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Preparing Teachers for Place-based Teaching

by Amy Vinlove

Given a broad definition of place-based education as “education grounded in the built and human (social, cultural and economic) world, as well as the natural world” (Bank Street College of Education, n.d.), what should be the central components of a teacher preparation program for effective place-based education? What knowledge, skills, and dispositions need to be emphasized in preservice education to encourage new teachers to not only recognize the places that surround their students, but also develop and implement effective ways to integrate these places into a curriculum in a purposeful and meaningful manner?

Experiences in my own elementary classrooms in Alaska, Denver, and New York, followed by a career in teacher education at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), have led me to consider these questions and explore the ways in which new teachers can be prepared to enact high quality place-based practices in their classrooms. This paper begins by offering two portraits of recent teacher education graduates providing place-based teaching in their classrooms, followed by a description of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions teachers (new or seasoned) must possess to effectively teach in a place-based manner. Next is a short discussion of the importance of experience and application of these tenets. Finally, there are three examples of activities and assignments my colleagues and I have developed for our teacher preparation program. We aim for these experiences to help inspire and prepare our graduates to integrate their local communities and places into their own classrooms, whether they find themselves in an urban classroom in Anchorage or a small Alaska Native community “off the road system” in rural Alaska.

Portraits of Two Graduates

Kara(1) grew up in a small fishing community in coastal Alaska. After graduation she was hired to teach third grade at a charter school in a midsized Alaskan town. Seventy percent of her students are Caucasian; the other 30% are of Hispanic, Asian, or Alaska Native origin. They come from a variety of economic backgrounds. Her school is located in a residential neighborhood, with forests and rivers within walking distance. When teaching about local Alaskan history, Kara developed a month-long unit that involved investigations of local active gold mines as well as historic gold-mining landmarks and required students to develop their own mining devices that

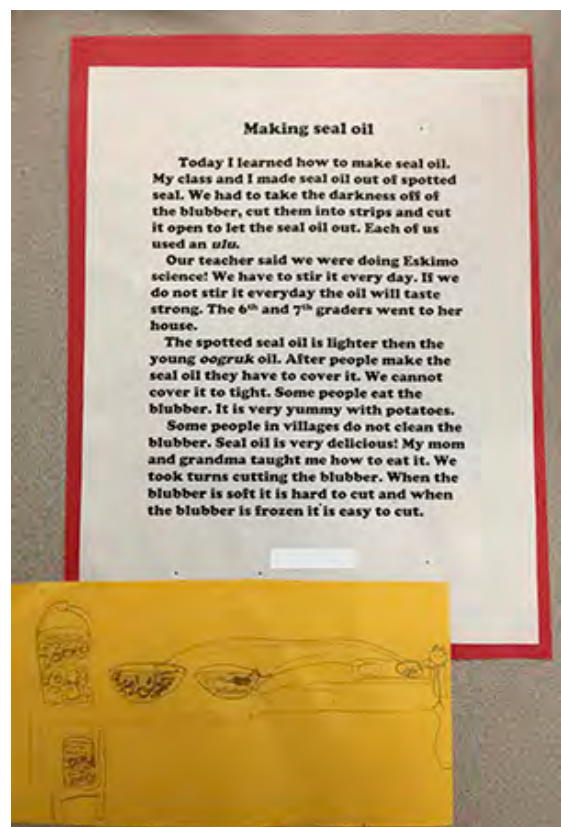


Figure 1. Student work sample reflecting on the seal oil project.

incorporated several types of simple machines that they were studying as part of their science curriculum.

