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Place-based Education: Transforming Teaching and Learning Through Community Engagement

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Abstract

Place-based education is a vibrant approach to education that takes students out into their communities, to learn, to do and to grow as human beings. Students are given the opportunity to learn subject matter in deep and lasting ways, understand the places in which they live and participate in authentic community renewal projects that make a difference to themselves, to others, and to the world around them. By “engaging the local,” place-based education opens a wide range of possibility for purposeful engagement for all learners.

Currently educators are challenged to deliver meaningful, community-based, democratic education. This has always been a challenge amidst a strong current of traditional, test-based assessment and a narrow view of the purpose of education. These demands are further accentuated by the current challenges and new possibilities of online learning. This is an opportunity to reflect on ways that a plan for equity, sustainability and joy can be grounded in place.

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Place-based Education: Transforming Teaching and Learning Through Community Engagement

Rachel Cohen and Amy Demarest

What is Place-based Education?

Place-based education (PBE) is a vibrant approach to teaching and learning that takes students out of their traditional classrooms into their communities to learn, to do, and to grow as human beings. Students are given the opportunity to learn subject matter in deep and lasting ways, understand the nuances of the places they live, solve real problems, and see their communities from interrelated perspectives such as ecology, economics and culture. Further, students are invited to participate in authentic work that benefits communities. By “engaging the local,” place-based education presents a wide span of purpose and possibility.

Place-based education:

- centers curriculum in a specific locale that integrates content and creates focus.
- invites innovative and varied ways of teaching and learning.
- makes learning more relevant and fosters relationships that can lead to understanding about one’s role in society.
- requires that students ask the “big whys,” questions that have the potential to transform individuals, institutions, and communities.
- provides an integrative construct for learning for equity, sustainability, and joy.

A more experiential educational approach remains a challenge amidst a strong national current of traditional, test-based assessment. Hurdles to implementing a more progressive education have been further accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fundamental changes to education we are currently experiencing. While we recognize that this moment has brought about serious new constraints, the reality of online and hybrid learning can also be seen as a fresh opportunity for a more personalized and self-directed approach. This crisis is a chance to reflect, regroup, and renew our conviction to a meaningful, useful, and inclusive education founded on the study of place.

Practice and Policy in Vermont

Place-based education provides a sturdy context for the delivery of Vermont’s policy and practice initiatives. Some unique factors that make Vermont schools particularly primed as laboratories for PBE include the close proximity of schools to natural areas (although PBE

most certainly does not utilize only natural environments), a strong tradition of small-town democracy and local control (as seen in practices like Town Meeting), and a celebration of grassroots change, community organizations, and a renewed quest for social justice. Perhaps



these established, cultural attributes of our state make a place-based approach to education in public schools more readily accepted by the communities we serve, and teachers, students, and families more open to the possibilities.

One goal of Vermont Act 77 (2013), which includes personalization, proficiency-based graduation models and flexible pathways, is to give students the opportunity to progress through learning sequences at different paces, taking detours and “fast lanes” when prior knowledge, interest, or ability warrant. From an individual classroom teacher’s pedagogy to full-school programming, a shift towards more personalized learning is a rich opportunity to embrace a place-

based approach. In local learning, there is more space for students’ genuine questions and wonderings to guide the learning sequence. When teachers begin constructing learning opportunities by asking questions like “who are my students?” “what do they already know?” “what do they care about?” it creates a natural bridge between learners and their place.

A place-based approach is inherently personalized, as Vermont educator Gay Craig reflects:

...it’s local, and it’s connected to students in a way that they can identify with. It’s either a problem in their community or an event that’s happening, or it could be a geological [phenomenon]. But [it’s something] they’re ... familiar with...so it means something to them. And then we ask questions about it. (Demarest, 2014, p. 21)

Within the new reality of hybrid and remote learning, teachers have been forced to think creatively about how to personalize and authenticate technology-based and outdoor instruction. In September 2020 the VT Agency of Education published key findings and recommendations related to the continuity of learning during and after COVID-19. In “Making Revisions to Schooling” the task force recommends a renewed investment in student-centered learning: “The idea of having students in the driver’s seat of their education is sometimes seen as radical, potentially leading to chaos in the classroom. However, we need to rethink the roles of teachers and the purpose of schools overall” (p. 7). With a place-based approach, student voice is amplified, learning is more self-directed, and authentic assessments are used to provide feedback along the learning journeys. Given the examples in this paper and beyond, we are hopeful that schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic has, in fact, renewed educators’ commitment to stronger school-community engagement as a foundation for instruction.

While PBE enjoys a great deal of support in Vermont schools and communities we must take a critical look at current practices through a lens of equity and inclusion. Place-based scholarship and practitioners have been dominated by a white, and often male, perspective. Thus, well-meaning constructivist teachers sometimes make assumptions about where their students come from, their experiences, and what they know and understand. In an effort to better reflect the stories and truths of all students, a place-based approach must be responsive to the diversity that does exist in this place, and also include repressed and hidden stories of our landscape and people. PBE educators must work to center the voices that have gone unheard for too long, such as those of indigenous Vermonters. At a moment when many educators are considering equity and access in their curriculum, it is essential that all educators take a critical look at who and what is being prioritized in our teaching, and where our own biases about place may unfairly put Vermont's Black, Indigenous and students of color at a disadvantage.

Foundations of Place Based Education

The foundational heart of place-based education is evident in the ways people throughout time have come to understand their home places. In Vermont's human history there is a long lineage expressed by [the Abenaki people](#) who first cared for this land and water. To honor a way of knowing passed from ancient to current times can be seen as the seed of PBE.

