“Place: it’s where we’re from; it’s where we’re going . . . It asks for our attention and care. If we pay attention, place has much to teach us.”

With this belief as a foundation, The Power of Place offers a comprehensive and compelling case for making communities the locus of learning for students of all ages and backgrounds. Dispelling the notion that place-based education is an approach limited to those who can afford it, the authors describe how schools in diverse contexts—urban and rural, public and private—have adopted place-based programs as a way to better engage students and attain three important goals of education: student agency, equity, and community.

This book identifies six defining principles of place-based education. Namely, it

1. Embeds learning everywhere and views the community as a classroom.
2. Is centered on individual learners.
3. Is inquiry based to help students develop an understanding of their place in the world.
4. Incorporates local and global thinking and investigations.
5. Requires design thinking to find solutions to authentic problems.
6. Is interdisciplinary.

For each principle, the authors share stories of students whose lives were transformed by their experiences in place-based programs, elaborate on what the principle means, demonstrate what it looks like in practice by presenting case studies from schools throughout the United States, and offer action steps for implementation.
THE POWER OF PLACE
AUTHENTIC LEARNING THROUGH PLACE-BASED EDUCATION

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3RD PAGES
Preface: The Future of Place in Learning

Well, in the ancient world, the word genus was not so much used about individual people, it was used about places, and almost always with the word loci. Genius loci meant “the spirit of a place.” And we all know what that intuitively means. We all have favorite places in the world, and it may be a seashore where you’ve got this ancient conversation between the ocean and the land and a particular geography of the way the cliffs or the beaches are formed. But it could’ve been the same in the ancient world. A little bridge crossing a stream with a pool at the back of it and a willow hanging over the pool; that place would be said to have a genius loci. But a more sophisticated understanding would [be that] it’s this weather front of all of these qualities that meet in that place. So I think it’s a very merciful thing to think of human beings in the same way—that is, your genius is just the way everything has met in you.

—David Whyte, The Conversational Nature of Reality
We have all experienced the power of place: those moments when we are fully alive; when the sights, sounds, and smells of an experience stopped us in our tracks; when learning was organic and visceral. It may be a strange new place where the culture and colors are unfamiliar and simultaneously delightful and disconcerting. Or it may be the mundane—an alley, a field, or a creek—seen with new eyes.

Place: it’s where we’re from; it’s where we’re going. Place comes in layers; it is old and new at the same time. Place is central to human development; it is how we comprehend the world; it asks for our attention and care. If we pay attention, place has much to teach us.

We have largely stopped making use of place in formal education. All the reasons were well-intentioned but industrial: abstracted frameworks, standardized measures, and efficient facilities. The addition of mobile technology, which has the power to unlock anytime, anywhere learning, is primarily used to provide useful differentiation, but the addition of screen time has (in most places) reduced, not increased, connection to place. Formal learning experiences that leverage the power of place are now the exception and not the rule. We hope to change that.

With this book and our related work, we seek to help educators, advocates, and parents connect children with places near and far. We hope for more engagement and authenticity in education. We seek expanded access to community-connected challenges. We aim to leverage local assets including parks, public spaces, museums, and businesses for learning.

**Why Place Matters to the Authors**

The power of place has been realized time and again by educators we work with. Place-based education also has been integral to our own learning journeys, careers, and lives.

**Emily:** In my first couple of years as an elementary school teacher, I didn’t pay much attention to where students were from or their connection to their communities (although I should have). Once I realized the value and strengths of these connections, I had an entirely new perspective on teaching and learning. I began to realize the incredible amount of untapped potential and creativity in the students that I was trying to contain in my traditional, four-walled classroom. My own most powerful learning experiences have been deeply rooted in place and connected to my community—so why wouldn’t this also be true for my students?

There is nothing more incredible than witnessing one of nature’s finest phenomena, more invigorating than being uncomfortable and curious in a new culture or context, and more humbling than helping tackle an issue in your own community.
Nate: Something unexpected happens when you explore a community for the first time. Your worldview shifts with each question, each interaction, and each inquiry. You understand the place more deeply, and yet the deeper you go, the more you realize you have to learn. This is the power of place—it’s an infinite mystery that continually leads to awe and wonder.

