

Place-Based Teacher Education

A Model Whose Time Has Come

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Abstract

Place-Based education (PBE) is gaining rapid recognition across the United States. The authors of this article contend that there is an imperative need to re-structure and re-conceptualize teacher education such that it allows for a significant shift in thinking and practice around learning, teaching, and community. They advocate that the PBE model is ideally suited to this end. Among the many strengths of PBE is the flexibility inherent in the model such that it can (and must) be adapted to authentically represent individual communities. In their work with PBE, the authors have identified three core pedagogical anchors: inquiry-based instruction; connection to place; and informed civic-engagement that uniquely represent the transformative work they are doing in teacher education. Along with examples and explanation of the three pedagogical anchors, the article also provides a brief discussion of the creation of the PBE teacher preparation pathway at Eastern Michigan University.

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Introduction

The fact that education has become synonymous with schooling reflects a set of problematic assumptions, two of which are- education is only received in the classroom, and learning is limited to education which in turn is limited to measurable cognitive outcomes. We argue that classrooms are just one place in which children learn and that learning occurs within interactions that encompass cognitive as well as socio-emotional domains. A majority of students' learning takes place outside of the institution of schooling, with their peers, their families, and in their communities (Cohen, 2011; Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2016). We encourage readers to imagine how the learning and teaching experience would be if teachers purposefully structured learning experiences in all of these relational contexts. What if teaching and learning happened with community in public spaces? What if the purpose of schools shifted from a narrow focus on cognitive success of individual students, to that in which the overall health and well-being of each individual and the entire community was valued? What if students were given the space to shape their learning and their community (Smith in Gliner, 2012; Boyle & Lowenstein, 2016)? Imagine the collective teaching and learning energies that could be unleashed and the collaborative problem solving that could be accomplished to strengthen our democracy. Perhaps, if young people were taught with an emphasis on seeing themselves as part of an interdependent web of life, they would develop the ethics and ability to care for that life within the midst of the significant and interconnected social and environmental challenges we face at this moment in our history. Place-Based Education (PBE) is a model that offers the opportunity for educators to embrace these understandings and for this reason is gaining increasing popularity around the country. For example, half of the original ten school designs that won the prestigious XQ: Super School competition were school designs that employed a place-based approach (see www.xqsuperschool.org). In the current educational environment, students are increasingly disengaged in formalized schooling (Zyngier, 2008). This is especially true in our nation's urban schools, where many students have concluded that the institution of schooling does not respect their individual, cultural, and community needs (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Within this context, PBE is not only a pedagogical option but also a necessity.

For PBE to be effective, we need to re-conceptualize the ways in which we think about teaching, learning, and community, particularly

within the context of teacher education. We need to create new ‘mental models’ that will guide this transformation as well as create awareness of cultural beliefs and language that do not align with the place-based model (Bowers, 2006; Lupinacci & Happel-Parkins, 2016; Martusewicz, Lupinacci, & Edmundson, 2015; Lowenstein & Erkaeva, 2016; Senge et al., 2008). According to Senge (1990), “Mental models are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images of how we understand the world and how we take action” (p. 8). Working both consciously and unconsciously, mental models guide our behaviors, perceptions, and values. For us to transform the mindsets that guide the way we think, act, and feel, we must consciously articulate them and intentionally reflect on them.

In Michigan, PBE is currently used as an approach by a notable number of teachers across the state. The growth of PBE’s popularity can be attributed to more than a decade of careful work done at scale by the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative (GLSI), a strong professional development and support network (Smith, 2017). Founded in 2007, the nine regional hubs of the GLSI have reached 1,562 teachers across the state and involved close to 115,000 students in Place-Based inquiries (<http://greatlakesstewardship.org>).