Mitakuye Oyasin (we are all related) is a Lakota phrase that captures an essence of tribal education because it reflects the understanding that our lives are truly and profoundly connected to other people and the physical world... Education in this context becomes education for life's sake. Indigenous education is at its very essence learning about life through participation in relationship to community, including not only people but plants, animals, and the whole of nature. (Cajete, 2005, p. 70)

While the term "place-based education" is a relatively new term, it is actually a "re-packaging" of many tried and true educational practices. The term itself emerged from a conversation at the Orion Society in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in the early 1990s. The group was trying to define a new direction for environmental education, one that was more inclusive and embraced the larger social context in which much environmental degradation takes place. It was a redefinition that united environmental awareness with a more critical understanding of the origins of the problems. As [Greg Smith](#) commented in 2005 at a national "Promise of Place" conference in New



Hampshire where educators still grappled with the confines of environmental education: “What we need to do is to marry Rachel Carson and Paulo Freire.”

Because PBE is more of a re-orientation than a specific practice, it lays claim to a wide array of educational beliefs/philosophy. As the history of its phrasing suggests, it came most

directly from environmental education. It is closely associated with experiential, project-based, and outdoor learning. It is deeply rooted in the progressive approach to education as expressed by John Dewey and has gained a new orientation from critical theory and the work of Paulo Freire. It draws inspiration from democratic education, service learning, and educating for sustainability.



Describing the new term as a “packaging” may actually be a misnomer, since it suggests a closed container. The practice of place-based education is anything but contained. The synergy generated when students explore their community is uncharted and prohibits a singular definition. In coming to understand PBE, it is important to recognize the fluid nature of its design and possibility.

The philosophical cornerstones and educational practices noted here serve as entry points for teachers as they weave together their obligations to the student, the subject, the place, and our collective future. These many pathways present the vast potential of PBE as teachers and students design new possibilities.

“Places themselves have something to say. Human beings... must learn to listen.”

(Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 624)

SENSE OF PLACE

The phrase “sense of place” operationalizes the premise that we all have and are shaped by a relationship with the places where we live. The idea of a “sense of place” is associated with an environmental awareness and an ability to take care of the land and water where one lives. Having knowledge of one’s place can range from knowing where the waters flow and how the plants grow to being able to identify sources of power and class arrangements in our society. David Gruenewald (now Greenwood), in an important article: “The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place” (2003b) presents the idea of “inhabiting space.” He maintains environmental education traditionally disregards the significant social and economic issues that are embedded in places and that “the ‘texts’ students and teachers should ‘decode’ are the images of their own concrete, situated experiences with the world” (p.5). Greenwood suggests that “acting on one’s situation often corresponds to changing one’s relationship to a place” (p.4). A critical stance, explained further in this paper, invites inhabitants of a place to build a relationship with where they live with eyes open to hidden stories and suppressed truths. This view calls us to **decolonize** our spaces in order to **inhabit** them with a clearer understanding of how our communities do and might function.

The phrasing of a “sense of place” suggests the personal nature of this relationship and invites teachers to include this as a goal in their teaching. Some teachers may simply want

students to be outdoors more, and to appreciate nature. Others may want to help students learn to live sustainably and understand the systems that govern their world. Some may want their students to become active stewards of their place and self-directed agents of change. However one approaches this “sense of place,” it is an understanding that must be acknowledged as part of a learner’s personal experience.

The earth, that first among good mothers, gives us the gift that we cannot provide ourselves. I hadn’t realized that I had come to the lake and said feed me, but my empty heart was fed. I had a good mother. She gives what we need without being asked. I wonder if she gets tired, old Mother Earth. Or if she too is fed by the giving. ‘Thanks,’ I whispered, ‘for all of this.’ (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 103)

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

EE and the promotion of “environmental literacy” reflects a basic premise of PBE – that of coming to know the workings of one’s place and learning to care for it. Associated practices such as experiential and outdoor education are part of this legacy. Many of these programs are well-established into the structure of the school day.

As its name suggests, EE has taught us ways to learn in different environments. Many of us have fond memories of learning outside of school as a welcome break from sitting at a desk. Field trips are a traditional aspect of environmental education that gets students to a site where they can explore the natural wonders around them. Science classes go outdoors to observe, experiment and collect data. Language arts classes go outside to watch and wonder and write creatively. Lessons learned outdoors can be purely experiential, nature-based, subject-based, or service-oriented, or all these things.



David Sobel in a summative work titled *Childhood and Nature: Design Principles for Educators* (2008) presents the benefits of outdoor exploration and play. He offers seven ways teachers might frame outdoor experiences: adventure, fantasy and imagination, animal allies, maps and paths, special places, small worlds, hunting and gathering. Such suggestions invite the teacher to take students outdoors where they can learn more freely and discover their own connections to place.

This view towards exploration might appear more relevant to elementary students, but it applies to all learners. It informs our view towards self-directed inquiry and how it can align with the intentions of older students as they more freely explore their places. Sobel’s design principles can be suggestive of the joy of being outside of school. For older students, fantasy and imagination might shift to creativity and design, hunting and gathering might inform

career exploration and internships. The spirit of inquiry and the need for schools to make room for it are the same for all ages.

PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

Progressive Education is a widely acknowledged “parent” of place-based education. PBE educators frequently quote the work of John Dewey (1859–1952), a world-renowned educator and author who was born and is buried in Burlington, Vermont. He advocated for school to be “more like life,” encouraging teachers to orient learning towards what was happening outside of school, both in the natural world and in society. He hoped that school could develop a young person’s civic sense as well as their intellectual ability.

[In traditional education]...the school environment of desks, blackboards, a small school yard was supposed to suffice...There was no demand that the teacher should become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, occupational etc. in order to utilize them as educational resources. (Dewey, 1938, p. 40)

In Dewey’s philosophy of education, the “lessons” of life were to be found in the questions students had about their world. In the progressive view, the skilled teacher is able to organize curriculum around these questions to make new understanding emerge along with the students’ own thoughts and views of the world. This view is the bedrock of problem-solving and project-based learning; students’ questions are the starting point for local investigations.

SERVICE LEARNING AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates relevant, meaningful community service and classroom instruction, with reflection serving as a means to enrich thoughtful connections that can eventually teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities for a strong and robust democracy. (Williams, 2016, p. 167)



Acts of service and community engagement happen in places. The more robust service-learning projects are ones where students actively investigate the origins of community issues rather than address a single, pre-defined problem. This more dynamic approach put the students front and center as researchers, inquirers and problem-solvers. Rather than completing a task arranged by a teacher such as picking up garbage in a river, the student will go “upriver” to find the cause of the problem and then actively work, often with community partners, to find a solution.