Pragmatically, my most important learning has come from place—in the outdoors, jobs, conversations, and explorations—all teaching skills and knowledge that were just as important as what I learned in school. I see that I can make an impact. I see that I can always learn. And I see that my actions create ripple effects across ecosystems and nations. This is what our young people need to learn—that they matter and that it starts with understanding and appreciating their local place.

Tom: I remember the sound of running water, the smell of damp logs, and the thrill of finding a tadpole in Sligo Creek. I was 11 and had time to dawdle. Years of battlefield and museum tours in and around Washington, D.C., introduced me to design and the way it can shape our lives. I knew I’d be an architect or engineer.

Awestruck a year later, I stood on a glacier at 14,000 feet, bracing against a 50-mile-per-hour wind and feeling very small against the vast expanse of the Colorado Rockies. Glaciology studies—that was the field for me (at least until frostbite and a girlfriend changed my mind). My interest in engineering and rocks sent me to the Colorado School of Mines and got me a good first job.

I’m the sum of the places I’ve been and the experiences I’ve accumulated. It wasn’t my parents preaching contribution that convinced me of the merits of service; it was the urban ministries they brought me to for a decade. It wasn’t a picture of the Rockies that won my heart; it was the paradox of fear and wonder that came with being in a spectacular remote setting. It wasn’t any of the classes I took in college that I remember; it was work in strange and wonderful places that shaped my path. Place is powerful, personal, and persuasive.

We invite you to explore—or continue—your own place-based journey with us as you read this book and to reexamine existing beliefs about what is possible.
Why Place Matters

“My experience with place-based education prepared me to thrive in every aspect of my being,” said high school student Elizabeth Irvin (2018, para. 6), after CITYterm, an immersive project-based learning experience in New York City. It combines city expeditions with seminars and meetings with politicians, artists, urban planners, and authors.

Irvin said the six-day experience uncovered new academic interests that she may pursue as a career. She added, “Discovering my passion for alternative learning styles has played a large role in my college search” (2018, para. 6).

The experiences that shape our lives almost always include relationships—with someone who walked alongside us, someone who expanded our horizons, someone who inspired us. In addition to people, shaping experiences are often connected to places—a gallery, theater, workplace, soccer pitch, clearing in the woods, or mountain trail. Sometimes that shaping place is at school, but the thesis of this book is that the entire community is a classroom worth connecting with and that place is an integral component of youth development.

This chapter addresses three questions: What does place do uniquely well? Doesn’t technology make place irrelevant? Why is place important now?

The following sections make the case that place is important, relevant, and timely. More specifically, place promotes agency, equity, and community;
it provides a compelling context for learning; and it is bolstered by current trends in practice, policy, and technology.

**Place Promotes Agency, Equity, and Community**

Context matters. Although time spent in the community or on a trip to another community seems academically “expensive,” place is uniquely efficient at delivering value to young people and the places they engage with. Every community and place has a unique ethos, ecosystem, and combination of assets and challenges. Connecting young learners to their community and enabling them to immerse in other communities near and far promotes the foundational goals of public education: agency, equity, and community. Engaging young people in exploring place stands to benefit us all.

**Agency**

Marie Bjerede progressed from an engineer to a high-tech general manager because she had great technical skills and the ability to communicate and collaborate. Leading Qualcomm’s Design Center, she studied human motivation and became an early advocate of self-organizing teams. Bjerede found that in attacking adaptive problems, it was creativity and collaboration that mattered. The most successful engineers didn’t wait to be told what to do; they understood the goals and took initiative. It’s this sense of *agency*—the ability to act on the world—that, according to Bjerede, will be the most important employment skill. It’s a confidence that we can affect our future and our surroundings (Getting Smart Staff, 2018a, para. 3).

Agency requires self-knowledge, social awareness, and a sense of place and time. It is an applied disposition gathered through successively larger actions on a progressively larger world. What teaches us to perceive our location and relations is not language; it is our physical senses collecting action research. Agency is a muscle; place-based learning is the gym.