Holly grew up in an Inupiaq village in northwestern Alaska. After completing her undergraduate degree and certification at UAF, she was hired to teach sixth and seventh grade in an Inupiaq community of 250 people in the same region as her hometown. All of her students are Alaska Native, and all are categorized as “economically disadvantaged.” The community has a strong heritage of subsistence activities, and most families participate extensively in traditional seasonal hunting and gathering. For a science project, Holly took her students to her house, and together they made seal oil from a seal harvested by her husband. After rendering the oil, they brought it back to the school in jars and decorated the jars; then pairs of students set out to deliver the seal oil to the community’s elders. Holly had her students write multiple entries in their science journals about the different steps of the process. How can a teacher education program prepare teachers for such diverse contexts? What strategies can and should be included and emphasized to help new teachers acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to learn deeply about their communities and to integrate that information into their school curriculum? Our experiences at UAF suggest that the approach must be multipronged and not only allow new teachers to be exposed to new strategies for gathering and using local information, but also require that they practice these strategies during their preservice internship. Furthermore, it must include experiences both large and small that offer opportunities to practice the dispositions necessary to incorporate place-based teaching respectfully.

The diversity of contexts our graduates find themselves in after receiving their certification has led us to consider the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to equip these new teachers with the ability to learn about, from, and with any community in any context. This broad approach to preparation for place-based teaching in any place may differ from one that includes learning opportunities focused on one specific geographic region and/or includes specific information on one group, or a small number of distinctive local groups, of students. Although the majority of nonwhite schoolchildren in Alaska are Alaska Native, and some of our students (like Holly) go on to teach in rural Alaska Native communities after graduation, we are mindful of the fact that we need to equip all of our graduates with strategies and skills to enact place- and community-based practices in their future classrooms wherever they teach.

Given this approach to emphasizing transferable knowledge, what is it that new teachers need to know and be able to do to incorporate place-based strategies in their classrooms? What dispositions are necessary to create a place-based pedagogy that identifies and values local information and resources and demonstrates a commitment to connecting academic curriculum with the nested contexts of children’s lives?

Knowledge

Knowledge of the communities and places where students and teachers live and where schools are located forms the foundation of a place-based education and accumulates over time spent at a particular school or in a particular community and place. What are the categories of community

knowledge that inform and contribute to meaningful place–school connections? Some areas to be probed are:

- What is the history of habitation and migration in the community? Who comes here, who leaves, and why? What populations are indigenous to this area?
- What languages and dialects are spoken in the community, and how are they used?
- What is the educational, social, and economic history of the community, and what is the current context of schools and work there?
- Who are the influential people in this community, and what is the source of their influence?
- What controversial or challenging issues is the community currently faced with?
- Where do community members tend to gather? Where do students go in the community outside of school time?
- What community resources are available that could connect with academic subjects?



Figure 2. Students on a field trip explore a local geographic landmark.

An understanding of community context, however, should not stop at the level of human-based histories, challenges, resources, and spaces. These elements do not exist outside of the natural environment or place in which the community is located. Gruenewald (2008) writes that “Place foregrounds a narrative of local and regional politics that is attuned to the particularities of where people actually live” (p. 308). Scollon and Scollon (1988), in describing a potential place-based curriculum, list 32 questions on a proposed final exam testing “How Well Do You Know Your

Place?” (p. 86). From this list, we can learn some of the important place-based elements that create the context in which schools and communities exist. Among other things, Scollon and Scollon suggest that persons who “know” their place can identify local geological and aquatic landmarks and their significance in the community; some local plants and animals as well as factors threatening their continued existence; local natural resources and the ways in which they are being used by community members; and primary weather patterns.

Skills

While local knowledge is the foundation of a place-based education, the ability to obtain that knowledge and then connect it to the academic curriculum requires an additional set of learned skills. McIntyre, Rosebery, and Gonzalez (2001) write

Instruction always takes place within a context. At one level, the idea of context has to do with trying to connect learning in a discipline with children’s learning in their everyday experiences, that is, their lives out of school. The key transformation then becomes the exploration of how to ground their learning . . . in everyday experience, while at the same time helping them acquire academic [competence]. (p. 121)

As part of a preservice education for place-based teaching, new teachers need guidance and practice in learning to obtain the local knowledge described above. They also need to practice planning curriculum that purposefully connects local knowledge and resources to academic subject matter. In addition, they must have experience with the practical skills needed to comfortably work in the local area, with children and other members of the local community.