For many educators the development of good citizens and a more just society sits at the crux of place-based education. It is what makes school useful again and befits the purpose of school in a democratic society. The general trend towards learning being useful to society and the belief that youth should engage in authentic acts of service and problem-solving have grown alongside the acknowledgment of the power of place. [Education for Sustainability](#) presents the most far reaching aspect of understanding place and taking action.

RESPONSIVE CURRICULUM AND LOCAL WAYS OF KNOWING

My current answer to ‘why do we have to learn this?’ is: So you can learn to read the story for yourselves. If you don’t learn how to read the world, then you will be dependent on others to tell you the stories, and you will live your life according to their stories. But learning to read the stories for yourself will allow you to choose your own course. (Krapfel, 1999, p. 62)

Connections to places are personal and are grounded in a student’s identity and history. Many students go to school and are forced to learn the stories of others, not their own. They learn of other places, other beliefs, other practices and perspectives but not the way they themselves have experienced the world. What is valued in dominant culture may ignore local ways of knowing and disregard a student’s knowledge gained from their family and other experiences in the community. In many ways, place-based education can be seen as a way to understand all of the stories of a place and not only a chosen few.

The tendency to discount certain stories can be seen clearly in the systematic denial of the knowledge and ways of native peoples. Learning more about the ways native people inhabit places also helps us learn how to uncover hidden stories of a place. Especially in history, but relevant to all subjects, certain stories are kept from the telling by those in control. How painfully we have learned these truths. (Vermont educators share their views on the importance of honoring the indigenous presence in this place: <https://youtu.be/WyDVh9RSgJ8>)

CRITICAL THEORY AND PAULO FREIRE

We learn over and over again that it is not just the workings of the natural world that we must come to understand but the intricate complexities of living together in a society. Critical theory, the idea that encourages us to look at the whole of things, including power relations within a system, gives us tools to understand the whole story.

Why not, for example, take advantage of the student’s experience of life in those parts of the city neglected by the authorities to discuss the problems of pollution in the rivers and the question of poverty and the risks to health from the rubbish heaps in such areas? Why are there no rubbish heaps in the heart of the rich areas of the city? This question is considered ‘in bad taste.’ Pure demagoguery. Almost subversive, say the defenders of democracy.

Why not discuss with students the concrete reality of their lives and that aggressive



reality in which violence is permanent and where people are much more familiar with death than with life? Why not establish an ‘intimate’ connection between knowledge considered basic to any school curriculum and knowledge that is the fruit of the lived experience of these students as individuals? (Freire, 1998, p. 36)

Place-based education has gained a new footing as a critical practice because of events still unfolding as we write. If writing this five years ago, we likely would report that critical theory was on the edge of place-based education and there were a handful of educators working to truly make school a force of change. These days, at a very tragic cost, there are many more people who are more aware of the intersectionality of the racist, oppressive, and hateful practices that govern our world and influence school curriculum. When students are authentically engaged in community, looking for answers to their questions, they can’t help but bump into these large issues of racism, injustice, and class control of society and the insidious interrelationships that connect them.

Such issues can’t stay hidden because racism and injustice remain our everyday reality. In order for curriculum to be truly progressive and responsive, it must be actively anti-racist and create opportunities for reparation and decolonization. In the article [“Don’t Say Nothing”](#) Jamilah Pitts urges educators to break white silence, encourage discussion, and perhaps even facilitate action. “This is essential if we are to allow our children, and our world, to heal. Teaching as an act of resistance and teaching as an act of healing are not mutually exclusive.”

At the foundation of all these ideas is the premise that students, through inquiry, can come to know their places and with that understanding take an active role in healing them. With authentic inquiry, there is a span of practice that invites students in. It can begin with the

simple, yet profound questions often attributed to Wendell Berry: “What happened here? What is happening here? What will happen here?” In deeper, more action-oriented work, the “what will happen here?” question enables students to envision and shape their own futures. Students become the agents of change, doing the hard but important work of creating more equity, sustainability, and joy right where they live.

Curriculum Design

From a planning point of view, this rich mix of opportunities presents the educator with four elements with which to create curriculum: personal experience, acquisition of content, understanding of place, and a student’s future role in or service to their community. In Amy’s book, *Place-based Curriculum Design: Exceeding Standards Through Local Investigations* (2014), she explores the educational implications of these elements and poses them as four questions:

- How can I better relate school to my students’ life experience?
- How can I help students better understand how this big idea works in the real world?
- How can I help students better understand this place?
- How can I help students better understand themselves and their possible futures?

Take for example the study of trees. One teacher may want students to be healthier and have time to play or hang out in places where there are trees so she might go weekly to the woods or a park nearby. Another teacher might want students to understand the science behind trees and go outside to do some more authentic observations and data collection. Or an art teacher might take students outside to collect and draw leaves and make books about trees. Another teacher may be exploring the school’s nearby property and find that the story of its history hides a significant displacement of a large number of people during an “urban renewal” project and that many of these people were moved to densely populated areas.

A teacher may invite students to inventory the health of their neighborhood with the essential question: “Is our community healthy?” They may not start out to research trees but as they explore, they find that people in neighborhoods with more trees are healthier. They discovered (as did [this group of researchers](#)) that the boundaries of these disparities went back to red lining when segregation determined where people could live. They found out that living in places without trees led to a host of health problems and that racism, housing, and climate change were all interrelated.

The dimensions of place-based education expand drastically with authentic investigations. Understanding places is a complex undertaking. The simple act of mapping, which we used to think was a way to record the location of mountains, rivers, and roads, now can be seen as a tool to track injustices from the past that shape our present.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, educators in Vermont are finding ways to craft original and worthwhile learning experiences that weave together curricular elements in different ways. Each creation shows us how to better understand the power of teaching and learning in the context of place.

