

Nature Study and the New Geography: Pre-Incarnations of Place-Based Educational Theory and Practice, ~ 1890-1920

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Abstract

Through an exploration of the primary works of progressive era geography educators and nature study advocates, this paper identifies two important historical antecedents of modern place-based curricular reform. In addition to systematically detailing connections between nature study, the new geography, and place-based curricular tenets, the paper discusses the ways in which deeper historical understanding might inform contemporary practice.

Introduction

Place-based education represents an approach to schooling in which local histories, geographies, sociocultural arrangements, and ecological systems take center stage in the learning process. In part or whole, the unique contexts and experiences in which schools are situated inform both the curriculum and practice of place-based education (see Sobel, 2004; Smith and Sobel, 2010). Nearing its twentieth anniversary as a formal, named approach to teaching and learning, place-based education has gained considerable momentum in educational research literature. Despite its growing popularity, however, place-based education is hardly a new approach. In fact, it is very much a reincarnation of several well-established educational theories and practices. This paper stands to clarify the relationship between contemporary and historical illustrations of place-based education through an examination of the developments in American nature study and geography education that took shape at the close of the nineteenth century. Together, nature study and the “new geography” provide representations of place-based

educational ideals nearly a century in advance of their modern counterpart.¹ This paper explores the educational writings surrounding nature study and the new geography in the years spanning roughly from 1890-1920 in an effort to bring to light two early localized curricula.

By the 1890s, the nature study movement encompassed a range of perspectives and motivations. Proponents developed extended courses of study designed to supplement traditional curricular fields, primarily elementary science. The adoption of school garden work, field excursions, and student inquiry projects represented a general appeal toward the rearrangement of the student-teacher relationship, one in which the learner’s experience would assume renewed prominence. Advocates of the approach called on practitioners to bring the surrounding home and school environment into the classroom. Nature study grew into an educational movement which exemplified many place-based pedagogical ideals, yet predated its modern counterpart by one-hundred years or more.

Whereas nature study best complimented the science curricula and those domains most relevant to an investigation of the natural, biological environment, suggested reforms for geography education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries approached what American educators would ultimately come to regard as the social studies, encompassing those subject areas most appropriate to *man* study. Like nature study, however, an emphasis on the home, the familiar, and the local, became very much a part of a new geography. From Charles McMurry’s discussion of home geography in the

mid-1890s and well beyond mid-century with Paul Hanna's "expanding communities" curriculum (see Stallones, 2002), educational reformers have historically been more than casually interested in the role of local contexts in the learning process.

Framework and Method

This study is based thoroughly within the notion that place-based education, though new in title, is actually quite mature as an approach to teaching and learning. Although there appears to be a casual awareness that place-based education is not an entirely new idea (see Duffin, 2005; Knapp, 2008; Smith and Sobel, 2010), little in the way of historical research on the subject is available currently. Two outstanding counterexamples to that trend are Canniff's (1998) brief foray into the County Life Movement (~1900-1920) and its connections to place-based ideals and Jayandhan's (2009) appraisal of the concept of *place* in the work of John Dewey. Most other examples of place-based educational literature suggest a past, yet stop far short of in-depth or systematic evaluations, thereby overlooking the potentially valuable insights represented in the curricular past. With that in mind, the study also assumes much about the potential worth of historical research in the field of education, particularly curriculum historical work. Following Tanner (1982) and others, this paper assumes that there is great value, or "useable knowledge" (410), embedded within the educational/curricular past. Grounded in these dual assumptions, this study endeavored (a) to identify nature study and early twentieth century geography education as precursors to modern place-based education and (b) to comment on the potential value of such a determination in the context of contemporary place-based reforms.

The manner in which the study situated nature study and the new geography as pre-incarnations of place-based thinking also warrants clarification. An outgrowth of a much larger, extended consideration of the history of place-based education (Elfer 2011), this study incorporated the use of an analytical net, or filter, which was then applied to historical curriculum models as encountered. The net contained three essential elements which together represented the core themes embedded within modern place-based education as presented in the literature currently available on the subject. Attention to local context, a respect for the nature and needs of the learner, and responsiveness to community, broadly defined, were the three criteria used to create the analytical filter.

Through a consideration of the primary works of early geography educators and nature study advocates, this study sought to identify two important historical antecedents of modern place-based pedagogy, thus addressing a significant gap in the literature. This research was informed by period journals, such as the *Nature-Study Review* and the *Journal of School Geography*, suggested courses of study, handbooks and manuals for practice, and descriptions of contemporary normal school training. Though not exhaustive, the educational writings of such nature study advocates as Liberty Hyde Bailey, Wilbur S. Jackman, and Clifton H. Hodge played critically important roles. With regard to the new geography, the primary works of major figures such as Charles and Frank McMurry, William Morris Davis, and Richard E. Dodge offered comparative illustrations. In addition to those core historical contributions, this study was informed also by relevant secondary works. Armitage's *The Nature Study Movement* (2009) and Barton's (2009) recent analysis of "home geography" represent two of such resources.

