

# **Ecological Schooling: Questions, Curriculum, and the Power of Place**

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It goes without saying (and this is precisely the problem), that our schools and communities are linked in ways that we do not often acknowledge in our classrooms. This means that the challenges we face in both our communities and schools will go unaddressed if we continue to approach the work of education in ways that have remained fundamentally unchanged from one century to the next. While we (i.e., teachers and teacher educators) might say that we value the vast human potential that resides in our public schools, we cannot at the same time go on defending a system that fails to leverage that potential in ways that address the systemic problems that produce the material conditions experienced by students, parents, and other community members in our most underresourced communities.

If we believe in preparing students to create a more just and habitable world, then we must acknowledge that schools are not doing a good job of directly addressing our most pressing social problems (i.e., poverty and inequality) (Marsh, 2012). One of our first priorities as educators should be to work with students, parents, and community-based organizations (CBOs) to reframe the purposes of schooling in ways that put community concerns at the center of the curriculum. This means seeing students, schools, and communities in ecological terms. It means asking questions about why our communities are the way they are and how we might work with others to make them different. It means that we need to stop pretending that if we could just write better standards, prepare better teachers, create better curriculum, or invent better assessments (and ways to prepare for them) that we could solve all the problems we face in our schools.

Ecological schooling emphasizes organic, community-based cooperation for solutions and relies on forms of conversation and communication that are connected to community priorities, concerns, and experience. Organic, in this sense, does not mean waiting for schools to change on their own, rather it suggests the opposite: curriculum evolves from direct interaction with

and participation by community members in order to identify the questions and concerns that matter most to them. This emphasis on community-based cooperation through direct communication and collaboration with community members is what Jay Robinson (1998) has called a type of “civic literacy” (p. 14-15). Working with others in our communities to create opportunities for school-based social action can help teachers and students further develop Robinson’s (1998) notion of civic literacy while addressing the things that matter most to them.

An emphasis in schools on civic literacies—i.e., how politics, culture, and economics function in specific locations—could promote different ways of knowing and doing in schools around what community organizers calls “communities of interest.” A community of interest can be understood in its simplest form as a group of people coming together around a question, a concern, or an issue that matters to them. What would it mean to organize schooling around communities of interest? What would it mean for teachers to take time to relate to community members in order to co-create curriculum around questions?

Appeals to ecological schooling—i.e., understanding schools as reflections of the social, economic, and political realities around them—can help us reclaim public schools as spaces where teachers and students can explore important questions about what it means to live in the world with others and determine for themselves how to do it. The famed community organizer, Saul Alinsky (1971), reminds us, “the first step in community organization is community disorganization...Present arrangements must be disorganized if they are to be displaced by new patterns that provide the opportunities and means for citizen participation” (p. 116).

Robert Yagelski (2009) suggests something similar. He notes that “If the overriding purpose of formal education is to enable us to imagine and create just and sustainable communities that contribute to our individual and collective well being,” then we will need to do more than simply reproduce the status quo (p. 8). After all, it is “the status quo that has helped give rise to the crisis of sustainability in the first place” (p. 8). The status quo—focusing on individuals while ignoring the unequal economic relations and the structures that create them—needs to be challenged in ways that do more than simply suggest or point out that what we currently do doesn’t work for many students in low-income neighborhoods.

Educators and activists, then, might begin by presenting plans and ideas that articulate principles and commitments that encourage different ways to organize schools, prepare teachers, and design curriculum. In doing so, we can “disorganize” schools and begin to address the problems that present the most pressing challenges to both individual and community success.

In what ways might teachers resist the current neoliberal reforms that result in policies of increasing regulation and control in public schools—policies that dictate what we do and how we do it? Literary critic Raymond Williams (1978) suggests that we look to the work of emergent culture as a kind of action that “depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of forms” (p. 126). The kinds of forms that Williams (1978) describes evolve from, but are not limited to, Do-it-Yourself (DIY) subcultures and publications as well as direct assertions of new possibilities like reclaiming public spaces, buildings, and monuments for arts, protests, public theater and art, marches, demonstrations, or something else entirely.

Teachers, in collaboration with CBOs, activists, students, parents and administrators might find related ways of knowing and doing that challenge dominant discourses in schools by reappropriating and reinventing symbols, spaces, and cultural forms. Such intentional collaborations and coalition building (evolving through an ongoing process of intentional relationship building in and out of schools) around shared concerns can elicit the forms of emergent culture that Williams suggests above. These types of cultural forms can create ways of participating in community life that evolve from particular circumstances and help us to resist, alter, or augment current practices. Cultural productions that emerge from forms of community engagement might then take us closer to effectively challenging the prevailing orthodoxy in schools.