Characteristics of Place Based Education and Stories From the Field

In the following section, we present a selection of stories of these creations. We have tried to take a wide view to illustrate the many pathways and entry points teachers and students have found that take them deeper into their communities.

PLACE-BASED EDUCATION LOOKS AT THE WHOLE OF THINGS.

When following authentic questions, we come to understand the interconnectedness and nuance of a place. Authentic inquiry invites students to observe a system without isolating any one aspect or issue, which is more consistent with how citizens view their surroundings—people don't naturally think in terms of separate subjects. Similar to the ways we have learned to "read" the natural landscape, we now can apply the same techniques to understanding culverts, the slope of a roof or the complications of city government. There are so many ways people come to know a place.

If we look at problems and perplexities in places, rather than through the narrow lens of subjects, or the sometimes confining view of "nature," we are better able to understand the whole of things. One teacher might want students to know where their food comes from as a way of thinking about local and global systems. Another might want students to be familiar with the stories of a place and to know how people lived on the land over time or how people worked together and helped each other in times of need. Teachers may pose one kind of environmental "problem" that entails complicated answers involving man-made activities. Multiple stories emerge as students turn towards their places to find the many layers of meaning. In this way, place-based education is unique to each place.

Luke Foley teaches social studies at Northfield Middle High School. He regularly uses local issues to teach big themes, such as sustainability, climate change and citizenship. Luke's students are truly creators, testing theories and creating products that impact a system, thus developing an understanding of global phenomena without ever leaving Northfield, Vermont.

I weave global issues into my curriculum every Wednesday in an activity called “Wednesday Why?” which uses the Question Formulation Technique (QFT). For example, in one of my classes students are reading a book about Australia, in which the characters encounter a wildfire. So that week, I brought in some imagery of the Australian wildfire that occurred last year. I will often use those activities to bring in images surrounding deforestation, sustainability, climate change. To take that to the local level, I might do a paired reading — I love the book “Reading the Forested Landscape,” which talks about how the indigenous people in New England used controlled fire to manage the landscape, promote the growth of plants they wanted, and control pests like ticks and mosquitoes. I want them to understand multiple layers: a historical context, how that plays out globally, and I want them to be able to apply their understanding locally.

A really cool project is around the book and website [Project Drawdown](#), which is the top 100 solutions for climate change. I love this book because while so much of what kids are exposed to is really negative, this is a solutions-based approach to the climate crisis. The way we make this local is that we ask students to identify ten solutions that might work in our town. In Northfield, we're never going to have a light rail, which is

one of the solutions, but we could have micro-hydro. We don't have any giant factory farms, but we do have composting systems in our school. Students filter things that are done on a global scale and think about what it could look like here.

Then, students design a project that will positively impact our school or community by reducing our carbon emissions. We have had students prototype green roofs as a form of insulation. Another student designed a micro-hydro system using materials he found either in the dump or in school trash cans. The system uses an old bucket, hoses, plastic spoons from the cafeteria and generates enough electricity to carry the sap from the bottom of our sugarbush up the hill to our school sugar house. He's created this really independent project that is self-directed because it's an area he's interested in, but it's a solution that can work locally, nationally, and it's a global solution to how we get our power.

The way I teach students to understand their community and their place in the world is through concentric circles. We start with knowing yourself. Then we expand out to knowing your community, knowing what it means to be from Vermont. We build these concentric circles of community. At each level students are exploring what relationship they have to that community and what they have to offer to that community. This

approach works well with a U.S. history curriculum, because as the U.S. grows and changes, we talk about how citizenship changes. When we talk about the Civil War we talk about what it means to be a patriot. When we talk about World War I, we discuss what it means to be a global citizen.

At our school students are outside a lot, so they realize they're part of the natural community too, there is an ecological community they exist in. Those expanding spheres, those concentric circles, really allow students to understand how they fit into each group and how they impact each, both positively and negatively.

We present a lot of the challenges in the world, whether it's racial justice or climate change. We want to approach these things from a solution-oriented perspective. We are trying to empower kids to realize that just because there's a problem that seems tricky doesn't mean you don't have the skills to solve it. I think we've been really successful in helping kids realize they can be agents of change, to take an idea from start to finish. Let's not sit on the sidelines and criticize the things that aren't happening; let's make it better.

→ **Contact Luke for more information on working with local issues, Project Drawdown and other resources: lfoley@cvsu.org.**

PLACE-BASED EDUCATION IS ACADEMICALLY RIGOROUS.

While out-of-school learning has often been regarded as a fun add-on without much academic purpose, teachers find ways to embed significant educational content into their place-based forays into the community. When community-based learning presents students with the opportunity to connect what they are learning to what happens outside of school, they come to better understand the heart of an academic discipline. Students are positioned to directly observe a phenomenon rather than learn at a distance. They see the world in real time and ask: “is this really true?” Students can be real historians, writers and mathematicians for their communities. Because the work is authentic and often used for real purposes, the incentive for quality work is higher. Within a place-based learning opportunity, traditional content standards can still define what a student should know and be able to do. Teachers and students can create learning targets and define the terms of an assessment.



Billy Corbitt is a social studies teacher at Vergennes Union High School where he partners with organizations such as the Rokeby Museum and Vermont Folklife Center to create academically rigorous projects grounded in place. Billy creates student-historians by prioritizing inquiry, historical thinking, and communication skills aligned to the C3 Social Studies standards.

Students come to the table with a sense of self and hopefully they leave my classroom with a sense of their place in the world. I want them to find themselves in our work, and in the content, with the idea that they'll ultimately develop a greater sense of agency in learning.

My work, as a guide, is to encourage them to think about where they live through a historical lens. I encourage them to interview members of our community using an oral history protocol. They practice communication and historical thinking skills by relating this moment, the pandemic, to what has happened in the past. They contextualize, compare, and identify cause and effect relationships. Through this, they develop all of these skills that are specific to the social studies discipline in a way that historians actually practice these skills.