Findings

Context for the nature study movement.

The American nature study movement grew out of several wider sociopolitical developments of the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the first place, the nature study movement was backgrounded by what Cremin (1961) described as “a stormy period of early industrial growth” (15). Indeed, the American experience post-Civil War was one of significant cultural, religious, economic, and political change. Responses to industrialism and its consequences in America were not singular, but rather pluralistic and often contradictory, and by the 1890s a wide variety of vocalized responses to change had begun to take shape (Urban and Wagoner, 2004). Without overlooking the diversity of the movement, however, whether reforms were geared toward sanitation and hygiene, or immigration and labor, the collective response to the industrialization of America represented a far-reaching Progressive Era transformation, a period of reorientation and change which provided a backdrop for a range of educational reform plans such as nature study among others.

Within the larger progressive movement of which it was a part, an independent nature study movement grew up and out of two additional developments, one social and one educational. In the first place, nature study should be regarded as a reflection of late nineteenth century American environmentalism and naturalism. Kohlstedt (2010) clarified that connection in her recent historical appraisal of American nature study noting that “the wide acceptance of nature study proved to be emblematic of public attitudes toward both nature and the human condition in the anxious years of social and intellectual change at the turn of the twentieth century” (1). On the one hand, Americans began to look back to nature in a

somewhat romantic and sympathetic fashion that longed for a deeper aesthetic appreciation in life perceived to exist in pre-industrial times as the result of a closer connection with the natural environment. Not unrelated, burgeoning trends to promote the conservation and preservation of the nation’s natural resources also buttressed support for nature study initiatives. But in addition to desires to reconnect and to preserve, support for nature study was also prompted by a growing appreciation for science itself. By the late 1890s, a “... scientific worldview had entered the daily lives of people as never before” (Armitage 2009, 2) and the study of nature offered a complement to that intellectual development.

Of course, the nature study movement was largely a pedagogical entity, one deeply impacted by the practical and theoretical reforms that characterized parallel trends in certain brands of educational progressivism. “... [T]eachers taught with natural objects from their local environments” and “... insisted that pupils should be taught using materials attractive to them and at a level readily understood” (Kohlstedt 2010, 1; 6). These sorts of curricular and instructional strategies flourished in the school reform climate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With these wider contexts in view, the discussion below turns to American nature study as an historical precedent for place-based reform.

The local, the learner and the community

Numerous reformers depicted nature study as a localized curriculum in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In many ways, in fact, this characteristic was a defining feature of the approach. In his *Manual of Nature-study by Grades*, an early contribution to the movement published in 1898, William Handford Hershman exemplified the use of the surrounding local

environment in nature study and offered practical nature study lessons on such topics as plant life, animal life, geography, weather, and physiology. An excerpt from a sample third-grade lesson on trees was illustrative:

The autumn month any time before frost will be the proper time to introduce the study of trees. A trip into the woods by the whole school is the best way to secure the right kind of interest. This may be done immediately after a study of leaves in the school room, as given in the first part of this outline ... (Hershman 1898, 39)

Throughout his manual, Hershman highlighted the value of what observers might term a *curriculum of opportunity* which was provided through locally available environments and conditions, extensions of the classroom-based laboratory. An early contributor to the movement, the emphasis on the local environment in Hershman's work was not his alone, but rather a characteristic trait across the literature representative of the nature study movement.

Clifton Hodge's contributions provided a similar illustration of the localized character of nature study. Speaking to the possibilities for insect study, Hodge wrote in *Nature-study and Life*, that "The best rule to follow is to study the insects that happen to be of most importance or of greatest interest for any locality or season" (1903, 50).

We never can tell what will come next," he added, "so, ... we must not be too much influenced by a formal list, but keep our minds open to study nature as it flows by and be ever ready to do the thing that is most worth our while" (Hodge 1903, 50).

In Hodge, as in numerous other nature study texts, readers found advocacy for an opportunity curriculum whereby the unique context of the school and community determined the character of student work. The precise dimensions of the nature study curriculum were locally determined and immediately accessible from the school.

