places we create or destroy reflects—and shapes—political thought and action. As critical geographers have shown, opportunities for public interaction, democratic or otherwise, are defined and limited by what Lefebvre (1974) called, “the production of space.” As Castells (1983) explains, “Space in not a ‘reflection of society,’ it is society” (p. 4). Critical geographers are concerned with how geographical space simultaneously reflects and reproduces social relationships of power domination, and control. The concept of social reproduction is not new to educators familiar with critical theory. However, a spatialized critical theory recognizes that it is largely the organization and experience of space that facilitates and legitimizes cultural production. Space is the medium through which culture is reproduced. This insight raises the question of the role of education and the role of place in the production of democratic societies.

Whatever democracy is, whatever the public good is, it cannot be understood apart from our everyday, embodied experience of places. What, if we choose to pay attention, might our everyday places teach us about the possibilities for democracy? In modern cultures, such a question would necessarily lead into an examination of private and public property, and the privatization and enclosure of the commons (Bowers, 2006). The functional role of private property is to grant and maintain exclusive access to space, along with related rights, for the privileged and to deny access and rights to others. In the 1990s, the top 5% of U.S. landowners own 75% of our land and the bottom 78% own only 3% (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998, p. 14). This means that for most people, the experience of most places comes with some kind of "keep out" sign and a set of property laws to support exclusion and any sort of ecological or cultural disturbance (e.g., genocide and ecocide). The relationship between space and the opportunities for democratic public life is a serious issue that place-based educators are beginning to address.
By paying attention to places, and inviting learners and citizens to play a direct role in describing what they are and what they will become, place-based educators are practicing democracy. The Bush administration recently unveiled plans to sell off more public lands, especially in the West where I live because of the access to public land. I wonder uneasily if any schools are paying attention to this landgrab. Our material spaces and places are the primary artifacts our cultures; they are the primary texts indicating the success or failure of the democratic project. What form of social and political organization do our places reflect? How might our places both reflect, and help to nurture, democracy? Place-conscious democratic education is capable with dealing with these kinds of political questions. Schooling that neglects place is obviously not, and in its lack of attention to place, schools are, perhaps unintentionally, reinforcing the ideology of privatization and enclosure that works against democracy.

6. Place can help to reframe the problem of accountability. The argument I’m making is that place-based education deals directly with two time-honored educational purposes that have been all but forgotten in this climax phase of the standards and testing movement: individual development (i.e., the development of the whole person) and democracy (i.e., the development of better communities). These aims, I believe, remain a high priority among citizens and educators who want something more, and different, from today’s schools. Place-based education offers a way of holding schools and school leaders accountable for providing experiences that are too often withheld from teachers and learners. Place-based education can reframe the meaning of accountability in several ways. First, it is possible to articulate a general set of place-based learning experiences and outcomes that simply should not be neglected in the process of public education. This appears to be the strategy adopted by the Alaska Native Knowledge Network (ANKN, 1998) in its Standards for Culturally-Responsive Schooling. A fundamental principle of the Alaska standards is that culturally-responsive educators use the local environment and community resources on a regular basis to link what they are teaching to the everyday lives of the students. Whether or not this is happening in a particular classroom or school is something that can be easily documented.

Further, the educative quality of such place-based interactions can be assessed and improved on. In collaboration with the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Educational Testing Service, The Rural School and Community Trust developed the Place-Based Education Portfolio Rubric as an assessment and planning tool for place-based education. The PBEP (see website at http://www.ruraledu.org/tpportfolio/index.htm) has two main features. First, it provides educators doing place-based education with a self-assessment tool with which to describe, document, assess, plan, and deepen place-based learning projects. Second, the PBEP provides narratives from diverse schools across the U.S. that have developed exemplary place-based education practices. The assessment tool is divided into three categories: student learning and contributions, community learning and empowerment, and deepening and spreading place-based learning. Each of these categories, in turn, is divided in to sub-themes (e.g., student intellectual growth or connections between school and community), and educators are encouraged to describe and analyze evidence of student and community work that demonstrates how the objectives of each theme are met. Thus, as an assessment tool, the PBEP differs markedly from conventional
accountability schemes because it acknowledges and encourages qualitative evaluation of teaching and learning, and because its focus is not only on student performance, but also on a broader learning community within and beyond the school.