Learning to gather knowledge from local sources. Preservice teachers must be guided in determining who to look to for local knowledge and how best to gather local information in a respectful manner. Preservice activities should be designed to help new teachers recognize and locate local information sources and determine where or to whom to go for different types of local knowledge. Activities can be designed that require preservice teachers to learn from any and all of the following resources:

- Children. Like most people, children are typically happy to talk about themselves, their lives, and their interests, if they are given the opportunity to do so in safe and nonthreatening environments. Preservice teachers should be given opportunities to interact with their students in informal situations, such as during recess and lunch, to learn their interests. Preservice teachers should also be encouraged to integrate student interests and knowledge into the academic curriculum.
- Families. Parents and caregivers are also a rich source of local knowledge, but new teachers must remember to first foster a relationship of trust and respect with them and to work with them in a collaborative manner to build on the families’ local knowledge and skills. Families can be looked to for local history and community knowledge as well as for their “funds of

knowledge” (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), i.e., their own personal banks of knowledge and skills.

- **Employees within the school community.** School employees constitute an often overlooked and undervalued rich source of knowledge. Noncertificated members of the school community, such as classroom aides, bilingual staff, custodians, secretaries, and other support staff, often come from the community surrounding the local school and have long-standing ties to it. New teachers should be encouraged to look within their school for expertise on local history, priorities, and controversies as well as general insights.
- **Community members outside the school.** Community-based organizations, businesses that serve a role in the local economy, universities and colleges, governmental agencies, and museums or other attractions showcasing locally relevant information offer a wealth of resources. All of these can be used as sources for in-class investigations, potential guest speakers, or sites for field trips.



Figure 3. An intern teacher in Western Alaska takes her students on a walk through the community.

- **Local gathering places and media sources.** Announcements posted at local coffee shops, post offices, and stores can provide excellent windows into the goings-on of the local community. Local media sources, such as websites of local organizations, agencies, and businesses; local newspapers; and local television news, radio stations, and talk shows, can do so

as well. Preservice activities should incorporate exposure to and use of some of these local sources to help new teachers practice learning from informal and formal local resources.

- **Getting outside.** Taking a walk around the neighborhood surrounding the school (provided the students come from the nearby neighborhood) is an easy way to gather information on their community and place. New teachers who are committed to incorporating the natural environment into their practices would also benefit from spending time outdoors in their area. Exploring local natural landmarks, such as lakes, rivers, forests, and trails, can provide a wealth of first-hand experiences and inspiration for curriculum integration. Connecting place with academic content. To claim the promise of place-based education, new teachers must learn and practice strategies that connect local knowledge with the academic curriculum. In their research following pre- and in-service teachers, Schultz, Jones-Walker, and Chikkatur (2008) found that “it was far more challenging for teachers to understand how the assets and resources within the community and other dimensions of students’ lives were critical to shaping pedagogy and curriculum” and that “most new teachers either overlooked these opportunities [to connect students’ lives to the curriculum], or initiated them but found it difficult to follow through once they entered the classroom as full-time teachers” (p. 163). For those without prior experience, these acts are challenging. However, a wealth of options and resources for meaningfully integrating place into the curriculum exists, in both large ways and small.

New teachers must learn and practice larger acts of place-based teaching. Larger acts of place-based teaching typically involve developing multistep, interdisciplinary curriculum projects, where the teachers learn about or through a local context alongside their students. Holly’s seal oil project described above is an example. These projects are particularly valuable in that they allow new teachers to gain information about their students’ lives and families, the local community, and/or the larger physical places surrounding the school, while teaching in a place-based manner. Place-based thematic units use the local context as the vehicle for learning and typically integrate core academic skills, including writing, reading, researching, conducting scientific experiments, and applying mathematical concepts in real-world situations. Although there are few prescribed curriculum plans for locally based thematic units—since they are, by nature, specific to the contexts in which they are taught—new teachers can be led step by step through the process of identifying local resources and then developing high quality curriculum units that use this information as a foundation. They can also be encouraged to develop and facilitate projects designed to address pressing issues in the local community.