Many schools value routine and compliance—and both squelch student agency. It’s extended encounters with novelty and complexity that build the disposition and skills of agency—the humility to appreciate the complex and the confidence to know what to do next. These valuable extended challenges are frequently connected to a community that provides context for learning and opportunities for contribution. Once students feel ownership in a space and feel valued, agency can begin to develop through these powerful learning experiences.
Equity

At the core of place-based education is the need for more equitable learning environments for all students—environments where students are seen, valued, and heard. In these environments, learning is designed with and for students as humans and individuals in the space. This is deep and complex work, but it should be at the core of why we choose to work with young people. Utilizing place is one way to do this.

Young people from affluent households often experience a rich variety of places both locally and internationally that are not easily accessible to those less fortunate. A school’s systematic commitment to expose children to a variety of community assets closes a portion of this opportunity gap. An example is a commitment by the city of Tacoma, Washington, to allow every preschooler in the city to spend a week learning at the zoo.

People who grew up experiencing racism or intolerance may feel like something—and some place—has been taken from them. Beyond providing access, community learning experiences can create enfranchisement—the sense that “people like me” belong here, whether that’s at the zoo, a museum, city hall, or a high-tech workplace.

Each learner is unique, and equity demands that we meet every child where he or she is—emotionally, cognitively, economically, and geographically. Connecting learners to the place where they live can contribute to a sense of identity—a sense of who they are and where they’re from. The humblest settings and surroundings have something to teach. And learning about a new place may be the best way to illustrate and support the variability in the way humans perceive and process an experience.

We cannot assume that everyone has the same access to opportunities and networks (Fisher & Fisher, 2018). By engaging students in place, we increase their ability to have meaningful experiences and build social capital (see page 12 for more details). Work-based learning and community service are examples of experiences that extend social networks and may expand future opportunities.

Place-based experiences can directly confront factors that have been oppressive or limiting for communities. For example, Vaux High School is a partnership between the School District of Philadelphia, the housing authority, the teacher’s union, and Big Picture Learning. Students engage in extensive internships and benefit from on-site partners that provide youth and family services (Vander Ark, 2018d). “We created a place kids want to be. We created ownership through internships,” said executive director David Bromley (Vander Ark, 2018d, para. 9).
Community

Place-based education connects learning to communities and the world around us; it builds community in four respects:

1. **It creates bonds.** When a group experiences the wonder of a vaulted ceiling, mountain vista, or night sky, it creates a special bond. Whether it’s the challenge of navigating a subway or trailblazing in the woods together, these moments of shared struggle or awe can act as a glue that connects people and builds community. Early childhood education environments often use community as the basis for teaching and learning throughout the year, grounding each experience in how we can work together and create common norms and culture.

2. **It personalizes learning.** Place-based learning allows students to find a personal connection to their community or a place. With some voice and choice in shaping projects, internships, and service experiences, learning is personal and community connected.

3. **It builds social capital.** With intentionality, place-based learning helps young people develop their social networks and take the chance out of chance encounters beyond school.

   Julia Freeland-Fisher, director of education at the Clayton Christensen Institute, became interested in social capital after learning that more than half of all job placements result from a personal connection—and that schools just aren’t set up to influence this critical success factor. She notes that schools may be social, but most are insular. Imagine the community that could be created if, through a series of internships, site visits, and community-connected projects, each high school graduate left school connected with 100 community leaders or professionals—locally and regionally.

4. **It promotes contribution.** Some schools treat students as participants preparing for a distant future. Place-based learning helps young people identify opportunities and make community contributions in the present—powered by new technologies that make it easier than ever to code an application, launch a campaign, or start a business. When empowered with a sense of agency and supported with time and tools, young people can contribute to their community in unprecedented ways.

With repeated place-based experiences, young people are cocreating the future. In a world that is becoming more individualistic, place-based learning invites young people into the community. Learning in a variety of places with a wide range of people builds agency, equity, and community.
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Place Provides a Compelling Context for Learning

With a global economy and technology that connects almost everyone and extends learning and work opportunities, one could ask, “Isn’t place less relevant?” In fact, community-connected learning is more relevant than ever because it offers a unique context for learning through four dimensions: motivational, instructional, environmental, and cultural (see Figure 1.1).