The Rural Trust and the ANK'N's accountability tools are only the beginning of rethinking accountability. The real challenge to education posed by place-conscious thought and experience is to question the relationship between schooling and the quality of places that all life forms inhabit. Schools, I argue, should be involved in improving the quality of these places, and when they are not, when they are outright ignoring places, they are failing to educate for worthwhile purpose. What, in other words, is the quality of community life, the quality of the environment, and the prospects for future generations of humans and non-humans? Place-based education as a movement can help to turn the attention of educators to these essential and currently neglected questions.

7. Places are the geographical nexus of culture, environment, and time. As any examination of the burgeoning place and community-based education literature reveals, place-based education is much more than environmental education repackaged. Place-based educators generally embrace the traditional purposes of environmental education, but they also recognize the general lack of responsiveness of environmental education to the lived experience of cultural diversity.

By naming critical geography and bioregionalism as the two key traditions supporting the further development of place-based education, I hope to present a theoretical framework that is constantly looking for connections between ecological and cultural thinking, and constantly making ecology and culture concrete in the lived experience of everyday life.

Conversations about diversity, culture, and schooling, focused as they often are on race, class, gender, etc., make it very difficult to talk about "the land" or "the environment." Somehow the natural environment or even the physical environment, in which the cultural environment is always embedded, continues to be neglected in most cultural and educational theory. Within schools and universities as a whole, environmental studies remain a subfield of various sciences, and are rarely the concern of those focused on diversity and the conflicts of cultural politics. In schooling, environmental education itself is rare, and rarely intersects with culturally-responsive teaching. Place helps to bridge this culturally-constructed epistemological divide (see Gruenewald, 2008).

For many educators advocating cultural-responsiveness, environment is not a high-priority concept and is, in fact, often ignored or resisted. A broader view of the environment, however, one that is informed by the traditions of environmental justice, social ecology, ecofeminism, indigenous knowledge, critical geography, ecojustice, recognizes that the poverty, oppression, injustice, and violence are quintessential environmental problems. Poverty and the violence of exploitation and racism have for hundreds of years been connected to patterns of colonization that impact people and their geographical-cultural environments. Talking about the cultural constructs of racism and poverty without talking about geography and environment is to abstract these concepts from where they have been constructed and experienced. Still, arguing that the environment is a critical cultural construct is difficult work in social and institutional
contexts such as schools and universities, probably no less difficult than arguing the enduring significance of race.

As a critical cultural and educational construct, place can be described as the nexus of culture and environment; places are where we constantly experience their interconnection. Further, one can examine this interconnection of people and place, land and culture at any spatial or temporal scale. History, in other words, at local, regional, and global scales, can be (re)constructed as the changing relationships between people and their places. I will develop this point further in the next section on globalization, but here I want to stress the importance of asking the following question with respect to all the places in which education takes place: What happened here? This question is obviously vital if one is to know anything about the past; not to know the past of where one’s present unfolds seems to me the most profound cultural negligence, yet this is an everyday act committed by most history texts and most schools. Attention to the temporal nature of places, their past, present, and possible futures, also necessarily leads to the study of who or what was indigenous to the place. I was once asked if I thought that indigenous culture and education should be the template for place-based education. Regrettably, I answered no, and my response has been haunting me ever since. Now I would answer that indigenous culture and education, as place-specific bioregional traditions, should be one of the fundamental frameworks for conceiving of how to live well in a place, and for educating for that purpose. As repositories of culture, geography, and time, places can help us recover a grounded sense of the cultural past.