New teachers must also learn and practice smaller acts of place-based teaching. These acts are less time and resource intensive but can (and should) become part of a new teacher’s place-based pedagogical repertoire. They are also crucial for new teachers who embrace place-based teaching but find themselves at school sites imposing stringent constraints on curriculum or pedagogy. The integration of local resources into curricular activities forms the most basic kind of place-based teaching. This can be as simple as using a local point of reference when presenting an example of a new vocabulary word or using an aspect of the community as the basis for a math story problem. It could also involve using the classroom, school, or local community as the point

of departure for an exploration of scientific concepts or a study of maps. The opportunities for small integrations on a regular basis are endless, but they are contingent on both teachers' willingness to look for such opportunities and on teachers' knowledge of relevant community-based resources.



Figure 4. Students explore the environment during a nature walk.

Practical skills for place-based teaching. A preservice education in place-based teaching must equip its new teachers with the management skills necessary to take a class outdoors, either in the woods or in an urban area. It must also give them guidance and practice in planning and facilitating field trips, both near the school and farther away. Field trips, which are also small acts of place-based teaching, need not be complicated, full-day affairs requiring permission slips and parent helpers. The areas within walking distance of a school typically provide a wealth of options and opportunities for short excursions with a variety of curriculum tie-ins. The Watershed School, a K-8 charter school in Fairbanks, Alaska, with a place-based curriculum focus, has developed a system of trails in the woods near the school. Trips on the trails are used for science observations, art lessons, writing inspiration, read-alouds in the woods, math activities, and sometimes just for a quick dose of fresh air and exercise. Teachers have secured permission in advance for these daily outings and take students out, both as a planned activity and spontaneously.

A new teacher committed to place-based teaching must also possess the ability to identify and enlist guest speakers and facilitate their visits in a manner that maximizes the learning potential of those opportunities. Teachers can either seek out visitors who possess “expert” knowledge on a subject under investigation by the class, or simply accept an offer from a community member or parent to visit the classroom and speak to the students on a subject of relevance. Like field trips, visits from guest speakers can sometimes be of little educational value unless they are properly organized and followed up with discussions or debriefings relevant to the academic content they are intended to enhance. Opportunities to enlist and facilitate visits from guest speakers should be incorporated into a preservice preparation for place-based teaching.

Dispositions

The ability to work respectfully within a community to learn and use location information requires the presence of several underlying dispositions or habits of mind. Mindful teachers practicing place-based education must be committed to building and sustaining meaningful relationships with the students, families, and communities in which they work. They must be attentive listeners to others, and they must understand and respect that people operate from multiple perspectives and possess diverse worldviews. In order to gather the local knowledge crucial to place-based pedagogy, new teachers must also be willing to learn from nontraditional knowledge sources and must recognize the need to mitigate the power differential that typically exists between teachers and the students and parents they serve. Needless to say, it cannot be assumed that every new teacher possesses these dispositions. It is important, though, that new teachers learn to value and recognize them. Teacher preparation programs emphasizing place-based practices must endeavor to foster these dispositions in their graduates through experiential activities.

The Importance of Experience and Application of Ideas

While some instruction in the knowledge and skills necessary to enact place-based education can be delivered in the context of a university classroom, the bulk of the learning must occur through experiential activities. These activities require hands-on practice: getting out and gathering information from the community as well as doing the challenging real-world work of connecting place and community resources to the academic curriculum. McDonald, Tyson, Brayko, Bowman, and Shimomura (2011) contend that “there is no substitute for the first-hand knowledge teachers gain from spending time learning about student’s personal and community cultural practices outside of school” (p. 7).