Place Is a Motivational Context

Think of your most memorable learning experience. It might have been in school—an experiment or a writing assignment—but chances are it was extracurricular or out of the ordinary. It was probably rooted in relationships and involved an authentic challenge. It may have been associated with a place.

Places have the ability to create a sense of awe and wonder—as might occur in a great hall for a musical performance, when viewing a mountain vista, or in the boundary spaces between sea and land. Places can also provoke anger and concern—for example, a polluted stream, the site of an obvious injustice, or a location marred by a dangerous condition—that, in turn, may promote study and action.

Moments of awe or anger, coupled with student-led inquiry, can fuel meaningful, deeper learning. Our inherited school structures tend to squeeze out place-based experiences (which are more common in the primary years) with a

![FIGURE 1.1. Context and Place-Based Learning](image)

Place-based learning promotes agency, equity, and community by offering a compelling context with four dimensions.
focus on content transfer. The cumulative effect of well-intentioned efforts has led to less focus on the outcomes that matter most and the experiences most likely to deliver them.

Place Is an Instructional Context

For teachers at High Tech High in San Diego, California, place is the palette and the city is the text. Students in the High Tech High network (four campuses total) benefit from museum partnerships, watershed studies, community-connected impact projects, and business partnerships (Liebtag, 2019).

The 200 schools that belong to the nationwide New Tech Network (90 percent of which are district schools) share outcomes that matter, teaching that engages, culture that empowers, and technology that enables. New Tech students participate in project-based and place-based learning experiences that leverage partnerships and community assets to make learning authentic and meaningful (Vander Ark, 2017). Teachers in New Tech schools engage in place-based learning including site visits and walking tours (McBride, 2016).

Whittle School and Studios is a global school network. Initial host cities of Washington, D.C., and Shenzhen, China, comprise a platform for understanding how communities work, for integrating classroom learning with the life of the world, for addressing global challenges, and for cultivating the awareness to become socially responsible global citizens. Whittle campuses have a weekly Expeditionary Day when students engage with questions from their peers or of their own design, both by working outside the classroom within the larger school community and by engaging the people, places, politics, and peculiarities of their city. Students can study at other Whittle campuses, each with their own Center of Excellence, with a theme based on local strengths (Getting Smart Staff, 2018b).

The Place Network is a collaborative network of rural schools that connect learning and communities to increase student engagement, academic outcomes, and community impact. They share an integrated project-based approach to community-connected learning.

These four school networks and many others believe that project-based learning is an effective way to build student agency, persistence, and project management skills and to apply communication and problem-solving skills. Many projects are community connected and use place as an instructional context.

Place-based learning uses the city or town as the classroom. It leverages local assets and partners in learning and connects local issues to global themes. It situates extended integrated challenges in a local ecosystem.
Place Is an Environmental Context

We live on a complicated planet—one that humans are just beginning to understand but increasingly influence. The Fourth U.S. Climate Report indicates rapid (and predictably catastrophic) changes and a decline in the overall health of the environment. Recent years were the hottest on record, with more than the usual number of natural disasters, such as fires and tropical storms (Reidmiller et al., 2018, p. 37). It appears that young people will continue to experience more extreme weather and the unpredicted collisions of manmade and natural systems.

The combination of increasing natural and manmade shocks will damage regional economies—and perhaps the global economy. As a result, there is an increased need for more community connections, along with more agility and adaptability.

The State Education and Environment Roundtable (SEER) sponsors a network of schools around the Environment as an Integrating Context (EIC) model for improving student learning. Launched in 1995 with support from The Pew Charitable Trusts, more than 200 schools are involved in the network.

The interaction of humans, nature, and built communities is extraordinarily complex. It involves the economic, cultural, and ecological forces at work in a region. Young people deserve the owner’s manual for the place they are inheriting. That means studying place from all three vantage points.

