

## Preface

Place- and community-based education—an approach to teaching and learning that connects learning to the local—has become for us an antidote to one of the most serious but generally unspoken dilemmas in American education: the alienation of children and youth from the real world right outside their homes and classrooms. What's real for many young people is what happens on their computer monitors, television screens, and MP3 players. Caught in an interior and electronically mediated world, they are losing touch with both the society of flesh-and-blood humans and the delicate natural world that supports our species. Like Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods* (2005), we suspect that American children are nature-deprived, but we would go further—they are community-deprived, as well. Schools are one of the few institutions where it might be possible to rectify this problem. This book will describe ways that educators can take on this issue.

Place- and community-based education also provides a way for teachers and communities to prepare children to become participants in the local problem-solving that we believe must become increasingly common as humanity adjusts to the consequences of climate change, economic globalization, and resource exhaustion. Negotiating the challenges of the coming decades is likely to require a level of human adaptability and creativity unmatched since the agricultural and industrial revolutions. Replacing fossil fuels and reinventing sustainable farming and manufacturing processes will demand the intelligent involvement of large numbers of widely dispersed people. An educational process that begins with the local and that draws students into real-time participation in civic life and decision-making can help children and youth begin to see themselves as actors and creators rather than observers and consumers. As the stories in this volume will illustrate, students in many communities across the United States are already demonstrating the impact that involvement in community problem-solving can have on their sense of efficacy and their academic achievement.

### Some Common Misconceptions

On one level, much of the vision of place- and community-based education is attractive. It often resonates with the kinds of educational experiences that many people find meaningful. In our work with educators across the country, however,

we've found that it's not always easy to implement. It can disrupt deeper connections and prevent people from seeing the value. Five of these come up most often.

- **Misconception 1:** Place-based education is just another fad, but it's not for us. We're too busy, so we can't do it.
- **Misconception 2:** Place-based education is just about teachers having to go out into the field.
- **Misconception 3:** Place-based education is just about mental education.
- **Misconception 4:** Place-based education is just about learning in small communities.
- **Misconception 5:** Place-based education is just about time and energy, but not about learning.

In response to the first misconception, both appealing and challenging when students are learning to everyday life experiences meaningful over the past decades demonstrated that students involved in real-world learning of length in Chapters 6 and 7. Into literacy, math, science, and improve student academic achievement.

**Reconceptualization** of students to learn and

Second, place- and community-based way of thinking broadens and the local environment. program, the new FO Math. Instead, it's a new for instance. The fact connecting the police department and community-based and the community. If we'd also have the partnership neighborhood redevelopment just having the DARE

we've found that it's not long before a variety of concerns and outright objections can disrupt deeper conversations about place- and community-based education and prevent people from giving this approach the serious consideration it deserves. Five of these come up with some frequency, and we'd like to address them at the outset.

- **Misconception 1:** Place- and community-based education sounds appealing, but it's not for us. Our school has to focus on keeping our test scores improving so we can meet Annual Yearly Progress.
- **Misconception 2:** Place- and community-based education is another add-on that teachers have to shoehorn into their curriculum.
- **Misconception 3:** An educational approach that focuses on place is environmental education in sheep's clothing.
- **Misconception 4:** Place- and community-based education is for rural schools in small communities with lots of wide open spaces out the back door.
- **Misconception 5:** Place- and community-based education takes much more time and energy, both of which are in short supply for most teachers.

In response to the first misconception, place- and community-based education is both appealing and capable of enhancing student learning. **Student achievement is hampered when students aren't motivated and they don't see the relevance of their learning to everyday life. Place- and community-based education makes school experiences meaningful and therefore motivates students to learn. Numerous studies over the past decade of authentic, place- and community-based education have demonstrated that students become more engaged in learning when they've been involved in real-world problem-solving,** something that will be discussed at greater length in Chapters 6 and 7. Incorporating place- and community-based approaches into literacy, math, social studies, and science curricula is therefore a proven way to improve student academic performance.