The Southeast Michigan Stewardship Coalition (SEMIS Coalition), the Detroit area hub of the GLSI, is based at Eastern Michigan University (EMU). Its members come from 30 schools in the region as well as over 35 community partner organizations with a focus on schools and communities in Detroit.¹

At EMU, along with several other hubs of the GLSI, most notably University of Michigan-Flint, we have begun to apply the wisdom gained over the past 10 years of GLSI and SEMIS Coalition place-based educational efforts, to the development of undergraduate teacher preparation programs and pathways. Our initial efforts have been the most powerful teacher education that the authors have seen in their 60 years of collective teacher education experience. Our successes have emerged over an extended period of time, and have required that we think very differently about pedagogy and program design. This is the first of a set of articles we are writing to tell the story of our work and share the wisdom we have accumulated. The purpose of this particular article is not to “prove” empirically that our program “works,” but rather to briefly and simply describe the PBE model we have developed for teachers and teacher educators, and share some of the pedagogical and organizational mindset shifts we believe are necessary for place-based teaching and teacher education. Our hope is that in our story readers will find inspiration, support, and ideas for developing a PBE model that fits their own context.

Pedagogical Anchors and Accompanying Pedagogical Shifts for Place-Based Education

There are many interrelated definitions of Place-Based Education (PBE) (see, for example, Demarest, 2015; Martusewicz et al., 2015; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Greenwood, 2013). In our PBE work we use the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative's (GLSI) definition—"a hands-on, inquiry-based, contextually embedded, and community-supported approach to teaching and learning that occurs *in and with* a place or community, is about a place or community, and *yields benefits for* a place or community" (www.glstewardship.org). For purposes of clarity, consistency, and guidance we have distilled place-based teaching into three pedagogical practices—inquiry-based instruction, connection to place, and informed civic engagement. These practices have become the anchors for our PBE work.

Inquiry-Based Instruction

In PBE, learning must be *inquiry-based*. In our practice, the process of place-based inquiry encompasses several critical components we use in varying combinations to best fit a specific context. Some of the key components include: reflection, respecting multiple perspectives, democratic dialogue, and situating complex issues of social and ecological justice within a cultural, historical, and community context. In place-based inquiry, young people investigate questions they are passionate about and identify issues of public concern in their communities. This inquiry emerges from a negotiation between the passions and questions of the students, the teacher's educational goals, and the interests, needs, and wisdom of the community. Because we think of inquiry as negotiated and contextualized meaning-making that takes place within a specific community, our view of what constitutes a class "text," that we "read" with students, changes. Here the relationship between the textbook and direct experience is flipped, with written texts supporting experiential learning, personal and group reflection, intergenerational dialogue, and immersion in a community's living landscapes. Using multiple non-traditional texts for instruction is a major developmental shift for teachers because it counters much of what they experienced in their own schooling. Community texts and complex community issues also require that students apply ways of thinking and tools from multiple disciplines. In PBE, the role of disciplinary knowledge is not abstract, but is rather seen as an essential tool for meeting community needs and for understanding our lived realities (see, for example, Basu, Calabrese Barton, & Tan, 2011).

The shift to thinking of inquiry as deep, negotiated, and integrated requires a fundamental re-thinking of the way that we perceive our roles. In PBE, teacher, student, and community member are not fixed roles, but rather roles we play, and they are inherently relational. For example, young people and community members are often in the role of teacher while their teachers act as students or guides. Rich inquiry-based teaching done in community requires us to not get stuck in the way our formal school system defines our roles. This is challenging work, since most school and university structures and cultural systems rigidly enforce teacher/student/community hierarchies (Duncan-Andrade & Morrel, 2008; Emdin, 2016).

Finally, deep inquiry, inquiry that asks the *why* question of human behavior, requires that we analyze the language and culture in which we live and how this culture shapes our behavior (Bowers, 2001, 2006; Lowenstein, Martusewicz, & Voelker, 2010; Martusewicz, et al., 2015; Plumwood, 1993; Turner, 2015). For example, to get to the root of the problem of waste and the solution of recycling, we must ask why we need recycling in the first place, and then seek to understand the cultural belief systems that underlie this problem, a primary one being consumerism (Lowenstein, Voelker, & Nielsen, 2017). Deep inquiry here means going beyond simply implementing the recycling program. In practice, most teachers rarely get to this deep level of inquiry with their students, even though inquiry and high levels of critical analysis are required by state and national standards and policies (e.g., Every Student Succeeds Act, C3 Social Studies, NGSS, Common Core). This may be because teachers themselves have to undergo an adult transformational learning process in order to identify and analyze the culture in which they are immersed.