Place Is a Cultural Context

Culture forms the foundation for behavioral norms—the unspoken rules of conduct and shared social conventions. Because culture matters to human development at the macroeconomic level and to identity development at the individual level, it is worth studying. Given the complexity of culture, immersive experiences are far better than a textbook at provoking deep and integrated learning about culture.

Ladson-Billings (1995) reminds us that for centuries, groups of people have used their culture as the starting point for learning about and understanding the world and then incorporated education. She contends that all too often, educational systems try to insert culture into education when we ought to be using culture as the context and viewing education through place.

Travel-based learning—even the virtual variety—builds empathy and cultural competency. When combined with language acquisition, it produces global competence that helps young people become productive contributors on diverse teams (Liebtag, 2015). According to Deardorff (2009), these experiences grow...
competencies that include cultural understanding and knowledge, self-awareness, openness, respect for different cultural norms and practices, and positive feelings about interacting with people from different cultures. This deep reflection about our own culture, communities, and contexts adds to the power of place-based learning.

Navigating a new city and culture develops wayfinding abilities, skills, and dispositions that are critical for young people who will face waves of complex change. As identified by Next Generation Learning Challenges, “wayfinding abilities” include surveying the landscape, spotting opportunities, asking for help, and making good decisions (NGLC MyWays, n.d.). Studying a place and its culture may be the best way to develop these wayfinding skills.

These four contexts—motivational, instructional, environmental, and cultural—interact with one another to make each and every place a useful learning location.

**Place Is Bolstered by Current Trends in Practice, Policy, and Technology**

Engaging in places near and far is becoming easier and more important than ever. Trends in practice, policy, and technology are aiding place-based education. As shown in Figure 1.2, four key factors are driving the future of place-based education: (1) personalized learning, (2) competency education, (3) mixed reality technologies, and (4) accessible transportation.

**FIGURE 1.2. Drivers That Bolster Place-Based Learning**

Place-based learning is bolstered by four drivers.
reality technologies—the merging of real and virtual worlds, and (4) accessible transportation.

**Personalized Learning Benefits from Place**

One of the most popular trends in American education today is *personalized learning*. In the narrowest sense, the term is used as a synonym for *blended learning*—a mix of adaptive technology and small-group instruction aimed at reading and math targets.

The skill-building sprints of personalized learning provide an on-ramp for full participation in project-based and place-based challenges. For example, before a planned water-quality analysis, some students need to catch up on data analysis techniques so they can fully contribute to their team’s effort.

Advocating a broader view, iNACOL (the International Association for K–12 Online Learning) says, “The purpose of personalized learning is to open student pathways and encourage student voice and choice in their education” (Abel, 2016, para. 6). It defines personalized learning as “tailoring learning for each student’s strengths, needs, and interests—including enabling student voice and choice in what, how, when, and where they learn—to provide flexibility and supports to ensure mastery of the highest standards possible” (Abel, 2016, para. 5).

In this broader view of personalized learning, “school” is no longer a physical space but an anytime, anywhere learning journey varying by path, pace, and place. Personalized learning not only sets up place-based education but also provides the full context for personalization.

In some cases, a teacher chooses a place for a class or team to study. In other cases, students have the option to choose a site or community partner. Even during whole-group work, each person experiences place in an individual way. It’s this context that helps develop a student’s fuller sense of identity, which leads to agency.

A growing number of schools are not just using whole-group activities but also returning to team projects (or are going back to project-based learning after years of focusing on only core math and literacy skills) because this approach provides application and integration of knowledge and skills. A high-quality project requires students to think critically about a complex problem, question, or issue with multiple answers and then to work on that project over the course of days, weeks, or even months. A project-based approach promotes persistence and collaboration and teaches project management skills.

A high-quality project also reflects what happens in the world outside school. It uses the tools, techniques, and technology found there and can both make an impact on other people and communities and connect to the interests and concerns of young people (High Quality Project Based Learning, n.d.).
Competency Education Unlocks the Potential of Place

For more than a century, schools have marked learning in time-based credits. As the world shifts to better measures of demonstrated capabilities, it has begun to unlock anytime, anywhere learning. With commonly recognized measures, learners can develop competencies in a wide variety of settings and accumulate those competencies in a secure, portable profile.