8. Globalization can only be understood as interactions between places. One of the frequent critiques of place-based education is that we live in a globalized society and that young people need to be educated for a globalized world and not for an insulated and perhaps provincial community. This is an important critique, but the complexity of place easily answers it. Simply put, the idea of place-based education is not only to develop a complex understanding of a place, but to develop a complex understanding of places and the relationship between places, past, present, and future. It may be helpful to simply think of the term place in the plural: not just place, but also places. Consciousness of place means consciousness of other places and relationships between places, such as the places people come from, the nearby Wal-Mart or McDonalds, and the far away farms, factories, and people that work for our “convenient,” fast-food lifestyles.

Just as place should be critiqued as a problematic term, so must globalization be questioned as a guiding educational construct, though it rarely is in schools. Globalization is perhaps the chief (geographical) metaphor of our time, and it has an enormous impact on our thought, language, action, and the organization of social institutions such as schools. As competition in the global economy is repeatedly invoked as the dominant reason for high standards in education, educators and students have a responsibility to investigate the use of the term and its impact on people and places everywhere. Such investigations can begin by examining the relationship between public and private spaces, and inquiring into the interrelated local and global consequences of industrial capitalism. In short, if educators and students are to understand culture in the places where they live, they must explore the interdependent economic, political, ideological, and ecological relationships between places near and far.
Moreover, because the purpose of education is often reduced to preparing workers to compete in the global economy, it is essential that educators and students develop an analysis of how that economy functions through space, geography, and the local institution of school. An analysis of the global economy and the privatization, enclosure and control of space suggests the need for a place-conscious education that is focused on political and economic relationships and that extends throughout localities, regions, states, nations, and the globe itself. Place-conscious education is a needed antidote to the reification of globalization because it pays attention to the impact of globalization on the places where people and other species actually live.

Wendell Berry writes eloquently on the difference between global and local thinking and his words are helpful in determining the appropriate scale of ecological and cultural thinking. Berry (1992) notes:

Properly speaking, global thinking is not possible. Those who have "thought globally" (and among them have been imperial governments and multinational corporations) have done so by means of simplifications too extreme and oppressive to merit the name of thought. Global thinkers have been and will be dangerous people....Global thinking can only be statistical. Its shallowness is exposed by the least intention to do something. Unless one is willing to be destructive on a very large scale, one cannot do something except locally, in a small place. (pp. 19-20)

These small, local places all over the globe are where place-based education begins.

9. Decolonization and reinhabitation depend on place-consciousness. Borrowing from the traditions of critical geography and bioregionalism, I have previously proposed the decolonization and reinhabitation of places as two long-range purposes of place-conscious education (Gruenewald, 2003b). Reinhabitation is learning to live well with others, human and non-human, in a place that has suffered culturally and ecologically from disruption and injury. Decolonization is learning to recognize and articulate disruption and injury, then undoing and unlearning it. These twin aims are, like places themselves, both simple and complex. Expanding on Chet Bowers’ (2003) radical cultural/ecological question—“What needs to be conserved?”—I propose an organic place-conscious curriculum germinating from the following questions: What needs to be conserved? What needs to be transformed? What needs to be restored, protected, or created?

Simply put, I believe that places everywhere, and our relationships to them, need to be healed. As Wes Jackson (1994) wrote, “Either all places are holy, or none of them are.” Colonization, globalization, and simple ignorance have become embedded everywhere. Everywhere people and places have suffered from exploitation, violence, and degradation. If the historical question “What happened here?” can help learners better understand the past, the ethical question, “What should happen here?” can help learners understand the process of creating a better future. “Making the world a better place”—the often unspoken aim of critical education—is an empty abstraction if, as Berry said, it does not translate into local knowledge and local action. Decolonization and reinhabitation provide a rough framework for local action, and for the work of local democracy. This does not mean that place-conscious educators wish to limit themselves
to local knowledge and action, but rather to claim that local knowledge and action are essential both to education and to creating a better world (see Hawken, 2007).