A philosophical leader and fixture in the nature study movement, Liberty Hyde Bailey's plan was characteristically localized as well and it was Bailey's intention that the general principles of the approach be adapted by teachers and students to particular local contexts. Though widely applicable, nature study could not be photocopied and duplicated in precise ways from one school to the next. "After all these years of nature-study enterprise," he wrote:

it is naturally assumed by many persons that we ought to be able to give statistics of the number of pupils who are enrolled in the subject, the number of books that have been read, and other exact figures. This supposition misses the very purpose of The Nature Study Movement, which is to set pupils at work informally and personally with the objects, the affairs and phenomena with which they are in daily contact ... If I could give a statistical measure of The Nature-Study Movement, I should consider the work to have been a failure, however large the figures might be. (Bailey 1909, 10-11)

Bailey's consternation for any finite or fixed nature study reform plan seemed to stem from his understanding that nature study was an organic, localized affair in practice. If nature study directed students and teachers to consider their own lived experiences, a necessarily idiosyncratic venture in many instances, a fully standardized practice would nearly always be elusive. Nature

study, as Frederick Holtz noted in his manual for teachers, was to begin “... with the common things in the home, garden, fields, and streets of the child’s neighborhood” (1908, 402). And similarly, as Coulter, Coulter, and Patterson (1909) concluded in their elementary-level nature study guide, “Nature-study is necessarily restricted in the materials it uses to those which any particular environment affords. Hence the details of nature-study courses must differ widely” (13). The practice could reasonably be generalized across a variety of contexts, but the nature study curriculum itself was inherently localized. Across the writings of the influential nature study advocates considered above, but a sampling of the texts reviewed in this study, a consistent and deep commitment to local contexts emerged.

The local emphasis characteristic of nature study was, at least in part, an outgrowth of the perceived needs and nature of the learner. The organization of nature study curricula around the shared contexts of home, community, and school was a matter of necessity, or perhaps efficiency, given the attention to student development and the significance attached to the lived experiences of the student. The impetus within nature study to organize instruction around first-hand observation and inquiry further promoted the use of the local as a curriculum source, as such measures provided the requisite opportunities for the study of objects and phenomena. In this way, American nature study in and around the early twentieth century reflected a pedagogical outlook that observers might regard as both experiential and child-centered. Advocates also emphasized problem-solving and inquiry skills over pedagogical alternatives geared toward rote memorization of unconnected disciplinary facts and principles.

Hodge (1903) offered one portrait of the manner in which nature study might channel and nurture the native interests of the learner. Hodge expressed his confidence in the notion that the approach held a unique capacity to build upon what he viewed as the natural motivations of young students through first-hand explorations of the natural environment, the local natural environment in fact. He concluded:

... [W]e shall have a nature-study that shall bind home and school together as nothing in the curriculum does at present. Instead of giving over our entire school system to passive book learning, we shall have at least one subject that shall keep alive in the child the spirit of research, under the impetus of which he makes such astounding progress in learning the great unknown of nature around him during the first three or four years of life. This matter of original research in hand-to-hand contact with nature ought to be made the breadth of life in an educational system. (Hodge 1903, 14)

First-hand experience with the local environment and an educational philosophy that created possibilities for student inquiry and exploration seemed to define Hodge’s nature study agenda. He was consciously sensitive to the needs and development of young learners, at least as far as he understood those dynamics. His goal, like many of his contemporaries, was to bring into greater union the learner and the subject matter to be learned.

Like Hodge, Bailey’s (1909) vision of nature study was also rooted in a respect for the unique character and development of the learner. To move away from strictly textual learning and toward a more experiential approach was a central part of his overall program. Bailey insisted upon

an educational program designed around what he believed to be great human potential for reason and thought. “Nature-study,” he argued, “is not the teaching of facts merely for the sake of the facts, or materials for the sake of the materials: its purpose is to develop certain intellectual powers by the use of the materials ... We must begin with the fact, to be sure, but the lesson lies in the significance of the fact” (Bailey 1909, 6). Bailey’s nature study encouraged habits of logical thinking and questioning, and again, the context deemed most appropriate for promoting such habits was that with which the student could interact directly. The local, familiar environment was the ready-made laboratory of nature study work. It was there that the school could be brought into greater association with the lived experiences of the learner. Bailey explained that “Nature-study should not be unrelated to the child’s life and circumstance [and lamented] how indirect and how remote from the lives of pupils much of our education has been” (1909, 33). An educational leader and a prominent reformer, Bailey was not alone, but was rather in the company of many like-minded nature study proponents.

An additional illustration of the connection between nature study and the needs and nature of learners was evidenced in Charles B. Scott’s *Nature-study and the Child*, published 1910. For Scott, nature study dealt with the first-hand investigation of the natural world, and with regard to the selection of materials in nature study, he recommended a straightforward approach whereby teachers could base instructional choices on both their own and their students’ interests. “If teachers are fond of flowers,” he reasoned, “they will be more apt to awaken in the minds of their pupils a similar fondness” (Scott 1910, 297). Going further, an important component of Scott’s conception of

nature study was built around first-hand experience with the natural world. Nature study, for Scott, was “not books, not mere reading or listening, ... [but rather] “a personal investigation” [whereby] “teachers and children [became] fellow-investigators of truth” (101). Like others, Scott intended nature study to address the unique needs of individual learners with the “aim to develop each child as an individual” (1910, 104-105). Across the nature study literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, readers found a pronounced emphasis on the nature of the learner, a feature of the approach difficult to overlook or discount. Inquiry and first-hand experience with the familiar were central themes embedded within the movement.

