

TEACHING THE COMMONS

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Place-Conscious
Elementary Classrooms

It is a great error to suppose that people are rendered stupid by remaining always in the same place.

—William Cobbett, 1830

What do you want to be when you grow up?" This question may be asked in elementary schools more often than any other. From very early on, children are socialized into an orientation toward the future. As I noted earlier in the book, we have given this particular orientation the cultural stamp of approval, whereas an orientation to the past gets a clear thumbs-down. There is no profound wisdom here, no natural law or innate prewiring at work. This is purely a cultural phenomenon that can be tied to a broad range of ingredients that have gone into the modern liberal recipe for selfhood.

As noted in earlier chapters, our political, economic, and educational theory since the Enlightenment has focused on the individual.¹ "We are all unique," we are ceaselessly told, just as we begin twelve years of institutionalized life that demands a most unforgiving brand of conformity. From day one on, children are encouraged to look to the future, and in the process, they are left with the message that their worth is wrapped up in their occupational choice (or, to put it a bit more maliciously, their occupational destiny) and that this worth has nothing to do with the depth and quality of the commitments they make in life. There are serious psychological ramifications here, because, as discussed earlier, deriving meaning from life seems to be inextricably tied to the quality of the commitments one

makes and honors. Ignoring this completely, schooling in this culture is endowed with a certain instrumentality. That is, it has become the vehicle designed to transport kids to their future jobs. In direct opposition to John Dewey's plea that schools should not be preparation for life, but instead should be life itself, schools have plunged ahead with the idea that time "spent" in schools should prepare students for a job at some future point in time. This instrumentality has become even more refined and pronounced as the twentieth century has progressed. Increasingly, schools are viewed as the mechanism designed to give the corporate liberal state what it needs: workers capable of doing their jobs well and a certain elite group of math-science performers who will carry the torch toward American domination in the global economic market.

"If you want to be a chemist you'd better do well in math and science." Some variant of this statement is uttered thousands of times each year all across the United States, and on the surface, it is true enough. But it betrays more of the cultural baggage that has put us in our current condition—that of a society with no facility for ethical deliberation, a society with no sense of place or community, a society, therefore, marked by unmatched levels of criminality and violence. Our culture converts the school into a sorting mechanism. Whereas some students receive the clear message that they are destined for interesting, high-paying careers, others come to see themselves as destined for the "world of work." In either case, we have, in the process, converted the notion of formal schooling into a kind of youth holding tank, a mechanism that serves to occupy our children until the economic utility of adulthood, or at least late adolescence, arrives. While in school, kids are encouraged to think about their future jobs. "Career education" and its contemporary variant "school to work" are two prominent slogans that have played a large role in creating these kinds of cultural messages. The problem is that the "world of work" to which these programs pay homage is not something that students will one day "join." It is something they will one day create. The students in our public schools are the future decision-makers in this country, if there is still any truth to the notion of a government of, for, and by the people. Our high-school graduates (and our dropouts, for that matter) are not, first and foremost, factory hands or dentists or professional baseball players. They are citizens living, ostensibly, in a democracy. What they deserve and must receive through schooling is an education conducive to the development of a sense of political efficacy and, coupled with this, a program of concerted community enculturation into the ethic of shouldering a responsible measure of civic virtue. Democracy can do nothing but erode in the absence of these measures. But the cultivation of civic virtue is not solely for the benefit of society, for it opens up, within individuals, the possibility of substantively addressing the void in meaning that marks so much of modern life.

This is not to say that the world of work has no place in the public-school curriculum. Certainly work is an important dimension of life and therefore ought to be a topic for extended study and deliberation in public schools. But this study should be linked to the school's primary role of educating citizens who live in a democracy. What characteristics should work possess? How available should it be? How should it be compensated for? What kinds of policies need to be in place to produce the answers to these questions? What does the past tell us about policy possibilities? What will our future resemble if society elects to operationalize the wrong answers to these questions?

Beginning at the elementary level, students must be socialized into the practice and habit of researching and deliberating answers to the questions that vex their communities *at the moment*. Schools can become places that live and work in the present, with no more attention paid to the past or future than the amount necessary to add substance and depth to students' increasingly complex understandings about the world and the place of their community within it.

