



REL Appalachia Ask A REL Response

Rural

February 2020

Question:

What is the evidence for a place-based learning approach to improve student outcomes, particularly for rural students?

Response:

Thank you for your request to our REL Reference Desk regarding evidence-based information about place-based learning for rural students. Ask A REL is a collaborative reference desk service provided by the 10 Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) that, by design, functions much in the same way as a technical reference library. Ask A REL provides references, referrals, and brief responses in the form of citations in response to questions about available education research.

Following an established REL Appalachia research protocol, we searched for peer-reviewed articles and other research reports on place-based learning. Our search yielded relatively little research that specifically addressed the effects of place-based learning on student outcomes, but we were able to identify other resources related to the implementation of place-based learning strategies in rural communities. The sources included ERIC and other federally funded databases and organizations, research institutions, academic research databases, and general Internet search engines. For more details, please see the methods section at the end of this document.

The research team did not evaluate the quality of the resources provided in this response; we offer them only for your reference. Also, the search included the most commonly used research databases and search engines to produce the references presented here, but the references are not necessarily comprehensive, and other relevant references and resources may exist. References are listed in alphabetical order, not necessarily in order of relevance.

References

Azano, A. (2011). The possibility of place: One teacher's use of place-based instruction for English students in a rural high school. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 26(10), 1–12. Abstract retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ931456>; full text available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331260922_The_Possibility_of_Place_One_Teacher's_Use_of_Place-based_Instruction_for_English_Students_in_a_Rural_High_School

From the abstract: "Educational practices that purposely seek to tie the realities of place to instruction, particularly for the purpose of student engagement, are typically referred to as place-based education. This study investigates how one teacher considered place in making instructional choices for eighth grade English students in a rural high school, and students' perceptions of this teacher's place-based instruction. Findings indicate that the teacher initially used his own understanding of place to activate students' prior knowledge. Additionally, when the teacher used place-based content to mediate instruction rather than his personal experience, students were able to construct their own understandings of place. While findings indicate that place-based strategies may increase curricular relevance, they also signal that without a critical lens rural students may be hindered in their capacity to identify and analytically interpret the challenges affecting their communities and the structures that serve to reproduce inequalities. The study concludes with a critique of the learning experience and makes suggestions for implementing a critical pedagogy of place in the English classroom."

Emekawuwa, E. (2004). *They remember what they touch...: The impact of place-based learning in East Feliciana Parish*. D. E. Williams (Ed.). Washington, DC: The Rural School and Community Trust. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED497983>

From the abstract: "Stressed by high-poverty levels, a low tax base and low teacher salaries, the East Feliciana School District competes, most often unsuccessfully, with neighboring districts and states, and with a relatively segregated white academy system for qualified teachers and pupil resources. Consequently, at the dawn of the federal government's landmark education reform initiative, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 55.8% percent of the district's K–8 teachers were not fully certified to teach and 80% of its students were performing below average in at least one core subject. At the same time, only 31.8% of the parish's adult population had completed high school and fewer than 5% were college graduates. With a median household income of \$26,864, 26% of the parish's children were living below the poverty level. This paper describes the implementation and results of a reform effort, undertaken in the late 1990s, that focused on place-based science and mathematics education. Standardized test scores have improved, and parish schools are now developing lasting school-community partnerships. The district is connecting its residents, including students, with natural resources located in East Feliciana and the surrounding communities by collaborating with educators, parents, community members, clergy, businesses, and nonprofits."

Howley, A., Showalter, D., Howley, M. D., Howley, C. B., Klein, R., & Johnson, J. (2011). Challenges for place-based mathematics pedagogy in rural schools and communities in the United States. *Children Youth and Environments*, 21(1), 101–127. Retrieved from

https://www.academia.edu/4559132/Challenges_for_Place-Based_Mathematics_Pedagogy_in_Rural_Schools_and_Communities_in_the_United_States_Site_Interviews_Classroom_ObservationsData_AnalysisSocial_Class_Interaction

From the abstract: “We studied the efforts of rural math teachers to make community connections, a comparatively rare field for place-based education. Subjects included educators, parents, non-parent community members, and students in Alabama, Kentucky, Maine, Nebraska, Ohio, Vermont, and Washington. We used a multiple case-study design, based on verbatim transcripts. Three themes emerged, comprising eight subthemes. Claims about ‘relevance’ (theme I) functioned complexly as follows: (1) real-world relevance served mostly as motivation; (2) higher-level math made fewer community connections; and (3) typically, these methods involved less capable math students, often in ‘vocational’ or ‘general’ tracks. Three interacting conditions sustained these initiatives (theme II): (4) the strength of the ‘champion’ educator and allied network; (5) ease of sponsorship, moderated by enabling conditions; and (6) strength of participants’ belief in the future of the local community. Inferences about social-class differentials (theme III) indicated: (7) egalitarian localism and elitist universalism were in active contest; and (8) this contest shaped the local purposes of math education in ways that tended to reinforce social reproduction and youth outmigration. The authors recommend that community members and educators interested in this approach to education give more attention to its purposes and to the place of mathematics education within such purposes.”

Jennings, N., Swidler, S., & Koliba, C. (2005). Place-based education in the standards-based reform era—conflict or complement? *American Journal of Education*, 112(1), 44–65. Retrieved from

<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.590.9134&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

From the abstract: “In this article we discuss the relationship between place-based education and standards-based reforms. Using an initiative in Vermont to include place-based standards into the state’s curricular frameworks, we examine state policy makers’ and practitioners’ views of state standards and place-based curriculum. Furthermore, we explore the ways in which the practitioners view the impact of both of these curricular efforts on their classroom practices. We challenge the common view of incompatibility between state standards and locally responsive curriculum and offer instead a view of complementarity.”

