# The Meaning of Place and Community in Contemporary Educational Discourse

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*Place and community are terms used with ever more frequency in discussions, reports, and research related to education, yet there is little agreement related to what these terms mean. This article examines the concepts of place and community in an attempt to bring more clarity to the role they may play in educational theory and, ultimately, educational policy.*

During the past two decades, the frequency with which the terms "place" and "community" have appeared in the literature related to education has increased dramatically. This is not to suggest that either term has been applied to educational policy to any significant extent, for we remain adrift in a standards and testing milieu that has left the ends of education utterly unexamined. But one can certainly find evidence to suggest that, here and there at least, the terms place-based and community-based education are affecting the world of practice.[1] The purpose of this essay is to sort through what is meant by these terms and the extent to which they represent different or similar concepts.

Community is certainly the older of the two; place is the newcomer to educational discourse. But the growing popularity of each we believe stems from two related although quite different scholarly movements. The frequency with which we hear of community tied to education is largely attributable to the communitarian movement represented by the work of such scholars as Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, Amitai Etzioni, and others who have tried to elevate community as a criterion for policy-making of all types. Increasing references to place, or place-based curriculum and instruction in education literature, is largely attributable to the environmental movement represented by the work of David Orr, Wendell Berry, Donald Worster, Chet Bowers, and many others who have attempted to elevate a sense of place as a fundamental part of American consciousness.

***Conceptual Distinctions and Similarities***

The most obvious distinction between place and community is that place is a physical location. Each place on earth has a range of attributes that distinguishes it from other places. Community, on the other hand, is something that exists on a continuum between less and more, for a strong sense of community exists where much is shared by the residents of a particular place and a weak sense of community exists where less is shared. Another way to express this distinction is to say that as a concept, place is concrete, community is an abstraction.

Another distinction is that all life must live some place, whether it be human, plant, or animal. We can only live by being in a particular place at a particular time. By contrast, it is not necessary that individuals reside or exist within a community. Many don't, in fact. Some have argued that American suburbs are not communities at all, but are merely "lifestyle enclaves" where people of like income live among one another (Bellah et al, 1991; Jackson, 1987). As a consequence, it makes some sense to look at place as an opportunity for the creation and/or maintenance of community, but the terms are not synonymous.

The most obvious conceptual similarity is that if community does indeed exist, it exists in a particular place. Place is in fact the only shared dimension to life that cannot be dismissed or denied, though it can certainly be ignored. Further, both place and community have the power to shape human beliefs and behaviors. Humans living in a particular place will come to believe certain things and behave in certain ways, given the exigencies of making a living in that location. This is merely another way of saying that humans are culture-producing beings. Those who live together for prolonged periods will generate norms for beliefs and behaviors and, further, they will enforce them with a kind of consensually produced morality.

Place and community are similar, too, in the extent to which they produce a range of human emotions. This is why it is common to hear people speak of a "sense of place" and a "sense of community." Where that sense is positive, it is because much is shared and the human emotions produced by the sharedness—that is to say, by the interactions required by shared circumstances—have a powerful psychological impact that produces a feeling of belonging. Where that sense is negative, it may be because little is shared. In such places it is a common occurrence that some residents will be required to "know their place," meaning they must learn to know well which facets of human life they are allowed to share with others—and which they

are not. The act of exclusion diminishes what is shared and thus diminishes any sense of community that might have otherwise existed.

The last similarity, and perhaps the most significant in terms of understanding why place and community are increasingly common in educational discourse, is that the health of a particular place from an ecological standpoint, and the health of a community measured in terms of the amount of shared circumstances, have both eroded in this country as a result of the same cultural forces. Looming large among these is a cultural emphasis on individualism. It is generally agreed among communitarian scholars that any responsible critique of modern life in the United States will reveal a cultural preoccupation with individualism that has led to policies that are harmful to communities and result in a society that is unable to deliver on its vision of democracy. These policies have led to a fracturing of community solidarity which in turn has resulted in the diminishment of a sense of political efficacy among citizens.[2] Worse still, it has elevated the most privileged in American society while condemning historically oppressed groups to ever-more rigid socioeconomic circumstances.