My own research on the quality and composition of preservice preparation in place-based education offered at the three campuses of the University of Alaska found similar beliefs among program graduates. Of 166 University of Alaska teacher education program graduates who responded to a survey regarding their preservice preparation in place-based education, 58% referred to some type of experiential activity when asked to describe the activities they engaged in that most contributed to their knowledge and understanding of place-based education (Vinlove, 2012). Only 40% said they acquired place-based teaching competency through a classroom-based activity. Some examples of influential experiential activities listed by graduates included “getting

outside and being taught by elders,” “connecting with local artists,” “the home visit project,” and “working with my local National Park Service” (Vinlove, 2012, p. 172).

The survey of University of Alaska graduates asked for suggestions of ways to strengthen preparation in place-based teaching. In 50% of the 68 ideas offered by the graduates, there were requests that some type of experiential activity be added to their program. The responses included “require students to create a place-based unit and to carry it out, not just plan it on paper,” “getting out into the community and exploring the unique history would be beneficial,” and “get teachers out into the local environment, partner with scientists, field experts, do more field sessions” (Vinlove, 2012, p. 135). Thirty percent of respondents to this question stated that place-based teaching had not been part of their preservice education and that they wished that it had been included (Vinlove, 2012).

Experiential Activities and Assignments to Foster Place-Based Teaching Practices

This paper will conclude by describing three different experiential activities and assignments we have developed at UAF to help our preservice elementary teachers (called interns in their final year of preparation) acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to enact meaningful place-based practices in their own classrooms. The activities are designed to help interns learn and practice the skills necessary to acquire local knowledge and meaningfully connect that knowledge with the academic curriculum. Additionally, we emphasize experiential activities that require students to interact with their local community outside of the school environment and provide opportunities for interns to hone the dispositions necessary to work respectfully with students, parents, and local community members.

Place-based mapping and curriculum development. Our place-based mapping and curriculum development project is a course-long activity that students complete as part of their social studies methods class. It involves gathering information about the community and environment surrounding each intern’s school and thinking of meaningful ways to incorporate place and community resources into the curriculum. During the semester, while working full time in elementary classrooms, interns use Google Maps to develop an interactive, annotated map of the area around their school and community. They locate and provide interpretive information on 14 different areas of geological, ecological, cultural, historical, social, and economic interest around the school and community. They share their maps and information with their fellow interns in class weekly. Simultaneously, they develop a narrative list of curricular ideas and tie-ins that connect with the points on their maps, and we discuss these ideas as a class.

