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Space vs. place for learning

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COVID-19 has and will forever change educational practices. It is time to review, reflect upon, and implement new ways of teaching to best engage students that will integrate place-based education and project-based learning with in-person instruction, no matter the environment. Returning to the "old teaching practices" will not suffice in a post-pandemic society. This paper explores the difference in creating a mere space for learning and the profoundness of creating a place for all learners through lived experiences.

Key-words: *pedagogy, pandemic, post-pandemic, place-based education*

They caught us tying our shoes, leaning against the black granite island. "Can we go?!" cascaded across the dining room from the family room to the kitchen, followed by the muffled sound of socked feet on tile. How did they see us through two walls? For that fact, how bored are they already with schools being closed indefinitely to want to join us "old people" on a walk?

"Absolutely," simultaneously chanted with a quick knowing smile. No more words spoken or needed, just the click of the back door firmly closing.

The pungent smell of onion grass glides by as the mixture of grass and dead nettles tickle our ankles. Mowing season has arrived swiftly in 2020. The wind sings a forte occasionally with a remembrance of winter, and the sun monologues in the loveliness of an early spring while we transverse the meadow. Bull Run Mountain occupies the distance, clear and trusting, holding the valley in its eye with an avant-garde cell tower and weather station perched like a kepi.

Boys, t-shirts and shorts suffice. Girls, jeans with a light fleece required. Meke spots Hailey immediately and begins a strong trot to the fence line as the four of us approach the paddocks. She approaches the stout, weathered slats and waits for him to put his muzzle to her hand in a religious-like action; Hailey the apostle and Meke the zealot. Adam and I hang back against the silverberries and

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cedars, hands intertwined, observers. Like Meke, I am still learning this new family that I seem to have meandered in to last fall.

Will darts in and out of the tree line with the treasures he has found, an old seed sack to fill with nature's wares. Hailey's shoulders visibly rise, hold, then fall in resolve. She speaks to the creature, which sounds like whispers from my vantage point, but elicits nickering, continued nuzzling, and a tail swish. Will unearths a palm-sized rock and questions his dad, "What kind is it?" as he holds it high in the air.

"Sedimentary, maybe limestone or sandstone? Want to look it up on our app that we downloaded for Boy Scouts?" Will buries himself under his father's arm for the brief lesson, then plops the specimen in what remains from last night's rain, with a quick harrumph-like giggle then dodges off again. I stand and observe the three of them; Hailey at the fence, Will dashing away, and Adam inspecting a cedar tree with tentacled, gelatinous orbs making the tree look decorated for Saint Nicholas' arrival. Adam looks up and catches me watching, his hazel eyes rimmed in green, and we share a quick glance at each other while his family, mine now too, explores and learns. This is a shared place, not merely a space, guarded from and impervious to the pandemic known as COVID-19.

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Philosopher Edward S. Casey in his book, *Senses of Place*, tackles the contrary nature of space and place from anthropological and phenomenological perspectives. He outlines that "Space comes first…" as a geographical, physical location (Casey 1996, 15). But, he continues that space transforms to place through "knowing" which can only be achieved by "perceiving it" through "lived experience" and "local knowledge" (Casey 1996, 18). Human science researcher and Professor van Manen defines lived experience, or "lived meaning," as "…the way that a person experiences and understands his or her words as real and meaningful… aspects of a situation as experienced by that person in it" (van Manen 2016, 183). van Manen reminds, through his book *Researching Lived Experience*, that

> the understanding of […] some lived experience, is not fulfilled in a reflective grasp […]. Rather, a true reflection on lived experience is a thoughtful, reflective grasping of what it is that renders this or that particular experience its special significance. (van Manen 2016, 32)

To bring van Manen's and Casey's concepts together, "…place, rather than being a mere product or portion of space, is as primary as the perception that gives access to it" (Casey 1996, 19). In summary, space is a location on a map or a

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> …mere patch of ground, a bare stretch of earth, a sedentary set of stones. Instead, place is something for which we continually have to discover or invent new forms of understanding, new concepts in the literal sense of ways of 'grasping together' (Casey 1996, 26).

That valley, that field under the watchful eye of Bull Run Mountain in Haymarket, Virginia, has become a place, not just a space. We live it, we experience it, we know it, we are local to it, and we learn and continue to learn it together, as a new family.

An article in *Educational Philosophy and Theory,* by Cannatella, furthers Casey's analysis and perspective on place. "…Places are primarily a factor of our relationship to the world, a measure of our existence" (Cannatella 2007, 624). He continues that "places often depend on bodily understandings … we use our hands intimately and knowingly" (Cannatella 2007, 627). Just as Hailey strokes Meke, just as Will clutches the rock, they are experiencing their place. "It is local to our existence in clearly indispensable ways … to look at the world, to move towards things and contend experiences" (Cannatella 2007, 627). Cannatella would have done well to incorporate John Dewey, philosopher and educational reformer, into his research. "The world in which most of us live is a world in which everyone has a calling and occupation, something to do" (Dewey 2017, 20). School should help and guide students towards that calling, yet often times misses the mark, like a tragic hero. Or as Dewey claims,

> …the great waste in the school comes from (the student's) inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school...within the school itself; … he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning at school. That is the isolation of the school – its isolation from life (Dewey 2017, 36).

