

## A Reflective Essay Concerning Something Better: The Experiences of Appalachian Rural Trust Schools

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*This article employs the philosophy of John Dewey and the experiences of several Appalachian Rural School and Community Trust participants to illustrate potential connections between rural schools that embrace place-situated curricula and the communities that sustain them. The article is not research-based. Rather, it is a reflective essay that discusses ways these specific schools interact with their local communities. While keeping in mind that each Rural Trust school is unique, we suggest possible alliances between other rural schools and communities. We also suggest the need for more empirical research that specifically examines outcomes of place-situated curricula for both schools and communities.*

*How can we have something better if we do not imagine it? How can we imagine it if we do not hope for it? How can we hope for it if we do not attempt to realize it? (Berry, 1990, p. 81)*

Rural schools have for centuries occupied a special place in the American educational system. However, the position of rural schools in contemporary society has been endangered for several decades by the national trend to close outlying schools by consolidating them into larger, more centralized facilities. Muse and Thomas (1992, p. 46) report, "Armed with their rational arguments for school structure, efficiency, and effectiveness, professional educators used principles of consolidation to eliminate small schools and to build bigger ones." More recently, educators and policymakers have questioned the logic of this "bigger is better" doctrine and recognized the unique contribution that community-based rural schools provide both to the students who emerge from them and to the local communities that sustain and support them (Nachtigal, 1992; Peskin, 1978; Theobald, 1997). This renewed interest in the importance of rural education has been supported in part by the work of the Rural School and Community Trust (Rural Trust), formerly the Annenberg Rural Challenge. Newly reorganized to focus specifically on reform and policy issues facing rural public schools, the Rural Trust emphasizes the importance of strengthening relationships between schools and communities. This article reviews the experiences of

several Appalachian partners in the Rural Trust effort. Using the work of John Dewey as a philosophical foundation, we examine the extent to which these Appalachian Rural Trust schools have successfully forged links with local communities and thereby enriched both the educational experiences of students and the political and economic resources of their supporting communities. By reflecting on the experiences of these schools, we invite speculation about ways other rural schools and communities might work together more effectively for their mutual benefit.

### *Philosophical Foundations of Rural Education*

Numerous researchers have argued the unique merits of community-based schools (i.e., Hobbs, 1992; Muse & Thomas, 1992; Nachtigal, 1992; Theobald, 1997). Theobald situates his argument in support of rural schools in the agrarian tradition of Jefferson and in the educational philosophies of both Rousseau and Dewey. It is John Dewey's position that is most pertinent here. Dewey's argument for grounding school experiences locally is both educational and political. He maintains that locally derived curricula are both pedagogically sound and politically necessary for democratic citizenship.

The scheme of a curriculum must take account of the adaptation of studies to the needs of the existing community life; it must select with the intention of improving the life we live in common so that the future shall be better than the past. . . . The things which are socially most fundamental, that is, which have to do with the experiences in which the widest groups share, are the essentials. (Archambault, 1964, p. 371)

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Curricula grounded in local interests and traditions, then, are pedagogically appropriate because they are relevant to both students and local citizenry in ways that broader curricular choices are not. Further, Dewey points out that place-specific curricular issues contribute to responsible citizenship by helping students see the connection between academic endeavors and community welfare.

Ideally, rural schools are linked to local communities in at least three ways. First, there is an intimate connection between school and community that results in mutual support and responsibility. This relationship fosters an exchange of information and resources between two interrelated and mutually supportive entities, a relationship well illustrated by Alan Peshkin in his description of Mansfield High School.

The school is located in a particular place, serves a particular clientele, and therefore takes on the flavor of that place, shaped by those who hire the educators, prepare student lunches, and cheer at football games. Thus each school is based not only in the notions of its educators, but often also in a community with its own history of aspirations and commitments broader than, though most decidedly embracing, education. (Peshkin, 1978, p. 9)

Thus, rural schools both influence and are influenced by the local communities they serve. The relationship between the school and community is of necessity one of mutual support and reciprocity and this relationship ideally benefits both partners.