Nature study promised much with regard to reformed classroom practice and student learning, but proponents were also very much in tune with the larger social purposes of the school and of education more generally. Many advocates hoped to address the health of the community of which the school was a part, if not society at large, and nature study’s connection to a budding conservation ethos in the final decade of the nineteenth century was not inconsequential. For Hershman (1898), as one example, the ultimate purpose of nature study was “... to enable [the student] to live completely” (vii). Hodge (1903) echoed those sentiments where he insisted that “the paramount value to be aimed at is character, will to do good, power to create happiness” (17). For him, nature study held the possibility for ethical, social, and spiritual development. Across Bailey’s writing, too, the study of nature often assumed a message of conservation and an appeal for the wise use of the natural environment. Nature study, he wrote, “... explains the relations between man and his environment. It establishes a new sense of our dependence on the

natural resources of the earth, and leads us not to abuse or waste our resources. It develops a public intelligence on these matters, and it ought to influence community conduct” (Bailey 1909, 57). Bailey and others often looked to the beatification of the school grounds and public spaces to highlight the potential connections between nature study and the improvement of community. “To improve the school-grounds, ... ” Bailey remarked, “is an expression of the people’s interest in the things that are the people’s” (1909, 84). Nature study was to create a “bond of connection between the school and community” (Holtz 1908, 89) and the type of the thinking required in nature study programs held real worth as a priming exercise for democratic living (see Bailey 1916). In addition to a deeper sympathy with the natural environment, nature study reformers often recognized a relationship between educational programs and local citizenship, part of which was a consideration of school-community linkages.

Context for the new geography

Many of the social and political contexts that provided space for the establishment of American nature study reforms applied equally well to the changes that took shape in the new geography. Trends in geography education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries closely paralleled developments in American educational progressivism, such as the acute emphasis on the learner and scientific/systematic approach to educational problem solving. On the other hand, the reform of geography education was perhaps less rooted than nature study in conservation or aesthetic appreciations for life and leisure. But there were nonetheless larger Progressive Era forces at work, those in addition to the purely educational.

The establishment of a new geography beginning in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in America was in some sense a reflection of a growing scientific spirit. Inspired by European pioneers, particularly the earlier German influences of Alexander Von Humboldt and Carl Ritter, the study of geography itself began to transform at mid-century into a scientific discipline. Geography began to appear in American universities by the 1890s and the nature of geographical thinking transitioned from an analytical compliment to an academic field of study in its own right. As Douglass (1998) noted in his historical review of geographic pedagogy and literacy, “Geography ... found itself torn between its past as an inquiry into the nature of the physical world and the new demands of developing empirical generalizations and even perhaps hypotheses and theories about spatial phenomena” (189). But there were other changes occurring still, and, in addition to the general creep of scientific inquiry, there was a simultaneous trend favoring the careful investigation of human, social phenomena.

The theoretical contributions of such figures as Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer inspired the appeal of the establishment of new “social sciences” (Cremin, 1961; Kliebard 2004) As Douglass (1998) described the transition, “The decades immediately preceding the turn of the century were witness, particularly, to an intense interest in studying human behavior modeled on the forms of scientific inquiry that were increasingly coming to characterize research in the natural sciences” (53). Although geography as a formal discipline would gravitate somewhere in between the natural and social sciences for some time, its rise to prominence as an independent field of study was a significant development. Similarly, whereas American geography in decades past had been largely descriptive, “with

hundreds of what and where questions,” the new geography was concerned expressly with causality (Noble 1954, 257). Combined with a range of similar adjustments taking place in the field of education, a new plan for geography study found its way into the American school.

The local, the learner, and the community

The prominence that local settings attained in geography education writings at the turn of the twentieth century was significant. By at least the last decade of the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, scholars concerned with the reform of American geography education consistently initiated their reform plans within those familiar contexts in the immediate vicinity of the school. In 1894, in *Home Geography for the Primary Grades*, C. C. Long expressed the idea that in the earliest years of introduction to the field, students were to engage in local geographic study. “The first work, ... ” he suggested, “is to study that small part of the earth’s surface lying just at our doors” (Long 1894, 3). A similar localized theme was apparent in Charles McMurry’s *Special Method in Geography* (1897), originally a sample course of study for the third and fourth grades, but by 1903, a complete elementary-level course of study. McMurry called for a number of visits to local gardens and farms and long the way, he imagined that there would likely be “ ... opportunity for incidental observation of the open country, fields, woods, streams, hills, soils, roads, bridges, and various occupations and industries” (1904, 167). McMurry’s plan also called for local map-making, a practice which he explained with detail. In addition to local map-making, McMurry went on to describe the relevance of local history in geography work and cited “grandfather stories, family histories, leading men and families” (169) as worthy items of attention in the third-grade