Below is a visual representation of our proposed mental model in order to give the reader a tool for applying this model to their thinking and practice. Table 1 indicates the shifts necessary for moving from dominant conceptions of teaching to inquiry-based instruction in PBE.

Connection to Place

To be human means to be in interdependent relationships with others (Bateson, 1972; Bowers, 2011; Martusewicz et al. 2015). Individual and collective well-being occurs when members feel that they belong (Martusewicz et al., 2015). Understanding who we are in community, the nature of the relationships we are entwined in, and how to ethically navigate these relationships requires us to develop a connection to place. Place-Based Education recognizes that the communities we are a part of include not only relationships among humans, but also relationships

with other beings in the natural world (e.g., the plants, the animals), and living systems (e.g., the living webs of relationships in bodies of water) (Martusewicz, et al., 2015; Martusewicz, 2013a, 2013b). For example, it is one thing for students to create a school garden. It is another to use that “project” as a means of helping young people develop an affinity for soil microorganisms, understand the relationship between how they treat the land and the water quality of their river, and develop relational networks with community experts who can help them learn how to grow food. Because modern consumer society in the U.S. stresses individualism and many in our society feel separated from people and other natural beings in their communities (Berry, 1977; Martusewicz et. al. 2015) a major task in place-based learning is to help students identify community strengths and wisdom. This strength-based approach requires understanding the community’s social and ecological past, observing carefully before jumping to action, and entering into intergenerational dialogue with others to collectively imagine community changes.

It is important to note that successfully helping prospective teachers to reorient themselves to a focus on the formation of communities of belonging requires significant support. Teachers themselves often internalize deficit views of the communities they teach in (Anyon, 2005).

Table 1
***Pedagogical Shifts Required for Place-Based Education:
Inquiry-Based Instruction***

<i>Shift from:</i>	<i>Shift to:</i>
Inquiry as teacher led	Inquiry negotiated with students and community
Addressing symptoms of problems	Addressing the roots of problems
Texts: written only	Texts: written, lived experiences, relationships, community, and environment among others
Academic disciplines as abstract	Disciplines as personally meaningful and locally applied
Academic disciplines viewed as being separate	Academic disciplines viewed as integrated and interdependent
Rigid and hierarchical roles of “student,” “teacher,” and “community member”	Horizontal relationships, shifting based on teaching and learning context and purpose
Teacher learning as content acquisition only	Teacher learning as also involving adult transformation

They also may internalize dominant messages being given to them by educational policy makers—e.g., that grades and test scores should be the primary aim of instruction, not building community. Such messages are damaging and misleading, since research shows that, in fact, student and family trust in schools is a primary predictor of academic success (Bryk, 2002), and that, when done well, PBE is an approach that can lead to exactly the kind of deep learning and academic success that the standards require (see, for example, Duffin et al., 2005; Polk, Jessup, & Whitmore, 2016).

Table 2 highlights the pedagogical shifts teachers need to make when connection to place is a goal.

Table 2
Pedagogical Shifts Required for Place-Based Education:
Connection to Place

<i>Shift from:</i>	<i>Shift to:</i>
The “class” is the community	Community is inclusive of class members, community human members, beings in nature, and living systems
Rigid age-based dialogues and interactions	Intergenerational dialogues and interactions
Deficit-based view of students’ cultures and communities	Strength-based view of students’ cultures and communities
Exclusive focus on grades and test scores	Focus on fostering a deep sense of belonging and membership (with academic success as a result)
Student social, emotional, and ethical development abstracted from community	Development of inclusive ethics of care grounded in deep connection to community
Seeing relationships in the world as given and unchangeable	Connection to a community’s past and present, and sensing possibilities for the future
Rush to problem solving	Emphasis on careful and prolonged observation
Problem solving detached from community living systems and needs	Problem solving tuned to community living systems and needs
Young people as outside of history	Young people as part of history