Some scholars claim that all institutions and organizations in the very near future will rise or fall on the basis of their success *at educating* everyone connected to them.² Lifelong learning takes on more and more meaning with each passing year. Education is a serious business, and this ought to be a kind of first maxim for everything that happens in schools. In a democracy, determining the extent and quality of social justice is the right-ful province of its citizens. Every issue that touches human lives in this society can be peeled back, as with an onion, to expose the heart of the matter—the extent and quality of social justice. This is not to suggest that schooling ought to be one long, ceaseless political debate. It does suggest, however, that at any point in time, a student should be able, if asked, to make the connection between ongoing work in the classroom or in the community and the issue of social justice.

The elementary school is a great place to begin the process of removing the instrumentality that currently defines the public-school experience. The question of what a child will be when he or she “grows up” ought to be downplayed. Even at grade-one level, students should be encouraged to live in the present, not in the future. It is what they are at the moment that matters, and students need to see, in the curriculum and pedagogy exhibited by caring, professional teachers, that it does matter. There is nothing quite so detrimental to the psychological health of school-age youth as the near-constant message that they are nothing until they get out of school. It is a very damaging socialization into the adult world. Knowing, as we do, that children are surrounded by such a message for years, there ought to be little cause for surprise at the extremely high levels of youthful experimentation with sex, drugs, and alcohol.

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It is all well and good to talk about focusing on the present with elementary-age students, about developing civic virtue and a capacity for give-and-take deliberation. Sooner or later, the question of “discipline” barges into the conversation. Teachers are quick to explain that children are not overly endowed with the patience required for deliberation. Children don't inately “take turns” when speaking, and it is important to note that listening is not one of their strengths.

These circumstances have contributed to the evolution of two persistent images of the elementary-school teacher. The first is deeply connected to the past, to the one-room schoolmarm. The image is that of the autocrat, the maker and enforcer of classroom rules. The “switch” is the symbol of this image: Break the rules, and expect a lashing. Although corporal punishment was primarily a nineteenth-century phenomenon, it was a defining characteristic of public schools well into this century. Today, at the century's end, there are still autocratic teachers working, but the punishments they employ have become less physical.

There is no need to go into a lengthy critique of the use of punishments to achieve the desired classroom atmosphere. Such critiques have been around for decades, even centuries. The French philosopher Michel de Montaigne, for instance, railed against it during the 1500s.³ That psychological damage accompanies the extensive use of punishment in elementary schools is almost conventional wisdom today. Good teachers seem to know, intuitively, that using punishments to achieve desired behaviors is not a strategy conducive to maximizing student learning. It structures in student resistance to the pedagogical efforts of the teacher. As that occurs, tension enters the very “feel” of the classroom.

The gradual rise of this understanding to the level of common sense has contributed to the development of another powerful image of the elementary-school teacher. This image, which seems close to being the opposite of the first, is of the warm, compassionate nurturer of children. This teacher, far from being ready to brandish a switch at a moment's notice, is full of praise and good feeling. The “happy face” is the symbol of this image.

Critiques of this stereotype are considerably less pervasive than are those of the teacher as disciplinarian, but they exist nonetheless. All elementary teachers should take a serious look at Alfie Kohn's *Punished by Rewards*.⁴ With our ability to dole out praise, we inure students to being emotionally dependent, a practice that is heavily criticized by a growing number of teachers and professors. The external signifiers of “good” behavior—the happy faces, the stickers, the candy bars, and so forth—all serve to take the focus away from learning and put it squarely into the realm of giving the teacher what he or she wants.

How often?

Rewards and punishments, however, do not exhaust the list of possibilities for dealing with the high energy and immediacy of childhood. Forrest Gathercoal has worked through a disciplinary orientation that seeks to balance "student rights and responsibilities." He calls his approach "judicious discipline," and I will be borrowing from his work later in this chapter.⁵ I was drawn to Gathercoal's work because part of the process of community restoration involves balancing this tension between rights and responsibilities. An overemphasis on individual rights destroys community (not to mention the environment), whereas creating the balance inherent in observing individual rights while shouldering responsibility builds community. If simultaneous renewal is the agenda, it makes sense to make use of such an approach to address the question of discipline in rural elementary schools.

There is a great deal of interest in the issue of discipline within our nation's public schools. Despite the fact that it seems obvious that discipline problems are heavily context-dependent, there are those who claim that some clever step-by-step process will solve all problems. There are also those who assert that there would be no problems if parents would do their job. (The implication seems to be that their "job" is to inculcate within their children a capacity for immediate and unquestioning submission to authority.) And there are those who claim that there would be no problems if teachers would do their job. (The implication seems to be that teacher quality is measured by the ability to manipulate the behavior of all the children in a classroom.)

