

Rural Research Brief

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Making Room for Place-Based Knowledge in Rural Classrooms*

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For many rural schools the view outside the classroom window is one of scenic fields, pasture lands, or forests nestled at the base of mountains. Despite the proximity of rural schools to both agricultural land and the natural world, what little connection to place that may have existed in rural schools' curricula has been disappearing as schools shift their focus toward basic academic skills (e.g., reading, math, and writing) (Sobel, 2005; Theobald, 1997). We argue that ultimately the trend in reduction of school programs and the practice of undervaluing place-based-knowledge, especially place-based knowledge gained outside the classroom through interactions within place, diminishes the ability of schools to be the primary location for collective socialization and the transmission of local community values to youth. We assert as well that consequences for both the quality of education and opportunities offered for youth and the overall community well-being ensue.

Place-Based Knowledge

The smallness and safety of rural communities promotes the development of place-based knowledge among the youth. Many youth who live in rural places have intimate knowledge of their communities and the surrounding areas both in terms of the natural landscapes, local culture, and values. They spend time in and out of town with the natural settings of their community as the backdrop to their lives (Brown, 2007; Childress 2000). They gain their knowledge of place through their own explorations—and by interacting with community members and the land through agricultural work, recreation, and outdoorsmanship.

Benefits for Youth: Youth benefit from developing place-based knowledge and engaging with place in multiple ways in both psychological and social realms of development. While urban and suburban youth generally lack a strong connection with nature and natural spaces (Brown, 2007; Louv, 2006) many rural youth remain actively engaged in

nature. While working with youth in Eastern Oregon, I had the opportunity to learn about the meanings youth give to nature and the natural spaces that surround them. On one particular occasion, a young woman drove me to a spot she knew that affords a spectacular view of the local mountain range. We parked, and she explained to me which mountain was which, adding details about which she had climbed and with whom, and how the world looks from the top. On a second occasion, a young man borrowed his dad's truck so he could show me some places well beyond town. He navigated numerous unmarked roads, pointing out upcoming vistas and fields in which he had worked always noting where we were in relation to town—demonstrating his mastery of the local geography despite the absence of street signs or other conventional markers. Another pair of students showed me the spaces they had named and thus claimed as their own. As we walked over bridges that crossed creeks, and through groves of trees they showed me—natural spaces that were technically in town, but places in which they could surround themselves with nature and quiet within a short walk from their homes. Their favorite is a spot by a creek they call the “new bookstore.” Evidence supports the notion that when youth regularly interact with nature, they are buffered from stress (Wells & Evans, 2003).

Socially, rural youth tend to have multiple connections to other community members across generations. As students led me around their communities they pointed out the homes of teachers, the nurse who was at their birth, and fields where they had worked. Students were frequently greeted by waves or car horns as they were recognized by peers and older community members. Several students pointed out a local store and told the story of its name, the owners named it for their newborn son. Moments like these exemplify the knowledge youth have about the social and natural spaces that surround them as well as the sense of belonging they feel to their communities and local landscapes. Place-based knowledge offers other developmental benefits. In rural

places, even youth who live in town often find the “best” summer jobs (those that pay well and afford youth some sense of autonomy) doing ranch and farm work. As ranch and farmhands, youth are responsible for moving pipe, driving farm machinery, helping with harvesting and general errands. Having these jobs means that youths spend most of their summers outside and are given tasks to learn under an apprenticeship model from family or community members and then are expected to perform unsupervised. The apprenticeship model facilitates intergenerational interaction and provides another venue for skills and local knowledge to be transmitted to youth. By providing these experiences employers are mentoring youth as they move into their future adult roles. Youth are more engaged in work that offers them genuine responsibility and independence (Childress, 2000; Williams & Kornblum, 1985); they relish such responsibility and are able to see clear connections between the tasks they accomplish and the more general success of their employer. Youth who feel mastery of the natural environment while also welcomed by adult community members are positively situated within their natural and social place (Salamon, 2003; Childress 2000).