Informed Civic Engagement

Although student inquiry and connection to place are worthy practices in and of themselves, if teaching and learning does not include informed civic engagement, we do not consider it PBE. Returning to the GLSI definition of PBE, learning “occurs in and with a place or community, is about a place or community, and yields benefits for a place or community” (www.glstewardship.org). Students cannot learn “in and with” a community or “yield benefits” for a community without taking meaningful civic actions within that community. In PBE, young people become informed citizens with multiple opportunities to practice and with guidance from trusted teachers and community members on how to be effective civic actors. Through the discussion of issues of public concern with those outside of their immediate social and cultural milieu, students learn how to understand multiple perspectives, and to engage in public issues with care and intentionality (see, for example, Lowenstein et al., 2016). Young people develop a commitment to the common good not by reading a textbook chapter in isolation, but by being immersed in examples of content in real world community settings (Bowers, 1993; Lowenstein & Smith, 2017). Civic education, as it is typically taught in this country, aims to prepare students to act in the future. For Place-Based Education, the purpose of civic engagement and education is to help young people shape, hone, and use their voices now (Galley, Lupinacci, Sarmiento, Flanagan, & Lowenstein, 2016; Lowenstein et al., 2016). For example, many adults who grew up in the United States remember the painfully boring experience of having to read a dry textbook about the three branches of government and checks and balances in a democracy. In contrast, when students investigate a social-ecological issue of justice like the Detroit water shutoffs or the Flint water crisis as part of a place-based project, they must necessarily learn about how power operates at the state and local level. To propose and actively engage in advocating for solutions, students also must understand how public policy is formed.

Within the PBE model, the purpose of civic engagement is to create just and healthy communities and a democratic society. One way that students, teachers, and community members can actively and creatively participate in civic engagement is through local art projects. We believe that art can play an essential role in community transformation because it liberates the imagination to develop new ways of seeing and being together (see, for example, Gallant, 2013; www.matrixtheatre.org). It also allows for the expression of complex ideas in integrated and emotionally engaging ways. For example, in Ypsilanti, Michigan, the African-American Mural Project involves young people in creating murals in

public places that uncover the city's hidden past and spur community discussions around issues of justice. (for a short video documentary of the project, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAo0Bo-E4XU>).

Table 3 summarizes the pedagogical shifts required for promoting youth-informed civic engagement through place-based practice.

Research shows that teachers are shaped by the learning structures and systems they first teach and learn in (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Following this research, in order for prospective teachers to make the ambitious mindset shifts articulated above, teaching candidates must directly experience PBE in their own teacher learning within the complexities of real-world teaching environments, schools, and communities.

Our Story:

Developing a PBE Teacher Preparation Pathway at EMU

At EMU, we have come to realize that in order to develop a significantly different teacher preparation pathway, one that is not focused on program implementation but on forming a learning community, we have to practice place-based learning principles and consciously examine our own mental models. This means that as we build our PBE pathway, students, administrators, EMU faculty, practicing teachers, along with

Table 3
***Pedagogical Shifts Required for Place-Based Education:
Informed Civic Engagement***

<i>Shift from:</i>	<i>Shift to:</i>
Few, if any, opportunities to discuss issues of public and/or community concern	Frequent opportunities to discuss issues of public and/or community concern
Civic action abstracted from community	Civic action connected to community needs
Civic education future-oriented	Civic education located in the present (with one result being future civic engagement)
Civic action defined exclusively as voting	Civic action broadly defined (e.g., presenting to a school board, hosting a community forum, working with local government to solve a problem)
The arts only used to support learning in other disciplines	The arts seen as a core capacity of all informed and engaged citizens

