

# At Home in the World, From School to Community: Potentials and Practices of Place-Based Education

Cinzia Zadra – Free University of Bozen-Bolzano

## Abstract

When can we call a place “Heimat”? When can we feel at home in the world? When can we say that we truly belong to a community? When does a space become a place? These questions underlie the critically-oriented place-based education (PBE) (Gruenewald, 2003), an idea of education that not only generates knowledge but also enables students to grasp the connections between what they are learning and the life experiences they go through in their entirety (hooks, 2009).

It is precisely from the recognition and use of teaching-learning opportunities in communities and territories that it is possible to connect the school to the community, and to identify the school’s primary task in terms of social and cultural progress, regarding sensitivity to social and environmental justice, but also in nurturing a sense of belonging and responsive relationships (Smith & Sobel, 2010; Biesta, 2021). Locally produced knowledge that is authentically linked to the needs of the surrounding community constitutes a progressive alternative to traditional subject-centred curriculum for students, and engages them in actions perceived as meaningful and relevant. This contribution explores the dimension of learning experiences in out-of-school places, recognises the multiplicity of places where learning can take place, and analyses the formative and transformative value of such learning (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). Student reflective diaries showcase, alongside the underlying theoretical perspective, that place-based educational projects can create opportunities for students to participate in community development actions. Moreover, an extended educational community can expand disciplinary boundaries and therefore cope with planetary destiny in a more responsive and participatory manner (Morin, 1999).

Part of

Nothdurfter, U., Zadra, F., Nagy, A. & Lintner, C. (Eds.).  
(2023). *Promoting Social Innovation and Solidarity Through  
Transformative Processes of Thought and Action.*  
<https://doi.org/10.13124/9788860461926>

153



## Foreword

I have to thank Professor Susanne Elsen for sparking in me the passion and dedication to open up the school to civil society and working in the social field. The school's educational work in terms of networking with institutions and service providers in the community not only requires horizontal links, but also real networking that promotes multiple connections in such a way as to work against inequalities and educational poverty. I am grateful to Professor Elsen, an "explorer of frontiers", for this idea of the world of schooling. Unconventional text suggestions and passionate conversations have allowed my academic work to frequently connect pedagogy with social pedagogy, identifying a fruitful field of empirical research in educational places outside the school setting. Out-of-school educational opportunities make schools less encapsulated within themselves, but also make room for an expansion of the dimensions of knowledge and skills, leading to pedagogical action for change, for "different roles, different organizational arrangements, a different understanding of work, different kinds of living and relationship within the human world and in relationship to nature" (Elsen, 2019, p. 4).

### 1. Introduction

In a rapidly-changing society, with a dynamic development of social conditions, an image of the school as a building site emerges, where the school project is the being in the making, a building site in which parallel projects that overlap take shape, that sometimes hinder each other but which are synchronised with each other by a red thread that traces the perspectives of the work: the reaction to accelerated social change that makes it increasingly necessary to place at the centre of educational action the readiness to face the unknown, the increasingly evident crises of natural resources, humanitarian emergencies, educational poverty and the fragility of large technological systems (Elsen, 2014).

The reforms implemented so far in schools, while perhaps having reached their transformative possibilities, have certainly represented a turning point,

or at least an incomplete shift from the centrality of school contents and curricula to the crucial role of students as conscious and active builders of knowledge, and a focus on interaction with the environment (Dumont & Instance, 2010).

Places and learning environments have acquired a more visible dimension in recent years thanks to socio-cultural theories. The cultural-historical matrix has, in fact, had the great merit of having located learning processes in a precise context considered from a cultural point of view and its socio-relational dimension: teaching and learning are not isolated from the social, cultural, historical, or political context. From the cultural-historical perspective comes the assumption that social-political realities and relationships constitute key aspects of the teaching and learning process, outlining a view of the socio-cultural and political spaces in which learning takes place, and student-teacher relationships are established. The OECD's (2017) definition of educational space also refers to open physical spaces, and to functionally, environmentally, and energetically sustainable teaching approaches that support safe social interactions and promote individual well-being and health. The educational space is an enclosed architectural place such as the conventional classroom, but at the same time also encompasses the extended or diffuse classroom, that is, the broad learning context that transcends the physical boundaries of the classroom and school and includes informal educational contexts.

