

PLACE-BASED EDUCATION: MAKING THE CASE FOR AN INVESTIGATION OF HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS

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Abstract

This article seeks to initiate an historical research agenda within the field of *place-based education (PBE)*. A relatively new phrase in educational research, theory, and practice, the fundamental elements of place-based education are in fact quite mature and have deep historical roots. Despite a rich past, curricular historical work in the field is thoroughly underdeveloped. Following a brief characterization of the contemporary literature, three select historical illustrations are presented, each with the intent of highlighting both opportunities and deficiencies.

Introduction

Place-based education (PBE) is a term which refers to those forms of pedagogy which seek to connect learning to the cultural, historical, and ecological contexts in which schooling itself takes place. Participatory and active, PBE frames the learning process around the unique experiences, situations, and events in which schools are located. In the most general sense, then, place-based education is a reference to those pedagogies that emphasize, to one extent or another, the *local* in the educative process. In his seminal introductory text on the subject, one of several primers that exist to date, Sobel (2005) offered what has become perhaps the most widely-cited formal definition. The author explained:

Place-based education is the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics,

social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students' appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. Community vitality and environmental quality are improved through the active engagement of local citizens, community organizations, and environmental resources in the life of the school. (Sobel 2005, 7)

From the standpoint of curriculum development, place-based educational approaches draw on a consideration of all things local as a way of determining, at least in part, what knowledge is of most worth. More precisely, place-based models generally share in common (1) a commitment to the places in which learning is situated, (2) the nature of the learner, and (3) the stakeholders maintaining positions in the process. Although Sobel's definition has been reworked and re-phrased by many, his version is nonetheless illustrative of the essential themes outlined in other variations.

In an account of his tenure with the Bread Leaf School of English at Middlebury College in Vermont, John Elder revealed that the phrase *place-based education* grew out of his own collaboration with Laurie Lane-Zucker and the Orion Society in the early 1990s (The Orion Society 1998; Lane-Zucker 2010). While this collaboration between the Orion Society and

Middlebury College, between Elder and Lane-Zucker, marks the source of the place-based heading as a named approach to teaching and learning, numerous other headings describe similar perspectives. A short list might include *place-consciousness*, *community-based education*, *outdoor education*, *rural education*, *ecological and environmental education*, and *bioregional education*, and there are perhaps more still. Again, what is important is that all share a fundamental commitment, though perhaps in distinctive ways, to the places in which learning is situated, the nature of the learner, and the stakeholders maintaining positions in the process. Yet many of these terms and the educational perspectives they represent boast lineages that stretch well beyond the formation of place-based education in the early 1990s. Strangely enough, despite what may be deep historical roots, few have ventured to consider the historical dimensions of the approach in a thorough and systematic fashion. It is this feature of the field, its *virtual ahistoricism*, which provides the context for the discussion that follows.

Several important features emerge through an examination of the existing research into place-based theory and practice. In the first instance, it is abundantly clear that the field lacks historical consciousness and that the historical dimensions of place-based pedagogy are ripe for exploration. Secondly, and of no lesser import, curriculum historians and place-based educators, in particular, must recognize that the historical work is worth doing. Following a brief consideration of the existing historical work in the field, three select case examples are presented in an effort to initiate a broader and more deliberate historical research agenda.

Hints and Glimmers of the Past

To be sure, place-based educational research is not altogether ahistorical. There are, in fact, hints and glimmers of the past scattered throughout the literature. There is a general recognition, as the discussion below reveals, of the theoretical connections that place-based education shares with early twentieth-century progressive educational thinkers. But while few place-based proponents argue that the approach is entirely new, an equal few have endeavored to explore this assumption. In short, historical work within the field of place-based education is far from complete and it is within this assumption that the call for new and more systematic historical investigation originates.

In reviewing contemporary place-based educational literature (those examples in which scholars reference the formal phrase *place-based education*), what readers typically find is a casual respect for the theoretical overlap that exists between modern versions of place-based education and elements of early twentieth-century educational progressivism. In their introductory comments to *Place-Based Education in the Global Age*, for instance, Gruenewald and Smith pointed out that “all education prior to the common school was place-based” (2008, 1). In the same text, Knapp (2008) offered a similar perspective. He added:

Today the field of place-based education has established itself a paper trail of thousands of pages in its young life as an educational movement. This doesn't mean that place-based education has never before been tried in schools and other educational institutions. In fact, the idea of learning from the local surroundings predates the formation of formal schooling ... From the late 1800s to the present time, several movements in schools have promoted the educational use of local areas as integral

parts on the curriculum ... (Knapp 2008, 6).