Hailey does not learn hippology, or equine studies, in middle school. Will has yet to have a course or lesson on geology in elementary school, according to the state curriculum guidelines and pacing. There is a disconnect between their place outside near their home and their space at their schools. However, COVID-19 has created a "classroom," beyond the imposed virtual instructional requirements, born from an outdoor arena of shared learning with school occurring at home due to an Executive Order by Governor Northam. Back in 1899, Dewey asked the question that contemporary education grapples with:

> What can be done, and how can it be done, to bring the school in to closer relation with the home and neighborhood life – instead of having the school a place where the child comes solely to learn certain lessons? (Dewey 2017, 43).

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Vinyl, 12” x 12” floor tile, most likely a product of Armstrong complete with asbestos, sports layers of wax. Fifty decades of mold captured forever underneath the unintentional sealant, attempting to ooze out taking advantage of the days before grout became the fashionable norm. The mold grows, unaware that it is trapped, somewhat like the 9th grade students in the room.

Dry erase markers supply the eau de perfume mixed with a generic, industrial disinfectant. A backpack sports the distinct odor of week-old cat pee, not atypical. Room 108 at Alleghany High School hums with conversation about Robert Frost poetry. “Ms. Huff, is the narrator Santa Claus? It has to be. Say I’m right!” Students have dragged the bulky, metal desk-chair combinations in to pods of four with broken textbook carriages slicing the wax and making a sound that makes me shutter even today fifteen years later. Groups chatter, somewhat on task and somewhat not.

I pause before answering to reread Frost’s poem, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” Oh my goodness, he is right. This totally sounds like Santa Claus or Saint Nicholas. How have I never seen this interpretation? Outside, snowflakes drift softly in the bus loop. No accumulation, just the flurry of winter in the Appalachian Mountains.

Fifteen years later, this shared space, rather than a true place, sleeps, being devoid of in-person instructional rhetoric and teacher-student rapport having been deeply impacted by the coronavirus. However, like Meke, this space waits for its people to arrive so that it can inhale again, having exhaled on March 13, 2020. Room 108, in the Highlands of Southwest Virginia will reflect the impact of a pandemic once it starts to breathe again, with a hopeful transformation from space to place under the direct instruction of Mr. Hagy, not Ms. Huff any longer.

Unfortunately, through lived experience, room 108 was devoid of “local knowledge… an intimate understanding of what is generally true in the locally obvious” when in my care (Casey 1996, 45). Gruenewald, a contemporary leader in place-based education, concurs in his writings with Casey and takes it a step further into the academic world of teaching and learning. “The emphasis on state-mandated standards for teachers and students tends to work toward uniform, if sometimes segregated, skills and outcomes that schools are expected to promote” (Gruenewald 2003, 620). True placed-based education

> …aims to work against the isolation of schooling’s discourse and practices from the living world outside the increasingly placeless institution of schooling. Furthermore, it aims to enlist teachers and students in the firsthand experience of local life … (Gruenewald 2003a, 620).

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Gruenewald, in another article, concludes that

> …place-based pedagogies can help to reframe and ground today's tiresome debates over standards in the lived experience of people and the actual social and ecological contexts of our lives. This does not mean replacing all of conventional education … (Gruenewald 2003b, 11).

He advocates for a blended instructional methodology with balanced practices which embraces place-based education.

Sobel and Smith in their book *Place-and Community-Based Education in Schools*, like Dewey and Gruenewald, discuss the transformational ability of place when it comes to learning. They promote two critical aspects to place-based education. One is that "place can be drawn upon to teach any subject area" (Sobel and Smith 2010, 23). It is cross-curricular from geology to agriculture to literature. Second is "…the role played … in the delivery of education to the young" (Sobel and Smith 2010, 23). In short, place can bring a variety of instructional subject areas together and anyone can be the teacher. It can be a professionally trained teacher, a community member, a family member, a friend, and/or a sibling. Place is universal when it comes to education.

