# Book Review

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*Place-Based Education in the Global Age: Local Diversity*. D. Gruenewald and G. Smith, Eds. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2008, 377 pp., ISBN 13-978-0-8058-5864-8.

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Without a doubt, *Place-Based Education in the Global Age* is an important and timely collection of work. Editors David A. Gruenewald and Gregory A. Smith do much to position the individual stories of learners and teachers that are found within this book at the forefront of a movement toward education in local diversity. At the outset, the editors make explicit the obstructive and detrimental division that exists between environmental educators and those interested in social justice and equity issues, and they highlight place-based education as a key mode of reconciliation. Following from Gruenewald's past work on the subject, the editors suggest that the book is an effort to consider what education might look like when it supports the twin goals of decolonization and reinhabitation—that is, when it supports both environmental and social justice objectives. This candid discussion, couched in a forceful critique of the corporate capitalist system, serves as an effective basis and guide for exploring the geographically and culturally varied stories of place-based education that are contained within this volume.

The book is impressive both in the breadth of topics covered (from individual and collective freedom to the sacred and beautiful) and also in the engagement of the authors' varied discussions (personal anecdotes and narrative description are common throughout). The topic of place is broadly and variously conceived in the volume, though colored and somewhat unified by the editors' initial attack on corporate capitalism. Overall, there seems to be a consensus that place refers to the location in which real life occurs—what some might call 'lived space.' In this broad sense, then, place is simply the antithesis of abstraction, where the theories and ideas that bounce around our intellectual towers actually get to play out in real time/space. Several authors in the volume also seem to assume that place has a "natural" connotation, less technological and more ecological. Most suggest that place is generally an arena of both meaning and conflict. Importantly, several of the authors are clear to point out that a focus on place, or on "the local," does not preclude but actually requires a focus on what lies beyond the bounds of any one community or locale—that is, on the relationships between places. (This is an especially crucial point given recent critiques of localism as insular and homogenous.) Although initially the ways in which the group of authors conceive of and describe place-based education may seem disparate in distracting ways, taken together there emerges a surprising coherency in how the contribution of each author's story fits into the overall advocacy of place-based approaches.

This book is important for the advancement of research on rural schools and communities for many reasons. Educators and researchers can make practical use of the lessons contained within each author's specific experience, and can additionally gain from the overall inspiration and direction that is offered by the book as a whole. In regard to the latter, I can think of three distinct threads, and there are probably more. First, the book lends strength and purpose to a focus on rural schools and communities by placing rural areas in particular, and marginal communities more generally, at the cutting edge of a widespread

movement to challenge the homogenizing forces of economic globalization. This effectively turns the well-worn stereotype of rural-as-backwater on its head and—through an emphasis on decolonization and multiple ways of knowing—gives legitimacy to a renewed focus on things local. This allows us to see particular, localized struggles against consolidation, standardization, and institutionalization as part of a coherent, radical force of change. Moreover, bringing geographically and culturally diverse stories together allows for a sense of solidarity between these local places, effectively balancing uniqueness and difference with relationship and (global) interconnection.

Second, the collection of essays successfully uses the concept of place to open up the doors for reconciliation between environmental activists and advocates of social justice. Such reconciliation is becoming more and more vital, and, though not limited to rural education, is especially important in the context of rural education because rural communities are often dismissed or overlooked by activists as significant sites of radical struggle—particularly in regard to issues of race and ethnicity. At times the book is refreshingly honest about the conflicts and contradictions that place-based education can uncover, and many of the contributing authors are successful in highlighting how their teachings were both influenced by and illustrative of the complexities of place. Indeed, in this book place-based education is not just some feel-good, warm and cozy attempt to return to the simplicities of years past—it is a complex, and often difficult journey to bear witness to the social and ecological hardships of local communities, and to gain from the wisdom that can be found within these struggles. As contributors Theobald and Siskar note, there is therefore a lot of overlap to be found between the political projects of radical multiculturalists like bell hooks (1990) and those who consider place from a rural perspective (p. 212). In regard to both, place-based education seems to enhance the potential for children and adult learners to understand, discuss, and take action concerning inequitable socioeconomic and ecological patterns in their communities.

Third, the collected essays show not only why it is important to reach students in rural communities but also how it might be possible to do this. Many of the authors discuss the sense of alienation that students can experience when standardized schooling does not speak to them. Their stories here are so relevant—insisting upon the obvious but often overlooked truism that students must *feel* the connections between their education in school and their lives beyond if they are to be motivated and inspired to continue learning. The authors narrate many important bodily sensations—excitement, joy, sense of purpose, pride, ownership, responsibility—all of which have the potential to combat the "brain drain" phenomenon that is experienced in rural areas. Increased attention to these emotional/physical states of being, and to what it takes for students (and teachers) to get there, is an emerging and important way to improve the effectiveness of place-based approaches.