10. Everyone can develop educative and satisfying practices of place. As with all worthwhile education, place-conscious learning is for everyone, young and old. Indeed, if young people in schools are to benefit from it fully, they will need to be in the company of other adults who have developed place-conscious ways of being. John Cameron from the University of Western Sydney is what he terms a “place-responsive” educator. Cameron (2003) has written autobiographically about his own needs to develop personal practices of place in order to take himself seriously as a place-responsive educator. Place-based education is not something you can teach very well unless it is developed through a program of a personal learning.

Teachers and other educational leaders all live and work somewhere, and they ought to know something about those places. Imagine if all the adults in schools and universities everywhere consciously developed even one practice of place, and through such practices they began to recognize common ground between themselves and others, and that this recognition led to relationship building and collaborative projects with students, and eventually to an entire network of place-conscious educational practices. What a rich places of learning these would be!

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1996) wrote, “place makes a poor abstraction.” In my attempt to generalize about why place matters to educators everywhere, I fear that the reasons I have been outlining too easily veer toward abstraction. In closing, therefore, I will share briefly about a personal practice of place that I intend to develop over time.

As I write today, March 22, 2007, I hear the sounds of spring on the Palouse, a 4000-square-mile swath of rich, dryland farming in the Inland Northwest, spanning the borders of eastern Washington and the north Idaho panhandle. The two dominant sounds outside my window are birdsong (finches, sparrows, chickadees, nuthatches, red-winged blackbirds, and flickers) and the local cropduster. This is the yin and the yang of life on the Palouse: a beautiful natural landscape bordered by rugged mountains and rivers that is patrolled by a massive six-month aerial assault of pesticides on all that is not wheat, lentils, or peas.

I have become a collector of stories about this region: stories about the Native Palouse Indians, a tribe that suffered the first known murder at the hands of whites in all of the Inland Northwest; stories about the gold rush and the logging boom that made my tiny town of Palouse a bustling boomtown during the 1890s (back then it had several brothels, now it doesn’t even have a gas station); stories of 19th century inhabitants buried in the cemetery near my home, one of whom, according to his tombstone, died a “VICTIM OF CORPORATE GREED.” There are stories everywhere here (and everywhere). The one that interests me today is what I’ve found to be the strangely silenced story of the region’s agriculture, the story that most people who live around here seem to take for granted and yet know little about.

Hidden, somehow, in the awesome beauty of these rolling hills are two undeniable, ubiquitous, and seldom-discussed facts: herbicide and pesticide. Last year during the second week of June, the local paper published a color photograph of a yellow crop duster spraying pesticides near my home and the homes of my neighbors. The
photograph was featured on the front page as the "Reader Photo of the Day." There was no commentary, only the picturesque image of a low-flying yellow biplane, filling the space between the blue sky and the green earth, trailing white clouds of chemical poisons.

I have been trying to make sense of the lack of concern most of my neighbors seem to have about pesticides and a host of other ecological and political issues associated with our region’s agriculture. Studying the relationship between pesticides, the aesthetics of the Palouse, the region’s natural and cultural history, the politics of export economics and biotechnology, the historical and contemporary presence of Native peoples, the Snake River dams, and the almost extinct wild salmon runs—this has become my personal practice of place. I am personally and passionately involved in learning something about this place and the people who live here (past, present, and future). As I plan to nurture roots here for myself and my family, I am not interested in playing the role of an overeducated environmentalist protesting the livelihood of ordinary people like farmers and cropdusters. Thus, when I talk to my students about my practices of place I don’t begin with my decision to buy local and organic food as much as I can. I tell them first about Brock Hill, the son-in-law of my neighbors (80-year-old and third generation inhabitants of the Palouse) who graciously took me up in his cropduster for the ride of my life, so that I may get a look at the place where I live, the place that I’ll wager, in many ways, he knows better than anyone.

References


