Place-Based Education in Georgia: Imagining the Possibilities for Local Study in the Contemporary Social Studies Classroom.

Charles Elfer  
*Clayton State University*

This essay serves three essential purposes. In the first place, the essay highlights the relevance of place-based education as an important curricular and methodological trend in the social studies. Secondly, an additional objective of this essay is to outline briefly several of the historical precedents for innovative place-based pedagogies in Georgia. And finally, with conceptual parameters and historical models established, this essay addresses the possibilities for localized, place-based based methodologies in the contemporary social studies classroom. With regard to the latter, three key recommendations for the advancement of place-based education in the social studies are outlined.

This essay is premised on two clear assumptions. First, powerful teaching and learning in the social studies are quite possible even in the context of increasingly stringent state and federal mandates. Second, utilization of the varied and valuable resources available in the communities in which we live and learn are almost wholly underused in the social studies classroom today. With these assumptions in mind, and in the spirit of drawing upon local historical, cultural, and geographic experiences in the pursuit of educational improvement, this essay briefly examines several illustrations of place-based education in Georgia. More specifically, this essay outlines the rich experiences embedded in histories of the early Berry School, the Rabun-Gap Nacoochee School, and the well-known Foxfire initiative. These several select historical illustrations represent the essential themes and character of place-based education. Perhaps more importantly, these initiatives highlight Georgia’s rich history of localized teaching and learning and provide a hopeful source of inspiration for contemporary educators in the social studies, both in Georgia and beyond.

**Situating Place-Based Education within the Social Studies**

Placed-based education is a contemporary term that refers to a broad range of educational approaches that attempt to connect classrooms to the ecological, cultural, and historical contexts in which schools themselves are situated. David Sobel, a leading figure in the field of place-based education, crafted the popular description below:

Place-based education is the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students’ appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. Community vitality and environmental quality are improved though the active engagement of local citizens, community organizations, and environmental resources in the life of the school. (2004, p. 7)
With Sobel’s definition in mind, place-based education is a reference to those pedagogies that emphasize the local in the educative process. At various times and places, scholars have referred to the approach alternatively as place-consciousness, pedagogy of place, community schooling, service learning, home geography, and local study. Each of these alternate terms represent educational approaches with unique traditions and objectives, but all versions, and there are surely even more still, share the fundamental commitment to the places in which schools are situated, to the nature of the learner, and to the stakeholders maintaining positions in the process (Elfer, 2011).

Despite the recent proliferation of place-based educational scholarship, formal consideration of the approach within the social studies has remained completely anemic. Place-based educational programs have accelerated sharply in the sciences within the past two decades, particularly in the fields of ecology and environmental science, yet only a handful of scholars have sought to make the connection to the social studies. Cynthia Resor’s (2010) recent article in The Social Studies stands as one notable counterexample. Among other valuable insights, Resor pointed out that “…as often is the case with educational terminology, the term [place-based education] is overused or misunderstood” (p. 185). One of the troubles with educational research and school reform is that all too often concepts and philosophies are repackaged as new and innovative with little regard for essentially similar agendas carried forth historically. Such is the case with place-based education and its relationship to the social studies. With that in mind, observers must understand that the question is not whether place-based education can be fitted to the social studies curriculum, or as Resor rhetorically queried, “...is [place-based education] appropriate for the social studies classroom” (2010, p. 185)? In fact, that question has been addressed repeatedly over time and the answer is a resounding nod in the affirmative.

Not only can social studies educators utilize the local in the classroom, many have done so, and with great success. The more central question, it seems, is will more social studies educators and educational researchers begin to take a closer look at the wealth of local resources available in their school communities? Among the suite of demonstrated benefits offered though place-based approaches, social studies classrooms stand to be enriched through a reconnection of classroom and community. In the first place, place-based learning offers an inherently experiential, and often purposeful, form of instruction that is all too often missing. Whether in the classroom or out-of-doors, place-based education places students in direct contact with real issues, circumstances, and phenomena that surround them. But in addition to what is surely a more experiential, and more engaging, educational approach, localized learning endeavors to bring each of us much closer to realizing a goal which is fundamental to our work as social studies educators; that is, in our thoughtful engagements with the communities that surround our schools, we stand a far better chance of developing thoughtful, engaged, democratic citizens.

Place-Based Educational Precedents in Georgia

Though it is not often voiced, educators in Georgia are connected to a particularly rich progressive educational legacy, one which deserves celebration. William Heard Kilpatrick of White Plains, as one notable example, started his teaching career at the Rock College Normal School in Athens and later went on to teach at the University of Georgia before securing a position at Teacher’s College, Columbia University. Kilpatrick was perhaps the most memorable student and colleague of John Dewey, and, in part through his promotion of the Project Method (1918), was among the most prominent and influential educational progressives of the early twentieth century. But Georgia also boasts a rich place-based curricular repertoire, one from which contemporary educators in the social studies might glean much inspiration. The early decades of the Berry School in northwest Georgia, the Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School, and the Foxfire initiative represent three
important legacies, each of which point broadly to possibilities for contemporary educators seeking to localize their classrooms.