From these short passages, it is clear that place-based educational scholars have recognized the existence of historical antecedents to modern place-based initiatives. At the same time, however, none of these authors, and few other place-based researchers, have endeavored to explore the historical domain in-depth. Even the most recent volume on the subject, Smith and Sobel's *Place- and Community-Based Education in Schools* (2010), devotes just nine pages to historical antecedents. Laudable perhaps for its "acknowledge[ment] that there is nothing new about place-based education" (Smith and Sobel 2010, 25), it falls short of any sort of systematic review of historical precedents. And this is the point precisely.

As is true of American educational literature generally, references to the work of John Dewey are not infrequent in the writing of place-based educators. Woodhouse and Knapp (2000), for instance, reported that place-based education "usually includes conventional outdoor education methodologies as advocated by John Dewey to help students connect with their particular corners of the world" (1). This represents the extent of their historical analysis, however. Another well-known contributor to the growing body of place-based educational scholarship, Smith (2002a; 2002b; 2007), too, has made consistent reference to the educational philosophies of Dewey. In an article entitled "Going Local," Smith (2002a) explained that "by focusing on students' local context, proponents address one of John Dewey's (1899/1959) major concerns about 19th century public schools that still applies to this century: the lack of connection between formal schooling and students' lives, ..." (31). Like others, Smith does a great deal to draw

connections within the confines of singular articles and book chapters outside of the historical field, yet his valuable contributions nonetheless fall short of in-depth historical consideration. In fact, Jayandhandan's recent contribution entitled "John Dewey and a Pedagogy of Place," published late 2009, stands as perhaps the sole counterexample to this tendency.

Beyond Dewey, there are several other glimmers of an historical consciousness in the place-based educational literature. Paul Theobald's continued efforts to investigate rural education have positioned him as a key figure in the contemporary field. Following *Call School* (1995), his first extended historical publication exploring the demise of the rural school in the American Midwest to 1918, Theobald has developed his interest in rural schools into a deeper advocacy for the renewal of a sense of community through localized education. As the author explained in *Teaching the Commons*:

This book is premised on two assumptions ... First, rural schools ought to have a place in the educational landscape of this country ... Second, schools ought to attend more consciously to their physical place on earth and the social, political, and economic dynamics that surround it. Doing so would render the entire school experience more meaningful and, in the process, would contribute in a small, though not insignificant, way to a cultural healing desperately needed in American society. (Theobald 1997, 7)

The notion that a rural, place-based education might provide opportunities for the establishment or restoration of an arguably more sustainable, community-focused ethos, both locally and

throughout the nation, is a theme that characterizes much of Theobald's writing. But while his work is often historical in nature, or contains elements of historical analysis, his writing is not generally framed within the context of place-based education *per se*. Rather than a history, in part or in full, of place-based educational theory or practice, Theobald's valuable historical work stands as a critical appraisal of American schooling and the notion of *community*, which often ends with a call for a shift toward a more place-conscious education. The challenge of producing a history, or histories, of place-based education, particularly one approaching a deeper consideration of practice, remains unmet.

Hutchison's (2004) comprehensive evaluation of place and schooling, *A Natural History of Place in Education*, represents a holistic appraisal of the variety of meanings that the notion of *place* might hold in educational contexts. Hutchison also included specific discussion of what he referred to as the "pedagogy of place" (2004, 26), which links the text, albeit somewhat indirectly, to place-based education. At the same time, however, Hutchison centered the bulk of his historical consideration on educational *spaces* and school and classroom *environments*. The notion of place-based education which incorporates the historical, ecological, and cultural particularities of a given locale as sources for curricular choices exists, for the most part, outside of the historically-focused portions of Hutchison's text. No doubt a seminal contribution, *A Natural History of Place in Education* Hutchison (2004) cannot be viewed as more than a partial history of place-based education as it neither emphasized the development of the strategy over time nor systemically analyzed curricular antecedents.