In addition, rural youth experience the ways by which land is used for its natural resources—through farming, ranching, logging, or mining. By interacting with land that is in production and personally knowing the families who work the land, youth learn about the difficulties landowners and their larger communities face as they seek to use land well, satisfy environmental standards, promote stewardship, and allow for financially solvent farm and ranch operations. Youth living in rural places with working agriculture are surrounded by the values that characterize an agrarian way of life, the same values that have been shown to support youth development (Elder & Conger 2000). Research suggests that youth who use and interact with natural spaces are more likely to become environmental stewards in the future (Chawla, 2007).

Through these intimate experiences, youth witness firsthand the connections and contradictions that exist between people, local and federal environmental policy, working landscapes, and natural spaces. As a result, these youth are better equipped to both understand the complexity of land issues and respect the benefits of natural spaces and land in production. Their deep and grounded understandings of rural land issues positions them well to participate in local land policy as community members, and also give them the understanding they need to discuss issues with the urban youth they are likely to meet in the future.

Place-Based Knowledge and Rural Schools

Contemporary rural schools are disconnected from place because of traditional curricula (Corbett, 2007). While some rural schools in the past may have integrated more place-based knowledge, in the current climate of “back to basics” the bifurcation between formal and informal knowledge has

become particularly stark. Rural residents often see the skills necessary for their own success as unique from the skills that are valued in urban environments. In *Learning to Leave*, Corbett (2007) describes the ways this disconnect emerges in Nova Scotia and why it is a critical issue that must be given greater attention. His work reveals the ways rural schools generally teach students in ways that build an urban skill set through emphasizing mastery of academic skills necessary in structured office professions. Unlike urban professionals, rural residents often cobble together multiple jobs over various seasons to earn enough money to support themselves. In addition, for “traditional” rural jobs such as ranch or farm work, valued skills include a willingness to do whatever work is at hand and devising on-the-spot creative and flexible solutions to various problems as they arise. Whether equipment fails, fences come down, or animals experience distress, all of these situations need to be assessed and dealt with immediately. Such skills, however, are not typically valued in school classroom settings. Instead, schools generally place value on slow, deliberate thought and carefully planned solutions. In some ways, this makes the classroom seem like a place best suited for youth who do *not* have what it takes to live successfully in rural places. This disconnect is historical and cyclical. Fluctuations in enrollment, financial resources, threats of consolidation, and educational trends have historically challenged rural schools and promoted educational innovation (Johnson & Strange 2005, 2007). Meanwhile, the contemporary educational landscape as structured by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is fueling an increased focus on basic skills and academic mastery in schools across the nation and exacerbates this disconnect. For rural schools that lack resources, NCLB has meant significant cuts in enrichment and schools’ ability to sustain innovative curriculum (Johnson & Strange 2005, 2007).

Place-Based Learning

Despite a deep and comprehensive knowledge of place that rural youth may possess, the schools these youth attend rarely value such place-based knowledge (Corbett, 2007). School curriculum generally encourages students to study faraway places such as South American Rainforests and African deserts without reference to local places and knowledge. The school context-disconnect described above that separates those skills that are valued *in* versus *out* of school settings does not need to exist. Place-based learning (PBL) has the potential to both situate curriculum in the local and build on place-based knowledge. PBL has been defined as:

PBL is learning that is rooted in what is local—the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art of a particular place. The community provides the context for learning, student work focuses on community

needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning (www.ruraledu.org).

PBL provides a framework that potentially integrates existing knowledge of place that youth have while at the same time continuing to nurture traditional academic skills such as reading and math. This curricular model also fosters the flexibility and problem-solving skills that are so valued within rural communities. While the definition honors the importance of place-based knowledge, the way PBL is generally implemented has not valued nor built on existing place-based knowledge that students bring with them to the classroom. The growing body of research on PBL has shown that using the local natural ecology and projects within the community have positive results both in improving academic achievement and in engaging youth in their school and their community (Sobel, 2005; Theobald, 2003). Place-based education has the potential to help youth develop and integrate both types of skills sets while simultaneously encouraging these students to see how school is relevant to their daily lives and their futures, regardless of their aspirations.