course. Practitioners might also include consideration of “Indian stories, ... Historical relics, public buildings, monuments, and museums, ... ” and other “Places of historic interest” (McMurry 1904, 170). McMurry’s plan was absolutely localized, but also preparatory for an outward, global focus in later years of study. And he was not alone. *The Oswego Normal Method*, published in 1896 by Amos Farnham, demonstrated a similar localized approach to revise geography instruction. Citing the German scholar, Carl Ritter, Farnham stated his firm belief that ““The very first step in a knowledge of geography, is to know thoroughly the districts where we live”” (1896, 26). In the case of fourth-grade instruction at Oswego, local study implied geographical description of the city, including its bridges, buildings, parks, and key organizations. Oswego geography also called for an investigation of local industry, occupations, and the various nationalities of its inhabitants. As further evidence still, *Home Geography* (1903), authored by Ralph Tarr and Frank McMurry, represented a localized instructional aide specifically fitted to New York-based geography teachers and students. And yet again, in William Sutherland’s *The Teaching of Geography*, published 1909, readers found a local emphasis. “A good preparation,” Sutherland wrote, “must include the ability to interpret geographical features in one’s own environment. How often people are wholly oblivious to the interesting features of the neighborhood?” (1909, 132-133). These several examples, far from exhaustive, nonetheless provide a strong case for the notion that early geography educators were ever-mindful of the value that local study might offer to learners. Like its German precursor in *Heimatskunde*, the home geographical aspect of the new American geography was very much a localized practice.

The attention new geography reformers paid to local contexts was based oftentimes upon certain understandings about the needs of students and the nature of learning itself, a feature of geography reform which lends further credence to its position as a significant historical predecessor of modern place-based education. Geography educators typically emphasized local contexts in an effort to provide for students an experiential learning environment, one in which first-hand observation was central. As Long (1894) noted, for example, "It must not be forgotten ... that actual observation by the pupil is necessary to seeing clearly and intelligently" (4). Rather than books and classroom work alone, Long wanted to supplement elementary geography with "short excursions in the neighborhood" and "out-of-door study" (1894, 3-4). W.M. Davis (1892), too, insisted on a form of instruction which offered "... a sense of reality," or, at the very least, something other than "barren recitation of geographical names" (426). Echoing Long's (1894) disdain for the reliance on the geography textbook, Davis wrote:

Actual examples of geographical facts and relationships are to be seen on every hand. No teacher need be entirely dependent upon a text-book. When geographical facts are taught from text-book alone they are bereft of their natural foundation and fail to develop that interest in the child that should be aroused and that can be aroused if geography is based on personal observation. (1899, 230)

And the same was true for many other writers of the day. Richard Dodge, for instance, spoke specifically about the value of the excursion and out-of-class study. "The children, if possible, and at any rate the teachers," he insisted, "should be

given the chance to study home geography, not from text-books, but from the only perfect geography reader – Nature herself" (Dodge 1896, 155). Not unlike contemporary nature study writers, Dodge insisted that the textbook could hardly match the utility of the excursion where first-hand experience and observation became guiding educational principles and curricular determinants.

In part a reflection of assumptions regarding the purposes of geography as a discipline, reform-minded writers in the field hoped to arrange curriculum and instruction around problem-solving and inquiry, a strong contrast to traditional school practice. Long (1894), as one illustration, urged practitioners to promote independent student investigations, the results of which might be shared in the classroom subsequently. Similarly, Davis (1899) expanded on themes of inquiry in his call for student investigations of the villages, towns, and cities nearby. His plan suggested a broader investigation to include causes and possible explanations of cause related to human settlement. "Through these observations and questions," Davis wrote, "the human element of geographical study is prominently brought forward, as it should be" (1899, 231). In very direct ways, Davis's reform plan incorporated observational work around both the physical and the human-cultural dimensions of geography in the education of young learners, all of which he initiated locally and geared toward an understanding of causality. Dodge (1898), too, was keen on the notion that geography study should move beyond the retention of factual knowledge and into a more organic understanding of broad geographical principles. Dodge explained:

We must aim to give a certain amount of information, but we should aim above

all, to give the ability to gather information; in other words, we should develop the knowledge of principles through the knowledge of facts ... We must in our early work study facts not singly and in a separated manner, but in their relations in time and space so as to lead the child to appreciate that there are one or more underlying truths which make explanation of the fact easy; then we can generalize. (1898, 16)

In sum, Dodge appreciated a student consciousness of the interconnectedness of geographical information far more than the mere memorization of factual content alone. In doing so, he reasoned, "... we develop in the child the ability to discover and apply principles, we give him the power to gain knowledge, and not merely unrelated items of knowledge" (Dodge 1898, 16). Like many of his contemporaries, Dodge called for reasoning over remembering in seeking to reform geography education.

