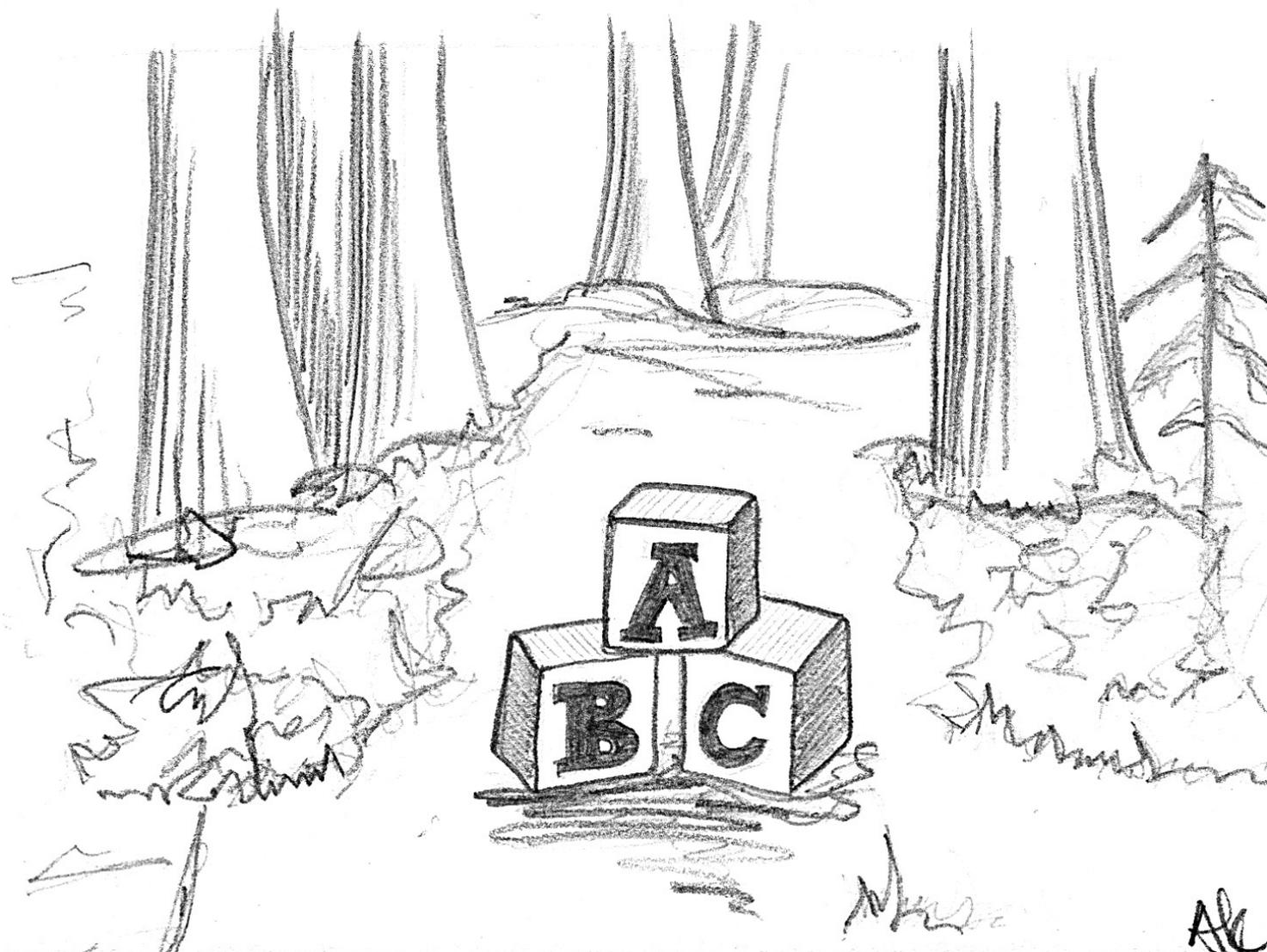
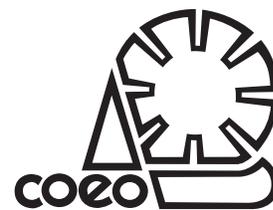