There is no clearer example of how far reaching the hegemonic influence of individualism has become than the 1886 U. S. Supreme Court *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* decision to extend the rights of "personhood" to business corporations, enabling them to buy one another up, to exercise the right of free speech through campaign donations, the distribution of anti-union pamphlets, etc. One outcome of that decision has been that when a corporation pulls up stakes and moves its operations abroad, it is under no obligation—nor is anyone else—to determine the quality of that choice by, say, measuring the hardship it might create in the community it has decided to leave. And the same can be said related to all kinds of policies enacted in this country—the way it affects a community is not a concern.

One could point to the way the nation's auto manufacturers bought out intra-city public transit systems and lobbied for the creation of mega-highways to promote automobile consumption as one illuminating example (Jacobs, 2004). The end result was the disintegration of America's inner cities and the further separation of races in this country due to the white flight it enabled. Or one might point to a common twentieth century school consolidation policy that literally robbed thousands of small rural communities of their schools, claiming they lacked sufficient economic efficiency. All such policies were premised on a notion of individual

rights—and the prevailing interpretation of the enforcement of these rights was totally blind to the effect of these policies on community life.

This understanding has led to a call for the reconsideration of the value of community across the full spectrum of the human condition. One outcome of such a reconsideration would be policies and laws that are generated in response to contextually and historically dependent circumstances. This would require a serious rethinking of the *a priori* protection of individual rights in the laws and policies the United States has adopted in the past and continues to apply in policy and judicial arenas. While the philosophical arguments behind the communitarian agenda can be quite convoluted, the agenda itself is simple: we need to find a way to insert community well-being into the list of criteria used to determine the formation of all manner of social policy, be it political, economic, or educational.

To understand the nature of the forces that have undermined places and communities in this country, we need to go back in history to examine a few critical assumptions that have guided the development of our culture and its regardlessness for places and communities. An examination of these assumptions should help delineate the reasons why place and community have been at the margins of educational theory and practice in this country, as well as why they are moving into mainstream educational discourse at this particular time.

### *The Genesis of Current Cultural Views Related to Place and Community*

The best place to start this discussion is at the point of our nation's founding. Victorious in a war of separation from England, we were then faced with the task of replacing a feudal governmental system, one that had been in place throughout practically all of Europe for over a thousand years. That was not an easy task. There were many ideas from which to choose. For example, Alexander Hamilton wanted to make George Washington a King. Others wanted to replicate the Athenian assembly. Still others wanted to create a republic, after Plato, only modernized and controlled by the best among men. Behind all the various ideas were philosophical arguments about the nature of man—what man really is, at bottom. In this regard, the main sources for the various arguments were two Enlightenment philosophers, John Locke of England and Charles de Montesquieu of France.

Most of those who are thought to be a part of the "Enlightenment," or the post-feudal intellectual awakening, spent a great deal of time theorizing about how human conditions would

unfold in a "state of nature," far from the interference of the feudal hierarchy. There was a crucial distinction to be made about man in the state of nature and, it turns out, Locke and Montesquieu differed profoundly in this regard. For instance, Locke believed that man roaming the forests would first turn his attention to looking for food—gathering acorns and apples to eat. The implication, according to Locke, was that man is fundamentally an economic being. This being the case, he determined that the role of government was to orchestrate the economy, make a level playing field, adjudicate any clashes between individuals, and, when necessary, create an army to defend the people from foreign invaders. The people would in effect enter into a contract with those who would form the government and perform these vital functions. Citizens could then go about their private affairs and pursue their economic self-interest. In this Lockean world view, community played no particular role. In fact, Locke and his followers looked upon community as a possible obstacle to the exercise of human freedom.