In a recent dissertation, Greenfield (2005) attempted to link the ecological consciousness of several early environmental thinkers to modern environmental education. Exploring the work of key figures such as Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, and Edward O. Wilson, Greenfield concluded that "*place-based* learning, critical thinking, and the interconnectedness of knowledge characterized these individuals' naturalistic philosophy toward learning [emphasis added]" (2005, 1). In the same year, Knapp (2005) drew a similar connection between Leopold's *I-Thou* relationship and place-based education and insisted that a deeper consideration of other naturalists, "such as John Muir, John Burroughs, Henry D. Thoreau, Gilbert White, Edwin Way Teale, Rachel Carson, Annie Dillard, Sally Carrighar, Virginia Eifert, and Anne Morrow Lindbergh" (2005, 284), might reveal similar valuable lessons for place-based educational researchers. More recently, Knapp has reported that "Newman and Oliver [in 1967] thoroughly outlined an educational plan that linked formal schooling with the community context without inventing a specific label for it" (2008, 7). Orr (1992) found a similar historical connection in Lewis Mumford's call for regional surveys in the 1940s. But again, aside from the general recognition that historical antecedents might exist, both Knapp (2005; 2008) and Orr (1992), like the vast majority of other place-based proponents, stop short of any sort of in-depth or systematic historical analysis of place-based educational theory and practice. Without overlooking their efforts to identify potentially fruitful areas for historical research, these valuable contributions have failed to engage in the historical work itself. As is true of other dimensions of the field, there is more work to be done.

Duffin remarked in a recent PBE-focused dissertation that the approach “is such an open and flexible proto-theory of education that it flows into a million different connections to other theories of education and society” (2006, 24). If Duffin's assessment was even modestly accurate, it is somewhat surprising that so few place-based educational researchers have ventured to embark on journeys that are historical in nature. While an exhaustive exploration of those *million different connections* might be overly cumbersome, the paucity of historical evaluations of place-based educational theory, let alone historical representations of practice, is difficult to comprehend.

The Tip of an Iceberg

Opportunities for a new, or expanded, historical research agenda in the field of place-based education are vast. What observers might conclude about the existing place-based educational literature is that while the field's historical consciousness might be underdeveloped, the historical road map has begun to take shape. In other words, while the work has yet to be done in most cases, there is general consensus on some of those key areas where the historical work in the field might begin. Others nodes, of course, have yet to be identified. Through the illustrations below, specifically the Berry School of northwest Georgia, the Penn School of coastal South Carolina, and the well-known *Foxfire* method, both issues are clarified; that is, the several select historical illustrations of place-based education highlighted below work simultaneously to identify new dimensions for exploration while problematizing existing examples. The case illustrations presented are all representative of the American South. This feature of the article is largely coincidental and

further exploration will undoubtedly reveal a much broader geographic influence.

The Berry School

Martha Berry's pioneering efforts to establish a school for rural Appalachian boys at the turn of the twentieth century stands as but one unexplored historical illustration of place-based education in practice. Even a cursory review of the institutional bulletins published by the Berry School reveals connections, yet neither Berry nor her schools have received mention in the literature. While the institution changed dramatically as the Boys Industrial School (founded 1902) grew into the coeducational Berry College by the early 1930s, a certain attention to the local in the curriculum was evident throughout the school's early history and across virtually all disciplines. Consider for example, excerpts from the science curriculum as described in the 1906-1907 edition of *The Berry School Bulletin*.

Freshman Year: Fall Term - Physiography. This is a four months' course, with daily recitations. Besides the study of the text-book, the class does some field work, examining under the direction of the teacher, certain aspects of the physical conformation of the section in the immediate vicinity of the School. (26)

While complimented with traditional classroom instruction, the suggestion that *the immediate vicinity of the school* might serve an educational purpose represents a place-based perspective. In addition to course and laboratory work following the freshman year, the same bulletin noted how the growing agricultural functions of the Berry School were to be achieved. Under the heading *Agricultural Department*, the following place-based approach was outlined:

Although this is not strictly an agricultural school it aims to give that practical knowledge of Agriculture which will enable any boy to become and intelligent and successful farmer. This training is given by class recitations in Agriculture and by practical work on the school farm.