Building curricula around local interests and issues is a second way that rural schools interact with local communities. This place-based pedagogy contributes both to the uniqueness and the relevance of rural education. The Rural Trust specifically identifies place-based curricula as an important component of rural education and this position is articulated in their statement on school standards.

Every school should be well rooted in a locale, and that locale should provide the context within which students learn. Context standards should provide for a pedagogy of place using the community and the native environment as curriculum and as filter for content standards. Context standards should provide for transmitting knowledge about the particular place the school inhabits, and about the importance of all places as habitats for community and for learning. (Annenberg Rural Challenge, 1999, p. 61)

Local context, then, serves as an appropriate and important source of subject content. The significance of locally derived subject matter is also emphasized by Dewey

who warns of the danger to students of "subjects that are too remote from their experience, that arouse no active curiosity, and that are beyond their power of understanding" (Archambault, 1964, p. 226). An important goal of place-based curricula, then, is to effectively build on students' intimate knowledge and prior experience, while taking advantage of their sustained interest in topics that are personally meaningful and relevant to their lives.

Finally, schools with strong ties to the local community provide avenues for developing an awareness of responsibility that contributes to democratic citizenship. This too is a concept strongly advocated by Dewey who clearly viewed educational experiences as opportunities for practicing democracy. Paul Theobald likewise suggests that close links between school and community can foster a sense of civic responsibility.

If students have been enculturated into an ethic of shouldering responsibility for a shared place, into reasoned study and deliberation, and into a propensity to look beyond conventional wisdom for solutions to problems, that will certainly increase the odds that community will become a primary factor in our economic and political reckoning in the future. (Theobald, 1997, p. 159)

Thus, educational experiences that are derived from and intimately connected to a specific community setting are likely to develop in students a sense of responsibility that might otherwise be lacking. Experiences built on local issues are by definition more meaningful to students than those that are remote from their lives. The remainder of this article examines the experiences of several Appalachian Rural Trust schools that are working with local communities in these three ways to enrich the educational experiences of students and to strengthen commitment to local places and issues.

#### *Establishing Ties to the Local Community*

Cordia School in Knott County, Kentucky, provides an example of a school with strong roots in the local community. Established in 1933 as a settlement school by Knott County native Alice Slone, Cordia School has resisted repeated consolidation attempts, and, in 1998, opened a new building that overlooks the site of the original school. A history of strong community support is in large part responsible for Cordia's success in avoiding consolidation. One of few K-12 schools in the nation, Cordia School serves approximately 400 students. Funding for the new \$4.2 million building was generated by the Lotts Creek Community Center, a local nonprofit corporation that retains ownership of the facility. Cordia students integrate local history into the curriculum by collecting and documenting

stories from community elders. In conjunction with Appalshop Media Center in Whitesburg, Cordia students have produced a video documentary depicting the school's history. Establishing ties with local partners such as Appalshop further strengthens links to the community and the Appalachian region. Cordia School serves as a focal point for community activities and provides strong evidence of the benefits reaped by both students and community members through close ties to a particular place.

Mt. Rogers Community School in Whitetop, Virginia, provides a second example of powerful school-community links. Geographic isolation contributes to the unique experiences of Mt. Rogers students. Located atop White Mountain, Mt. Rogers Community School serves only 92 students in K-12 classes and is staffed by 12 teachers. Its small size creates a sense of intimacy among students and teachers, and this closeness is enhanced by strong support from the local community. Mt. Rogers provides a traditional music program that meets daily and involves more than half of the high school students. The program utilizes the expertise of local musicians and emphasizes the importance of local musical traditions and heritage. Mt. Rogers students learn banjo, guitar, and fiddle music, and they frequently perform in the community. Traditional dances are also included in the curriculum. By emphasizing local musical traditions and utilizing musicians from the area as teachers, Mt. Rogers School maintains an intimate connection to the community.