By contrast, Montesquieu saw the state of nature much differently. In his view, man's first act in the forest would have been to search for a friend, someone with whom he could move through life, someone who would make economic activity worth the effort. Thus, for Montesquieu, man is fundamentally social, and consequently a political being. This suggests a rather different role for government than that envisioned by Locke. For Montesquieu, government ought to be the collective voice of the people, ascertained in numerous ways. And while modern states were too large to replicate the Athenian assembly, citizens could exercise their political voice through all manner of local associations that animate community life. A major function of government, then, was to serve as a catalyst to community health and well-being. In contrast to Locke, Montesquieu looked at community not as a possible detriment to the realization of human freedom, but as the vehicle through which that realization could take place.

But when the constitutional convention delegates gathered in Philadelphia during the summer of 1787, they showed a marked preference for Locke's views about man's essential nature. As a consequence, these men effectively minimized any political role America's citizens might play, for all intents and purposes confining that to the mere exercise of the vote once every two years—and even this limited democratic space was reserved for those who held sufficient property. Further, the economic essence of human nature as perceived by Locke and his American followers made man out to be an acquisitive being, someone who required assistance to keep his appetites in check. Witness the remarks of two prominent constitutional architects.

Said James Madison, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary." And Hamilton, "Why government? Because the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason without constraint" (Wright, pp.160, 356).

While Madison and Hamilton demonstrated a clear preference for the views of Locke over Montesquieu, they did not dismiss all of the Frenchman's views. For instance, our sacred governmental trinity: executive, legislative, and judicial—is straight from Montesquieu—as is giving each governmental branch a kind of power check over the others (Cohler, Miller, and Stone, 1989). The delegates in Philadelphia took from Montesquieu what they thought was useful, and discarded the rest. High on the list of ideas headed for the trash heap was Montesquieu's conception of the role local associations should play in the maintenance of a healthy republic. But that doesn't mean that this idea, or any others emanating from Montesquieu, for that matter, went unheeded in the early republic. In fact, an examination of some of America's lesser statesmen--some of the anti-federalists who opposed the Constitution, even some of the early clergy--reveals that the idea that government ought to cultivate the well-being of communities was widespread.

In a 1768 sermon, Daniel Shute of Boston described "the nature of the human species." He adamantly rejected the Lockean thesis about the state of nature. Shute believed man was "adapted to society" which in turn afforded "vastly more happiness then solitary existence could do. From the make of man, the disadvantages of a solitary, and the advantages of a social state, evidently appear" (Hyneman and Lutz, 1983, 1:111). Shute was not interested in entertaining theories about a pre-social state of existence dominated by ceaseless and self-aggrandizing economic activity. In his view, man at all stages had been a social, and thus political, being.

In 1774 Nathaniel Niles delivered a similar sermon in Newburyport, Massachusetts. Echoing Montesquieu's analysis of the strengths of republics, Niles asked his listeners to "imagine a state whose members are all of a free spirit." And then asked them to imagine that: the individuals are all of one mind. They unite in the same grand pursuit, the highest good of the whole. Only suppose all members of such a state to be acquainted with the best means of promoting their general end; and we shall see them all moving in perfect concert. The good of the body will be their first aim. And in subservience to this, they will impartially regard the particular interests of individuals (Hyneman and Lutz, 1:269).

Niles' sermon demonstrates the considerable tension between the individual orientation of Locke's views and the community focus of Montesquieu. On this question, Niles shows a clear preference for the Frenchmen.