The farm consists of about five hundred acres and is one of the most important resources of the School ... This year about seventy-five acres of corn has been planted, which will provide for the stock on the farm for the coming year ... It is our aim to make the agricultural training the best of any school in the South. (*The Berry School Bulletin 1906-1907*, 28-9)

In some sense, these several passages might lead observers to conclude that the vocational aspects of Berry overwhelmed the place-focused approach; that is, that Berry was more concerned with technical training than any sort of educational philosophy grounded in the local. This is a reasonable conclusion, but incomplete for several reasons. While a focus of the Berry School was always agricultural and industrial education, features that remains evident in Berry College even today, that focus did not preclude a place-based approach to learning, be it agricultural, industrial, or otherwise. The particular area of northwest Georgia in which the school was located, indeed much of Georgia and the South at the turn of the century, were, in fact, heavily invested economically, culturally, and politically in agriculture. Agriculture, and more broadly the goal of educational improvement for the then impoverished agricultural families of Appalachia, was always part of Berry's mission and a reflection of local conditions. This focus is apparent in the course catalogues dating between 1905 and 1922 and explicitly stated in the

annually reoccurring section titled *Special Information for Students*.

Candidates for admission must live in the country, must be unable to attend a more expensive school ... No city boys are accepted as students ... The following boys also are not wanted: Those who are "headed for town," whose ambition in life is to be a clerk, bookkeeper, chauffer, insurance agent, "drummer," street-car conductor, book-agent, "dude," etc. or who are looking for easy jobs. (*The Berry School Bulletin 1912-1913*, 49)

The dedication to those boys, and later girls, intent on a rural life, not a life in the nearby city of Rome, Georgia, was evident.

A more direct refutation to any claim that the Berry School was purely an agricultural one is evidenced through the fact that throughout the early bulletins were descriptions of a whole-curriculum grounded in the *local*; that is, the evidence for a place-based approach at Berry extends well beyond the agricultural components of the curriculum. The English and social studies curricula, for instance, maintained a place-based attentiveness to issues local, Georgian, and Southern. In addition to Nature Study, a curriculum component found throughout Berry's Grammar School course descriptions, one finds a place-based approach to geography education. The following Geography II course description provides an illustration:

Throughout the course in this subject the view-point is always that of the homes of the students and constant reference is made to local conditions. The work is made interesting and practical through the use of maps, pictures, models,

apparatus and field observations. (*The Berry School Bulletin 1912-1913*, 25)

The passage is telling in that appears to reveal a locally-focused approach to teaching and learning, one that built on student interest of those things familiar, perhaps believed to be inherent in the learner's experience. The description of Berry's Country Life course offers further evidence.

The aim of this course is to take the everyday activities of the boys on the farm and make these the basis for arithmetic, science and agriculture ... Most of the boys in this class have studied very little arithmetic in the rural communities from which they come. The practical way in which arithmetic, agriculture, economics, and current events are blended enable the quick assimilation of what otherwise would be dry and indigestible material. No definite text-book is used during this year, but the students are encouraged to accumulate and read bulletins on the subjects discussed in class. (*The Berry School Bulletin 1921-1922*, 47)

In many ways, this passage reads like a modern description of place-based education. As an important aside, the passage also provides an interesting link between place-based education, The Berry School, and the Country Life Movement. In this way, a deeper consideration of the Berry curricula and philosophy may add significantly to the historical portrait provided by Canniff (1998) and her work on the theoretical connections between modern place-based education and the Country Life Movement.

But what of the other social studies courses, mathematics, English, and literature? While not present in every course description, an

attention to the local existed in each component of the curriculum, with the possible exceptions of Bible Studies and Music. With regard to the social studies, the bulk of the coursework was historical in nature and not explicitly place-based. Despite the persistence of what appears to be a more traditional history curriculum, however, a place-conscious theme did permeate a number of other social studies courses. Coupled with the Geography II excerpt cited above, selections from the course descriptions for Civics I and Economics I below lend further support to the argument that the early Berry School exemplified a place-based approach in practice which pre-dates modern initiatives.

Civics I [*sic*]. An elementary study of the structure and function of local, state and national government, with study and practice in the ordinary duties of rural citizenship, including things a boy should know about the law.

Economics I. An elementary course in political economy, ethics, and the duties of American citizenship, special reference being paid to rural conditions and needs. (*The Berry School Bulletin 1921-1922*, 51-52)

In both Civics and Economics, the *rural* focus arguably represented an attempt to make the social studies locally relevant and representative of the lives lived by Berry students.