I could have made my classroom a place like the paddocks and could have developed a place for us to share. As Cameron narrates in *Place-Based Education in the Global Age*, my students and I could have made a "Sense of Place" devoid of "placelessness and displacement…" (Cameron 2010, 292). We could have made a place that we "inhabited" together rather than just residing in, which is distinguished by "…the resident who lives in the indoor world of house, office, car, and television, and the inhabitant who knows their place, cares deeply about it, and has a mutually sustaining relationship with it" (Cameron 2010, 284). I could have followed the lesson of Biviano, as she published in her article "I Just Ain't Buyin' It" by promoting and showcasing cultural voice and creative interpretation rather than reinforcing "… patterns and models for students to fit into" (Biviano 2019, 33). I could have made Pyle and Dickinson proud. In Dickinson's article on the North Carolina Education State Forest program, I could have provided, "…instead of structured, patterned, disciplinary, and timed lessons…", a "…collapsing (of) classes in to larger, unbound blocks" by "…reconceptualizing place-based practices …in ways that can enhance sense of place" (Dickinson 2011, 315), just as with Will and Hailey. Unfortunately, I was as Pyle outlines in *Place-based Education in the Global Age*; I kept Frost's poetry and nature study marginalized. I proved that "personal acquaintance with local flora and fauna – once an essential knowledge and later at least commonplace in most cultures – has become scanty to absent" (Pyle 2010, 155). I was "…ignorant of the living world and physical around them" (Pyle 2010, 155). But,

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as van Manen clarifies, I needed to have “lived experiences.” I needed to be a traditional English teacher, I needed to meet Adam, I needed to find my place in the paddocks, I needed to be a doctoral candidate, and so many more “live and learn” moments in order to understand and expose the “….opposition to spontaneous place-based inquiry (Pyle 2010, 160).

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Adam calls Will, Hailey, and me over to the cedar tree. Will runs up, full speed, with a stripped, sun-bleached deer skull. “Kelly, check this out!” He thrusts his treasure in to my hand, hoping for the typical female shriek.

I grab it immediately. “Cool!” Will gives me a quick sideways look with a flash of disappointment, then narrates to me where he found it. I ask, “What type of deer do you think this was?”

“Whitetail?” I smile and praise him on a good inference given the area.

Hailey strolls up, and I look up to see Meke trotting back to the barn, his home, his space. She, like this early spring, is starting to bloom, and I envision the woman she will become. Strong, beautiful, kind, and patient. Adam holds a branch in his hands with the cedar-apple rust fungus on it. The tree is heavy with its burden. He captivates his students, children and fiancé in this case, in this outdoor classroom on how this fungus needs multiple hosts in order to complete its lifecycle. Will reaches out to touch the orange bulb, and Adam gently places his hand on Will’s arm with a small shake of the head, respect nature. Hailey and I turn to make the walk back to the house with Will and Adam following closely behind us. We walk in a staggered fashion, no organization, no rules, no structure with Bull Run Mountain monitoring in agreement from a distance. “The gathering power of place works in many ways and at many levels” (Casey 1996, 38).

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I respond, “I can totally see what you mean about the narrator in this poem by Frost. Santa Claus is a possibility. Let’s …” But, the bell will soon cut that teachable moment short, so the class begins to move based on rehearsal, day in and day out, with no direction from me with students moving desks back in to neat, tidy rows and packing up bags. I walk around to monitor, holding brief conversations about missing work and upcoming basketball games. The big rivalry game against Covington approaches with palpable excitement. With the snow continuing its light flurry, the bell finally peels through the school. The students exit Room 108 in an organized fashion, orderly and structured. The bell tolling for the next class and the next lesson has lost that moment, forever. I post myself in the doorway, like a sentinel, watching the hallway in disconnect, divergence between

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space and place, with an understanding of this internal conflict awaiting me in my lived experiences in Haymarket, Virginia, a decade and a half in the future.

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As a public school leader with a variety of personal and professional lived experiences and a potential fresh start to pedagogical approaches due to COVID-19 as districts negotiate the 2020-2021 school year via remote and hybrid learning models, I adhere to Gruenewald by

> recognizing that places are what people make of them – that people are place makers and that places are a primary artifact of human culture – suggests a more active role for schools in the study, care, and creation of places (Gruenewald 2003a, 627).

Educators, no matter the role, must develop "the connections with places that allow us to invest them with particular kinds of meaning" (Gruenewald 2003a, 627). "…Place-based education aims to empower people to act on their situationality…educators should create curricula designed to foster empathy and allow for the exploration of local places…" (Gruenewald 2003b, 8). This pandemic gives perspective to address "situationality" on multiple levels, both individually and collectively. As education is a collective situation under the pandemic, place-based education and project-based learning show a positive impact on re-engaging students in their education in any environment. I wish I could have provided shared place for my English students years ago, but I am empowered and challenged as a soon to be step-mother, instructional leader, and community member to share, to promote, to practice, and to implement place-based education with my lived experiences confirming this instructional pathway. Mr. Hagy, along with all teachers, stands ready to fully re-open room 108 under a new instructional methodology with understanding of

> the importance of being facilitators of learning and implementation of their staff members rather than directors of school or classroom change…Because deep-seated curricular and instructional changes entail transformation of fundamental aspects of school's culture, it is important for school leaders to see themselves more as gardeners than engineers. (Sobel and Smith 2010, 118-119)

And, there will be plenty to prune in the educational garden of 2021 and beyond to promote new sprouts, new buds, and new roots.

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