Vergennes has been shifting toward a proficiency-based grading system, as have all schools in Vermont, and that has given us flexibility in what content we learn and what questions we ask. And, it's given me more opportunity to ask students what they want to learn about. Proficiency-based grading seems to give over more control to the students.

I am then able to take those desires and apply the skills that we teachers want them to walk away with. We've done a lot of



revisions to incorporate the [C3 standards](#), and we've decided that within the inquiry cycle there are two history-specific skills that we want students to practice. One is "sources and situations" (being able to understand where a source is coming from and being able to use it in an argument) and the other is "historical argumentation" (being able to make a claim about the past, and defend it with evidence).

Students are going to be doing an oral history project looking at the impact of the pandemic on people they actually know in Vergennes. There is a lot of academic rigor there, but it simultaneously connects the students to their community, to their families, and they get to see where they live from another angle.

It's up to the teacher to encourage the students to find their own access point to the material and then ensure they are applying the appropriate skills in designing the task. What's exciting about place-based learning is that the good stuff is out there. The resources and the know-how and the expertise is in your community already. It's just identifying it and putting it into play when it's most needed and most effective. I am excited about this project because everybody has a story to tell.

- [Project Design for Pandemic Inquiry Oral Histories](#)
- [Example of Student Work](#)
- [Claire and Nora's Pandemic Podcast](#)

PLACE-BASED EDUCATION INVOLVES AUTHENTIC WORK.

Local investigations involve learning information in new, more relevant ways. When students take part in the authentic practice of the discipline: such as gathering evidence and conducting interviews, there is a level of engagement that invites a higher level of accountability. People are depending on the accuracy of the work, the timeliness of its completion, and a high level of professionalism.

In many iterations of place-based education, students are involved in active work to address real issues. Students may become engaged in complex community problem-solving related to climate change, housing and issues of social justice. This process does not always resemble traditional learning.

A pedagogy of place appears to transform the language of learning. Many students [in Rural Challenge settings] study history by becoming historians of their local towns and the major events which are rarely chronicled in history books. They study science by joining contextual knowledge with scientific understandings, becoming, in the process, scientists who analyze their watersheds, or raise fish for commercial use, or map and document the trees, birds or mammals in their regions. They learn grammar and syntax by producing newspapers read by virtually everyone in a local community and they learn accountability by being asked to share their work at school board meetings, legislative hearings, community meetings and state conventions. No assessment is more powerful than having to defend one's research and analysis, written work or mathematical understandings, before a critical audience, not necessarily including one's parents! (Annenberg, 1999, p. 14)

Authentic assessment comes to mean whether the project actually works. Is the job complete? Did the proposal convince the school board? Will the roof stay on? Would you drink this glass of water? Real life provides the feedback on a job well done.

Jillian Joyce is a Humanities Teacher at Burr and Burton Academy (BBA) and 2020-21 Rowland Fellow. Jillian's students have advocated for legislation at the state and local level by presenting to the local select board and giving testimony in Montpelier. She believes that partnering with government officials fosters relationships which open up the halls of government to us all, improving democracy through the increased participation of young people.

By inviting legislators into the students' space, it gets them comfortable with these adults. Allowing them to come to the student space first allows the students to feel more welcome in the halls of government that really are open to all of us, but can feel intimidating to younger people. Whether it's coming to a class to present the platforms they're running on or the bills they are working on and sponsoring, Vermont legislators are so willing to participate in student learning. They are interested to know what the issues are that students care about, and the perspectives that the students can bring to the State House.

I gave an assignment to make change through one of the strategies that are used in our government system: writing a petition, promoting a bill, calling representatives or advocating in another way. Two student groups chose to promote the plastic bag ban bill and one group went to Montpelier and gave testimony. The other group went to our local Select Board and presented to them to try and have a local ban passed. They also wrote letters to the editor. So the authentic feedback was their back and forth with this community forum. At the Select Board level [town officials] said "Your ideas are

great, students are always welcome to come and share, but we're really not going to take action on this." It really threw kids for a loop that the board agreed to hear them and then weren't going to do anything! So the students asked: "Okay, what are we going to do next?"

And those are the exact questions we want citizens asking: "I have this thing I care about, what are the multiple ways I can make my voice heard?" The students went back to the select board with a petition to have the issue warned, so then it came up at Town Meeting, and then they had an even bigger audience for their voices to be heard. The select board's recommendation was that we actually needed to push this to the state level, and at the same time these efforts were happening all over the state in various towns. We had all these small, local initiatives going on, which then pushed the representatives to take action when they began hearing from adults on select boards around the state. They realized they couldn't have a "mish-mashed" series of bans, and the state had to do something consistent.

The kids might have been disappointed at first, but they got to see firsthand that sometimes it makes more sense to intervene at a higher level, especially if the local government doesn't feel like they

have the jurisdiction to take action on the problem.

Two years later we witnessed the death of George Floyd, and the same kids who had been involved in the bag ban had the idea that they wanted a resolution to ring the town bell in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. The town felt like that would be political and were reluctant to take action. Over the summer, the kids showed up to a select board meeting again, and they brought adult allies. They made their case and they said "we really think you're hiding behind bureaucracy, and trying to not take action on something that might be controversial. Deal with the white supremacists if they come. We wrote a petition, we had it signed, we are following the guidelines you set. We believe that your inaction is racist."

Students had access to the process and they leveraged it. The petition passed, the bell rang and they felt a small success in making their voices matter.