In contrast to the experiences of Mt. Rogers and Cordia Schools, Shelby Valley High School in Pike County (KY) demonstrates the efforts of a relatively new school to create a sense of community where none formerly existed. Created in 1990 through the consolidation of two local high schools, Shelby Valley has for the past 10 years worked to build ties to the local community and to forge a sense of tradition linking the school to the area and its past. Among the programs established at Shelby Valley is a community center jointly supported by the school and local area. The Community Learning Center is housed in the school, but it is designed to serve as a gathering place for community members as well. Shelby Valley teachers and students have also conducted a series of community-school forums that have further strengthened ties to the area. One of the projects to grow out of these discussions was the decision to develop a piece of unused school property into a community park. These efforts illustrate the possibility of building community support for a large consolidated school and, further, demonstrate that rural schools take a variety of forms and are not defined exclusively by size.

#### *Building a Pedagogy of Place*

Links to the local community reach beyond an exchange of resources, however, and also affect curricular

decisions. In its lengthy analysis of Annenberg Rural Challenge schools across the nation, the Rural Challenge and Evaluation Program (1999a) describes the importance of place-situated curricula for rural schools.

In its most simple form, pedagogy/curriculum of place is an expression of the growing recognition of context and locale and their unique contributions to the educational project. Using what is local and immediate as a source of curriculum tends to deepen knowledge through the larger understandings of the familiar and accessible. It clearly increases student understanding and often gives a stronger impetus to apply problem-solving skills. (p. 11)

Projects that are of local interest necessarily engage students in ways that less personally relevant subjects do. Again, philosophical support for place-based curricula can also be found in Dewey's work.

Abandon the notion of subject-matter as something fixed and ready-made in itself, outside the child's experience; cease thinking of the child's experience as also something hard and fast; see it as something fluent, embryonic, vital. [Instruction] is continuous reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies. (Archambault, p. 344).

Curricular offerings, then, should ideally grow out of local issues and concerns. The Appalachian Rural Trust schools demonstrate effectively the influence of local issues on curriculum development.

Stanton Elementary School in Powell County (KY) draws extensively on local interests to develop curricula that reflect its unique location. Bluegrass music provides a focal point for an extensive project that involves Stanton students, many of whom participate in the Wise Village Pickers and Singers performance group. These elementary students have received extensive local and regional attention. The 60-member group studies and performs traditional bluegrass music that reflects and embraces Appalachian culture. The program encompasses several curricular areas. For example, students study history by learning the origins of the songs they perform and learn fractions by counting the rhythm of the music. Because the school draws extensively on the musical knowledge of local performers, the program has also strengthened connections to the local community.

Other examples of place-based curricula at Stanton Elementary School include an archaeology unit taught in conjunction with the U.S. Forestry Service in nearby Red

River Gorge. This unit includes the reenactment of a pre-historic village scene and teaches students both the ecology and history of Eastern Kentucky. Stanton Elementary students also participate in an American chestnut tree project that involves planting seedlings and tracking them as part of an effort to develop a blight resistant variety that will eventually restore the trees to the local forest ecology. These projects capitalize on the unique natural and cultural resources of the area and provide strong evidence of the value of place-situated curricula.

St. Paul High School in Virginia has also implemented curricula that reflect the unique interests of the local area. St. Paul students participate in an extensive project to document the lives of community elders. Journalism classes compile community documentaries and produce a morning television show of local and regional news. The school plans to expand this project and eventually broadcast it to the larger community through local cable stations. St. Paul High School has also developed an Appalachian Media Center and a community-based science program that includes a fitness and wellness component as well as an extensive study of the Clinch River ecological area. Additional components that focus on Appalachian culture are taught across the curriculum and many of these involve close ties to the larger community. These projects demonstrate the effectiveness of drawing on local issues as a source for curricula that reflects the unique locations and interests of rural schools.

### *Developing Civic Responsibility*

Schools that successfully forge links to the local community both through an exchange of resources and by implementing place-situated curricula are likely to develop in students a sense of civic responsibility that may be lacking in less grounded educational settings. The Rural Challenge Research and Evaluation Program (1999a) recognizes the "need to think of students as genuine citizens of communities" (p. 68), a commitment that extends beyond learning about civic participation to actual involvement in it. Preparing students for participation in democratic society is an important task for schools and the Appalachia Rural Trust partners demonstrate the effectiveness of their efforts to do so.

