

The place of learning

Why *where* we learn matters

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The unfortunate reality is that schooling for many learners is experienced as something separate and disconnected their local lives and interests. Learning about the outside world from inside a classroom overlooks that every learner is *already* living in multiple worlds of rich relationships and issues. Family dynamics, friend groups, and contentious neighborhood issues are just a few of the complex contexts in which learners are already situated. While compulsory schools aim to help learners later in life, this well-intentioned goal has several negative side effects. Chief among them is maleficent message that learning is primarily for *later* (and not for *now*).

Another is that students view learning as something detached from the local lives, their nearby environments, and divorced from the lived social-cultural contexts in which they are already living. The physical place of learning, whether it is a classroom or a neighborhood garden, sends powerful messages of connection to or separation from learners' local lives. How can educators find and create places that situate learning more meaningfully in students' daily lives, community contexts and local environments? In other words, how can educators and schools put learning back in place?

The good news is that there are many recent examples from which we can learn. When the COVID-19 pandemic displaced learning



Alterier XI's Peach Hut in Jiazozuo, China is one of seven small learning centers built in various community locations reading and reflection. This public hut is at a local peach farm (Moren, 2022).

(and learners) from schools, many educators experimented with pedagogies that leveraged other contexts, such as the home, as a place for learning. Other educators explored ways to find alternative community locations for learning—such as parks, playgrounds, and other public spaces (Adams & Gray, 2023; Moren, 2022; Shea, 2021). There students could safely gather and connect in new ways to their locale. Understanding the *place of learning* invites educators to consider where learning can more meaningfully happen, reconceiving local out-of-classroom places as powerful pedagogical opportunities.

What is place?

Geographers draw a sharp and helpful distinction between place and space. Spaces are geographic locations with functions, such as a home, a playground, a supply closet, or a school lobby. We can talk of spaces in objective and often geometric terms, such as its area, layout or orientation. However, when we inhabit these spaces we make them *places* through our subjective experiences of meaning making (Cresswell, 2014; Tuan, 1977): What does it feel like? What values or beliefs does it develop? For

example, your home is a space. It has a location, an address, walls, etc. Your home is also more than its geometric elements: it *means* something to you. It holds personal, subjective value that will continue to emerge as you live there. We create a strong personal attachment to some places. Other places may conjure a sense of “placelessness” –a feeling of disconnection and detachment (Relph, 1976). The design of many airports or large shopping malls, for instance, often create feeling of “I could be anywhere” or “I could be nowhere.” In contrast, learning places should firmly convey the power of being situated somewhere (Nagel, 1986).



Kindergartners at International School SEK Santa Isabel School in Madrid, Spain engage a local auto mechanics to learn how they fix cars in their neighborhood. SEK educators are creating learning paths in which students' learning is directly connected to their local community's activities, resources and needs.

Place is important because we educators are experience designers: we create the conditions and moments that we hope enable our students to learn and develop. For example, educators at the International School SEK Santa Isabel in Madrid, Spain design “learning paths” in which students

journey to various local contexts to learn about and with their community.

Kindergartners visit an auto repair shop to learn about different ways people in their community work and help one another. Where learning happens – including the physical location but also the arrangement of the space, the temperature and lighting, qualities of furniture and objects, types of tools and materials available, etc. – offers a powerful set of ways to create the conditions for meaning-making we seek to create. When we begin to play with the contextual conditions of where meaning-making happens we engage in practices of *place-based learning*.

Place-based learning: What & Why?

“Place-based learning” has emerged in recent decades to describe a form of education that draws attention to the *context* of where learning happens. Many educators have found powerful learning opportunities for their students that are outside of classroom walls, such as nearby ponds, artist workshops, a school bakery, or public parks. Perhaps a school had an experiential learning, service learning or internship programs that connect learners to their communities. Smith (2002) has documented several common types of place-based learning programs in schools, including local cultural studies, community-based problem solving projects, engaging in civic processes, local nature studies, and community internships. Whether in a large urban city or a small rural town, schools that excel in place-based learning approaches become skilled at assembling local cultural resources and experiences (e.g., public spaces, businesses, forests, cultural centers, etc.) as core components of their campus and curricula.