And lastly, an element of the new geography education was based in the progressive educational notion that student motivation and interest were often outgrowths of familiar contexts. The bigger plan, as Long (1894) noted, was "... not to impart information," but rather "to awaken and stimulate interest" (5). McMurry's (1897) use of the geographical "type" supported a similar conclusion about the connection of interest through localized study, observation, and inquiry. McMurry intended the use of local "types" as partial remedy for an otherwise bland tradition of abstraction in the school. "... [T]here is a powerful realism," he explained, "in this kind of study which gives a healthy tonic effect. The worst criticism that can be brought to bear upon our present teaching of geography is that it is abstract and unreal. It is formal and dry" (1897, 187). Observation and

study of those many familiar "types" available locally McMurry believed to be curative. Motivations to highlight familiarity and interest evidenced in McMurry's work were not fleeting and continued to appear in the writings of geography educators well into the first two decades of the twentieth century. As one of numerous indications of that trend, Chamberlain suggested in 1907 that the field-trip relieved "... the difficulty experienced in placing geography among the life-interests of the child" (70). In combination with pictures, stereoscopic images, school museums, and personal travel, to name but a few of the other sources of inspiration identified by Chamberlain, the field-trip provided valuable first-hand experiences for students, valuable in the sense that he regarded direct observation as a most vital component of learning. The ultimate purpose, of course, was to garner the interests of the student towards geographic learning, or, as Chamberlain phrased it, "to enlist [the pupil's] conscious and purposeful participation in its study" (1907, 72). Though his views were widely shared among contemporaries seeking reform within the field of geography education, Chamberlain's effort to outline a learner-centered rationale, one which emphasized first-hand observation, inquiry, and the lived experiences of the learner, was among the most explicit.

The community responsiveness function in the writing surrounding the new geography was arguably less pronounced than other characteristic features of the field. There were, however, indications that scholars recognized the potentially valuable role that geography study played in the solution of social problems. While this study identified few scholars who wrote about the direct ways in which students might engage in the improvement of the local community, there was nonetheless a general appreciation for the citizenship education function

that the study of geography potentially provided. In some instances, that appreciation was reflected in the desire to promote an appreciation for the interconnectedness of peoples and places locally and throughout the world. Sutherland (1909), as one illustration, addressed the relationship between the school and the learner's home community in a discussion of what he deemed the "social phase" of geography education. His social phase contained much of what contemporary observers might term *human geography*, a feature of geography education which Sutherland suggested might be developed by practitioners and students throughout the learning process. As a part of this social investigation, he promoted the establishment of a deep knowledge of the interconnectedness of one's home area to other peoples and places. "When we study the methods by which ourselves and our neighbors are fed, and clothed," Sutherland remarked, "the idea of doing for others, of being socially helpful, again appeals to us. So butcher, baker, and candlestick-maker, each in his own way, renders some social service ... " (1909, 49). Embedded in the passage was a call for what might be regarded as a type of responsiveness to community. Through an investigation of peoples and places near and far, Sutherland seemed to suggest, however implicitly, that a sentiment of social duty might be fostered in young learners through the study of geography. He explained further:

The pupil may come to see that no individual or community can, independently of other individuals or communities, live as well or produce as much, as is possible through the reciprocal helpfulness of exchange. Such an outlook, it would seem, will make the future citizen more rationale in his industrial pursuits, and more democratic

in the exercise of his civil rights.
(Sutherland 1909, 104)

Social geography under Sutherland, then, promoted a form of citizenship education which emphasized the importance of interconnectedness in democratic life.

E. Ehrlich Smith outlined a plan in 1921 to connect conservation to geography and offered a second illustration of the community responsiveness function embedded within the new geography. In his view, geography study might ultimately confer a direct benefit on society by promoting in students an awareness of principles surrounding environmental stewardship. The primary understanding to be gained, Smith concluded, was that "... in order to supply the needs of the world, men must use the resources about them in the most economical way; that they must increase production by means of conservation; and that, by wise consumption, they must make the wealth of the world 'go around' to all" (Smith 1921, 27). Although he wrote little about the role of students of geography in the process of identifying and enacting solutions for local conservation problems, an investigation of social relationships was nonetheless of central importance in Smith's geography. Contained within Smith's plan was a direct consideration of the process through which geography study in the school might intersect with the needs of the community, global though it may have been.