Much like the persistence of traditional history, English courses had perhaps the least place-focused flavor at Berry. This trend was particularly salient at the high school level as illustrated through the curricular emphasis on classic, non-local texts. At the grammar school level, however, the use of Stewart's Country Life Readers suggests localized, rural topics were at least present. While the course descriptions for high school English and literature courses did not

indicate a place-based approach directly, student work on *The Advance*, the school paper designed "to give items of news in regard to local happenings, and also furnish an opportunity for literary effort on the part of students" (The Berry School Bulletin 1905-1906, 24), may have served a similar purpose. In fact, to approach disciplinary learning through local journalism is not at all unlike other historical place-based educational practices, namely the *cultural journalism* method illustrated through the *Foxfire* program.

Place-based elements were even apparent in mathematics course descriptions, though perhaps less pronounced given the nature of the subject area. Mathematics VII, for instance, boasted "practical applications to country life," (The Berry School Bulletin 1921-1922, 48) while Mathematics X offered work in "simple bookkeeping, particularly as applied to the farm, shop and home" (49). The same place-based focus was evident in the education courses described in the Berry bulletins. Both courses recorded reportedly maintained "special reference to rural school work," and, particularly in Course II, the rural high school's "place in the community life, the training of leaders, and ... agricultural and industrial training for country life" (*The Berry School Bulletin 1921-1922*, 52).

Even where the focus was agricultural, the Berry School course bulletins were suggestive of an experiential, place-based approach. Whether horticulture and gardening, botany and forestry, or animal husbandry, course descriptions maintained a focus on the subject as relevant to, and in the context of, *local* circumstance. The course description for Botany and Forestry provides as an example.

Each student is required to work out a practical plan for the management of the average forested area on a 160-acre

farm; considerable attention is also given to the relation of the state and national governments to forestry and to its influences upon the industrial and social welfare of rural communities. (*The Berry School Bulletin 1921-1922*, 53)

Throughout the curriculum, then, at least as represented through the institution's bulletins and course descriptions, the Berry School appears to have advocated and implemented a place-based approach to its work with rural Appalachian students in northwest Georgia. Despite what appears to be a rich historical illustration of place-based education in practice, the Berry School has been entirely overlooked by place-based researchers.

The Penn School

Whereas the Berry experiment was designed to serve rural white boys in Georgia's Appalachian foothills, the Penn School was initially intended to educate newly freed slaves of South Carolina's Sea Islands. Established in 1862 on St. Helena Island, South Carolina and in operation until the late 1940s, the Penn school stands as another early illustration of place-based education and a model of practice that has remained unstudied. In his introductory remarks to *School Acres*, an internally produced history of the Penn School published in 1930, Paul Kellogg offered a description of the school's mission. He noted:

The experience of Penn in education "of the people, by the people, for the people" not only plays luminously on the needs of rural districts the country over, but upon a dilemma confronting our cities. Miss Cooley reveals how the New England school of the "three R's" with its academic ramifications fell short

when it came to training-for-life under the changing conditions of the rural South. She sets forth a strategy and spirit of the two revolutions at Penn School—how the life of the farms was brought into the classrooms, and the how through the school acres and other extramural activities the process was reversed and the educational impulse was spread to the ends of the island. (Cooley 1930, xiv)

From its democratic approach to building the community *through the school* to the explicit effort to bring the life experiences of students into the classroom, the description that Kellogg provided points to the Penn School's place-based educational outlook, both its purposes and its methods.

Laura M. Towne, founder of the Penn School, embarked on her experiment with an understanding that a traditional, perhaps detached, educational system was not meeting the needs of local students and local communities. As Rossa Cooley, once principal of the Penn School, noted:

... the limitations of a purely academic education became etched deeply in the life of the island. They are the same limitations that are to be found, repeated over and over again, in the average Negro school in the rural South. They are the same limitations which mark the general run of rural schools the country over; the same limitations which mark much of the work of the mission schools in foreign lands which have taken over too faithfully the models of our traditional schooling; the same limitations which in various guises have confronted elementary and high schools and colleges everywhere. (Cooley 1930, 4)

Clearly critical of educational waste generally, The Penn School intended to offer an alternative suited specifically to the needs of the community and students it served. As Cooley phrased it, the Penn School brought “the school to the farms, and making this oldest of Negro schools in a sense the newest – an all-island school, an all-the-year-round school, merging school and community into a common adventure” (1930, 5). The community-to-school relationship indicated by Cooley (1930) is clear evidence of a place-based approach to teaching and learning.