The school must be a construction site, unfolding as a moving map on which extended educational experiences take shape, synchronised with each other by a precise line that traces the pedagogical action in terms of cooperation and dialogue. As Dewey (1915) wrote, school should be

an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society and permeated throughout with the spirit of art, history and science. When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with instruments of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely and harmonious. (p. 27)

## 2. Place-Based Education

The concept of out-of-school places encompasses a wide variety of organisations: libraries, theatres, youth centres, research institutes, and voluntary associations, but also open places such as national parks and places of nature, which together can be defined as local collective actors offering non-formal learning opportunities. Place-based education extends the places of schooling and education to include all learning opportunities that any school can plan and organise in everyday life, in the lifeworld, and throughout life, and in correlation with curriculum content and objectives (Smith, 2002, 2007; Sobel, 2013).

The concept of place is the starting point for critically reflecting on the theory and practice of place-based education, and for providing a framework open to various conceptual developments oriented towards the challenges of the present and the future. The theoretical suggestions that seek to make clear the interdependence between school and community, and the need for a continuous and profound exchange and alliance so that the school is a world of life and a social centre (Dewey, 1902, 1915, 1944; Scuola di Barbiana, 1967), are increasingly topical due to the progressive and already very advanced destruction of the ecological foundations of human life on earth that threatens the existence of the planet and must call into question the relationship between people and the places they inhabit, and the way they are cared for.

On the one hand, we thus see the potential of place as an actor that, for aesthetic reasons, - think, for example, of natural places such as forests - can exert healing and educational effects (Cresswell, 2004; Lengen & Kistemann, 2012). On the other hand, we have places that are instead used as mere stages for educational experiences, which could, however, also take place elsewhere. Heidegger (1951/1971) attributes to the place a special meaning in which the relationship between human being and environment can be grasped, and which is taken up by the place-based education in the crucial role of being in the world and in interaction with it.

What makes the market, the museum, the civic library, the nature park a place? Space, according to Heidegger, becomes a place when we personally, socially and culturally appropriate it.

What the word for space, *Raum*, *Rum* designates is said by its ancient meaning. *Raum* means a place cleared or freed for settlement and lodging. A space is something that has been made room for, something that- namely within a boundary, Greek πέρας. A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognised, the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*. That is why the concept is that of *horismos*, that is, the horizon, the boundary. Space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds. That for which room is made is always granted and hence is joined, that is, gathered, by virtue of a location, that is, by such a thing as the bridge. *Accordingly, spaces receive their being from locations and not from "space"*. (Heidegger, 1951/1971, p. 154, author's emphasis)

A space becomes a place when people attribute meaning and significance to it through direct and personal experience, when it becomes meaningful place (Cresswell, 1996). By interacting with place, its material nature, its spatial extension, and its social actors, we experience such places and learn to enter into a responsive relationship with the world (Waldenfels, 2008/2006). Through perceptual pathways, the emotional charge, the recognition of values, and the memory of place, collective and individual, lead to conscious and unconscious attributions of meaning and significance with respect to place. Starting from Heidegger's philosophy of *Dasein*, we can speak of the transformation of space into place: an undefined space becomes a place when we attribute values to it and perceive a sense of belonging to it (Cresswell, 2004; Zadra, 2022). This happens, however, only if we are there, in the place: being-in-the-world needs corporeity, it is not just a mental thing, and spatiality is generated precisely through such corporeality (Heidegger, 1951/1971). Space is invested with meaning and becomes place through bodily confrontation: this occurs when individuals or groups become familiar with a particular space and associate it with cultural values, social meanings, and personal experiences. In other words, the processes of personal, social, and cultural appropriation impose a layer of meaning on space and allow it to become place. Spaces can be measured and understood; places can be experienced through direct perceptions and emotions. Places contain events, whereas

spaces are functional and abstract; places are defined around meanings and senses, spaces around functional relationships.

What does it mean to use places outside the school as educational opportunities? Alignment with the global measurement industry, the pressure to improve test scores and related skills, unfortunately leave little time to prepare young people for the continuous and rapid transformation of living conditions and environmental situations (Callari Galli et al., 2003; Morin, 2015; Biesta, 2021). We forget to ask ourselves about the educational needs that the world requires of us, such as respecting nature, taking care of each other, distributing resources fairly, living together without war, and seeking new solutions together and for all. This calls for an education “here and now”, an education about how to be in the world and how to make a difference (Mortari, 2020; International Commission on the Futures of Education, 2021). Consequently, education is challenged to enable the encounter between the learner and the world, to rethink how to bring the child into the world and bring the world to the child (Biesta, 2012, 2021).