→ [Change Making Assignment](#)

→ **Letter to the Editor:**
[Sage Lator, "Banning plastic bags will happen"](#)

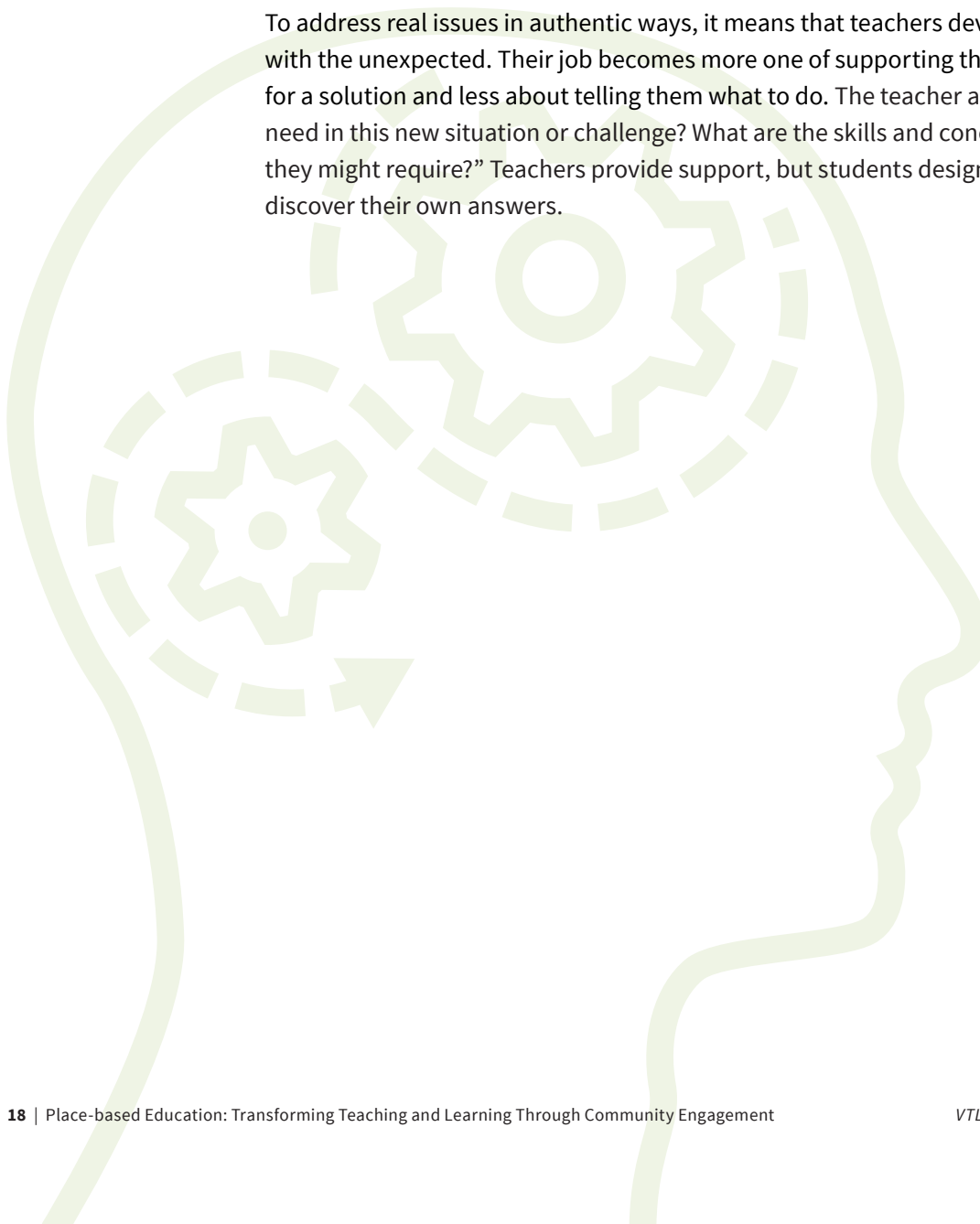
→ [Student Testimony on climate bill 6.888](#)

PLACE-BASED EDUCATION INVOLVES NEW KINDS OF LEARNING— FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS.

It is a particular skill to orchestrate learning in a different setting. Over time, teachers develop their talents as organizers of these out-of-classroom experiences. They deepen their belief in the power of inquiry and learn how to step aside to allow students to engage with other people and places. Because the end result is not always known at the outset, the role of the teacher becomes more of a coach, mentor, and facilitator as teachers and students carve new directions together.

Teaching in new settings will undoubtedly create some discomfort for educators. While teachers can (and should) do things like pre-visit a learning site and discuss desired outcomes with guest speakers, PBE is, by nature, unpredictable. In place-based learning environments new understandings can unexpectedly surface, inequities can be exposed, and both the teacher and students will be surprised by what is learned. In authentic investigations, students come face to face with the realities of their place, the good and the bad.

To address real issues in authentic ways, it means that teachers develop an ability to deal with the unexpected. Their job becomes more one of supporting the students in their quest for a solution and less about telling them what to do. The teacher asks: “What do my students need in this new situation or challenge? What are the skills and concrete knowledge that they might require?” Teachers provide support, but students design their own process and discover their own answers.



Kim Brockway is a 4th grade teacher at CP Smith School in Burlington's New North End. She is committed to centering the voices of indigenous Vermonters in her integrated curriculum. She has partnered with local Abenaki storytellers to widen her students' (and her own) understanding of the natural world and the culture of the first Vermonters.

Teaching about our place is part of my teaching identity. My students are motivated about learning the stories of our places and I am too! Exploring our place takes advance planning. Often I visit the location (river, wetland, historical site) the weekend before I am going to teach there. Each time I teach in the place where a historical event happened or in the woods it gets easier. I keep a bag packed in my classroom with a first-aid kit, clipboard and extra pencils. I have also developed relationships with many community organizations that help enrich our experiences. These contacts help me teach, provide activities or fund equipment.

Fourth graders in Burlington are lucky because the social studies curriculum is Vermont history. It makes sense to start with the people who have always been here. We do work around learning about Abenaki and some of the geography of the state, because so many of our place names derive from the people who have always been here. Places like Winooski or Missisquoi are nice jumping off points. In our district it is a focus to honor the land our schools are on as Abenaki land. Our schools welcome people to N'dakina, or "Homeland" in Abenaki. And our students have done prints of indigenous plants so as to honor the people and the plants that have always been there.



