

**Place-Based Education in the Global Age: Local Diversity**

Edited by David Gruenewald and Gregory Smith.

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Reviewed by J. William Hug, Ph.D.

There are many things I think about as I go about my professional life as a university teacher educator and personal life as a parent, neighbor and friend. I wonder about how to better connect others and myself with the places where we live. How can I best reduce my impact on the earth's natural systems? How can I appreciate and support diversity, liberty and justice? I wonder if what I am doing can be improved. I wonder how other people have approached similar problems, issues and dilemmas. Some of the most important thinking I do is to consider how to live in the reality of this world at this time, as well as how to make it better for future generations and myself. I also consciously or unconsciously calculate the risks and rewards of turning my thinking into actions in relationship to anticipated consequences and benefits for family, my neighbors and myself. Every moment is filled with thinking.

I believe that Ivan Illich enjoyed thinking. David Gruenewald and Gregory Smith enjoy thinking as well. In their edited book, *Place-Based Education in the Global Age: Local Diversity* (hereafter *PBEGA*) they have assembled 15 contributors who ponder these issues and share inspiring stories of action across the United States and the world. Gruenewald and Smith describe the purpose of the book in this way:

First, we wish to contribute to the theory and practice of place-based or place-conscious education by collecting instructive and inspiring stories that can serve as exemplars...[and] Second, we want to make the case through these stories of collaboration that place-based education can be viewed as the educational counterpart of a broader movement toward reclaiming the significance of the local in the global age.<sup>1</sup>

The book accomplishes these purposes and the contributors indeed tell compelling stories of reconnecting people and place through education.

One way I remember Ivan Illich is as a storyteller. Attending a few of his lectures at Penn State in the mid 1990s, I remember his stories of collaborations with friends, stories of dinner conversations and stories about his reading—all used as examples to illustrate philosophical arguments. David Gruenewald and Gregory Smith use story in their book as a way to extend the conversation about place-based education and highlight people who have successfully taken action. The book contains stories of both thinking and action that cause one to re-think and re-act appropriately, each to our own places. For instance, one chapter written by Clifford Knapp tells the story of his university course, “Integrating Community Resources in Curriculum and Instruction.” In another chapter, Mark Graham describes his thinking as a high school art teacher. The chapter composed by Mark Sorensen describes a K-8 charter school serving mainly Navajo youth in Arizona while Julie Bartsch describes in her contribution student stories of community-based service learning at a school in Skowhegan, Maine. Elaine Senechal describes

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<sup>1</sup> David Gruenewald and Gregory Smith, eds., *Place-Based Education in the Global Age: Local Diversity* (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2008), xiii.

ways in which she has involved students in environmental justice in the state of Massachusetts. Finally, Ray Barnhardt shows us the thinking of the Alaska Native Knowledge Network and how it is implemented in Alaskan schools. Each of these diverse stories provides us with the opportunity to look over the fence to see how others in their local contexts have responded to the challenges of place-based education. These distinguished contributors use their stories to highlight strategies for the reader to consider and then contemplate their own educational practice change. These stories will resonate well with those familiar with Ivan Illich's work.

The chapters in the second section of the book "explore some of the reasons for adopting an approach to teaching and learning that is more grounded in students' experiences of particular places" (135). In one of the more assertive chapters, Robert Michael Pyle describes modern Americans as "profoundly ignorant of the living and physical world around them."<sup>2</sup> He details the decline of natural knowledge/experience, connects this decline to "alienation, apathy and inaction," attacks "environmentally regressive governments," advocates for "spontaneous place-based inquiry" for children and asserts, "place-based education, no matter how topographically or culturally informed, cannot fully or even substantially succeed without reinstating the pursuit of natural history as an everyday act."<sup>3</sup> I concur. I experienced this disconnect recently when I was asked to review a draft of a park interpretive plan developed over many months by professional environmental educators. I noticed that there were no interpretive messages in the plan concerning the plants and animals of the region. While my friends and colleagues on the committee are dedicated professionals, we are all susceptible to the larger social trends and norms of the society in which we live. The contributors in *PBEGA* effectively call attention to these trends and encourage alternative pathways.

Other chapters in section two include the examination of cultural questions by David Gruenewald that explore how a "critical pedagogy of place posits two fundamental goals for education: decolonization and reinhabitation."<sup>4</sup> A chapter on diversity by Theobald and Siskar examines diversity's relationship to place and schooling. Each chapter in section two thoughtfully contributes to the dialogue about place-based education.