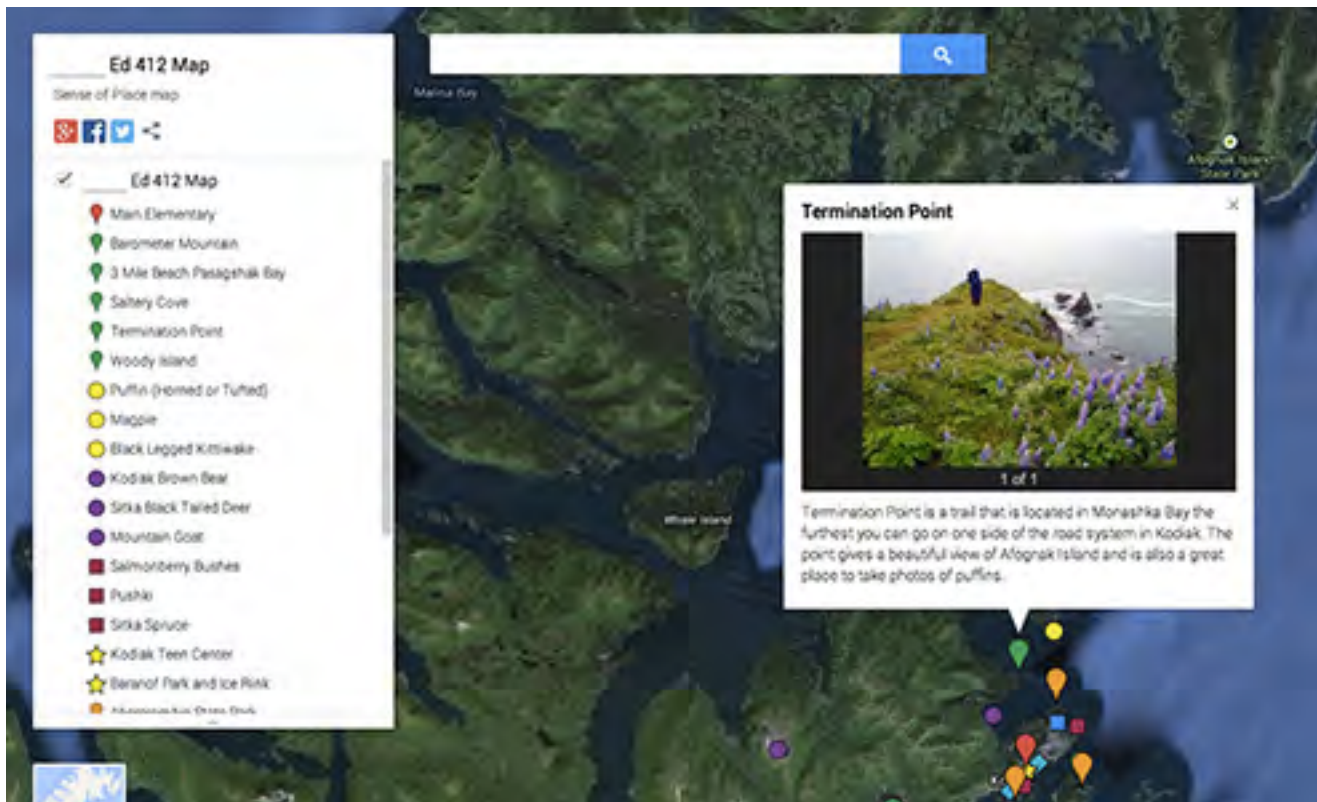


Figure 5. Screen shot of an intern-created place-based map of Kodiak, Alaska.

Many of the prompts for the project, such as “Identify community gathering areas in the neighborhood(s) your students come from“ or “Identify at least five significant natural landmarks in the area and define local uses or associations with the landmarks—why is the location significant to the community? What activities occur there or what is it used for?” require that interns get out into their community and learn about the natural environment as well as places of local importance. Unless interns are working in a community where they have lived for a long time, they typically have to talk to community members to gather the information required for their map. Other prompts, such as “Using the draw-a-line button in Google Maps, map a one-mile walk you could take with your students,” provide a point of departure for discussing some of the skills necessary to enact place-based teaching, such as how to successfully lead a class on a walk beyond school grounds.

Creating the narrative that accompanies the map requires students to think about each component of their map and make a purposeful connection between that component and an aspect of their school’s academic curriculum. Examples of curriculum prompts include “Think of a realistic occasion you might have to invite an influential member of the community into your classroom. Describe how you would facilitate their visit and a class interview of that individual” and “Imagine teaching a unit on the Alaskan or local economy. How would you incorporate the locations or local businesses you have identified?” Although the interns do not have an opportunity to implement all of the place-based curriculum ideas they develop in this assignment during

their internship year, many use identified community resources as the point of departure for the creation of their week-long social studies unit, described below.

Community-based social studies unit and local artist project. During their final year of preparation, our interns have two structured opportunities to develop and teach place-based curriculum in their internship classrooms. As part of the same class that requires the place-based mapping and curriculum development assignment, interns have to develop, teach, and reflect on a week-long social studies unit that integrates a resource in the local community. Many interns, as a result of the mapping activity, choose to design units that have a place-based resource as the focus. These have included a third-grade unit on mapping important community subsistence areas; a first-grade unit on “me in my community” that incorporated five interviews with local community helpers; a second-grade unit on Alaskan aviation history; and a fourth-grade unit on the climate of interior Alaska. The units are developed by using the Understanding by Design curriculum framework and a component of the unit assessment that evaluates the extent to which community resources were used. The different topics and pedagogical strategies in the interns’ place-based social studies units also provide rich opportunities to discuss the practical skills of place-based teaching.