It was a popular preference. Witness Robert Coram, writing in 1791: "The end of government, we are told, is public good, by which it is understood the happiness of the community." Or Samuel West, speaking before the House of Representatives of the Massachusetts Bay colony in 1776: "It becomes me not to say what particular form of government is best for a community," but aristocracies and monarchies "are two of the most exceptionable forms of government." Note that his first measure of fit for a government was the role it would play or fail to play on behalf of a community—not an individual. Or Timothy Stone speaking in Hartford in 1792:

> Civil liberty is one of the most important blessings, the most valuable inheritance on this side of heaven. That constitution may therefore be esteemed the best, *which doth most effectively secure this treasure to a community*. That liberty consists of freedom from restraint, leaving each one to act as seemeth right to himself, is a most unwise mistaken apprehension. Civil liberty, consists in the being and administration of such a system of laws, as doth bind all classes of men, rulers and subjects, to unite their exertions for the promotion of virtue and public happiness.[3]

Once again, the individualism of the Lockean tradition is condemned, while Montesquieu's community-oriented notion of civil liberty is affirmed. Clearly the Shutes', Corams, and Stones of the early republic were plentiful, but they were not among the nation's elite statesmen, and thus were not present in Philadelphia during the summer of 1787. The leaders of that group were far less enamored with Montesquieu's idea of a republic, and were much more likely to embrace Locke's views.

Still, the opening of the interior states proved Montesquieu to be prophetic. In the far-flung reaches of the new nation, at a time when communication was very slow, local associations sprung up at a rapid pace to deal with matters Washington was too distant to handle. A wide range of frontier citizens of necessity became involved in local political matters. Combined with the ascendancy of Andrew Jackson, the "people's President," a great new democratic era began (with regrettable exceptions for women, Native Americans, and blacks). It was the era of "log

cabin presidents," universal (white) male suffrage, prison reform, park construction, and the establishment of free common school systems.

The ethos of the era was captured by Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic study entitled *Democracy in America*, published in 1836. Said Tocqueville, "In every case, at the head of any new undertaking, where in France you would find the government, or in England some territorial magnate, in the United States you are sure to find an Association." (p. 198) He elaborated further, "If an American should be reduced to occupying himself with his own affairs, half his existence would be snatched from him, he would feel it as a vast void in his life." (p. 167) Tocqueville's analysis suggests that Montesquieu was right. Local associations could provide the stage on which ordinary citizens insert a political dimension in their lives, thus invigorating democracy and greatly enhancing a sense of personal fulfillment.

Many of the local associations Tocqueville witnessed during this era were focused on single issues, a county wool growers association, for example. But many others went considerably beyond single issues. In fact, the historian Christopher Clark has called the 1840s America's "communitarian moment," citing the widespread proliferation of community-building experiments during this decade, like Hopedale, Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and the Northampton Association for Education and Industry, as well as some 200 others, as examples (Clark, 1995).

***New Ideas Strengthen Old Theory***

The pivotal role played by the "state of nature" in the Enlightenment project led to more and more speculation concerned with what comes "naturally" to the human condition. Another eighteenth century Frenchmen, Jean Jacques Rousseau, spoke of nature within man, something manifest through an "inner voice." Many believe that Rousseau's emphasis on the significance of our feelings—legitimated because they come to us naturally—ushered in what has come to be known as the era of Romanticism.

We won't spend much time trying to define this ideological movement, for there are many convoluted definitions in the scholarly literature. But we bring it up because of the way it bolstered and advanced the individualism of the Lockean world view. Romanticism encompassed the view that nature served as an intrinsic source for ideas about the world and an individual's place within it. For Immanuel Kant this nature within became the source for moral law—a view that would lead to twentieth century conceptions of morality as an individual

possession—each person wielding their own, equally acceptable, morality.[4] For Johann Herder it became the definitional source of an individual's identity. Said Herder, "Each human being has his own measure, as it were an accord peculiar to him of all his feelings to each other" (Quoted in Taylor, p.375).

This heavy theorizing about the state of nature eventually led to the view that—and Herder was probably the most articulate and persuasive spokesperson for this—each individual is unique, there is only one "me," and, further, only one way to be me. And the way to be me can only be found by looking within, by examining the feelings that come to me naturally.