community members, are engaged in interdisciplinary, intergenerational, and inter-organizational dialogue and inquiry ourselves. The formation of healthy learning communities of interdependence and moral purpose takes much longer than school systems typically provide. In the U.S., school system policies are infamous among practitioners for changing from year to year, or going through five-year reform cycles that never sustain themselves (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Such efforts breed cynicism in teachers and injure the public's trust in school as an institution. A by-product of chaotic school reform policy environments is that university teacher preparation programs themselves are under constant pressure to adjust to K-12 reform cycles (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Educational communities, in contrast to programs, are built over 10, 15, or 20 years (and longer). For example, EMU has a strong and long-standing historical commitment to community engagement and an integrated approach to teaching for social and ecological justice, including an EcoJustice Education program and the Southeast Michigan Stewardship Coalition (SEMIS Coalition). The theoretical grounding in EcoJustice Education and the practice of the SEMIS Coalition have provided the foundation for, and are an integral part of, the PBE pathway. One of the significant benefits of using a place-based approach to teacher preparation is that it uses community as the root metaphor for its work. Here, our place-based program development is the product of long-term, strength-based, coalition building. We briefly describe the history of our place-based teacher preparation community's formation below.

Our Community

Community vitalization efforts that align and support PBE are dense in Detroit, and Detroit has a long history of community transformation (Boggs, 2012). The SEMIS Coalition has successfully embedded its work within the context of these efforts. For example, a number of SEMIS Coalition members and EMU professors and students have had relationships with the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nourish Community Leadership spanning two decades (Lowenstein, 2016). The Boggs Center is a focal point for community transformation efforts in Detroit and has advocated for Place-Based Education as an approach that maps onto community transformational aims. The James and Grace Lee Boggs School was founded on place-based principles, is chartered by EMU, and is a member of the SEMIS Coalition.

Place-Based Teacher Preparation Pathway at EMU

We—the students, faculty, administrators, and community partners

collaboratively working on the program—did not create a program from scratch, but rather uncovered, named, and stitched together the webs of relationships that already existed within and between GLSI, SEMIS Coalition, EMU, and community efforts. The coordination and focusing of existing relationships, resources, and perspectives provided fertile ground for the creation of the program. After much discussion, we have chosen to provide PBE teacher preparation as one possible pathway to teacher certification at our University and are initially rolling out the program in the fall of 2018 for secondary education majors. Our goal is to develop an elementary pathway in the near future. We are also in conversation with education faculty across the university about the possibility of adopting the PBE model as one common framework for the University’s teacher preparation efforts.

Upon reflection, there were a set of important conditions in place that allowed for the creation of a formal PBE program:

- Webs of relationships between university, school, and community-based educators, as well as their relationships to local living landscapes had become dense, trusting, and mutually transformative.
- A deep sense of belonging based on a commitment to the common good, and a shared language of instruction, had been formed within these relationships.
- Significant knowledge of rigorous place-based teaching and learning had been accumulated within the webs of relationships.
- We had developed and articulated an effective system of adult development and professional learning.
- As a Coalition, SEMIS provided K-12 youth with access to multiple opportunities every year to advocate for their ideas, and teach the broader community.
- A critical mass of youth leaders emerged within the SEMIS Coalition who could articulate how Place-Based practices impacted them and could teach “teachers” about what roles, approaches, and practices lead to meaningful student learning.
- The results of rigorous Place-Based inquiries led to young people going beyond “the standards,” and adult expectations. Higher expectations led to richer growth in youth, which in turn led to even higher expectations and more growth.
- The SEMIS Coalition system of professional development and personal growth reflected the pedagogical shifts we describe in the first part of this article.

The Creation of the Place-Based “Block”

Teachers, especially those with the kinds of civic and pro-social aims that PBE educators have, need a sense of self-efficacy—a belief that they can accomplish teaching tasks in complex environments (Lowenstein, Selman, Barr, & Adalbjarnardottir, 2007; Milson, 2003). A sense of self-efficacy is closely related to teacher identity and role definition. A recent review of 35 rigorous studies in teacher professional development shows that for professional development to be effective, it must include active adult learning, use models of effective practice, support collaboration, and include coaching and expert support (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Place-based teacher candidates need to experience PBE in action themselves as learners, see role models play it out in practice, hear from youth who testify to the approach’s power, and join communities of educators who can embody the aims and values that they aspire to. Learning by “doing the thing” is especially important in Place-Based Education, since PBE is an experiential pedagogy that involves inquiry and action and the experience of connecting to people and the living landscape (Demarest & Lowenstein, 2017). If new teachers have not experienced PBE in their own prior schooling they must experience it in powerful ways themselves for their mindsets to shift.