Longhurst, J. M. (2012). Incorporating rural and farm novels in the secondary school classroom: Where we come from is who we are. *Journal of Inquiry and Action in Education*, 4(3), 68–88. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1134225>

From the abstract: “Place-based education has received significant attention in recent years. This article briefly surveys common place-based education models and then argues for a more place-focused English language arts classroom in secondary schools where rural and regional literature is often absent from the curricula. The author posits that teacher-education programs do not usually address rural or regional literature and consequently, teachers enter the classroom unprepared to teach it. The article presents a rationale for focusing on rural literature written before 1965 as well as a rationale for foregrounding the rural experience in such a course. The author then describes the process of researching

and developing a course template for teacher-education programs wishing to focus on regional literature. Also included are the course template and materials developed using the Rural Lit. R.A.L.L.Y. regional and rural authors database.”

Powers, A. L. (2004). An evaluation of four place-based education programs. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 35(4), 17–32. Abstract retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ707586>; full text available at <http://ecosensing.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Powers-JEE-article.pdf>

From the abstract: “The Place-Based Education Evaluation Collaborative (PEEC) was formed to invest in the development of place-based education models of professional development and whole school improvement through more rigorous evaluation. An external evaluation team conducted a cross-program study, analyzing the effects of 4 place-based education programs on teachers, students, schools, and communities. This article reports on 2 aspects of the study: (a) a cross-program analysis of the 4 programs strengths and challenges, and (b) an analysis of trends in teacher practice change across the programs. Data sources included 163 adult interviews (teachers, administrators, program staff, and community members), 85 student interviews, and 41 field observations. Recommendations for program development and emergent themes for further research are reported.”

Shamah, D., & MacTavish, K. A. (2009). Making room for place-based knowledge in rural classrooms. *Rural Educator*, 30(2), 1–4. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ869303>

From the abstract: “For many rural schools the view outside the classroom window is one of scenic fields, pasture lands, or forests nestled at the base of mountains. Despite the proximity of rural schools to both agricultural land and the natural world, what little connection to place that may have existed in rural schools’ curricula has been disappearing as schools shift their focus toward basic academic skills (e.g., reading, math, and writing). The authors argue that ultimately the trend in reduction of school programs and the practice of undervaluing place-based-knowledge, especially place-based knowledge gained outside the classroom through interactions within place, diminishes the ability of schools to be the primary location for collective socialization and the transmission of local community values to youth. They assert as well that consequences for both the quality of education and opportunities offered for youth and the overall community well-being ensue.”

Additional Organizations to Consult

Rural Schools Collaborative: <https://ruralschoolscollaborative.org/>

From the website: “The organization’s mission is to build sustainable rural communities through a keen focus on place, teachers, and philanthropy.”

- Place-Based Education: <https://ruralschoolscollaborative.org/place-based-education>

Edutopia: <https://www.edutopia.org/>

From the website: “Our Foundation is dedicated to transforming K–12 education so that all students can acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to thrive in their studies, careers, and adult lives.”

- Using Place-Based Education to Revitalize Rural Schools – and Communities: <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/place-based-education-new-mexico-anne-obrien>

Promise of Place: <https://promiseofplace.org/>

From the website: “The Promise of Place website is a project of [the] Center for Place-Based Learning and Community Engagement, a unique public private partnership that works to advance the state of the art in place-based education by facilitating collaborative efforts in research, program design, technical assistance, resource development and dissemination.”

Methods

Keywords and Search Strings

The following keywords and search strings were used to search the reference databases and other sources:

- (“Place-based learning” OR “place-based pedagogy” OR “place-based education” OR “place-based instruction”) AND rural
- (“Place-based learning” OR “place-based pedagogy” OR “place-based education” OR “place-based instruction”) AND rural AND “student outcome*”

Databases and Resources

We searched ERIC, a free online library of more than 1.6 million citations of education research sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), for relevant resources. Additionally, we searched the academic database ProQuest, Google Scholar, and the commercial search engine Google.

Reference Search and Selection Criteria

In reviewing resources, Reference Desk researchers consider—among other things—these four factors:

- Date of the publication: Searches cover information available within the last ten years, except in the case of nationally known seminal resources.
- Reference sources: IES, nationally funded, and certain other vetted sources known for strict attention to research protocols receive highest priority. Applicable resources must be publicly available online and in English.
- Methodology: The following methodological priorities/considerations guide the review and selection of the references: (a) study types—randomized controlled trials, quasi experiments, surveys, descriptive data analyses, literature reviews, policy briefs, etc., generally in this order; (b) target population, samples (representativeness of the target population, sample size, volunteered or randomly selected), study duration, etc.; (c) limitations, generalizability of the findings and conclusions, etc.
- Existing knowledge base: Vetted resources (e.g., peer-reviewed research journals) are the primary focus, but the research base is occasionally slim or nonexistent. In those cases, the best resources available may include, for example, reports, white papers, guides, reviews in non-peer-reviewed journals, newspaper articles, interviews with content specialists, and organization websites.

Resources included in this document were last accessed on February 10, 2020. URLs, descriptions, and content included here were current at that time.

This memorandum is one in a series of quick-turnaround responses to specific questions posed by education stakeholders in the Appalachia region (Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia), which is served by the Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia (REL AP) at SRI International. This Ask A REL response was developed by REL AP under Contract ED-IES-17-C-0004 from the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, administered by SRI International. The content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government.