These ideas spread at precisely the point when America opened up the interior states for settlement. The tremendous opportunity represented by the unsettled west seemed to work as a catalyst to the notion that individuals are unique, and those who were rugged and independent enough would successfully negotiate the rigors of life on the frontier. In the United States this played out with great faith in the notion of the nation's ultimate, or manifest, destiny—a nation stretching from coast to coast made up of rugged individuals. In Germany, where it was also popular, it culminated in the cultural concept of "volk," or love of the fatherland.

The romantic views about an identity within each individual, waiting to be discovered, have had great staying power. In fact, they are still popular notions in the United States today. But the individualism of Locke's world view received even greater legitimation from ideas related to Charles Darwin's great work of modern biology, *The Origin of Species*. Darwin never saw his efforts in anything other than biological terms, though that wasn't the case for many of his subsequent followers. Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner are two of the most prominent examples of men who translated evolutionary concepts into contemporary sociology. The end result was what we casually refer to as social Darwinism, though it would have more explanatory power if we simply called it racism.

But beyond that part of social Darwinism which claimed some races were more evolved than others were other societal conceptions that gave additional strength to the already quite strong Lockean-inspired individualism in American culture. For instance, most social Darwinists came to see society as a kind of organism, with the individuals in society analogous to cells. Since all cells play an identifiable role in the health of the organism, all individuals have an identifiable role to play in the interest of a healthy society. This insight became the

wellspring for all manner of attempts to "socially engineer" a healthy society, but we will confine our remarks to those that concerned the public educational endeavor.

Recall that it was at the height of Montesquieu's influence in America—the 1830s and 40s—described and documented by Tocqueville, that we finally began to adopt a system of free common schools for all (with some lamentable exceptions). By the first decades of the twentieth century we were so sure that each individual had an "evident and probable destiny," to quote long-time Harvard president Charles Eliot, we believed education had to be differentiated, not common, where individual dispositions were accurately matched to societal needs.

In keeping with our earlier embrace of Locke's views related to life as an economic endeavor, schools were designed to prepare students for economic roles. The idea that there might be a curriculum common to all citizens of a democracy was scarcely acknowledged in the heavily Darwinian milieu of the early twentieth century. And of course some individuals were more fit than others—those would receive a college-bound curriculum en route to the important jobs in society and government. Later in the century another Harvard president, James Conant, added more resolve to the development of meritocratic principles through his tireless promotion of gifted education.

The point here is that we have moved in a certain direction in this society, a direction first set by our founders in their selection of Lockean views to create a governmental structure. The cultural development set in motion by those decisions has promoted the idea that we are a nation of individuals living among strangers. The heavy emphasis on individualism ostensibly sewn into our cultural make up from the outset—which is one and the same as saying the heavy doses of suspicion reserved for community as a possible deterrent to freedom—was further advanced by the popularity of the romanticist views of Rousseau, Kant, and Herder. And it received still another, and greater, ideological boost from the ascendancy of social Darwinism. In fact, some scholars are convinced that American society at least, has come to be dominated by a kind of hyper- individualism (the late Christopher Lasch referred to it as a "culture of narcissism") and that the drawbacks from this have begun to seriously outnumber the benefits. As evidence, they point to the fact that America has slipped to the bottom of the top 25 democracies in virtually every measure that defines a democracy (Dahl, 2002; Levinson, 2006). These scholars have collectively created a kind of critique of our modern circumstances which is generally described as communitarianism. Because the arguments call for a reconsideration of the value of

community across the full spectrum of the human condition, communitarianism has become a part of the intellectual rationale undergirding place-based education.