**The Berry Schools**

Martha Berry was an educational pioneer and her efforts to develop a school for southern Appalachian youth today represents one illustration of a place-based initiative consistent with the foundational themes of the modern reform movement. A review of the institutional course description and school bulletins published by the early Berry Schools reveals clearly such connections. Although the character of the institution changed significantly as the Boys Industrial School, which was established in 1902, transformed into Berry College in the 1930s, a sincere consideration of the local in the Berry curriculum was tangible throughout the early history of the institution and across virtually all fields of study, including those disciplines today recognized as the social studies.

The corner of northwest Georgia in which the Berry Schools were situated, and, in fact, the greater portion of Georgia and the South in the early twentieth century, was largely agricultural. That rural, agricultural foundation did much to inform Berry’s curriculum and school objectives. In a very real and explicit way, the institution’s mission was to serve southern Appalachian students immersed in a rural, agricultural life. With that in mind, the Berry curriculum focused intently on the needs and understandings of local peoples. The following course description for “Geography II” provides a brief illustration of that mission:

Throughout the course in this subject the viewpoint is always that of the homes of the students and constant reference is made to local conditions. The work is made interesting and practical through the use of maps, pictures, models, apparatus and field observations. (The Berry School Bulletin, 1912-1913, p. 25)

Emphasis on the “homes of the students” and “local conditions” highlighted a locally-focused agenda for teaching and learning in geography and worked to build upon student interest of those things familiar to northwest Georgia and to the learner’s lived experience. The Berry School curriculum also contained a unit titled “Country Life.” The course description below lends still further support for a localized, place-based mode of instruction.

The aim of this course is to take the everyday activities of the boys on the farm and make these the basis for arithmetic, science and agriculture...Most of the boys in this class have studied very little arithmetic in the rural communities from which they come. The practical way in which arithmetic, agriculture, economics, and current events are blended enable the quick assimilation of what otherwise would be dry and indigestible material. No definite text-book is used during this year, but the students are encouraged to accumulate and read bulletins on the subjects discussed in class. (The Berry School Bulletin, 1921-1922, p. 47)

Oddly enough, the ninety year-old passage above sounds incredibly similar to modern depictions of place-based education. But what of the other social studies domains? Despite the persistence of what appeared to be a more traditional history curriculum, a community-focused theme did permeate a number of other social studies courses at Berry. Selections from the course descriptions for “Civics I” and “Economics I,” for instance, provide further support for the argument that the early Berry School exemplified a place-based approach in practice which pre-dates modern initiatives. With regard to civics, a portion of the course was dedicated to “ordinary duties” and “rural citizenship” (The Berry School Bulletin, 1921-1922, p. 51-52). And similarly, in economics, considerable attention was paid “to rural conditions and needs” (p. 51-52). In both courses, “Civics
I” and “Economics I,” the emphasis on rural life and the effort to make the social studies locally relevant illustrated the school’s mission to tap into southern Appalachian lifeways and the lived experiences of Berry School students.

If course descriptions and institutional bulletins were any indication, Martha Berry's approach to schooling represented a place-based approach in her work with rural Appalachian students at the turn of the twentieth century. The localized nature of learning at Berry spanned the entire course of study and touched nearly all disciplines, including those constituent of the social studies. Martha Berry’s mission was clearly designed around the local social, economic, and political realities in the highlands of southern Appalachia and the utilization of the surrounding community was an inextricable component of her experiment (see Kane & Henry, 1947). Better still, her efforts were enormously successful. Yet the legacy of progressive education in Georgia may offer still more.

The Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School

Two additional Georgia-based initiatives relevant to the present discussion are the Rabun-Gap Nacoochee School and Foxfire. While Foxfire boasts perhaps the most memorable educational legacy, its forbearer certainly deserves attention. Established in the mid-1920s, the Rabun-Gap Nacoochee School, not unlike that of Martha Berry’s work near Rome, Georgia, combined principles of place-based education, rural reform, and educational progressivism. With the assistance of Harvard colleague and University President, Charles Eliot, founder Andrew Ritchie secured the funds necessary to purchase nearly 2,000 acres of land in rural northeast Georgia. Once in possession, the school invited local farm families to live on the campus grounds, which Ritchie had arranged to be subdivided into workable plots of farmland under his Farm Family Program. In exchange for the use of the land and the fruits of their labor, participating farmers and their families agreed to take part in agricultural training exercises, and, not insignificantly, to send their children to school (Puckett, 1989; Oliver, 2011). Like the contemporaneous Berry Schools, the Rabun Gap-Nacoochee School itself was self-sufficient and a laboratory for place-based experiential learning.

The Rabun-Gap Nacoochee School clearly served important educational functions for rural northeast Georgians in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century. Serving the dual functions of educating rural farm youth and providing support to families to better manage their agricultural lifestyles, the school bridged a wide variety of educational purposes, some of which are today echoed by modern advocates of place-based education. As other rural reform efforts waned in the 1920s, Rabun Gap gained momentum and thrived until the 1950s when larger economic forces transplanted industry for what was once an agricultural dependence. Regardless, the Rabun Gap Nacoochee School was, in and of itself, a powerful illustration for innovative, localized, educational reform. All of this, of course, set the stage for Eliot Wigginton’s later work in the 1960s with the development of Foxfire (Puckett, 1989; Oliver, 2011).