Students at the Sandore Madrasa gather outdoors for religious lessons in Timbuktu, Mali (Batin, 2023).

Though there is a recent growing interest in place-based learning, the power of connecting place and learning is not a new idea. Place is rooted deeply in how we human beings have adapted over many millennia. Clans, tribes and early societies survived largely through learning – generating, preserving, and sharing cultural knowledge and skills through generations (Cheduk et al., 2015). This learning was intimately linked to the locale. Plato’s Academy was a center of learning of Ancient Greece that, interestingly, had no main buildings. Instead, intellectual exchange unfolded through strolls in fields and gardens or gatherings under trees. The Silk Road provided critical opportunities for travelers to exchange goods, services and learn new cultural knowledge. To aid them, dozens of “caravanserais” were built using local materials to provide comfort and safety to trekkers as they made their way across dangerous landscapes (Salimei, 2019). The Sankore Madrasa was an epicenter for moral and civic development for the Mali Empire. Its central open space was designed to echo the dimensions of the Kaaba in Mecca, one of the most revered Islamic landmarks. Learning sessions were held in the open expanses of the mosque-like edifice, constructed primarily of clay

and robust stone beams (Batin, 2023).

Throughout history, whether in a garden or a place of worship, *where* learning happened was shaped by local environments and driven by community goals and member needs.

Just as in the past, contemporary approaches to place-based learning aim to link learners with community locations, activities and issues in meaningful ways. The literature suggests that in today’s world, schools turn to place-based learning do so to achieve an array of goals, including:

Making learning meaningful and diverse

As previously noted, too many learners experience school learning as something separate from their local lives and interests. While modern education aims to offer many economic benefits to societies, Gruenewald (2003) warns of the social harm that can follow. Divorcing what and how we teach from local community contexts and cultures risks creating social systems of meaninglessness in which what is learned has little to do with everyday experiences (Theobald & Curtiss, 2000). Many educational approaches, either explicitly or tacitly, view learning as an individualized and uniform process that is reinforced through standardized testing. The seduction of standardization and scaling sinks societies toward educational sameness. A homogeneity of experience that belies the rich diversity of experiences necessary for a thriving democracy. These and other scholars believe education can be global but must be meaningfully connected to its local community needs, resources, and actors. Learning should be local first –connecting learners their lived environments, neighborhood issues, and their community – while still critically addressing broader societal and global challenges such as social injustice, effects of capitalism and

colonialization, and ecological sustainability.

Developing ecological literacy

Impacts of climate change have reawakened the need to cultivate a complex understanding of how local actions have near and far-reaching effects on our world. While abstract knowledge of environmental sustainability and ecological systems is helpful, supporting practical action and everyday literacy is paramount. Sobel (2001, 2014) argues that environmental education is an opportunity for schools to connect with their communities to create higher levels of awareness and action. No matter where they live, students are already embedded in environments and ecosystems (Siskar & Theobald, 2008).

Perhaps your community is challenged by air quality, drought, disease, or invasive species. These or other local issues are opportunities for place-based learning. Gruenewald (2003) argues that to be “in place” entails being in dialogue with one’s natural environment and complex relationships among its elements and its people. This includes the landscape, ecosystems, flora, fauna and interactions among organisms and its environment. For instance, students at the International School SEK Santa Isabel step onto the streets of Madrid to examine the urban impacts on properties of soil and how trees grow. Students revisit these trees over weeks and years as they are also part of their local environment. Examining nearby elements in one’s ecology opens opportunities to create lifelong ecological literacy and environmental stewardship.