***The World of Practice***

Beyond the large arguments of communitarians concerning the fate of community in America, and beyond the similarly large arguments of environmentalists concerning the ecological health of American places, there is also new learning theory that reveals much wisdom in place-based and community-based educational efforts. Like almost any intellectual endeavor undertaken during the twentieth century, efforts to understand learning were cast largely in individual terms. Behaviorism dominated the field for decades, and that was followed by a brief period dominated by information processing models. These were largely usurped by the advent of constructivism, however, and we are only now beginning to understand that learning, like other distinctly human traits, is largely a social undertaking, thus the popularity of the phrase "social constructivism."

At the heart of constructivist theory is an understanding that culture informs the way we process information, think, and come to understand anything. Jerome Bruner (1986) has contributed a great deal to our ability to see learning as a socially-constructive act: "Society provides a tool kit of concepts and ideas and theories that permit one to get to higher ground mentally" (p. 73). Many others have contributed to the slow development of learning theory premised on the belief that the way one constructs the world is socially dependent (Cahan & Kohur, 1996; Dewey, 1916; Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr; 1998; Gadamer, 1976; McLaren, 1989; Neperud, 1995; Orr, 1992 ). This concept is at the root of constructivist thinking and has been influenced by many throughout the history of the development of American education. Perhaps, no one is more eloquent in expressing this idea then John Dewey, who noted:

> Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may be fairly said to exist in transmission, in communication. There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community by virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they must have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge--a common understanding--like-mindedness

> as the sociologists say. Such things cannot be passed physically from one to another, like bricks; they cannot be shared as persons would share a pie by dividing it into physical pieces. The communication which insures participation in a common understanding is one which secures similar emotional and intellectual dispositions--like ways of responding to expectations and requirements. (Dewey, 1916, p. 4).

Dewey's educational vision was largely usurped by America's first generation of test-makers, individuals such as Thorndyke, Termin, Goddard, and others. But Jean Piaget played a role in Dewey's demise as well. He focused on identifying the individual stages a child goes through as he or she matures. Piaget's theory suggested a laissez faire pedagogy where educators were taught to wait until the individual child was ready for content deemed to be congruent with Piagetian stages. By contrast, Lev Vygotsky saw child development as an inherently social process. One key component of this view was his Zone of Proximal Development, "the distance between the child's current level of independent problem solving and what he or she is able to do under adult guidance" (Prawat, 1993, p. 10). Instruction informed by Vygotsky would begin with the identification of benchmarks (the child's current status, his or her potential, etc) through social interaction with the child. Once the benchmarks are established, scaffolding activities, activities that are appropriate for the child to reach that potential, are designed to help the child reach that goal. The teacher may model behavior, set up activities in which the teacher works with the child, or structure the class so that the student is working with a peer. Where Piaget would have us wait, Vygotsky is encouraging us to design experiences where the student must interact with others. The "discovery" of Vygotsky in the 1970s has gradually served to re-legitimize Deweyan views regarding education and also has served as a key part of the rationale supporting place-based and community-based curriculum and instruction.

Put simply, understanding traditional school subjects is augmented by social interchange and by grounding subjects in the immediate lives of students. What this suggests is that even if our goal was as narrow as raising test scores, place-based or community-based education is probably the best route to getting there. But its appeal is greatly aided by the promise it holds for the development of individuals willing to allow relationships and commitments to define themselves as human beings.

"Place" and "community" are a greater part of educational discourse in this country today because they represent a legitimate path to a much more substantive definition of what constitutes an education—or an educated person. They are a rejection of the Lockean premise for political, economic, and educational theory—that humans are essentially economic beings. They are an acknowledgment of Montesquieu's belief that humans are essentially social beings, and therefore require a political role to play in order to live fulfilled lives. And, further, place and community resonate with our best thinking about learning and about the development of deep-level understanding. In order to provide a glimpse of what kinds of things happen in schools that embrace place-based or community-based pedagogy, we thought it might be beneficial to describe three schools with whom we have worked that cover the typical range of school types in this country: urban, suburban, and rural.

