

Critical place-based education (CPBE)
Summary, critiques, and resources
Kesson, 2020

Place-based education (PBE) is an idea that has begun to attain mainstream status along with the growing awareness that we have exceeded the carrying capacities of our planetary life-support systems and are in the midst of multiple extinction events and potential disruptions due to climate change. Conceptually, its aims and purposes include cultivating ecological awareness of the interconnectedness between human and “more-than-human” species, increasing young people’s knowledge of their environments, getting students out into their communities to pursue authentic investigations that lead to engaged interdisciplinary learning, and fostering service and civic engagement (see Demarest, 2015).

Conventional ideas about Place-based Education align beautifully with the values embodied in Act 77.

PBE:

- can be personalized to meet individual learning needs.
- offers flexibility to meet learning standards in different ways.
- is project based, requiring sustained focus and integrative knowing.
- is inquiry-based, utilizes students’ own questions.
- can be made relevant to students’ current interests.
- offers creative, individualized opportunities to showcase learning.
- brings in a variety of mentors and teachers from the community, including experts in the field.

Some critiques of PBE note the following:

- It tends to be a-historical, in that while “land” is at the center of the pedagogy, few of the proposed learning activities involve historical reckoning with issues of genocide, dislocation, and forced migration that moved indigenous people off their land to make way for settlers.
- It also is silent on the continuing dispossession of Native peoples and the desecration of land and water by national/corporate interests.
- It lacks a larger cultural analysis; contextualization in the critique of modernity, capitalism, and industrial civilization.
- While gardening and restoration projects may enhance students’ positive affinities for nature and the outdoors, they do not necessarily empower youth to create a more just and environmentally prudent society.
- It mostly ignores issues of social justice.
- Centers “whiteness” and middle class environmental values without problematizing settler narratives.

One solution that has been proposed is the development of a “**Critical Pedagogy of Place,**”

an integration of the social justice oriented critical pedagogy and the practices of PBE.

Debates between CP and PBE: Critical pedagogy (derived from the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (See Kesson, 2004) deals primarily with power and oppression in the context of human, political and economic relationships, and has generally had an urban context. PBE, mostly happening in rural areas, is focused on human relationships to land/nature, and is oriented towards environmental sustainability and re-inhabitation.

Ecological theorists point out that critical pedagogy can actually contribute to anti-ecological thinking with its focus on individual emancipation, progress, and the emphasis on rationality to the exclusion of other ways of knowing (intergenerational knowing, traditional ecological knowledge and local wisdom).

Critical theorists point out that PBE has an uneven commitment to issues of social justice and radical social change, as noted above.

While PBE explores the laudable aims of re-inhabitation, it also needs to “identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization)” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 9). The synthesis of critical pedagogy and place-based education (CPBE) is consistent with the aims of decolonization (see Kesson, 2019), in that it troubles colonial (settler) narratives, aims to incorporate principles of indigeneity into its conceptual framework (while being cautious to avoid cultural appropriation), and rejects the “management” form of stewardship that is central to dominant environmental education.

Some further thoughts:

- Both critical pedagogy and place-based education are generally silent about the role of **language** in encoding (through metaphors) aspects of a worldview that do not equate with sustainability.
 - ~ The “language of schooling” is rife with military, industrial, and corporate metaphors: *value added instruction, accountability, performance standards, in-the-trenches, time-on-task, deliverables*, etc. The buzzwords and tropes associated with this technical/corporate language find their way into policy, and have fooled us into thinking that the false sciences promoted by such jargon equates with genuinely effective teaching and learning.
 - ~ The curriculum is infused with root metaphors of mechanism (a theory established in 17th century Europe that understood the world as a machine), which influences our thought patterns (Bowers, 2002, p. 4). If we wish to cultivate educational environments characterized by regeneration, empathy, and connection, we need to use language that reflects these purposes, and teachers need to study the role of language in passing on outmoded ways of understanding the world.
- The ‘common knowledge’ of pre-service teachers does not include complex understandings of Indigenous peoples, lands, or history in what is currently known as the United States, and this has grave consequences for Indigenous peoples and lands.

- A CPBE must include anti-racist education that contends with white privilege, and must center local Indigenous communities by prioritizing relationships and learning contexts with them.

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