Founders created the Penn School to serve the local community, in this case an African-American one, but Cooley's (1930) appraisal of the approach at Sea Islands, suggested a belief in the transferability of the locally-focused model. Reflecting on the school's past, Cooley remarked:

Nor was this peculiar to the race. How many white children in America went through our public schools during these same decades with little consideration of how their education might fit them for the life they must fit into? And all over the world in the mission fields (with noteworthy exceptions), we can see the same tendency – an education that is plastered on, regardless of the life and the needs of the people. (1930, 20)

The lament expressed over an education that is *plastered on* lends further credence to a wider appreciation for an educational approach that is home-grown. Cooley's claim that the old method of education was one that favored “isolated facts learned not because they fitted into life but because they fitted into the examinations” (1930, 36) is perhaps even more telling, not to mention oddly familiar.

As were her remarks on the school's mission and educational approach, Cooley's

(1930) descriptions of Penn students and their work are clarifying. In no small part, the Penn School curriculum was framed through agriculture, specifically through the school's miniature farms. As Cooley explained, "arithmetic and agriculture played into each other's hands" (1930, 47). She continued:

Each pupil was given a small plot of land [and later] we put a whole group on another acre of old cotton land to raise corn ... the land rented from the school; and the cost of the seeds, fertilizer, time of "man and mule," and the net returns of the crop made a computation worthwhile ... New enthusiasm was thus kindled for the next year's work. (Cooley 1930, 48)

Preserving the local history of the Sea Islands was another task taken up by Penn students. The Folklore Society, Cooley reported, held "responsibility for seeing to it that these songs of people are preserved in the midst of a faster life" (1930, 20). Although Cooley's (1930) representations were in some ways incomplete, the attention to local history seems clear and is suggestive of a social studies education that was at least partially place-based. The school and its curriculum deserve further attention in the context of an historical review of place-based education.

Again, despite rather solid connections, neither the Penn School nor the Berry Schools have appeared in the existing literature on place-based education. There may be other historical examples, perhaps numerous ones, akin to Berry and Penn that deserve attention. But the call for historical perspective in place-based education runs deeper still. In addition to what are possibly dozens of unexplored curricular models, those historical antecedents already noted by place-based researchers have generally received only

shallow consideration. The *Foxfire* program of northwest Georgia's Rabun Gap serves as one example.

Foxfire

Foxfire, named for a phosphorescent fungi native to southern Appalachia, was a place-based initiative that grew out of the Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School near Cleveland, Georgia. The institution that later evolved into the Rabun Gap School was founded by Andrew Richie in 1905 and functioned as a hybrid organization, with both public and private support. During the daytime hours, the school was publically funded, including its teaching staff, while the non-school hours were overseen by a privately owned and operated school board and administration (Puckett, 1989). *Foxfire* was not established until much later, not until the late 1960s under the initial direction Eliot Wigginton.

Plagued by an uninterested and sometimes unruly group of English students, *Foxfire* was Wigginton's effort to promote engagement by redirecting the disciplinary fundamentals under study through a consideration of local Appalachian lifeways. The result was a school publication which reported on everything from the homemade distillation of moonshine to methods for killing hogs and procuring souse meat. Often referred to as *cultural journalism*, the *Foxfire Magazine* and associated texts, which ultimately grew to national prominence by the 1970s and 1980s, was a practice in cultural and historical preservation. More importantly, it was place-based in every way.

Several references to *Foxfire* do appear in the existing literature on place-based education. Smith and Sobel's (2010) recent volume included a paragraph on the program and briefly highlighted the contributions of the much less

frequently referenced leadership of Hilton Smith. The authors noted:

The *Foxfire* journals and books explored the unique characteristics of Appalachian culture in northern Georgia. They inspired the development of similar journals and books across the United States and became a basis for an educational model that affected hundreds if not thousands of teachers through *Foxfire* training institutes ... Although the great majority of *Foxfire* activities centered around the collection of oral histories, under the leadership of Hilton Smith and others the program also investigated contemporary issues and involved students in local decision-making processes. (Smith and Sobel 2010, 28)

While Smith and Sobel's (2010) assessment is valuable, there may be more to learn from the place-based educational approach exemplified through *Foxfire*.