***Urban***

Buffalo Community School #53 is located on the eastside of Buffalo, New York. The students are 98 percent African American and come to school with the full range of difficulties one would typically find in an urban setting. In many ways, School #53 is a model urban school. The administration is strong, supportive of staff, and works tirelessly maintain a safe atmosphere conducive to learning. The teaching staff is dedicated and extremely competent. School #53 has adopted a community school philosophy and is part of the national community school network. There is a fulltime community coordinator on site. A "parent room" is staffed by volunteers and is coordinated by a parent who acts as another resource for faculty and administration. There is a caring, passionate, and energized feeling that is almost palpable when one enters the building. Successful applications for local and federal grants have brought in much-needed dollars and resources for a wide variety of curriculum and extracurricular programming.

One such project involved the transformation of an abandoned lot across from the school from a dangerous space to a community garden. The effort, led by the school principal and the community coordinator, was funded by one of the school's business partners. Students help design the layout and do some of the work. Parents and other members of the community helped build the garden. The area was cleaned of all debris, weeded, and dug up. A series of small perennial and vegetable gardens were designed, ground tilled, beds laid, and framing built. A pergola was built in the center, paths were created, and the area was fenced.

The new space was visibly beautiful and functional. Students planted flowers and vegetables as part of the science curriculum. The space was available for recesses and other school related activities. The pergola has been used for small ceremonies. The vegetables the students planted were available to members of the community and throughout the summer community members harvest the vegetables and help maintain the grounds.

***Suburban***

The Art Department at Fredonia High School in Fredonia, New York instituted a course, *Redesign*, where students worked in teams to increase the aesthetic beauty of an area in the one of the school buildings or on the school grounds in a manner that improved the learning environment of that location.

Students identified areas in need of improvement. They researched the locations and the activities that took place in those settings. They interviewed faculty, surveyed students, and did on-site observations. They defined a theme that they presented to the school administrator for approval. Once the theme was approved, they began creating sketches, blueprints, a budget, and a timeline for completion. Each step of the process had them interacting with the larger school community, and, in some cases, the community at large.

Over the years projects addressed a full range of academic and extra curriculum concepts. In the high school students created a 130 square foot mural that identified every extracurricular activity that took place at the school. The mural was situated so that the high school students passed it on the way to getting on the busses. It was a reminder and an enticement to get involved. In the front of the high school was a slightly larger than life-size sculpture of three abstracted figures reading. In one of the lecture halls was a mural that showed different parts of the community. On the wall of the elementary cafeteria was the 26 two-foot “letter people” that were an integral part of the elementary English Language Arts curriculum. Projects defined curricular areas, improved the learning environment, and encouraged student activity.

Students had to present their ideas in many forums and secure the help or expertise of the community to complete the projects. When students needed help bending metal and welding, an area welding company allowed students to work on their site with their people. When another project called for pieces of slate to be cut into specific shapes, a local tile company supplied

expertise and staff to work with the students. Students were often able to convince area business people donate materials and supplies.

Students also worked closely with the entire school community. Students regularly presented their ideas to principals, assistant principals, the superintendent, and, occasionally, the Board of Education. Students worked closely with the janitorial staff, arranging for times when they could work on the projects, making sure they cleaned up the area consistent with the needs of the cleaning crew. They worked with the maintenance crew, designing footers for the larger sculptures, planning strategies to attach murals and/or prep walls prior to painting on the walls, and delivering heavy materials. They worked with teachers making sure the symbols or images were consistent with the curricular or extracurricular activities they were presenting. And, of course, they worked with one another, assigning tasks, working through ideas, developing budgets, preparing presentations, soliciting donations, and a myriad of other activities.

The culminating activity was a public unveiling where all those involved celebrated the successful conclusion of the project. School Board members and other school officials, the students' family and friends, the community members who were involved, and the local press would be present. Long after they left school, students would return to the school to visit their projects first with college roommates, then spouses, and eventually, their own children.