Pathways

THE ONTARIO JOURNAL OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION
Fall 2015, 28(1)



Place-Based Education: A Reconnaissance of the Literature

By Simon Beames

In September 2014, I had the pleasure of giving a keynote address at COEO's annual conference. The subject of my talk was place-based education. While I was delighted to be invited to present to the delegates, I was lukewarm on the subject matter—not because I don't believe in place-based education, but because I didn't think I had any thing to add on the topic. I figured that place-based education was widely supported by a fair amount of literature, and that educators should just get on with it. What could I possibly contribute to the discussion?

Over the last 20 years, conversations about place and education have seen increasing attention in books, journals, dissertations, blogs, magazines and conferences. Indeed, in outdoor learning circles in particular, place-based pedagogies and curricula are no longer uncommon. As I started delving into the place-based education literature in order to prepare my talk, I came to realize that, while the term "place-based education" was used by many, a deep understanding of how to teach through local phenomena was not so obvious. It seemed to me that educators needed a more nuanced understanding of place-based approaches to teaching, and therein lay the rationale for my talk, and this article which summarizes it.

In the pages that follow, I will first present a language for considering the degree to which our place-based education actually responds to place. I'll then propose and explain three levels of place-based education practice. Together, these will enable us to have more meaningful conversations about our place-based outdoor teaching.

Foundational Literature

Place-based education finds its roots in four principal fields. In the 1970s, human

geography featured writers such as Yi Fu Tuan, Edward Relph and George Seddon. Henderson (2010) paraphrased place guru Tuan's central thesis in simple terms: "space is unstoried place" (p. 84). Eco-psychology was driven by luminaries like Theodore Roszak, as was deep ecology by Nils Faarlund, and philosophy by Edward Casey. As you can see, none of these four roots is in the field of education.

The birth of place-based education literature was in the 1990s, with the likes of David Orr, Gregory Smith and Dilafruz Williams writing about "ecological education," Stephen Haymes focusing on a "pedagogy of place," and Robbie Nicol and Pete Higgins highlighting the educational importance of gaining "a sense of place." Towards the end of the millennium, Paul Theobald outlined his view of "place-conscious classrooms and community-oriented schooling," while Frank Traina and Susan Darley Hill recounted the merits of "bioregional education" and Janice Woodhouse and Cliff Knapp championed "place-based curriculum and instruction." The 1990s also featured the first place-based education PhDs, which included works by Canadians James Raffan, Bob Henderson and the late Brent Cuthbertson.

The noughties was a time that saw the world of place-based education maturing and "instructing" educators; the literature focused less on what "it" was and more on how to do it. Gregory Smith's piece, "Place-Based Education: Learning to Be Where We Are," and David Sobel's *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms & Communities*, both provided digestible and convincing imperatives and guidelines for this approach, while David Gruenewald's oft-cited paper, "The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place," laid out a watertight theoretical argument for such teaching through place. Peer-reviewed papers in outdoor education journals

followed, with two examples being Alistair Stewart's explication of "decolonising encounters" through "place-responsive" education, and Molly Baker's "landfulness" approach to reconnecting with the land, which drew upon the conservationist Aldo Leopold's iconic writing. Two key books then followed: Smith & Sobel's *Place- and Community-Based Education in Schools*, and Brian Wattchow and Mike Brown's *A Pedagogy of Place*. With this growing corpus of literature (which includes many titles I haven't mentioned), place-based education had arrived and was here to stay.