My students love to hear the Gluskabe stories. We listen to Abenaki story tellers like Joseph Bruchac (videos and recordings) and kids also create their own re-telling of a Gluskabe story with a skit. We always do that work in the woods near our school, as it makes for a better stage and they can bring in elements of the land as their props. Right now our configurations in the physical classroom are so disrupted due to COVID, and being in the woods is special.

Some students have never learned the word "Abenaki." We put a huge emphasis on the fact that these

people are still with us; this is a culture that very much still exists. We have a relationship with an Abenaki woman, Lucy Neal, and we're hoping to work with her this year over Zoom. In the past two years when she has actually come to our school, students realize these people are here with us and they have jobs, they dress like most adults they see, they could be their neighbors.

→ Project Design: [Telling Gluskabi Stories](#)

BRINGING THE TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE TO SCALE

In order to bring these rich experiences to scale for all students, teachers and community members must shift their thinking about what real, deep learning looks like. Schools have been more successful when they begin to dismantle some of the “content borders” around curriculum that confine learning into subject silos and instead promote interdisciplinary learning opportunities.

It is no easy undertaking to change the pattern of schooling, to unlock the doors of tradition and challenge a school’s long-accepted procedures. At Rachel’s own high school, the urgency to get students outside during the COVID-19 pandemic sped up the process of establishing outdoor classrooms and revising policies for taking student groups out and onto the larger natural campus. While the curriculum being delivered in new outdoor spaces ranged from fully place-based to just a change in location, a new setting changed the frame for everyone and invited new possibilities.

Map Your Assets. We encourage teachers to spend time exploring the local assets within a short distance from their schools. As part of the school-wide audit, consider building collaborative documents that categorize assets based on walking distance. For example, a small cluster of trees beside the parking lot could be used to observe natural systems or in a tree identification lab, all within a 5-minute walk. Imagine, for example, how a visit to the town offices, only a 10-minute walk in many towns, could foster discussions related to citizenship, voting, town planning, and service-oriented jobs.

Cover the Details Teachers and administrations can design safety systems like a faculty reservation system on a Google spreadsheet. A faculty can establish norms about which doors will be used to ensure proper flow of traffic. You can create “to-go” crates complete with wipes and extra supplies to support being out of the classroom and keep everyone comfortable in the elements. You may be able to purchase clipboards for each student, or ask for donations of yoga mats that can be cut and repurposed into sit-upons. Creating sound systems that support taking learning outside is often the first step for teachers reimagining teaching and learning.

Secure Supports. Teachers must be supported, both by their administrators and school policy-makers to take students out of the traditional classroom and into the world. Teachers also need adequate planning time in order to plan their field visits and partner with local assets, which now includes updated procedures for classroom management, contract tracing, and cleaning. Some schools have hired community-based learning or expanded learning coordinators that can also provide critical support.

Build Partnerships. Forging partnership arrangements for lessons and units in a community takes time. Many teachers do not live in the communities they teach in, so it takes some extra effort to get to know the school’s community. Teachers might advocate for faculty meeting time that could be used to share resources and contacts and place a few phone calls to start lasting school-community partnerships. A school-wide self-study of ways in which teachers have engaged with the local community is a great place to start.

Jennifer Aldrich is the Principal at Albert Bridge School in Brownsville. She and her school community redesigned the school campus and partnered with Ascutney Outdoors to better facilitate outdoor learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The movement towards being outdoors started because we're in a beautiful place. We have a brook right out back and we're at the base of Mount Ascutney. We have woods all around us. There was already one outdoor classroom established before I showed up and teachers were going outside regularly.

What COVID did was give us this really special opportunity to launch it fully. They said 'be outside!' We've got spaces! We already had three spaces and we built three more late in the summer. We had community members come set those up; students and families were able to meet and work with teachers before coming back. And we also have a partnership with Ascutney Outdoors, which is a non-profit organization that has been a wonderful collaborator. We put up two outdoor acoustic shields for classrooms on the mountain, and they can be used by anybody. Our place-based learning coordinator takes kids up there to explore and teach how to maintain a section of trail that becomes theirs, essentially. This curriculum teaches a sense of ownership and stewardship. Maybe they'll go back with their own kids and show them how to take care of that same land. We want to encourage a sense of volunteerism and expand the opportunities on our mountain and in our environment.

We're a small community and the community wants to be part of our

school. There's a store, a church, a town hall, historical society--and the school! A lot of people who live in the town also went to school here, so it's just naturally embedded. It feels like you're fighting against what should be if you're not doing it [incorporating place].

This year each grade has taken on different components of understanding how Brownsville is affected by the maple industry. Some students are researching how maple syrup is made and some are looking at the economic impact on our community. Some classes are researching the environmental implications of sugaring and the history of maple syrup. We were able to do a community gathering (pre-COVID) in March where kids presented and celebrated the trees that are right outside their rooms. Younger kids gathered sap, older kids stoked the fire and maintained the process. Then we brought in the community for a pancake breakfast where students cooked and served, and then everyone could mingle and use the syrup we created.

Additionally, we have an ice rink outside that kids maintain based on their age group. Kindergartners set up the foam, 5-6 graders use their math skills to be sure we have a good rectangle with good angles and they help with pounding it in. They have also helped create trails and built more permanent outdoor classrooms such as lean-tos.



5th and 6th graders teaching 3rd and 4th graders at Albert Bridge School.

The teachers help process these experiences through reading and writing, how to make sense of these projects within our five competencies: critical thinking, perseverance, empathy, integrity and communication. Those skills are embedded in the process of building. We ask: What do we need to understand about each other as we're working together? How are we going to communicate the work we're doing at school out to our community? How are we going to ask people if we can use their land? This is really authentic work that the kids are doing--the adults are not doing it, the kids are.

