



COULD PLACE-BASED EDUCATION HELP SAVE THE WORLD?



It's not too difficult to make the case these days that humanity is facing a crisis. **Climate change** alone has the potential to upend society as we know it, with devastating consequences.

In a **new piece** published in the May issue of *Holistic Education Review*, NEPC Fellow **Gregory Smith**, professor emeritus at Lewis & Clark College Graduate School of Education and Counseling in Portland, Oregon, reflects upon what the world's uncertain future means for one of its most future-focused institutions: education.

In the future, Smith suggests,

people will become increasingly dependent on their immediate communities for their support and welfare because it will not be in the interest of large political and economic institutions to do so, just as it is not in the interest of these institutions to marshal the resources and talent needed to address climate change . . . This means that people at the local level will need to be the ones who initiate the necessary changes.

This forecast suggests a confluence of disinvestment plus climate change that is mirrored in the racialized **water crisis** facing **Jackson, Mississippi**.

In order to prepare students for this future of local interdependence and grassroots change, Smith proposes that schools should focus increasingly on "**place-based education**," the philosophy that schools should prepare students to live in, improve, and sustain the communi-

ties where they live by immersing them in local culture, service-oriented projects, opportunities and experiences. Topics such as reading or math are taught in the context of real-world community experiences and concerns.

To offer concrete examples of what this sort of education might look like in real life, Smith describes a [unit about trash disposal](#) sparked by a student's question about why a garbage incinerator was located near [Boggs School](#), a Detroit charter school that embraces place-based education. (Student questions, interests and responses are a core focus of place-based education.) Inspired by what their classmate asked, first and second graders began walking through their neighborhood, picking up trash and then exploring what happened to different types of items after it was disposed of. This led them to visit the incinerator and a recycling center, watch videos of interviews with the CEO of Detroit Renewable Energy, and create a film about different ways a Styrofoam cup might be discarded. Ultimate goals of this unit included teaching students how to follow their curiosity and encouraging them to value their community and be committed to its improvement and sustainability.

Smith is not sanguine about these ideas taking hold on a large scale in the near future. Until an economic model premised on unlimited growth becomes unable to deliver its promise of upward mobility, schools seem likely to remain as they are," he writes. "However, as our society changes, it may be possible to better prepare children for the world they will be inheriting."

Until then, writes Smith, the goal is to identify "gaps where such an education can take place and then getting to work."

NEPC Resources on Philosophy of Education

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