Foxfire and Cultural Journalism

Frustrated with a lack of intellectual engagement on the part of his English students, Eliot Wigginton, a new teacher at the time, looked to democratize and vitalize his instructional decision-making. To that end, Wigginton worked collaboratively with students to develop a range of somewhat non-traditional classroom activities that he hoped might invigorate English and grammar learning. The lasting result was the establishment of a literary magazine, a cornerstone of the Foxfire initiative and an exercise in the preservation of local history and culture. From Puckett’s (1989) account of the Foxfire magazine, “It would be a literary journal and would include, first, creative writing and art submitted by Rabun Gap students, students at other Georgia high schools, and practicing writers and poets; second, articles based on materials drawn from the local
community, e.g., superstitions, home remedies, folk expressions, and weather signs” (p. 18). In 1967, students selected from a list of possible monikers the name *Foxfire* to represent the journal and distributed calls for proposals throughout the community and to area schools.

The success of *Foxfire*, which continues to this day under new and dedicated leadership, highlights the potential significance of the local in educational contexts. “Cleverly or unwittingly,” as Puckett wrote, “[*Foxfire*] had turned to advantage a liability of small rural schools and communities-their paucity of meaningful and engaging things to do. The initiative had done this, in large part, by making rurality itself-its traditional practitioners, folk patterns, and survival arts-a source of adolescent activity and interest” (1989, p. 21). *Foxfire* was a successful illustration of place-based pedagogy delivered some thirty years in advance of the modern place-based reform movement. And while the cultural journalistic enterprise grew out of an English classroom, the investigation of local history and culture surely holds powerful lessons for teachers and students in the social studies.

**Imagining the Possibilities for Local Learning in the Social Studies**

Suffice it to say, the past is not the present. Norms and expectations in the social studies classroom today are obviously not a perfect match to those experienced by Martha Berry or Andrew Ritchie. The curricular flexibility enjoyed by educators historically is arguably a vestige of the past. Despite rather dramatic shifts in context, however, the state’s educational legacy still holds important lessons for contemporary social studies educators in Georgia, particularly for those entertaining the possibility of exploring place-based pedagogies.

The successes highlighted above serve a critical function in that they demonstrate the possibilities for powerful teaching and learning through the use of the local. In an age where curriculum reform must be “data-driven” and “field-tested,” the progressive educational legacy in our state, and elsewhere for that matter, should not be forgotten, but celebrated and highlighted. Place-based education is not a radical or untested innovation for the social studies, but has instead enjoyed a prosperous history of practice. The short illustrations highlighted above suggest that the utilization of the community as an educational resource is not antithetical to the traditional academic curriculum, but a rather powerful supplement.

In addition to offering to contemporary social studies educators a strong rationale for place-based instruction, the history of localized education in Georgia represents a deep and fruitful curricular repertoire, one that points to possibilities. A deeper consideration of the work that took place at Berry or the cultural journalistic model represented in *Foxfire* offers to practitioners and researchers a catalogue of options, both opportunities to consider and potential pitfalls to avoid.

In order for place-based education to assume a more prominent role in the social studies classroom, several important understandings and actions must be established. In the first place, as Resor (2010) highlighted, place-based education must not be situated as a singular, perfect reform. True of most reforms, place-based education is not an educational panacea. Instead, the use of the local in the social studies classroom is but one among many strategies to improve teaching, invigorate the social studies curriculum, and engage students in their communities. But the approach should not be billed as something that it is not. Secondly, and this is perhaps the most critical component, educators must endeavor to investigate the possibilities available in and around their schools. Place-based educators, in the social studies or elsewhere, have to become students of their own communities. Rather than an expertise, an interest in and commitment to developing knowledge of the places in which we live and work is what is essential. Seeking out opportunities for learning locally is a significant first step in the larger process. And finally, practitioners, teacher educators, and educational researchers must work to make their experiences with place-based education known to the wider community of social studies education community, locally, nationally, and internationally. While not exhaustive, annual state meetings such as those hosted
by the Georgia Council for the Social Studies, outlets such as the Georgia Social Studies Journal, and state and local newspapers represent several accessible and appropriate venues. Region and state, of course, will determine opportunities, but the importance of engaging with colleagues and sharing experiences remains critical across contexts. Only through the sharing of successes and challenges will place-based practices gain momentum and support as a viable social studies practice.

Place-based education in the social studies is not new, but it remains surprisingly novel and uncommon. That certainly does not have to be the case. Despite the increasing curricular expectations on teachers in Georgia and throughout the country, there remains a great deal of space for the inclusion of local cultural, historical, and geographic resources in the social studies classroom. Given the practicality and demonstrated successes of place-based models with regard to student motivation, community stewardship, and academic learning, the benefits seem to far outweigh the challenges to implementation.

References


About the Author

Charles Elfer is an assistant professor of history education at Clayton State University. His research interests include place-based education and social studies education. He can be contacted at charleselfer@clayton.edu.