At the heart of place-based education are efforts to make the geographical, cultural, and social particularities of out-of-school places the starting point and the object of new transformative resources for education (Shannon & Galle, 2017).

### 3. Experiences Outside School

The reflective diaries written by secondary school students during out-of-school experiences, organised by the school and connected to the curricular content, were the source of data for this study. Some testimonies highlight reflections on the activities they experienced which focus not on learning outcomes or competences, but on the event of subjectification (Biesta, 2021), on the students' encounter with the world of life (*Lebenswelt*) and their awareness of the possibility and duty to act in this world. The diaries were collected during an extensive research project carried out between 2021 and 2022 in Trentino-South Tyrol. The aim of the study was to describe and analyse the perceptions and experiences of students in activities carried out beyond the

classroom walls. For the purposes of this contribution, we refer only to the content analysis of the reflective diaries of 20 secondary school students, but the study included the collection of multiple qualitative data, such as phenomenologically oriented vignettes and interviews gathered in different levels and type of school.

The main theme that emerged from the data analysis is about the responsive relationship with the world, understood as responding that, as Waldenfels states, “irrevocably anticipates responsibility for what we do and say” (2011, p. 67). An example for this can be found in Irene’s reflections on a page of her reflective diary written during her trip to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps, part of an experience in which many students in South Tyrol can participate thanks to the work of various associations and to the sponsorship of the province.

The texts by Primo Levi we had read in class here meant something else, the words I felt on my skin like a wound. I was physically sick, I could no longer keep the headphones with the music in my ears, everything seemed sacrilegious. I wished the whole class was there, I knew I could not tell, words would not be enough, I would need another language. Everyone should experience this and care about their thoughts and memories of something that school with books cannot represent. I also thanked our organising tutors for this slow journey, for giving me the space for silence and solitude to calm my emotions and collect my thoughts. This journey of many hours made me think that it takes time not to lose emotions. There was no rush to get back to the usual school stuff..., there was fortunately no rush to get on with the school curriculum. (Irene, 19 years old)

Experience is “a slow journey” and remembering is not a passive scholastic act aimed at evaluation or control. Rather, it is as in the Latin word *recordari* (remember), which means putting back into the heart (*cor*), giving meaning again.

Learning takes place not in the reception and accumulation of knowledge but in the reflected, elaborated and continuously transformed experience, in the experience of spaces and times dedicated to silence, meditation, taking up the meaning of the Greek word *scholé*, σχολή, that indicates time free from

practical implications and frenetic actions, filled with relationship and reflection (Bertagna, 2016).

Irene seems to appeal to a different way of “learning”, to educational practices that allow one to “practice” taking responsibility, to experience new possibilities of being, participating and even working.

In engaging in school outside school, commitment, and responsibility for the betterment of society emerge. The students also pay attention to perspectives that sometimes seem silent in the classroom and in curricula that stop with the treatment of issues and problems at the beginning of the last century. Climate change and the global goals of the 2030 Agenda are top priorities for them; they want to bring them into the classroom and make them content on a par with “the history of the Middle Ages, because it is part of our responsibility” as 16-year-old Matthias puts it.

The complexity of the surrounding community, the right to diversity, to the protection of many cultures, and the promotion of one’s own identity, but also the ability and opportunity to participate in public life and contribute to the common good become horizons for action, answers to be given and communicated in such a way that they are also heard by politicians and the media.

The curriculum for civic education focuses largely on the transmission of information and knowledge. Instead, it should be service in society, in institutions, in the world of associations and cooperatives. I am an activist, I want to participate in decisions, especially those that affect us, basically everything, because the future is ours. (Marcel, 17 years old)

The words of these young people suggest to us that the school should open up to transdisciplinarity, to heterogeneity that combines with reflective processes and also allows for greater social participation. The orientation towards the world of life could represent a grounding of learning in real issues (and thus no longer in the curriculum) that allow students to ask themselves what their role is in the world.

