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# Introduction: Claiming the Promise of Place-Based Education

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# Claiming the Promise of Place-Based Education



## Introduction

### Guest Editors Roberta Altman, Susan Stires, Susan Weseen

Bank Street College of Education has a long history of putting “place” front and center in all aspects of curriculum, from pre-school to graduate programs of teacher education. As educators steeped in this progressive tradition that privileges social studies and experiential learning, we (the editors of this issue) agree with those who understand place-based education as education grounded in the built and human (social, cultural, and economic) environment, as well as in the natural environment. The multiple dimensions of the term “environment” are a critical—and often overlooked—aspect of place-based approaches to education, and allow for a transformative notion of place that extends beyond its traditional environmental education borders.

Still, in conversations with colleagues about place-based education, some have asked us: Isn't place-based education just progressive education? Isn't it the kind of education that many of us champion in the face of the recent trends in K-12 education? Why does it need a special name, with an issue of the Occasional Paper Series devoted to it? In the interview that begins this issue, place-based education scholar David Greenwood suggests that a focus on place has much to offer in a time saturated with the denial of place.

Place-based education is resonant with all the wonderful examples of progressive education that precede it, but there is an urgency about this enterprise that is unique to our time. In a culture that is anything but mind-



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ful and present, place has never been so important. So many things—technology, social media, over-scheduled days, information overload, to name a few—pull us away from where we actually are. In classrooms particularly, teachers and students are distracted by the dictates of data-driven instruction, high stakes assessment, and standardized curriculum. The pressing need to attend to our disconnection from place leads Greenwood to frame place-based education as a teachers’ and students’ rights issue, essential to “survival, peace, and well-being.”

Across America, children are taught in classrooms that are judged increasingly by their adherence to common standards (in terms of appearance as well as content), by teachers who receive increasingly standardized training, and who are governed by imperatives that crowd out the possibility of paying attention to place. As Greenwood notes, “Whatever diversity and community might exist within classrooms, way more exists and thrives outside of them, in places, and kids know it” (emphasis added). Teachers know it, too, which may be part of the reason for the burgeoning “teacher dropout crisis.” This narrow, depleted classroom (a place in its own right) calls out for air—for opportunities, Greenwood says, “to decolonize and re-inhabit our own assumptions about the entire educational process.” It is our hope that this issue offers such an opportunity—an invitation to embrace all that the places both in and outside the classroom have to offer.

From New York City to streams in Hawaii, to the foothills of the Himalayas, to the literary landscapes in imaginative literature, to the state of Alaska, to economically challenged Lansing, Michigan, and to preschools in the Midwest and Northeast, the teachers and students described in this issue are engaged in the essential work of exploring the “diversity and community... that exists and thrives” outside the narrowly defined classroom. Rather than handing us a fully developed model of how to “do” place-based education, which is counter to the very premise of such practice, these examples invite us to claim our “right of access” to the full range of places we find ourselves in and to savor the depth and breadth of learning that results.

These places are found not only in the natural environment that many think of when they hear the term place-based education, but also in the social and built contexts in which teachers and students work. Taking into account that the full range of “place” is still a work in progress in place-based education, we are happy to include four essays that extend the traditional understanding of place. Sarah Fisher draws upon non-traditional environmental places in her examination of the need for aesthetic engagement with literary landscapes (i.e., imagined places) as part of the place-based education curriculum for elementary school children. Her research explores how children use imagination and play about reading to achieve “a lasting influence on the reader’s identity and connection to special childhood places.”

Three other papers draw upon urban environments in their use of place. Two of them, based in New York City, also have aesthetic, imaginative components. Chiara Di Lello describes how the Guggenheim Museum works with children on the autism spectrum by using the building’s architecture and contents as places of learning. The author highlights teaching techniques that result in positive learning outcomes for students, young and old, and reminds us of the social justice stance necessary to achieve educational inclusion. In their essay, Brian Andes and Peggy Mc-

Namara describe the integrated curricular study of Broadway theater, an important community resource within walking distance of their school. First-grade students are eager participants in this teacher-led design that clearly benefits learning in multiple ways and opens students' eyes to the wonders and hard work that it takes to make theater a reality.