As part of their arts methodology course, our interns complete an assignment identifying a local artist, interviewing the artist, and then developing and implementing a lesson or series of lessons that teaches students about the artist and allows them to experiment with the technique and medium that artist employs. In this assignment, which was developed by my colleague Joan Hornig, interns (in pairs or small groups) have the opportunity to meet with local professional artists in their art studios to learn about their work and their artistic process. After meeting with the artist, the interns create an art lesson that is inspired by (but does not copy) the artist’s work. As part of the lesson, the interns must also create a piece of artwork along with their students. Afterward, the interns reflect on the connections between this assignment and the place-based mapping assignment. The local artist project has been an excellent opportunity for students to experience locating and using community resources and incorporating those resources into the curriculum.



Figure 6. An intern plays basketball with her students.

Experiences with the community and nontraditional sources of information. Other opportunities and requirements for interacting with the community or locating and using nontraditional sources of information are infused throughout the year-long internship. Over the course of the year, our interns are required to maintain a “log of collaboration” that chronicles their collaborative efforts within and beyond their internship schools. As part of this assignment, they are twice required to attend or participate in events that support the cultural and linguistic heritage of the community in which their school is located. At the start of the school year, we brainstorm a list of opportunities to meet this requirement; the primary criteria are that the activities must not be school related and that they cannot take place on school grounds. Interns attend a wide variety of activities to fulfill this requirement, from the yearly Native Arts Festival to sporting events to which their students have invited them.

During their internship year, our students also complete an assignment called “Turning Learning Upside Down” that requires that they learn something new from one of their students or a student’s parent. The goals of this assignment, which has several short steps, are to encourage interns to find the individual knowledge assets and expertise held by students and/or families in the classroom as well as to enable interns to connect students’ school learning experiences to their out-of-school knowledge and experiences. For the assignment, interns must first identify at least four potential nontraditional sources of knowledge—either the students’ or the students’ family members—and state what they might learn from each of those sources. After settling on one new source, they must then decide where and how to facilitate an hour-long learning experience using that source. After the learning experience has taken place, interns write a short reflection about it. They consider how they might use the information gained during the learning experience to enhance future academic learning in the classroom and also how they could connect the knowledge shared by the student or parent to some aspect of classroom learning. Over the last several years, interns have learned about a myriad of different topics, including how to can smoked salmon,

play a new basketball game, crochet a scarf, prepare Thai spring rolls, groom a show dog, sign some basic phrases in American Sign Language, and make a wallet out of duct tape.

Where We're Headed

Geertz (1996) stated, "No one lives in the world in general" (p. 262). Indeed, no one should teach "in general" either. Meaningful learning occurs when students can connect new knowledge to their personal lives and situated experiences. This can only occur when their teachers are equipped with deep knowledge of their students' lives and of the communities they teach in, possess the skills required for connecting this local knowledge to academic subject matter, and have acquired the dispositions necessary to want and be able to do these tasks effectively. The practices described above have been developed collaboratively by faculty in my department over the last 15 years to help new teachers acquire these skills as part of their preservice education. As reflective practitioners, we continue to retool and reshape these activities based on feedback from our graduates and the perceived needs of the students they serve.

Over the past year, I have been engaging in a small-scale follow-up study to observe our graduates in their classrooms, interview them about their practices, and collect artifacts in order to assess the impact that their preservice education in place-based teaching has had on their actual classroom practices. This information is helping us to shape and refine our place-based preservice activities. To fully claim the promise of place-based education, we recognize and value the education of teachers themselves, and emphasize the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to harness the power of place-based teaching. We hope to see the fruits of our efforts manifest in teaching practices that are intimately tied to and derived from communities as well as in classrooms that place the intrinsic knowledge of their students, families, and communities at the center of the educational experience.

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