For example, Evarts High School students in Harlan County (KY) have been actively involved in efforts to Save Black Mountain from strip mining. Similarly, students at Rocky Gap High School in Virginia are actively involved in oral history projects designed to simultaneously document local issues and develop political awareness. Students from Jones Fork Elementary School in Mousie (KY) are working with the University of Kentucky Robinson Forest Research Center to explore the impact of the timber industry on the area. This project involves curricular compo-

nents in mathematics and science classes, but also serves as an important opportunity for students to develop an awareness of the consequences of depleting natural resources. Given the history of Appalachia and the extensive misuse of its abundant natural resources, Appalachian schools are especially situated to serve an educative role that helps students understand the responsibility of handling resources wisely. Participation in issues of local concern encourages students to assume responsibility for the communities in which they live.

As relationships around local issues and common purposes develop through community service initiatives, they take on a complex life of their own. . . . From working and learning together, people of all ages and different backgrounds have begun to see themselves as a deeply rooted, interdependent collective with common interests, values, and responsibilities. (Rural Challenge Research and Evaluation Program, 1999b, p. 105)

Students who are provided opportunities to study and act on issues that directly affect themselves and their families are uniquely prepared to assume responsibility for the world around them and this is amply illustrated by the experiences of the Rural Trust Appalachian schools.

### *Looking to the Larger World*

However, schools are not limited to preparing students to confront local issues and concerns. It is imperative that rural schools extend student experiences beyond the local to encompass the larger world. Technology provides an avenue for this shift, and rural schools—often isolated geographically—can take advantage of technological resources to connect students to broader issues (e.g., Coladarci, 1993). Paul Nachtigal suggests that technology provides an important avenue for this connection.

While the basics can be learned in the local community, not all of what we need to know can be found within its immediate confines. Here, the information technologies will link the rural secondary school with neighboring communities whether they are fifteen miles down Route 15 or halfway around the world. Schools will share teachers and other resources through interactive networks. Specialists can be brought into the classroom via satellite. Computers with a modem can access an unending array of data sources anywhere in the world. Isolation and insulation need no longer be a problem for rural communities. (Nachtigal, 1992, p. 86)

Several Appalachian Rural Trust partners have expanded their technological resources to facilitate communication with both local and distant sources. Powell Valley Middle School in Wise County, Virginia, received private foundation support that enabled it to place additional hardware in classrooms. Powell Valley also provides professional and personal development opportunities in technological use to both staff and community members, thus extending these resources beyond the school to the community as well. Similarly, Johnson Central High School in Kentucky has added technological resources that engage students with issues beyond the school and local area. Because Appalachian students have historically lagged behind the nation in technological expertise and opportunities, providing rural students with extensive technological resources and training is imperative. By enhancing technological opportunities, Rural Trust schools are preparing students to interact with the larger world.

#### *Toward Something Better*

The experiences of the Appalachian Rural Trust schools reviewed here clearly indicate the importance of providing students with educational experiences that are locally grounded and intimately connected to their lives in meaningful ways. Strengthening ties to the local community is beneficial not only to schools but to communities as well, as the Rural Challenge Research and Evaluation Program (1999a) indicates.

This work of creating community through shared experiences provides new ground on which students and adults can interact. The difference between student engagement that is common to typical school activities and that which is required when real community work is being accomplished is evident . . . The involvement of students in community affairs as participating equals with adults is a strong indicator of the power of place-based pedagogy. (p. 121)

The Rural School and Community Trust commitment to place-situated education shifts the educational focus from the general to the specific. Rural schools that enable students to understand the importance of local issues and the myriad ways these issues are connected to the world beyond their communities prepare them for active and responsible participation in that world. This is an example of what Theobald (1997) calls “education as a catalyst in the development of civic virtue” (p. 119). By situating students as active participants in community life, place-centered

education prepares them both academically and politically for full participation in adult society. These benefits of locally-situated education need not be limited to rural schools, however. As Theobald points out, a place-centered education can benefit all students and provides a useful model for working toward an educational system that envisions “something better” for all U.S. schools.

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