Finally, in the fourth non-traditional, urban environment of Lansing, Michigan, Mark Kissling and Angela Calabrese Barton describe their work with a group of middle-school urban students participating in a science program on green energy technology at a Boys and Girls Club. They write about how a place-based approach led students to engage in complex thinking about the issues (e.g., jobs, money, standard of living, and environmental quality) and what was at stake for their city, their families, and the environment. Kissling and Barton and their students make strong connections between the social and ecological realms, showing that a focus on natural environment (or ecology) includes attention to the social and built dimensions of their community, and vice versa.

The explicit connections between the environmental and the social are also evident in Monimalika Day's paper with Doug Hernandez, a case study on Indian Balwadis (preschools) run by a non-governmental organization dedicated to environmental conservation through education. Part of a larger research project on the effects of early childhood education on primary education in India, this paper highlights Day's discovery of a remarkable teacher and her young students, and zooms in to show how place affects relationships, both social and physical. In the same way, Rebecca Kesler describes the development and execution of a curriculum unit on water—specifically streams and their origins—for her primary students in Hawaii. Going out into the field forms the core of her absorbing story. In her clear teacher voice, she provides a portrait of her students' evolving engagement and learning as well as a nuanced discussion of parental involvement.

The final two papers are concerned with the development of those who are entering school and those who are getting ready to teach, and both connect the environment with the social realm. Ken Finch and Patti Bailie describe various types of nature preschools and their value in early childhood education. The authors discuss how outdoor activities in nature support young children's brain development in terms of motor skills, cognition, and language. Along with forest kindergartens and their adaptations (as described by Hopeman and Sobel), these centers are providing new alternatives in education for the very young.

Although pre-service teachers are at the other end of the educational spectrum from pre-schoolers, their development is no less crucial. Amy Vinlove shows how she and her colleagues at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, respond to the diversity of contexts in which their graduates may teach by examining the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for place-based education. Vinlove provides three compelling examples of experiential activities and assignments. Since Alaska is a rural state many of those contexts are in the natural world, but the preparation is applicable to teaching in urban centers as well.

Each of the papers in *Claiming the Promise of Place-based Education* offers a much-needed antidote to the forces that disconnect us from the places we teach, learn, and live in. Taken together, they provide an opportunity to reflect on the power of place in education. We invite you to enjoy the fresh air that the authors of this issue of *Occasional Papers* have brought with them to share with you.

In August 2014, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan observed that testing issues are “sucking the oxygen out of the room in many schools.” His solution: give states an additional year to transition into using test scores in teacher evaluations. We see another solution: open up the windows and let the “places” in! In an era of increasingly standardized curriculum and high-stakes testing this is easier said than done—yet more essential than ever.



## Guests Editors



**Roberta Altman** is a member of the graduate faculty in the Museum Education program at Bank Street College of Education. She is also consultant to the American Museum of Natural History in the Higher Education Department. She designs and provides place-based education programs and helps educators implement them in their settings. She has worked with teachers and museum educators throughout the United States and internationally, most frequently in India, where she advises at several colleges of education as well as for the National Council for Educational Research and Training on the role of place-based education in the curriculum.



Until recently, **Susan Stires** taught writing, reading, language, and children's literature courses at Bank Street College of Education. She was also a lecturer at Teachers College, Columbia University, and a staff developer in New York City schools, following 30 years as an elementary school teacher. She is the author of numerous chapters and articles. In her retirement, she is providing literacy support at Juniper Hill School for Place-Based Education, which was founded by her daughter, Anne Stires, in 2011.



**Susan Weseen** is a librarian at a public elementary school in New York City, where she also works as the gardening and sustainability coordinator. Student engagement is a main focus of her work, and her favorite moments in the library and garden are those when students light up and stretch out—to the world and to each other. A PhD in social-personality psychology from the Graduate Center at the City University of New York informs her daily practice as a teacher and as a human being.