**Reconceptualization 1: Place- and community-based education helps motivate students to learn and can contribute to increased test scores on standardized tests.**

Second, place- and community-based education is a mindset, a paradigm shift, a way of thinking broadly about the school's integral relationship to the community and the local environment. It's not a new curriculum unit. It's not like the DARE program, the new FOSS science curriculum mandated by the district, or Everyday Math. Instead, it's a new approach to all of these curricular areas. Let's take DARE for instance. The fact that the local police officer is coming into the classroom, connecting the police department and the school, is illustrative of one aspect of place- and community-based education—breaking down the walls between the school and the community. From a place- and community-based education perspective, we'd also have the park superintendent and the town recycling coordinator and the neighborhood redevelopment director in the classroom, as well. And, instead of just having the DARE police officer in the school, the fifth graders might take a field

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**Reconceptualization 2:** Place- and community-based education is a new way of thinking about the school's role in society. It requires a more holistic mindset about school reform than No Child Left Behind.

Third, place- and community-based education owes much to environmental education as well as to critical pedagogy, problem-based learning, service learning, constructivism, and many other education innovations of the last half-century. Place- and community-based education is certainly about local places and the environment, but it's also about history, the arts, cultural diversity, social justice, and more. It's about literacy emerging from reading neighborhood street signs; it's about supermarket math; it's about learning history in the cemetery; it's about drumming being central to the music curriculum in a school with a majority of African-American students; it's about learning to sail as part of the science curriculum. Therefore,

**Reconceptualization 3:** Place- and community-based education involves using all of the environments in which students live—natural, social, cultural—as starting points to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum.

Fourth, it is true that much good place- and community-based education has happened in rural communities. The Rural School and Community Trust has initiated projects from Maine to Alaska, and from North Dakota to Louisiana that have resulted in community revitalization and school improvement. But cities are places, too. And some of the most exciting examples of place- and community-based education are flourishing in inner-city schools. Most interesting is to see the coming together of critical pedagogy, with its emphasis on social justice, and place- and community-based education, with its emphasis on learning the neighborhood. This results in curriculum initiatives that focus on access to green space as a social justice issue, homelessness, the bathrooms in substandard school buildings, learning the history of community revitalization, and including local African-American, Asian, Cape Verdean, and Hispanic artists in the art curriculum. Therefore,

**Reconceptualization 4:** Place- and community-based education is alive and well in urban and rural, Northern and Southern, liberal and conservative communities and schools.

Finally, place- and community-based education requires a different approach to planning and teaching than an education centered on textbooks, lectures, and classroom demonstrations. It doesn't necessarily take more time. In effective place- and community-based educational settings, teachers and students become co-investigators of issues and concerns, with students taking increasing responsibility

for their own learning. Students are to master and outside-of-classroom learning. When learning is meaningful, uncommonly effective. Teaching in this way has a new meaning.

**Reconceptualization 5:** Learning experiences are learning experiences.

We are discovering that members have a lot of activities, teaching adults. What has the dangerous result and activism of become involvement and commitments and energized and people realize that capable of making

## An Overview

We have envisioned the public interest. Each of us explored place- that what we have that will allow to implement some

We begin in students in Boston school and place Mathematics Program to teaching and mented in a set discuss definition approach, and in this direction at the abstract and

for their own learning. Teachers no longer must prepare all of the content that students are to master. They instead assemble materials, human resources, and inside- and outside-of-classroom experiences that serve as the foundation for student learning. When this happens and the work students are asked to complete is vital and meaningful, young people take control of their own education. Teachers not uncommonly experience professional revitalization and an increase in energy. Teaching in this way does not become a source of exhaustion but a source of vocational meaning. Therefore,

**Reconceptualization 5:** Place- and community-based education relies upon learning experiences that require teachers to use their time in new and often invigorating ways.

We are discovering that in schools where teachers, students, and community members have embarked on the process of integrating the local into educational activities, teaching and learning become dynamic for both young people and adults. What had been abstract and seemingly irrelevant becomes as immediate as the dangerous railroad crossing on the way to school or stories about the heroism and activism of children's neighbors and ancestors. More students find reasons to become involved in school, and their achievement begins to demonstrate the attention and commitment they bring to their studies. Many teachers rediscover the possibilities and ideals that drew them into education as a vocation and become energized and passionate about their work with the young. And community members realize that schools can be more than they ever imagined and that students are capable of making extraordinary contributions to their common life.

# Place- and Community-based Education in Schools

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