At EMU, a Place-Based block of three courses has been developed over the past three years (see <https://vimeo.com/189398000>) to give teachers a sense of efficacy in using PBE as a core instructional approach and in making the pedagogical shifts we discuss in this article. This block will be used as a foundation for the pathway, and course revisions are underway in other areas of the program.

The block consists of a curriculum methods course, a school-based practicum in which candidates observe and help out in high school classrooms, and a social foundations course, originally developed by Rebecca Martusewicz, that introduces candidates to an EcoJustice framework (Martusewicz, et al., 2015). By blocking three courses, a team of instructors is able to meet with the same cohort of candidates from 9:00 AM to 2:15 AM, twice a week. This design gives the instructors flexibility and creative control over a large block of time and allows them to embed rich half- and full-day field experiences. It also allows teaching candidates to see team teaching and interdisciplinary instruction modeled and to witness how a team of teachers are able to effectively shift content in the course, based on teacher candidate needs, interests, and inquiry questions. Anecdotally, teacher candidates who take this three-course block feel a deep sense of belonging, not only with each other, but with young people and their communities, including the living landscape (Southeast

Michigan Stewardship Coalition, 2016). Without any prompting from us, many teaching candidates have registered together for future classes, and maintained a close and supportive community throughout the rest of the program and after graduation. Graduates of the PBE block have created a Students for Place-Based Education club whose role is to support each other and create relationships between prospective members of the cohort, current members, and graduates who are student teaching or have become full time teachers.

In order for our teaching candidates to see place-based teaching as powerful and possible, they need to become part of a community of teachers practicing this approach in a variety of challenging contexts. They also need to see that there are professional networks of support available to them now and after they graduate. In short, they need to connect to their place. As part of the blocked course structure, students are given an assignment that asks them to take part in a SEMIS Coalition, Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative (GLSI), or community partner professional development event. Candidates usually choose either a full-day professional development with SEMIS, the two-day state-wide annual Place-Based Education Conference, or presenting at the SEMIS Community Forum. These experiences serve as an existence proof that in spite of all of the obstacles that educators face in today's schools powerful PBE can and is happening. They also create powerful intrinsic motivation for candidates to make the pedagogical shifts discussed in this article.

Locating Learning On-Site

In PBE, the place is a text and teacher (Lowenstein & Smith, 2017). In the place-based block, we spend one to two class sessions a week learning at the school and community site. We purposefully select schools and communities where:

- transformational community revitalization is underway,
- groups of youth leaders affiliated with the SEMIS Coalition are present (see, for example, Lowenstein et al., 2016) who can teach our candidates about their lives, interests and needs, and the role of the teacher in meeting those needs through Place-Based Education,
- SEMIS Coalition teachers are present to serve as mentor teachers, and
- SEMIS Coalition community partners are present to teach our candidates and give them practice in forming community relationships.

A critical part of our approach is to involve youth leaders affiliated with the SEMIS Coalition in teacher candidate reflective discussions

that we hold on-site in order to help teacher candidates learn more about the students and community. It is one thing to read about water scarcity, food access, and poverty. It is another thing for teacher candidates to hear from a 17-year-old high school student that she doesn't have regular access to food in spite of having two working parents. When teacher candidates are part of a learning environment in which that same student is excited about learning, experiences academic success, and is motivated to improve her community, teacher candidates see that Place-Based Education is not only possible, but is the most powerful teaching and learning they have seen or experienced.

Conclusion

Teacher education programs need to “walk the walk.” If we are to prepare our teacher candidates for being place-based educators then we have to design our learning community to mirror place-based practices. This has been hard work because it has forced us to engage in transformative learning ourselves and to make the exact shifts in our own teaching practice and program design that we are asking our teachers to make. Creating systems for individual and collective transformation in higher education can be a challenge. However, our success thus far and the rapid growth we have experienced in our learning community demonstrates that we are at a time in our nation's and world's history where people recognize that a different way forward is necessary.

Note

¹For more information about the Southeast Michigan Stewardship Coalition go to semiscoalition.org

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