Written in 1925, Harold Rugg and John Hockett's recommendations for geography reform offered further commentary on the connection between the student and the community. Rugg and Hockett insisted that the perceived lack of knowledge of American students in geography was in many ways problematic. More important than factual content knowledge was the anticipated ability of students to address the

problems they might face as adult citizens in a democratic society. "We know," they lamented, "that – excepting a few who will be compelled by practical needs later to learn the basic facts- the great majority will be barren of information, thoroughly stupid, in fact, when faced with the need of exercising intelligence about contemporary problems" (Rugg and Hockett 1925, 2). Hardly an endorsement of the efficacy of American geography education, the problem, as they viewed it, was the failure to develop capable citizens. While readers could observe many of the central themes in the recommendations offered by Rugg and Hockett in the work of others contributing to the reform of geography education in decades prior, the close attention to social action was arguably somewhat unique. Rugg and Hockett called for direct civic action on the part of the student and in their words, "constructively but critically, students will be influenced to put their ideas sanely into action" (16). With regard to the relationship between the school and the community, then, Rugg and Hockett's plan for geography study was perhaps more immediate and direct than that of other geography-related writers of the era. The essential educational problem was one of "producing a generation of informed, thinking, socially-disposed citizens" and Rugg and Hockett's desire, "... that the masses of people shall be both well informed and keenly interested in the carrying on of their community affairs" (8) is a theme characteristic in much modern place-based educational writing. Although they did not belabor the point, the value that Rugg and Hockett attached to "studies of local needs" (1925, 92) revealed a belief in the potential educational utility of local study and reinforced, to some degree, a commitment to fostering in students a desire to participate in and improve the community. In the context of an historical review

of place-based education, the relationship between the school and the improvement of the local community is an important consideration, and although geography reformers in the early twentieth century arguably emphasized direct community improvement only sporadically, the attention to the relationship between the school and citizenship education was significant. Coupled with the emphasis on the local and the learner, the new geography represented an important historical precedent for place-based pedagogy, one that has largely escaped consideration from modern placed-based educators.

Discussion

As noted at the outset, this study was framed in part around the proclamation that "...curriculum history is more than useful; it is essential for improving the character of curriculum reform efforts" (Tanner 1982, 410). The discussion below represents an effort to provide explicit commentary on the manner in which this study might inform contemporary practice. In other words, clarification of the historical developments above provides a synthetic appraisal that might serve to inform solutions to similar educational problems attached to the contemporary field, not to mention provide foundations for continued historical investigation. The discussion is selective and focuses primarily on issues surrounding academic formalism, curriculum articulation, local/global connections, and teacher education.

A response to academic formalism

From the theories and models evaluated above, it appears that, in many instances, a return to the local developed in response to the perceived formalism of mainstream curriculum and practice. A theme echoed throughout both

nature study and new geography reforms was the notion that exclusive attention to the textbook, to tests, and to recitations had overwhelmed the most important function of the school – to educate. Symbolism over learning was the charge and a renewed emphasis on observation, problem-solving, and inquiry represented sound alternatives. “Nature, not books,” was the mantra for many and a reconsideration of the educative value of first-hand experiences just beyond the school door gained wide appeal.

It is perhaps not altogether surprising that place-based reform literature has proliferated in the past two decades. The past twenty years in American education have been marked by accelerated efforts at the state and federal levels to raise academic achievement through testing regimes and standardized curricula. In a climate utterly dominated by the strictures of *No Child Left Behind* and its legislative accoutrements, and given the instructional and curricular fixity that such policies generally produce, the localized, student-centered, and experiential nature of place-based education stands in fairly stark contrast. This twenty-first century response to academic formalism has arguably taken on a new intensity, yet it is not altogether new.

Importantly, engagement with developments in nature study and the new geography reveal that critiques of academic formalism, of testing mechanisms, and of standardization, have not necessarily guaranteed the adoption or success of place-based educational reforms historically. Mainstream traditions were more easily critiqued than they were transformed. One valuable lesson that modern place-based educators might build upon in the pursuit of contemporary reform is the need for wide public support. As Wilbur S. Jackman noted more than a century ago in his advocacy for nature study, “It is of great importance to enlist

and cultivate the interest of the parents in field work” (1894, 10). Given the unorthodox nature of nature study and its non-traditional fieldwork component, Jackman recommended that advocates embark on campaigns that might “disarm their prejudices” (10). Alongside critiques of mainstream academic practice, proponents of reform were nonetheless sensitive to the need for wider public acceptance. Contemporary place-based educators might build upon the lessons of past reformers and the mechanisms developed to elicit parental, administrative, and public support for the installation of practices that might otherwise be regarded as unorthodox and threaten to dismantle school and curricular change. It does not seem as though merely localizing the curricula was in any way a guarantee for community acceptance.