***Rural***

In the small town of Howard, South Dakota (population 900) a business teacher at the high school came up with a rough plan for a community-oriented learning unit. After acquiring the support of his principal and a mini-grant of $500 from a nearby university, he worked with his students to develop a plan to measure the community's cash flow—how much was earned there, where it was spent, and what it was spent for. The students conducted town meetings with local business owners, consulted with the county auditor, and engaged in long debates with all stakeholders over the wording on their surveys.

It was a courageous undertaking, and the students were never shy about proceeding. They unabashedly asked community members throughout Miner County to reveal the intimate details of their income and spending habits. When the surveys were collected, the students found themselves with a phenomenal 64 percent response rate and an enormous amount of data to analyze. Using sophisticated statistical procedures, the students sorted data by income level,

spending location, spending category, and other parameters. All takes on the data revealed much the same lesson, however: the people of Howard spent most of their income in the larger and more distant cities of Mitchell and Sioux Falls.

Student analyses of the data were reported in the local newspaper before the school year was out. The community response was overwhelming. When Howard citizens saw how much they were spending outside of the community, they changed their spending habits. They bought much more locally. Revenue from local sales tax began to skyrocket. The county auditor reported that by the end of the summer, annual sales tax projections had already been exceeded. Based on the average number of times a locally spent dollar will turn over within a community, the county auditor estimated that the students had engineered a $6 to 7 million infusion into the local economy.

Needless to say, the Howard business students learned a good deal about economics: spending, saving, and the relationship between economic vitality and community well-being. They experienced what it feels like to do something worthwhile and to earn the respect of the community in the process. The subject matter, the audience outside the classroom, the interaction with community members, and the constructive nature of the learning process all helped heighten the students' academic achievement. Since this pedagogical experiment, Howard has developed a national reputation for aggressively combating policy decisions that might adversely affect it. The town was the subject of a *Wall Street Journal* article during the spring of 2005.[5]

### *Conclusion*

The examples shared here demonstrate the symmetry between place-based and community-based curriculum and instruction. The greater contribution, though, lies in the fact that theses approaches to education possess considerable potential to combat the regardlessness of our current culture as it relates to the health and well-being of places and communities. Further, place- and community-oriented approaches to schooling are arguably far more conducive to ascendant views on learning and the development of understanding than traditional textbook driven approaches. And they are far more amenable to creating a pedagogical balance—an education that contributes to the development of political *and* economic wherewithal.

It may well be, however, that the enculturating effects of asking students to shoulder some obligation for the well-being of their communities, and the places that contain them, is the greatest educational good to be derived from place-based and community-based studies. If Americans are able to make a cultural corrective by elevating the value of community, one essential part of the process will be more widespread use of place-based education.

## Endnotes

[1] See, for example, Dolce and Morales-Vasquez, Gruenwald, Noddings, Smith, Theobald and Curtiss, Johnson, Finn, and Lewis in reference list below.

[2] Robert Putnam has persuasively tied the decline of American community to a kind of political apathy among citizens. See Chapter Two of his *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of Community*.

[3] Coram is quoted from Hyneman & Lutz, *American Political Writing*, vol. 2, 760; West is quoted from Thornton, *The Pulpit and the American Revolution*, 280; and Stone is quoted from Hyneman & Lutz, vol. 2, 842.

[4] This is a reference to what philosophers call "emotivism," made popular by the British philosopher G. E. Moore. Moore argued that each person's conscience was by nature irrefutable and couldn't be deemed true or false. All moral judgments, therefore, are mere expressions of personal preference. His opus, *Principia Ethica*, was published in 1902. This view has meshed with American conceptions of human freedom to produce a popular cultural position in this country: all persons are entitled to their own morality. This position is a popular target for communitarian critics of the status quo.

[4]Eig, J. (March 25, 2005). "In a bid to hang on, Miner County, S.D., downsizes dreams." *Wall Street Journal*.

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