The reflections of these and many other young people who have made their writings available allow us to issue a challenge to schools still entrenched in propositional knowledge, so that they take into account the contexts of



practice, but also, and above all, the role of students who demand access to relevant learning that emphasises their active role in defining issues and identifying problems, and in producing world-oriented knowledge that pays less attention to disciplinary boundaries or educational institutions.

#### 4. Conclusion

School autonomy allows for a focus on the needs and characteristics of school systems. It also promotes various political and administrative initiatives but also a consideration of civil society organisations that involve a variety of actors and institutions in out-of-school places, from the private social sector to cultural or nature bodies, social welfare institutions and voluntary associations.

The educational institution seems to clearly benefit from a coordination of educational resources. This is because any horizontal collaborative network (OECD, 2018) allows for an enrichment of available learning opportunities and for schools to tap into resources otherwise unavailable.

Within this very interesting process of horizontal connections is the new role assumed by extracurricular partners and organisations in education. It is a role that focuses on learning opportunities in everyday life and throughout life that emerge in the interstices of collaborative networks (Pensiero & Green, 2016). We can think of extracurricular projects and initiatives as being enriching in terms of offering learning opportunities, but also in terms of engaging in the coordination of actions: action in an extracurricular setting provides an opportunity for an alternative approach to school practices and to mutual inspiration (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). Extracurricular partners and experts interact in a familiar environment. They do not have to adapt to the prevailing environments, logics and technical equipment of schools. Rather, they can offer real-life contexts and authentic learning places (Smith & Sobel, 2010). Students' reflective diaries emphasise how motivation regarding topics is enhanced in extracurricular learning venues compared to the preparatory lessons that take place at school. Greater initiative and dynamism can be observed in discussions, and a habit of critical reflection can be encouraged on

the part of the students. This can be justified, among other things, by the “excursion” character that the cooperation has taken on, and the fact that the visit to the extracurricular learning location, as one pupil puts it, is “something special”. On the teachers' side, cooperation can be seen as a necessary support. Analyses of diaries in other settings, for instance in museums or nature parks, have shown that extracurricular learning sites, which specialise in working with school classes and offer methodologically- and didactically designed projects and workshops as a service to schools, can ensure a positive learning experience for students, even with minimal consultation between the teacher and the extracurricular team (Gruenewald, 2003). However, one cannot speak of cooperation in the case of complete “externalisation”: the integration of extracurricular learning in the classroom is only successful and sustainable when teachers are willing to precisely coordinate content and integrate extracurricular themes and activities into school lessons through pre- and post-event preparation phases. The significantly increased amount of work on the part of teachers is often perceived as a necessary effort so that cooperation between school and extracurricular learning venues can significantly broaden opportunities for action and learning. However, it is also a chance for teachers to discover themselves in different, broader roles in an educational dimension that transcends disciplinary competences and becomes a capacity for responsible action and participation in a democratic society (Dewey, 1944).

Experiences in and with the local community take place where ruptures are created, disrupting existing practices and creating spheres of action in which new objects are produced and resignification nodes and connections are identified (Engeström & Sannino, 2021).

Place-based education is learning about what does not yet exist, and therefore cannot be transmitted. It is learning how to manage a new way of working at the same time as a new working practice is being experienced and implemented. Place-based education, according to the narratives collected among the students allows – what Biesta (2021) calls – the possibility of being in and with the world, so

the key task of the teacher is to point the student to the world, to (re)direct the student's attention to the world, so that it becomes possible, without guarantees of

course, that the student may meet that which the world is asking from him. One could say, that in this regard it is the world ... that teaches, and what teachers do is to try to keep students "turned" towards the world and "open" towards the world, so that it may become possible for students to attend to the world and, in one and the same move, attend to themselves, so to speak, by encountering the question what the world, this world, this reality right here and right now, is asking from me. (p. 99)