Curriculum articulation

Exploration of nature study and the new geography demonstrated that although localized reforms often arose in opposition to academic formalism, that contextual feature did not serve to replace commitments to thoughtful, integrated, curricular and instructional plans. Instead, this study highlighted the fact that place-based approaches have sometimes manifested as articulated courses of study. In both nature study and geography education, advocates worked to develop extended courses of study with the intent to avoid overlap and presumably the waste of instructional time. In the case of the new geography, in particular, efforts to develop an articulated plan led to the continuation of what educators have since labeled as a curriculum of “expanding horizons,” a generalized plan for geography study across the grades. In McMurry’s *Special Method in Geography* (1897), readers found a localized and graded course outlined in detail and *The Oswego Normal Method* (1896)

offered a secondary illustration. While this study reviewed texts between the approximate years of 1890 and 1920, further review of similar programs such as Paul Hanna's expanding communities may point further to the longevity of an articulated, initially local, approach to geography education. With nature study, too, idiosyncratic, localized curricula existed in tandem with articulated curricula. As two examples, Hodge's *Nature Study and Life* (1903) and Holtz's *Nature Study* (1908) each outlined sample courses of study through the eighth-grade. With those several illustrations in mind, historical practices of place-based education often managed to navigate between the overly rigid academic program and the complete lack of curricular structure. At the same time that nature study plans could express "... endless variation in the details and in the little applications" (Bailey 1909, 10-11) room for a well thought out and transferable plan was nonetheless possible (and encouraged).

Without becoming standardized, historical place-based methodologies often represented sets of standard practices nonetheless. Insect study, local geography study, the field excursion, school garden work, and specimen catalogues all became relatively standard practices in the place-based reform initiatives surrounding nature study and the new geography. So while the practices of historical place-based reforms often assumed standard forms, thus gaining some measure of appeal and refinement, curricular flexibility and localized practice remained intact. Although many historical illustrations of place-based theory and practice represented assaults on formalism, most reforms were not presented as complete curricular departures. Whether large or small, place-based educational strategies generally maintained certain elements of the traditional academic curriculum at the same time that certain mainstream practices were challenged. Of no

small significance, then, historical examples highlight possibilities. In particular, where the goal is to expand modern place-based practice, what contemporary practitioners might build upon is the possibility of balancing the sometimes idiosyncratic nature of localized teaching and learning without completely dismissing the need for certain standards of practice, instructional refinement, or curriculum articulation. Localized curriculum and instruction are not necessarily antithetical to the creation of robust and widely applicable educational programs.

Teacher education

Although it was certainly not true in all instances, the place-based antecedents highlighted here achieved a great measure of success in the sense that the principles and practices advocated gained relatively wide institutional and professional support. One area where that support was especially pronounced was with regard to the attention that reformers paid to the training of teachers. The number of texts and descriptions associated with nature study and the new geography geared exclusively toward teachers was noteworthy. The presence of normal school courses designed around localized, observational study was also significant, an indication of the support that each of those reform movements enjoyed, if not a cause as well.

Oddly enough, while there are numerous examples of place-based education in practice today, very little in the way of teacher training has emerged in the past two decades. Dubel and Sobel's *Place-Based Teacher Education*, published 2008, and Todd's *Place-based Learning in Teacher Education*, published in 2007, represent two counterexamples. Suffice it to say, the domain remains underdeveloped. The handful of available illustrations in the literature have not indicated any real momentum for

change. While many of the themes represented in place-based educational approaches likely receive attention in teacher education programs (e.g., experientialism, community responsiveness, etc.), it seems clear that the contemporary movement has hardly succeeded in developing a presence within the critically important domain of teacher education. Given the apparently robust normal school support historically, the issue likely warrants attention from modern proponents seeking to expand support and opportunities to wider audiences. On a similar note, lessons gained through this historical study suggest that the lack of availability of place-based educational resources (e.g., texts, description of methods, etc.) that are locally relevant is peculiar and arguably thwarts expansion to some extent.

Conclusion

Together, nature study and the new geography illustrated curricular models thoroughly consistent with modern place-based educational ideals in ways that were perhaps more comprehensive than even modern proponents of the approach have achieved. Despite what appears to be a rich historical legacy of theory and practice, modern place-based educators have largely neglected substantive investigations into the nature study movement and geography education and the present discussion hopefully stands as a partial corrective. Of course, historical investigations such as this one only scratch the surface and continued research will surely reveal further insights. Explorations into other twentieth-century developments such as the Country Life Movement, camping and outdoor education, and community education will add to the developing portrait, as will pre-twentieth century curricular developments both domestic and international. With the characteristic emphasis on the local, the learner, and the community, place-based

education contains within its components arguably essential to the educative process. As the historical portrait of the approach develops further, educators will be better positioned to account for the apparent ubiquity of place-based pedagogies. Why is it the case that educators throughout the centuries have endeavored time after time to situate local contexts at the heart of so many of their plans for educational reform? Answers to that important question are various and are likely to be found somewhere in between an understanding of the efficacy of place-based education as a curricular reform plan, the cause and challenge of educational reform itself, and the capacity of educational scholars to recognize and build upon the experiences of their forbearers.

Notes

¹ It is not entirely clear where the phrase “new geography” originated or in what context. Spencer Trotter of Swarthmore College incorporated the phrase by at least 1894. “New geography” is used here to refer to a whole body of reforms surrounding American geography education at the turn of the twentieth century.

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