

Professional Book Review

Gruenewald, D. A., & Smith, G. A. (Eds.) (2008). *Place-based education in the global age: Local diversity*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 377 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8058-5864-8 (pbk). \$35.00

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This volume significantly contributes to the theory and practice of the emerging field of place-based education. It informs, expands perspectives, and challenges the reader to rethink the purposes of schooling. The potentially transformative nature of this book makes it a recommended reading for all engaged in reforming education and seeking to improve our world.

The two main purposes of this volume are to contribute to the theory and practice of place-based education and to reclaim “the significance of the local in the global age” (p. xiii). The editors create a context for the varied perspectives of chapter contributors by defining place-based education and sharing socially conscious reasons for connecting students to where they live. “Place-based or place-conscious education introduces children and youth to the skills and dispositions needed to regenerate and sustain communities” (p. xvi). It guides students in recognizing community needs, identifying themselves as intellectual resources, partnering with other community members, and actively seeking to make contributions to improve their community. A heightened respect for place, recognition of the inter-relationships between people and place, and commitment to care for one’s place are key ideas. The core themes of place-based education are reflected in the following questions: “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?” (p. xix)

This volume challenges the reader to examine the purposes and structures of schooling. It questions the current emphasis on standardized knowledge and global capitalism and suggests a closer examination of the impact of these trends. It seeks to shift the focus from individual competition to collective responsibility, from alienation to empowerment, and from addressing issues of race, class, and gender separate from place to connecting these issues to people’s total environment. It places these issues in an ethical context by making decisions about what to accept or reject in the emerging “global civilization” based on its impact on local welfare now and in the future.

The book is organized around three themes:

- models for place-based learning;
- reclaiming broader meaning of education; and
- global visions of the local in higher education.

The first section shares six success stories of place-based education in the United States. Practitioners in rural, suburban, and urban environments describe how place-based education contributed to the learning of students and communities while promoting the public good. The range of programs described reveals the potential for universal applications: an overview of several contemporary models including the Foxfire program; a class that uses art to build relationships with places; the STAR (Service To All Relations) charter school's commitment to serving the community and the Earth; efforts supported by the Rural School and Community Trust in the Northeast to revitalize their economies and communities; a science teacher in inner-city Boston who guides students toward addressing local concerns through political action; and a statewide effort in Alaska to integrate indigenous knowledge and cultural practices into the school system. Experiential, inquiry-oriented, and action-directed, these models of place-based education reflect local diversity. Intrinsically meaningful, place-based learning actively involves students in the democratic process. These are stories to inspire and instill hope in oftentimes marginalized populations. They are stories about together making a difference.

The second section examines reasons for place-based education. The authors emphasize the interconnections between place, community well-being, and schooling. They provide multiple perspectives on why connecting students to place enhances learning while simultaneously aiding them in adapting to a changing environment. The first author invites readers to examine institutional interpretations of diversity critically. He views public schools as lacking in diversity due to their very structure. "This fundamental lack of diversity, the isolated, regulated, and narrow nature of schooling, its disconnection and disregard for community life—these are issues that critical educators need to take seriously" (p.142). He suggests bridging the division between environmental education and culturally responsive education. The phrase "a critical pedagogy of place" describes this confluence as combining "the critical tradition that has historically been concerned with human oppression, difference, and radical multiculturalism with geographically and ecologically grounded (i.e., place-based) cultural experience. A critical pedagogy of place posits two fundamental goals for education: decolonization and reinhabitation" (p. 149).

The next perspective examines how schools have largely abandoned nature literacy. Even when programs exist, they infrequently create opportunities for students to explore nature. The author identifies several obstacles to nature study and offers suggestions for social change in this area. He poses the question, "How can a culture confront imperiled ecosystems when a large majority of the members have no functional knowledge of the system's working parts" (p. 155). Another chapter discusses efforts of the Rural School and Community Trust to address trends such as centralization and out-migration of youth in rural communities. It shares an asset-based model for promoting rural development, along with research on centralization of schools, two examples of collaboration between schools and communities for mutual benefit, and a list of

lessons learned. “Connecting students to community development teaches them to be good citizens of any place and builds their leadership capacity” (p. 193). The final authors in this section discuss a theoretical framework based on the writings of Montesquieu to blend the concepts of diversity and community. Viewing these ideas as complementary rather than mutually exclusive, they suggest applying both lenses in reform efforts with place providing a relevant context for study.

The last section of the book, “Global Visions of the Local in Higher Education,” examines how educators from New Mexico, Israel, Sydney, and New England apply place-based education. One educator created an institute that develops leaders by bringing together community members and educators to address local issues. In war-torn Middle East, students discover the role of “at-homeness” in transcending national divisions. Imagination, a tool for reformers, is nurtured in the power of natural places. Finally, the authors apply place-based education in teacher training.

Thought provoking, inspiring, and compelling, this volume is a call to social action. It views students, teachers, and community members as potential leaders with the capability and responsibility to improve their locales. In times of emerging global markets, overpopulation, and disruptive climate change, place-conscious education empowers people to make a difference in their own communities. It reconnects people to each other and to the land. The editors express this vision of hope: “...we believe that the future of humanity will once more be tied to the emergence of diverse, regional societies grounded in the unique possibilities of their own locales” (p. 357). This volume may well challenge and change your beliefs about schooling in the 21st century!