→ [Maple Unit Design](#)

Co-create with the Power of Student Voice

When designing place-based learning opportunities teachers will often see greater buy-in when students have some voice and choice in where they go, what they see, and who they talk with. In reflecting on a community-based learning day for seniors called Seminar Day, Rachel was reminded of the importance of co-designing with students in order to further engage students. After the unit, students who chose a more teacher-designed day said “let us pick the places we visit!” while the students who took a more self-designed approach expressed appreciation for the added degree of personalization. A student who chose to spend the day exploring small business in the South End [of Burlington, VT] reflected:

A large part of my adolescence has been spent groaning and complaining about the limitations that Vermont has imposed on me. The schools to which I am applying are all out of state, and five of them are in California. The reason why I chose these schools, in some part, was to ‘escape’ what I saw as a limited and limiting state. After walking around and seeing the various careers available at the Conant building, I can confidently say that I was wrong about my home state. There is so much more to do and see than shopping in Burlington or climbing the Green Mountains. After Seminar Day, I realized that I was the one imposing limitations on myself. During your tour, I learned that [my future] path may not be as defined as I want it to be, that it is oftentimes out of my control. The store owner described how passionate she was for photography as a high schooler, and that she later got into interior design, eventually using the skills she learned in both of those fields for making colorful juices in an inviting environment. I am still very committed to my career path, but after the Conant tour, I think I am going to be more open in the future to life’s twists and turns. This state is more than beautiful foliage and a bustling town center, it’s a place full



of energy and passion for new ideas. I have a much greater appreciation for my home state as a direct result of what I learned on the Conant tour.

YOU AND YOUR STUDENTS ARE OFF ON A WONDERFUL ADVENTURE!

There's no question that there are many challenges to teaching with place-based education. Designing out-of-classroom experiences can be more time consuming than simply planning a traditional lesson, but it is always worth the pay off. Students report being more engaged; they learn more deeply, and their education seems useful to them. Today, that is precisely what is needed most! Despite the hurdles, we encourage you to keep on exploring the possibilities, no matter how small your step forward may seem.

If you are one of the many teachers that have ventured out with your students to learn differently during the COVID-19 crisis, you have probably seen some different ways of learning and understanding subject matter. You've also probably seen some examples of camaraderie and fun that might be new to your learning space. You may have noticed how stepping outside the traditional classroom reduced the anxiety in some of your students. Or you might be a veteran teacher that is heartened by the new energy surrounding community-based education and you are inspired to deepen your practice.

If you're looking to do more place-based learning with your students, we couldn't be more thrilled to support you. We encourage you to reach out to a new community partner. Visit a new site where you could bring students. Ask your students where they see local examples in your curriculum. Learning in the context of place doesn't happen overnight. It is a series of small steps, reorientation, adjusting your plans and learning from your students. Just go forward, utilizing your supports and resources along the way.

When students are engaged in important conversations, adventurous learning, and meaningful, authentic tasks, the potential for learning is limitless. Place-based education has the power to transform our students' learning, our school communities, and our shared future.

Resources

[Getting Started with Place-based Education](#)

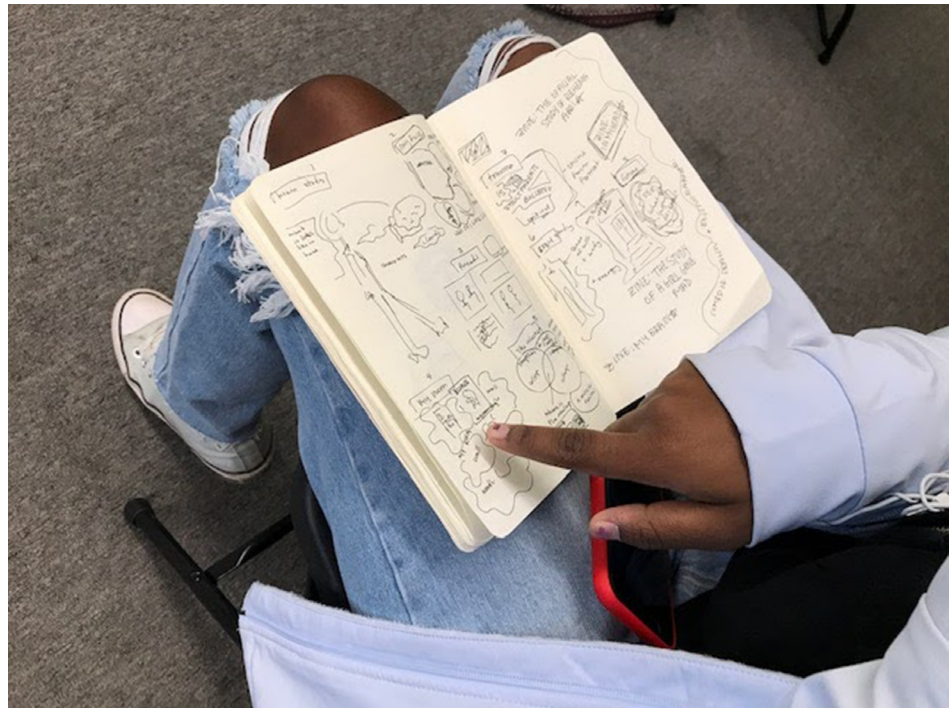
[Green Schoolyards America](#)

[Our Curriculum Matters](#)

[Schools Out\(doors\)](#)

[VTLFF Place Based Education](#)

Keep in touch! Share your stories of PBE success in your school and community! Contact Ben Freeman at VTLFF: bfreeman@vtlff.org or 802-258-0638. Or visit www.vtlff.org.



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About the authors



Rachel Cohen teaches humanities at Colchester High School in Vermont. Rachel has also taught for the National Outdoor Leadership School, a wilderness education school in Alaska, and in 2017-18 she was a Fulbright Roving Scholar in American Studies in Norway. In 2019-20 she was a Rowland Fellow researching and implementing experiential and place-based learning initiatives in her school.



Amy Demarest is a former middle-school teacher who works with both formal and non-formal educators in a variety of settings. She has taught watershed and place-based education in northern Vermont and elsewhere around the globe. Her most recent book: *Place-based Curriculum Design: Exceeding Standards Through Local Investigations* (Routledge, 2014) provides teachers the rationale and the tools to create meaningful place-based learning in their communities. Her website: ourcurriculummatters.com.

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