A question that intrigued me was, "Why the recent interest in place-based education? What has brought about its rise at this time?" Wattchow and Brown suggest that its emergence has come from a "concern about the cumulative effects of modernity upon our ability to respect and care for the local places we call home and the remote places we encounter when we travel" (p. 51). Seen this way, place-based education (or place-responsive education, as many antipodeans prefer to call it) has come to the forefront because of the times in which we live; in pre-Internet, pre-globalized times, our parents and our parents' parents had much less need for place-based education.

Some Key Assumptions and Limitations

Now that we've had a whirlwind tour of the seminal place-based education literature, some of its key assumptions can be summarized here:

- It's about education (not only "learning"—education involves an educator!)
- It involves the near and far, urban and rural (and everything in between)
- It considers the past / present / future
- It can be used across the curriculum
- It encompasses interactions between land, humans and broader ecosystems
- It requires a certain amount of "dwelling" and "responding"

If you accept these assumptions, then let us next examine just how place-based your teaching can and should be. Take a moment to consider the following topics and how they might best be taught:

- Biodiversity loss in the Brazilian rain forest
- 19th century Russian literature
- Monet impressionist art
- WWI trench warfare
- The Palestine / Israel conflict
- The influence of climate change on Bangladesh

The accepted wisdom in place-based education appears to be as follows:

If a topic has to be taught without attention to place, it will lack real-world application, and thus reduce student engagement, and presumably learning.

The million-dollar question then is this: Shall we only teach topics that can be taught through engagement with local places?

If so, we might not want to teach the six above topics and others like them. Seen this way, focusing exclusively on place-based approaches might actually limit student learning.

Clearly, we need a more nuanced understanding of the hows and whys of place-based education. This takes us to the next section of the paper, which deconstructs place-based education into three levels of theory.

For starters, it may be helpful to conceive of three kinds of place-based outdoor education: "Place ambivalent," which ignores place (e.g., doing a Shakespeare lesson outside because the sun is shining); "place sensitive," which pays some attention to local phenomena; and "place essential," which describes learning that is directly related to the exact location in which it takes place (e.g., learning about trench warfare on a field trip to Belgium) (Mannion, Fenwick, Nugent, & l'Anson,

2011). I can see how a dimension, with place-ambivalent practice at one end and place-essential practice at the other, could be helpful for teachers to better consider the degree to which their teaching is place-based. Employing this dimension as a tool for analyzing practice is the first level.

The next thing that place-based educators can do is to add a critical dimension to their work. Drawing on Paulo Friere and Henry Giroux, Gruenewald's (2003) "Critical Pedagogy of

Place" espouses questioning inequalities of power and opportunity; this allows places to become understood at a deeper, more political level, which in turn lays the platform for people to transform their places. This moves the discussion from simply learning about place to changing place. Gruenewald's two key concepts are decolonization, which involves learning to recognize disruption and "injury" to place, and reinhabitation, which focuses on learning to live well socially and ecologically in these places.

This all sounds wonderful, doesn't it? We have the knowledge and skills to use place-based pedagogies to bring alive all of our curricular areas. We also possess the capacity to question the way we live and travel through our places, and to consider how we might change them for the better. Is that all there is to it?

The short answer to this rhetorical question is "no, it isn't." The long answer is as follows. In my view, place-based education, while being a "child" or product of the late modern times in which we live, is also highly complicated by these same circumstances.

Countless social theorists have described contemporary society as being characterized by obsessions with minimizing risks of all kinds, increasing speeds associated with "hyper-modernity," people on the move who live "mobile lives," the impossible complexity of many "simple" everyday tasks, and the constant change that comes from living in

"liquid times."¹ Commercial influences and consumer culture is so pervasive that most of us aren't even aware of it—even when we're "buying green" (Soron, 2011). Borrowing from Pete Higgins' conundrum on learning for sustainability, one could be forgiven for feeling exasperated by the challenges posed by trying to educate for place, when the place is the Earth and Earth is in a constant state of change. This brings us to what might be called a "third wave" of place-responsive education.