The degree to which the *Foxfire* initiatives of Rabun Gap were student-directed is not entirely settled. The following passage from Puckett's *Foxfire Reconsidered*, published 1989, is clarifying:

In an early formulation of his pedagogical creed, Wigginton opined that *Foxfire* was a sounder and more powerful approach to teaching English than textbook or lecture methods: "Is the subject, English, ignored in the process? Hardly. In fact, the opposite is true. English, in its simplest definition, is communication – reaching out and touching people with words, sounds, and visual images. We are in the business of improving students' prowess in these areas...In their [magazine] work ... they

learn more about English than any other curriculum I could devise. (75)

But as Puckett went on to point out, "The reality of *Foxfire* fails to support Wigginton's rhetoric ... Indeed, *Foxfire*'s potential as a writing curriculum is diminished by a style of staff editing and teaching that is geared more to publication deadlines than to the academic deficiencies of students" (1989, 75). This potential pitfall in the method that of product over process has shown itself in several ways throughout the years of *Foxfire*'s development as a place-based curricular model. In the first instance, the disciplinary skills of former *Foxfire* students placed in supervisory roles in subsequent *Foxfire* projects was found by staff members to be lacking. Was the approach to English and literature serving to educate in those areas as intended? As one observing staff member noted:

Lack of grammatical skills, carelessness, being sloppy about her work, not checking to make sure that she's accurate ... [But] she was a *Foxfire* student and they're trying to maintain a commitment to that. I don't think she would have been given all that leeway if she hadn't been a *Foxfire* student. (Puckett 1989, 76)

There is additional evidence to suggest concern over journalistic creativity, authorship, and direction; that is, the model may not have been as student-focused as many presumed. One-time proponent and board member for the *Foxfire* program, critic Herbert Kohl ultimately posed several provocative questions regarding the legitimacy of the program. Kohl asked:

Who actually produces the *Foxfire* books? Are they the work of the students, who should then take pride of

authorship, or are they reworked versions of materials students collected? Does the staff of *Foxfire* and the editorial staff of Doubleday do the actual writing? ... Who makes the decisions at *Foxfire* anyway? (Puckett 1989, 70)

Not insignificantly, Puckett insinuated that Kohl's eventual discontent with *Foxfire* may have grown out of his failed efforts to involve the organization in a local unionization movement. What is perhaps more important, is that none of these issues are referenced in the place-based educational literature. To date, while *Foxfire* does appear on two occasions in two separate volumes, a total of five paragraphs in all, the initiative has yet to be explored in any depth. It is possible that a deeper consideration of *Foxfire* and off-shoot initiatives that have grown from it may serve to inform current practice in meaningful ways.

Conclusions and Directions

While place-based education as a named approach to curriculum development appears to be a relatively new term, even a cursory examination reveals that the fundamental principles of the approach have a much deeper lineage indeed. By at least the early twentieth century, and perhaps much earlier, educators were writing often about the value and importance of maintaining a commitment to local contexts, the student experience, and community engagement, three components characteristic of modern place-based educational initiatives. Although place-based educators generally recognize some of their roots, little in the way of comparative or historical research is currently available. This must be remedied. Beyond casual considerations of several notable antecedents, the writings of John Dewey for instance, place-based educational researchers have done little to consider linkages with other place-conscious thinkers and reform

efforts historically or across disciplines. Where historical consciousness does exist, it is typically abbreviated and incomplete.

It may be the case that place-based education is unique primarily in name. Rather than a wholly new idea, place-based education's recent call for a return to the local as the center of the educational experience is perhaps the latest revisioning of a number of older reform efforts, large and small. What is required is a concerted effort to move beyond the formal phrase of *place-based education* and to consider other educational reforms and case illustrations that are fundamentally similar. This article is intended to initiate that important research agenda.