Reconnecting community relationships

Thriving communities are those in which its members form and reform close knit relationships. While globalization and



Young students at International School SEK Santa Isabel School in Madrid, Spain explore the soil and trees in their urban neighborhood.

technologies are connecting people in new ways, they have also widened long-lasting disconnections among many groups in local communities. Migration, social inequalities, and vast economic disparities leave many community members disenfranchised and disempowered. Smith (2002) believes that schools should play a leading role in inviting, creating and mending community relationships. He identifies induction into community processes as an opportunity for children of any age to make significant contributions to the lives of others. As they do so, their desire to learn and believe in their own capacity to be change agents increases. Smith & Gruenewald (2007) argue that while education standards and accountability are important, they should not deepen disconnections between schooling and its local people, culture and values. Learners should first and foremost develop deep connections to the places they live in and understand their unique history, values, and peoples that make the place. While social distancing was an unfortunate phrase during the pandemics, many schools must now face how to best create social closeness.

Supporting happiness and health

Supporting student well-being, which includes physical health as well as feelings of happiness and engagement, is high on the list of challenges many schools are facing today. The COVID pandemic forced educators and learners into prolonged isolation, social distancing, and remote learning in sedentary settings. This has contributed to unprecedented declines in adolescent mental and physical health around the globe (Viner et al., 2022).

Research suggests that learning outdoors is often a powerful but overlooked remedy. Sobel (2020) argues that outdoor contexts readily offer moments that develop learners' well-being and happiness. Positive affective states –feeling joy, satisfaction, pride, etc. – are powerful pieces of well-being, arguably more important than instrumental aims of improved math tests or preparation for higher education and careers. Students at International School SEK Santa Isabel regularly visit a neighborhood park for various learning experiences. The park offers a natural refuge replete with local flora and fauna. And during the short walk there and back, students often sing, notice new things in shops, play games, and laugh. Fresh air, physical movement, interactions with nature, unplanned explorations, and play are just a few of the inherent affordances of being outside.

After the pandemic, there has been a natural pull to return to teaching and learning as usual. However, restoring and cultivating student well-being – their physical health as well as their sense of joy, agency, connectedness, and belonging – in traditional schools and classrooms is difficult at best (Vestal, 2021). As schools scramble to understand how to best address students' inner states of well-being, place-based learning experiments from the



Third graders at International School SEK Santa Isabel convene class at a nearby park to explore the flora and fauna. The twenty-minute walk provides fresh air, exercise and many unplanned moments of curiosity, laughter, and playfulness.

pandemic may offer some important insight.

These broad goals –*making learning meaningful, building ecological literacy, building community relationships, and supporting well-being* –are what place-based learning aims to achieve. Evaluating the impact of place-based learning models vary depending on program's aims but generally suggest positive impacts on various student outcomes. One of the more influential US studies by the State Environment and Education Roundtable (SEER) which examined the effects of model public school outdoor learning programs in a dozen US states (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998). The findings reveal several positive impacts, including increased test scores, attendance, and math engagement and self-expression in language arts. Additionally, the Place-Based Education Evaluation Collaborative (PEEC) findings revealed impacts of enhanced community and school connections, increased understanding of the local place, ecological concepts, enhanced stewardship behavior, improved academic

performance in students, and increased civic participation (Powers, 2004). These studies also reveal the challenges of place-based learning approaches. For example, time constraints due to logistics, ensuring student safety, and finding and organizing community contacts are just a few of the hurdles educators face with this approach. However, teachers across these programs reported consistent impacts on their teaching approaches, including an increased use of local places and resources in teaching, enhanced interdisciplinary teaching, and greater collaboration with other teachers, fostering teamwork.

Four frames for learning and place

Given all this, what can we educators do? It might feel a bit overwhelming to think of bringing your class to a nearby park or visit a local business. Does your school already have some initiative that you can build upon, such as local environmental studies program or internships? If not, perhaps talk to colleagues, parents and students about the interesting options that might already exist between nearby locations that connect to your curriculum and goals. Or perhaps focus on the school and campus itself: where might you relocate learning to better connect with a place? You might visit the accounting department, explore how the school grounds are maintained, or find a nearby area outside to explore nature. Though many examples of places in this paper are well outside of school, remember that your school is also a community of places. There likely are dozens of locations within or on the school grounds that could serve as powerful authentic contexts for learning.