## References

- Bertagna, G. (2016). Plaidoyer della scuola come scholé. In S. Bolognini (a cura di), *Studi in onore di Lanfranco Rosati* (pp. 29–46). Giuffré Editore.
- Biesta, G. (2012). The educational significance of the experience of resistance: Schooling and the dialogue between child and world. *The Journal of Educational Alternatives*, 1(1), 92–103, <http://hdl.handle.net/10993/7847>
- Biesta, G. (2021). *World-centred education. A view for the present*. Routledge.
- Callari Galli, M. Cambi, F., & Cerruti, M. (2003). *Formare alla complessità. Prospettive dell'educazione nelle società globali*. Carocci.
- Cresswell, T. (1996). *In place/Out of place: Geography, ideology, and transgression*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Cresswell, T. (2004). *Place. A short introduction*. Blackwell.
- Dewey, J. (1902). The school as social centre. *The Elementary School Teacher*, 3(2), 73–86.
- Dewey, J. (1915). *The school and the society*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey, J. (1944). *Democracy and education. An introduction to the philosophy of education*. The Free Press. Original published 1916.
- Dumont, H., & Istance, D. (2010). Analysing and designing learning environments for the 21st century. In H. Dumont, D., Istance, & F., Benevides (Eds.), *The nature of learning. Using research to inspire practice* (pp. 19–34). OECD.
- Engeström, Y., & Sannino, A. (2021). From mediated actions to heterogenous coalitions: four generations of activity-theoretical studies of work and learning. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 28(1), 4–23.

- Elsen, S. (2014). Soziale Innovation, ökosoziale Ökonomien und Community Development. In S. Elsen & W. Lorenz (Eds.), *Social innovation, participation and the development of society. Soziale Innovation, Partizipation und die Entwicklung der Gesellschaft* (pp. 231–263). bu.press. [https://doi.org/10.13124/9788860461100\\_13](https://doi.org/10.13124/9788860461100_13)
- Elsen, S. (2019). *Eco-social transformation and community-based economy*. Routledge.
- Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). Foundations of place: A multidisciplinary framework for place-conscious education. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40(3), 47–76. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312040003619>
- Gruenewald, D. A., & Smith, G. A. (Eds.). (2008). *Place-based education in the global age. Local diversity*. Routledge.
- Heidegger, M. (1971). Building, dwelling, thinking. In *Poetry, language, thought* (A. Hofstadter, Trans., pp. 143–161). Harper & Row. Original published 1951.
- hooks, b. (2009). *Belonging. A culture of place*. Routledge.
- International Commission on the Futures of Education. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education*. UNESCO. [https://unevoc.unesco.org/pub/futures\\_of\\_education\\_report\\_eng.pdf](https://unevoc.unesco.org/pub/futures_of_education_report_eng.pdf)
- Lengen, C., & Kistemann, T. (2012). Sense of place and place identity: Review of neuroscientific evidence. *Health & place*, 18(5), 1162–1171. [10.1016/j.healthplace.2012.01.012](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2012.01.012)
- Morin, E. (1999). *Seven complex lessons in education for the future*. Unesco Publishing.
- Morin, E. (2015). *Insegnare a vivere. Manifesto per cambiare l'educazione*. Raffaello Cortina.
- Mortari, L. (2020). *Educazione ecologica*. Laterza.
- OECD. (2017). *The OECD handbook for innovative learning environments*. <http://dx.doi.org/9789264277274-en>
- OECD. (2018). *Teachers as designer of learning environments: The importance of innovative pedagogies*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264085374-en>.
- Pensiero, N., & Green, F. (2016). Out-of-school-time study programmes. Do they work? *Oxford Review of Education*, 43(1), 127–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2016.1240673>

- Scuola di Barbiana (a cura di L. don Milani). (1967). *Lettera a una professoressa*. Libreria Editrice Fiorentina.
- Shannon, D., & Galle, J. (Eds.). (2017). *Interdisciplinary approaches to pedagogy and place-based education. From abstract to quotidian*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-50621-0>
- Smith, G. A. (2002). *Place-based Education: learning to be where we are*. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83(8), 584–594. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170208300806>
- Smith, G. A. (2007). Place-based education. Breaking through the constraining regularities of public school. *Environmental Education Research*, 13(2), 189–207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504620701285180>
- Smith, G. A., & Sobel, D. (2010). *Place and community-based education in schools*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203858530>
- Sobel, D. (2013). *Place-Based Education. Connecting Classrooms and Communities* (2nd ed.). The Orion Society.
- Waldenfels, B. (2008). *Fenomenologia dell'estraneo* (F. G. Menga, Trans.). Raffaello Cortina. Original published 2006.
- Zadra, C. (2022). *A casa nel mondo. Pedagogia dei luoghi ed esperienze educative estese*. Guida.