There are at least three broad and guiding questions relevant to the historical agenda as it pertains to place-based curricula. In the first place, "What are the historical precedents of modern place-based education?" While researchers have identified a handful of historical antecedents, there is clearly more work to be done to this end. Potentially relevant domains include, but are not limited to the following: *community education*, *outdoor education*, *service learning*, *challenge education*, *problem-centered learning*, and *rural education*. There are likely other initiatives and domains, perhaps the most notable of which is the *Foxfire* program, which exemplified place-based learning, yet are not necessarily historically affiliated with larger reform efforts. The Penn School and the Berry Schools are highly relevant as well, and there are likely numerous others. The Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes and a wide range of progressive experimental schools throughout the 20th century also warrant attention. In addition, the work of such thinkers as Ralph Tyler, L. Thomas Hopkins, Charles and Frank McMurry, Liberty Hyde Bailey, Harold Foght, Ellwood Cubberley, Paul Hanna, and L.B. Sharp, among

numerous others, has been largely overlooked in any detail in this context, but may deserve consideration nonetheless. Scholars must also be contentious of international examples of place-based education in their efforts to explore historical precedents.

A second question to consider pertains to the manner in which sociopolitical contexts have influenced calls for place-focused pedagogies. In other words, “Why have educators looked to the local surroundings in their efforts to solve educational problems and how have the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts in which those efforts have grown affected outcomes? Do these causes and effects vary and why?” In each of three examples provided above, place-focused models were adopted to meet the needs of underserved communities and students. At Penn, a unique educational experiment was undertaken in the midst of civil unrest and as a means to reconstruct the lives of newly freed slaves, specifically the Gullah. For Berry, the mission was to provide an educational outlet and route to social and economic advancement for underserved and isolated Appalachian families for whom opportunities were few. Like the support that Penn received from philanthropists associated with the Port Royal Experiment, curriculum resources suggest that Berry enjoyed at least some measure of inspiration and support from the Country Life Movement. With that in mind, *Foxfire* arguably stands as somewhat of an outlier in this instance as it was not directly associated with any sort of larger, identifiable social or political movement. Given this particular set of cases, then, it appears that motivations for place-focused educational reforms are not entirely unitary. While more investigation is clearly warranted, the contexts in which place-based reform efforts have come into being are highly relevant for the overall historical agenda and

ultimately contain a great deal of explanatory power.

Lastly, but of no lesser importance, place-based educators must consider “How past experiences with place-focused educational initiatives might inform contemporary efforts to reform schools?” If place-based education is fast becoming a *movement*, as some have suggested, it is doing so with a thoroughly underdeveloped historical consciousness. Without mistaking the past for the present, it seems reasonable to suggest that successes and failures of similar reform efforts historically might inform current practice in the field. Consider Janyandhan’s (2009) thoughtful engagement with the intersections that exist between John Dewey and modern PBE initiatives. Addressing what she regarded as a tendency of place-based researchers to “quote Dewey, somewhat selectively, to support their arguments” (2009, 107), Jayanadhan moved beyond those more widely cited passages from *Experience and Education* (Dewey 1915) and *Democracy and Education* (Dewey 1916), to consider somewhat more obscure works such as “Americanism and Localism” (Dewey 1929) and *The Public and Its Problems* (Dewey 1927). More significant than Jayanadhan’s somewhat wider reading was her attempt to clarify multiple conceptions of the concept of *place* in Dewey’s philosophy of education. More important still was Jayanadhan’s analysis of the conflict she argued Dewey perceived to exist between localism and an increasingly mobile society, a conflict with direct relevance to contemporary place-based educational initiatives. The author remarked:

Dewey, then, is struggling with a problem that is seldom articulated in place-based education, but which is one of its greatest challenges - how to frame place-based education for inhabitants of a mobile and global society. Both urban

and rural place-based pedagogies tend to tacitly assume that the members of the community are static and have roots in that community - or if not static, they are at risk of leaving the community rather than arriving ... This, to me, is the second lesson an analysis of Dewey has for a pedagogy of place. (Jayanandhan 2009, 109)

In addition to her thoughtful consideration of a theory of place-based education that pre-dates modern efforts, Jayanandhan (2009) demonstrated that historical appraisals of theory and practice may provide insights for contemporary reformers. While anomalous, her work is exemplary of the type of reward that an expanded historical research agenda, one that more deliberately considers that vast range of experience earned by our educational predecessors, might provide. Recalling the sage advice of Laurel Tanner, it may be the case that great “strength lies in our experience” (1983, 42).

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