The third section contains chapters about how people apply these ideals in the university setting. Michael Morris, for instance, describes how the University of New Mexico develops community leaders that are attuned to the complex needs of local communities and how to implement long-term community improvement. Freema Elbaz-Luwisch explores the diverse ways teachers understand sense of place in the midst of the Israeli experience of conflict between Jewish and Palestinian people. Australian, John Cameron, discusses his thinking about university teaching and the emergence of the "Sense of Place Colloquium." Finally, Matt Dubel and David Sobel describe the strategies employed in the teacher education program at the Antioch New England Graduate School. Each chapter provides a unique look at how place-based education informs their work at the university.

While there is much to like about *PBEGA*, dedicated Ivan Illich scholars may find some ideas and vocabulary that do not resonate very well. For instance, Illich wrote in his lecture *The "History of Homo Educandus"* that "Education, as the term is now used, means learning under the assumption that this learning is a prerequisite for all human activities while, at the same time,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 155.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 149.

the opportunities for this learning are by their very nature in scarce supply.”<sup>5</sup> Illich points out that education separates learning from living and professionalizes teaching, which has dire implications for society. Further, Illich laments in *Deschooling Society* that people, “...depend on schools ...which guide their lives, form their world view, and define for them what is legitimate and what is not.”<sup>6</sup> He provides reasoning for “why we must disestablish school” and suggests that the ideal independent, self-directed learner learns within the context of living and with the support of networks that replace modern schooling. Extending Illich’s thinking, Prakash and Esteva (1998) suggest that it is unlikely that modern schooling can be fixed or reformed, thus the authors look for exemplars among indigenous, remote and marginalized cultures where learning thrives without modern schooling.<sup>7</sup> Prakash and Esteva’s ideas contrast with a main assumption of most *PBEGA* contributors who accept the education and schooling endeavor while seeking to reform or improve it. Such an acceptance of traditional forms of education within *PBEGA* is expressed by statements like: “This does not mean abandoning the classroom, but rethinking it’s relationship to the wider community”<sup>8</sup> and “Although we may dream of a totally different approach to public education than the one that currently exists, it is necessary to work with, while trying to change, what we have.”<sup>9</sup> Readers will see the abandon it or reform it approaches through their own values and contexts. Some Illich scholars might also take exception to sentences such as, “Schools produce social capital – educated students – that is very often not reinvested in the local community, as many students leave upon graduation or are not being used to their fullest potential as community members while in school.”<sup>10</sup> I believe the intent of this sentence is to advocate for closer connections and participation in community life but the vocabulary will likely sustain critical arguments about how the use of economic language conveys insidious messages about the role of children in a community. While I point out these contrasts for Illich devotees, *PBEGA* also provided 358 pages of text that stimulated my thinking about the endeavor to re-connect people to place, community and environment.

Taken as a whole, *PBEGA* provides excellent opportunities to explore theoretical and practical extensions to Ivan Illich’s thinking. One example of this begins with Illich and Sanders’ assertion that, “The alphabetization of silence has brought about the new loneliness of the ‘I,’ and of an analytic *we*.”<sup>11</sup> In response to this, I envision practical scenes of common place-based strategies where children engage in quiet solo outdoor time next to a playground tree or a spontaneous conversation with a community elder on a walk outside the physical and structural institution of the school. These scenes contain the possibility for educators to help children explore silence without text and something of the Illichian “we.” Perhaps the heart of the *PBEGA* contribution is to invite further theoretical and practical thinking about how place-based

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<sup>5</sup> Ivan Illich, *In the Mirror of the Past: Lectures and Addresses 1978 - 1990* (New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1992), 115.

<sup>6</sup> Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1972), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Madhu Prakash and Gustavo Esteva, *Escaping Education: Living as Learning within Grassroots Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> David Gruenwald and Gregory Smith, eds., *Place-Based Education in the Global Age: Local Diversity* (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2008), 149.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 350.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>11</sup> Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, *(The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988), 123.

education contributes to the practice of genuine friendship and through friendship reconnect people, community and place.

Each reader will encounter *PBEGA* differently. The book contains a valuable collection of accomplished educators, researchers, and activists with diverse views that contribute powerfully and deeply to the conversation about place-based education. As I read the chapters, I was pleased to be able to share and celebrate in the outstanding work of many individuals. I was reminded that I am not alone in this work. I realized once again that there are friends in many places who care deeply about the world in which we live, enjoy thinking about it and are practicing the act of living well. I believe this is something Ivan Illich would appreciate.

### **Author's Bio**

J. William Hug is an Assistant Professor of Education at the California University of Pennsylvania. His research focuses on educational processes that facilitate learning which empowers people to improve the quality of life in the places where they live. Research areas include: elementary science teacher education; citizen scientific literacy; place-based curriculum design, implementation and evaluation; and ecology/natural history conceptual understanding. More about him can be found at: <http://www.placebasededucation.org>.