Considering your goals and how to better connect your curriculum to the local lives

and environments in which your learners live is an epistemological exercise. You are exploring where and how learning can most meaningful and lasting. Granit-Dgani (2021), as cited in Yemini et al. (2023), offers an useful epistemological framework to understand and differentiate how knowledge is created in various place-based learning programs. Based on our reading of the literature, we were inspired to build on this work and suggest distinct frames for place-based learning. Each frame offers a different purpose that can aid your approach:

Learning *in* place

There are many positive reasons to simply change the venue where a lesson or activity happens to a location outside of a classroom. Perhaps a team building exercise can better happen in a field. An outdoor spill out area might provide some privacy. Or visiting a to nearby park allows for exercise and creates a sense of novelty. Learning “in” place refers to relocating a lesson or class activity outside of school. While the setting of where learning happens changes, the lesson or activity does not. Students may learn fractions, but be in a more pleasant, interesting, or healthy place. The new place aims to aid the learning experience, but the place is not the focus of the learning.

Learning *of* place

Learning about places can be powerful drivers for leaving the classroom confines. When students go to a place outside of school and examine its significance and its systems they are learning “of” place. Students could explore the cultural meaning, historical role or economic value of a place. Or they may examine the elements and actors and how they interrelate forming social or environmental relationships. The place is the focus and what is learned emerges from close examination of how the

place works and the meanings it has for a variety of stakeholders.

Learning from place

Exploring places creates opportunities to distill patterns, themes and insights that can be extended to other areas or experiences of a community. This is learning “from” place. The aim is to critically examine significance or systems of one place and use that knowledge to understand other contexts. Students might examine the inner systems of a local bakery and use that to compare systems in their home kitchen. Or students might explore native flora several areas of their neighborhood and develop ideas for a sustainable community garden. The aim is to derive meanings from places that can be transferred and adapted to other local places or collection of places.

Learning with place

Finally, when students join members of a place to collaboratively act and support changes they are learning “with” place. Learners as partners and resources to assist community members to experiment and develop solutions that they enact, examine, and refine over time. This pedagogical place-based activism is based on opportunities for students to learn of/from a place and offers opportunities for students to engage in leadership, advocacy and partnerships for changes in their community.

Each of these frames invites us to create opportunities for students to situate learning in place. They represent different degrees of engaging in place-based learning –from simply changing the venue (learning in place) to more complex collaborative projects (learning with place). Learning of, from and with place integrate local experiences with global issues in meaningful ways. They engage various actors and

natural phenomena in order to strengthen community relationships and deepen ecological literacy. The process of wondering, noticing, and celebrating aims to develop well-being in all those involved. In sum, these perspectives resonate with Smith's & Gruenewald's (2007) concept of the "new localism," a broader social movement in today's global age that aims to reclaim the significance of our surroundings and those within them.

	Learning in Place	Learning of Place	Learning from Place	Learning with Place
Aims to...	Aids learning but the place is not the focus of learning.	Exploring the significance and systems of a place.	Examining, contrasting, and extending insights from one place to another.	Participate alongside stakeholders of a place in problem finding and solving.
Looks like ...	Moving a planned lesson to a more pleasant, healthy, or supportive venue out of the classroom	Visiting a place to learn about and experience its meanings, norms, values, elements and relationship	Experiencing multiple, related places in order to develop comparisons, generalizations, and insights across places.	Developing relationships with community members in places in order to frame challenges and experiment with solutions.

As we close, let us remember that pedagogical approaches such as place-based learning are designed solutions to some challenge educators, schools, communities and societies face. For example, to better meet the needs and skills of their students, a teacher may develop differentiated instruction strategies. If a school struggles to understand how their students develop over time, teachers may consider implementing portfolios. Cooperative learning methods can be used in classrooms to help teachers create interdependence among students. Such teaching strategies and tools have purposes that are important to understand.

Techniques are more effective when we know what they are aiming to achieve. And place-based learning is no different. We hope this paper has provided some foundational motivations for educators to understand before using place-based learning approaches in their learners and communities.

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