As competency systems mature, learners have more community-based learning opportunities. An early example is LRNG, a nonprofit (now part of Southern New Hampshire University) that extends learning experiences to urban youth. Students complete playlists of digital and physical experiences and earn badges that unlock employment opportunities and may be combined to earn college credit. Similarly, by means of community-connected challenges, students can earn competency credits in writing, math, and science as a result of their demonstrated learning.

Personalized and competency-based learning is also changing the place called school. Around the world, schools are moving away from long hallways lined with identical classrooms to more flexible learning spaces that facilitate project-based learning and competency-based progressions. Students move from project teams to skill groups to activity centers while building skills and developing agency and self-management.

Flexible seating is a big part of this trend. Not every school can afford to remodel or build new facilities, but many have added new seating options—including a mix of high- and low-top tables, hard and soft seating—that give students choice in how and where they work (Vander Ark, 2018f, para. 3).

Mixed Reality Extends Immersive Experiences

Place-based learning is immersive. The technology of mixed reality can extend and enhance those immersive experiences and will likely increase the power of place in the future.

On screen. Rich video can introduce a place or explain a place-based phenomenon. National Geographic, for example, has an extensive library of videos covering geology, geography, and ecology. Video is frequently used to add cultural relevance to language instruction.

Augmented screens and spaces. As half a billion people have experienced by playing Pokémon Go, augmented reality (AR) allows you to place holograms in the space around you to blend people, places, and objects from the physical and digital worlds. Google has more than 150 AR experiences that bring to life
animals, human physiology, history, and natural phenomena (everything from mitosis to *Moby Dick* to modern art). It makes possible what once would have been impractical or dangerous—like viewing a swirling tornado or bringing a buzzing beehive into your classroom.

Using the Google Expeditions app, teachers and students can connect on the same network and take on the roles of “guide” and “explorer.” Teacher guides can lead explorers by following the script and guiding questions, or they can use the accompanying audio narration (Poth, 2018, para. 4). The future of place-based education will likely blend these experiences with the physical presence in a place.

**Immersive screen.** Virtual reality (VR) allows users to step into immersive environments. It is particularly well suited to taking students into imagined worlds (e.g., science fiction), dangerous worlds (e.g., flight simulation, military actions), places that are difficult to visit (e.g., deep sea, mountain peaks), and gamified experiences. Immersive training has long been used in aviation and military training, where risks are high and where experiencing an unlikely failure may nevertheless be a valuable lesson. As costs of equipment and experience development have dropped, VR has become widely used in industrial training.

With a smartphone and a cardboard viewer, Google Expeditions offers more than 900 virtual reality field trips. Tours are related to famous locations, and students can learn about global initiatives and explore career pathways. Likewise, the Nearpod VR library includes lessons in social studies, science, and life skills, as well as college tours.

Anson Ho, program manager for Microsoft, is encouraged by early classroom applications of mixed reality, which suggest improved engagement and outcomes for students. He sees potential for more academic growth in classrooms and to transform distance learning.

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**Mixed Reality Enhances Place-Based Learning**

Mixed reality technology can enhance, supplement, and extend place-based learning. Specifically, it

- Provides immersive cultural experiences in places a student has not visited.
Accessible Transportation Will Extend Access

Transportation is one of the biggest challenges to making the community the classroom. However, as rideshare applications expand and begin to incorporate autonomous vehicles, transportation will become less expensive and more accessible. This expanded access to transportation will have a profound effect on secondary education. Many students will have better access to work-based and service-learning experiences, and community assets, including parks, museums, libraries, and cultural centers, will be more accessible. As competency systems expand, it will become easier not only to travel to an alternative learning site but also to demonstrate new skills, earn a badge or credit, and have that learning be widely recognized.

Summary

As educational models further embrace deep connections to place, entire ecosystems become classrooms, and agency, equity, and community are developed for all learners. The four contexts of place-based education—motivational, instructional, environmental, and cultural—are enhanced as this approach to education expands. The future of place-based education will be driven by trends in practice, policy, and technology in four realms: personalized learning, competency education, mixed reality technology, and accessible transportation.
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