Did you notice what I did there? I used the term "place-responsive." As Mike Brown explained to me, responding to a place implies active engagement; it is more aligned with Gruenewald's work, which seeks to go beyond merely learning about a place (which is still good) to transforming that place (which is even better). Let's kick it up a notch, though. What could be even better than even better? That's right, the third wave (as I have labelled it), which features something called "critical cosmopolitanism."

Getting beyond the fancy name, this approach features one over-arching goal. And that, according to Margaret Hawkins (2014), is to "create citizens of the world" (p. 97) by fusing locally situated practices and "global others." On the ground, this can happen through sharing our critical responses to our places with those in other parts of the world and vice versa. Critical cosmopolitanism shows students how the issues within their places are related to other places in a complex web of history, geography, politics and economics. This perspective argues for devising ways to help our students understand local issues "within the broader context of the global shifts that are reshaping the very nature of localities" (Rizvi, 2006, p. 21). Meanings that are constructed and arrived at by students can be sent and received through technology (e.g., videos, slide shows, interviews, podcasts, Facebook, Twitter and other social media). This kind of "techno cosmo" teaching is beyond my own current practice, but I can see how it could be my next pedagogical step.

This brings us to the end of our whistlestop recce of place-responsive education. We've acknowledged its origins, highlighted some assumptions and limitations, and then looked at how place-based education can be considered on a dimension that has ambivalent and essential at its two ends; we've seen how education for place can go beyond simply learning about it to helping to change it; and, finally, we've understood how it is possible to take this a step further and share one's critical responses to place with far-away others, while learning about theirs at the same time.

All useful papers in education theory need to help readers connect concepts to their practice. With this in mind, I propose that educators interested in teaching through place consider the following questions:

1. To what degree can (and should) your place-based education genuinely respond to the place in which it happens?
2. To what degree is your place-based education an emancipatory, place-transforming one?
3. To what degree is your place-based education linking participants' local, fluid lives with those of global others?

I know that I've got work to do on all three fronts and I wish you well as you develop your place-responsive teaching practices.

Note

1. In order of concept: Beck (1992), Virilio (2000), Elliot & Urry (2010), Lewin (1993), Baumant (2007).

References

Gruenewald, D. (2003). The best of both worlds: A critical pedagogy of place. *Educational Researcher*, 32(3), 3–12.

Hawkins, M. (2014). Ontologies of place, creative meaning making and critical cosmopolitan education. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 44(1), 90–112.

Henderson, B. (2010). Understanding heritage travel: Story, place, and technology. In S. Beames (Ed.), *Understanding educational expeditions* (pp. 79–89). Rotterdam: Sense.

Mannion, G., Fenwick, A., Nugent, C., & I'Anson, J. (2011). *Teaching in nature*. Scottish Natural Heritage Commissioned Report No. 476. http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/commissioned_reports/476.pdf

Rizvi, F. (2006). *Epistemic virtues and cosmopolitan learning*. Radford Lecture, Adelaide, Australia. Retrieved from <http://www.aare.edu.au/aer/online/0801c.pdf>

Smith, G. (2002). Place-based education: Learning to be where we are. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83, 584–594.

Smith, G., & Sobel, D. (2010). *Place- and community-based education in schools*. New York: Routledge.

Sobel, D. (2004). *Place-based education: Connecting classrooms & communities*. Great Barrington, Mass.: Orion Society.

Soron, D. (2010). Sustainability, self-identity and the sociology of consumption. *Sustainable Development*, 18, 172–181.

Wattchow, B., & Brown, M. (2011). *A pedagogy of place: Outdoor education for a changing world*. Clayton, Australia: Monash University.

Simon Beames is program director for the MSc in Outdoor Education at the University of Edinburgh. Simon created the Outdoor Journeys program—a cross-curricular, local outdoor learning pedagogy—and is currently working on his fourth book, which examines the relationship between adventure and education.