One example of this type of community-based approach to schooling can be seen in the work of the Chicago Grassroots Curriculum Taskforce (CGCT, 2012). According to the group’s mission statement, “CGCT is working to revolutionize the traditional education model of classroom learning by infusing the curriculum with local and relevant content from students’ lives—through their families, cultures, histories, communities, and experiences” (p. 2). While the entire CGCT curriculum embraces a community-centered approach, I want to highlight one project in particular

that crystalizes what an ecological approach to schooling might look like. CGCT's grassroots community tours project, developed by Kevin Kauffman and Anton Miglietta (2013), invites, teachers, students, and community members to investigate the history of their communities (e.g., historically significant events, sites, and struggles) and then host public tours in order to educate others about their community, its history, and its ongoing struggles. Students conduct in-depth research, identify community histories, concerns, and local resources for addressing issues that matter to them.

The CGCT community tours emphasize ethnographic research, data gathering, and analysis of local spaces, including the economic, political, and social realities that shape them. Students not only design and host tours, but they also participate in an exchange with students from other neighborhoods. The goals of the project are to introduce students to research methods while also encouraging them to see their own lives and experiences as relevant and useful starting points for social change.

An ecological metaphor for schooling can help us do things like community tours, because this kind of schooling allows educators to broaden the scope of teacher and student-driven inquiry to include the health and well-being of our communities. The ecological metaphor also helps bring into focus the reciprocal nature of our work in schools and the possibility for doing it differently and for different reasons. According to Sarah Robbins (2012), doing our work differently means that teachers come to "believe that viewing school literacy as 'public' can also mean tapping into its potential for culture-making" (p. 8). Similar to Raymond Williams' idea about the potential of emergent culture, Robbins sees public literacy as a way for students and teachers "to make meaningful contributions to the places where they live" (p. 8).

While most current models of education tend to emphasize individual achievement and success (both student and teacher) on standardized exams, these same models often ignore the power and importance of relationship building and collaboration among teachers, parents, students, administrators, community members and schools. When teachers acknowledge the connections between schools and communities and see these spaces as sites of legitimate inquiry, Robbins (2012) tells us "it encourages students to see themselves as active composers of their

communities' identities" (p. 10).

In other words, when we authorize ourselves to explore our communities with our students, we transform the community and its most pressing issues into the lived curriculum of our classrooms (Robbins 2012). In this way, we refocus the goals of teaching and schooling on the meaningful contributions we make to place and people, shifting our gaze away from our obsession with individual achievement in order to look to the ways in which people and place are involved in a reciprocal process of redefining the aims of education to include the health and well-being of communities.

It is important to recognize, as Dewey (1927/1954) did, that an individual's successes, achievements, and learning are never solely the results of that one individual. As Dewey (1927/1954) notes in *The Public and Its Problems*, "Singular things act, but they act together. Nothing has been discovered which acts in entire isolation" (p. 22). Yet, so often in our schools and classrooms we imagine the opposite: we valorize individual student achievement based on test scores, school assignments, college acceptance letters, etc., while ignoring the myriad ways in which the environment, peers, mentors, teachers, and parents have contributed to a student's successes. Seeing schools in traditional ways—as sites for individual development in competition with others—encourages us to ignore the importance of context and relationships with others in the work that we do.

By using what community psychologists have called an "ecological approach" to our schools—meaning we take into account the institutions, community resources, and experiences that shape our students—teachers and school officials can develop a much richer understanding of who their students are and how these students can best succeed in ways that reach beyond individual benefits (Trickett, 1984). That is, by seeing the work of the teacher as involving intentional relationship building with parents and community organizations—making it our job to first learn about the places our students come from—teachers stand a much better chance of becoming allies with and advocates for the success of both their students and the communities where these students live.

As community psychologist Edison J. Trickett (1984) notes, "While the concept of ecology has many meanings, its general intent is to focus on the

community embeddedness of persons and the nature of communities themselves” (p. 265). To put this another way, where the neoliberal lens compels us to ignore context and ask what an individual has done to deserve access to additional resources, opportunities, and institutions, the ecological metaphor suggests that we ask what the community (i.e., the political, social, and economic reality) has done (or can do) to and for the individual.

Such a view encourages us to examine how we can make changes to this broader structure—changes that would benefit entire communities. In other words, it allows us to ask the question, What do we want this community to be and how can we make it so? Individuals, of course, play a role in our attempts to answer this question. However, individuals in this framework are understood as always and already part of a larger context. This is an important distinction, since the ecological model for schools encourages individual growth and development with an eye toward the greater good of the community, rather than, say, at its expense. Individuals are encouraged to learn about themselves, to ask questions about their world, and to identify ways of being in the world that will allow them to live a happy life with others.

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