In the United States, place-based education harkens back to the early twentieth century with the work of John Dewey at the University of Chicago Laboratory School. The notion of connecting education to “real life” and local place has been periodically revived throughout the last century (see Sobel, 2005; Smith, 2002; Rural School Community Trust). While PBL has been employed in both urban and rural settings, and different programs have emphasized different aspects, PBL has a deep history in rural schools (Sobel, 2005; Smith, 2002). Historically rural schools have had multi-age classrooms, implemented project based learning, and have had to use local resources to make ends meet (Johnson & Strange, 2005, 2007; Smith 2002). However, even teachers who embrace PBL have rarely brought the local knowledge that youth have from their home, play, and work experiences explicitly into the classroom. To fully integrate place-based knowledge into the classroom, PBL must intentionally value what young people bring to the classroom from their experiences outside of the classroom, not just what they learn in the process of PBL curricula. Teachers using PBL need to assist students in identifying the knowledge they bring to a project at hand and what they still need to learn. For example, in doing a PBL project that centers around collecting oral histories, before learning interview techniques and assembling lists of who to interview the class needs to discuss and identify what they know about local history, where they have learned this history, and why this project makes sense to them as residents of the community.

Many examples exist of PBL projects that have focused on different aspects of place from biology to history. However, while the projects are engaging, most could give place-based knowledge a stronger focus. When youth in Seaside,

Oregon used their math and physics skills to do measurements for the sea wall (Smith 2002;), bringing in place-based knowledge would have required that they discussed what they already knew about engineering and sea walls from home projects, their day to day observations, and adults around them that engaged in construction or engineering work. In Thetford, Vermont, elementary students studied nearby wetlands (Kruzshack & Levy, 1998). One aspect of the project included having children sit in their “magic spots” where they sat quietly and observed nature. While this activity did not necessarily include existing place-based knowledge, it provided the skills for children to continue exploration of place at home and to increase their place-based knowledge on their own.

By actively valuing and using the knowledge youth come to school with, students are more likely to perceive school as a relevant and worthwhile investment. They are also likely to feel that being successful in school places them on an exclusive path that leads out of a rural place in exchange for an adult life in an urban place. While many young people want to leave their hometown - some permanently and others temporarily - it is crucial to nurture not only those who want to leave, but also those who want to stay. As communities struggle to reduce “brain drain” and maintain the vitality of young families, full classrooms, and agrarian community values, the value of a formal education rich in PBL must be cultivated and given attention for all youth.

Implications

In addition to being the center of most youth’s social world (Steinberg, 2002), schools often function as the center of community life and the primary institutions that maintain and transmit local community values to youth (Lyson, 2005). Ultimately, when a school’s curriculum is disconnected from place, schools and communities transmit subtle but clear messages to youth about what academic success is useful for - living and being successful in urban areas rather than rural ones (Corbett, 2007). For young people who enjoy rural living and see themselves living in rural places as adults, this message has important ramifications. If the skills taught at school are disconnected from rural life, then these youth either disengage from school because it feels unimportant or they conclude they can only use the skills they are learning at school in urban places and shift their aspirations toward an urban life.

PBL, done well, provides a promising avenue for schools to engage youth, support residential aspirations that encompass both urban and rural places, and increase academic success (Hynes, et al., 2003). However, not all PBL is equal. To truly be effective, PBL must both value knowledge gained outside the classroom *and* make use of local landscapes to more firmly ground classroom based knowledge. Projects such as an initiative in Maine where youth were asked by the local parks organization to take an inventory of playgrounds (Smith, 2002) allowed youth to

incorporate their knowledge learned outside of school into their classroom project. Assisting students in bringing their outside knowledge into school requires teachers to help young people recognize their existing skills and to actively engage them to build on their skills. It is important to provide these experiences for all our rural youth, not just those enrolled in agriculture and vocational programs. This is especially critical if rural schools want their youth to see the value that exists in the intersection between academic learning and rural living. By incorporating an approach to PBL that honors place-based knowledge throughout school curricula, schools can once again become dynamic locations where local values are transmitted and where all youth are supported regardless of their aspirations.

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