Despite this important groundwork, there are some shortcomings, indicating the need for more research and discussion. First, I was disappointed at the lack of attention given to obstacles and sticky-points of place-based education. While many of the contributing authors mention complexity and hardship, only a few succeed in giving us the wisdom behind such hard lessons. Does place-based education always reach students? When has it failed, and why? And, if it has worked, what circumstances helped it to do so? To take inspiration from these stories, I needed more admissions like Senechal's—who confesses she was lucky: that a progressive, alternative setting made her work possible (p. 94). From the title of the book, and from what I know about the contradictions of globalization and localism, I expected more discussions about student and administrative resistance to place-based approaches, about conflict in the community or among parents, about financial barriers and time constraints, and the hard compromises that are often required to function effectively within the current sociopolitical system.

Second, while I fully embrace the vision of decolonization and reinhabitation that is promoted by the editors, I am not entirely convinced that the place-based education movement is yet capable of effectively encouraging anti-colonial/anti-racist projects. For one, it is unclear to me whether place-based education can effectively allow an explicit discussion of social inequities—at least while operating, as we are, under the current educational system, in which many schools are "reluctant to involve students in controversial issues" (p. 82). How exactly is place-based education supposed to encourage sociopolitical consciousness if the parties involved cannot directly and openly discuss how racist and colonialist visions have given rise to

our own social positions as teachers, students, workers, parents, and citizens? If place-based education is to be the merger between social justice and environmental concerns (a potential that is fully possible and exciting), then it is particularly important to be explicit about why and how environmentalism often continues to carry strong connotations of middle-class whiteness (p. 145), and more importantly, to be conscious of what impact this connotation might have on the way that poor, non-white students, teachers, and parents feel about environmentally-oriented, place-based approaches. To be fair, I think that Gruenewald's and my point is the same; but saying that place-based education is inherently attentive to local diversity (by nature of the meaning of "place") is not the same as explicitly addressing the myriad ways in which race, class, and gender oppression can be hidden within everyday, local experiences. Indeed, if we do not uncover the latter, place itself is just an abstraction.

Following from this, it would have been helpful if all of the contributing authors were conscious about revealing and discussing their own positions in society. Although many of the essays are narrative in style, few actually divulge much about the 'difference' that is present in their own lives. Who are these place-based educators, and how do their own gender, racial, and class-based identities influence their ability to teach/reach using place-based approaches? From what I can gather, most are white, and many are men. I would venture most of the authors, if not all, are middle-class—anyway, all are highly educated, in itself a mark of privilege. What sort of obstacles have these authors encountered in trying to forge diverse relationships with people who are not like them? The editors importantly critique academia's preoccupation with difference and stress instead the importance of relationships. But it is crucial also to recognize that healthy relationships require continued, critical attention to the ways that difference can alienate and contradict, yet also bind.

In regard to the social construction of place, the editors do well to highlight "place" as a nature-culture hybrid, but the book as a whole does not explicitly address the *material* forces that are involved in these dynamic constructions. While place in this book is considered a nexus between the forces of culture and nature, there still seems to exist an assumption that anthropocentric forces fall on the side of culture, knowledge, and meaning, while natural forces make up the physical, non-human world. Such an assumption reifies the nature-culture binary, and puts the human body in an awkward state of non-belonging. This is problematic given that we experience place in and through our material, interconnected selves. The essays in this volume attend to how people produce places, but not visa-versa.

There are the many examples in the book of how both "non-human" nature and human-made place, can inspire, motivate, and lead to spiritual and emotional growth. But what is happening when the human body is inspired or motivated, or alternately, as it is disappointed or alienated by the projects of place? Recent scholarly work suggests that if we are concerned about encouraging political/social change, it is also important to pay attention to the ways that places affect and are embodied (e.g., Thrift, 2005). In other words, places produce human bodies that react, feel, and sense in unique, material ways. Therefore, place-based education's ability to *affect*—to materially produce feelings and sensations within the human body—is certainly an important avenue of future investigation for research in rural education. Perhaps even more important is its capacity to affect *differentially*, in regard to race, class, gender, and other human or social differences.

Finally, on a smaller point, while I fully understand the intention behind localist calls for more "self-reliant problem solvers," and communities that can make things right on their own (p. 176), it would seem important for any such calls to be framed within a knowledgeable and thoughtful discussion of the current realities of neoliberal capitalism. All too often I have heard the political economic arguments of new localism and new agrarianism dismissed by academics who take them to be simply neoliberalism in disguise (see, e.g., Allen & Guthman, 2006; Brenner & Theodore, 2002). At best, community-oriented, localist positions fail to hold the government accountable for social welfare; at worst, they promote individualistic and blinkered thinkers who buy into the ideology of free-trade. (Or so the critique goes. . . .) While I disagree with this dismissal on many levels, I also believe that advocates of localism must respond effectively to these critiques if we are to encourage fellow activists to jump on the place-based, localist bandwagon.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that *Place-Based Education in the Global Age* is undoubtedly an important book and a significant contribution to scholarship on rural schools and communities. Educators and

academics both would do well to read it, assign it to students and allow it to influence and inspire us. But let's not stop here. We need to use *Place-Based Education in the Global Age* to springboard our thoughts and actions toward ever-new processes of decolonization and reinhabitation!

## REFERENCES

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