None of this is helpful. First of all, the "sure-thing" discipline package is a veritable for-profit industry in this country, despite the fact that would-be entrepreneurs, often looking to maximize their own self-interest, can promise little or nothing by way of results. Second, the claim that poor parenting is at the root of our discipline problems is also chimerical. Certainly, our culture has defined what constitutes good parenting, and just as certainly, it is no secret that a significant portion of the parent population in this country does not measure up. In the case of the affluent, for example, children often become inconvenient, an obstacle to the ever-hotter pursuit of self-interest. Poor parents, in contrast, having been socialized to believe that their inability to successfully maximize their self-interest is due to some failing on their part, also believe that this same something will constrain the lives of their children. Blaming inappropriate classroom discipline on parents is a malicious sort of "blaming the victim." The victims, of course, are the children whose parents have both won and lost the race for self-interest. Last, the claim that teachers are to blame for our epidemic-level classroom discipline problems just doesn't hold up under scrutiny. Although it is true that there are many common pedagogical and curricular practices that fairly beg for student misbehavior (such as reducing the school day to an

unending series of worksheets), it is also true that the sole motivation for teaching is to help students learn. How could such an agenda be construed as an invitation to unruly behavior?

If we want to be serious about the question of school discipline, looking for shortcomings in either parents or teachers represents a waste of time and energy. The shortcoming is embedded in our culture. It takes the form of a fetish for individual acquisition, a fetish that has guided the evolution of schooling to facilitate that end. "Here's what you need to know" is, all too often, what teaching has become. Three-year-olds, in all but the most isolated homes, have already been socialized to accept the role of student with dutiful passivity while an older sibling or neighbor spouts out information at a rapid clip. It is not just community and the environment that are destroyed by a culture that eschews moderation and pronounces ethical deliberation a waste of time; the possibility of meaningful education is destroyed as well.

If a year or two of concerted school and community planning were followed by a reduction of teacher-student contact hours to a maximum of four per day, however, significant gains might be made quickly. Not only would student behavior improve, but so too would the depth and quality of the understandings constructed by students. Making such a schedule change, however, must be accompanied by change in the definition of schooling as a teacher workplace. That is, a significant portion of the teacher's day would then be given over to intense, in-depth study. Shared readings, action research projects, discussions, team planning, and the like would all become a part of the teacher's day. In short, an intellectual dimension can be reinserted into the profession, and students, as they begin to actively engage curriculum made relevant by connections to their place on earth, can become the beneficiary.

There are those who will say that an intellectual embrace of the immediate locality cannot be sustained for long, that students will inevitably have to go back to studying decontextualized "stuff," stuff they "need to know" or "have to have" for some future date with destiny (or with the Educational Testing Service, although there are those who claim that this is one and the same). This is a seductive argument, of course, for it legitimates the status quo—one more good reason not to change a thing. But imagine for a moment that the immediate locale *was* the lens for disciplinary engagement in all schools across the country. Next, try to imagine that we wanted to change this circumstance, that we wanted to make it, in fact, today's agenda. Could we create a persuasive argument? We would have to contend that we must not ground concepts and ideas in the child's immediate surroundings, that we must instead do what we can to decontextualize curriculum, to make it artificial and detached from the everyday life of the

child. Far from being persuasive, such an argument borders on the ridiculous, and yet this is exactly what is said between the lines whenever the idea that schools should focus on their place is criticized.

The idea of using the immediate locality as a lens for disciplinary engagement is, at a minimum, as old as Rousseau. More recently, John Dewey made similar arguments, and a host of twentieth-century educational theorists have followed his lead. Still, the idea remains countercultural, and as a result, it may be worthwhile to attempt to describe what it means to use the school's place as a curricular lens. Perhaps the biggest hurdle here is recognizing that curriculum is simply not synonymous with information. Although there is certainly a mass of information one might "acquire" concerning various subjects—for instance, the American Revolution, photosynthesis, musical tone and timbre, quadratic equations, or nineteenth-century American novels—unless this acquired information is used by students to construct understanding about the world as it currently exists for them, the time spent in acquisition will have been wasted.

The school's place allows educators to take what is artificial out of the schooling experience. For example, questions can be framed to connect remote events with today's time and place: What circumstances led to the American Revolution? Do any of these continue to trouble the residents in our rural county? Which ones? How can we find out? Did the American Revolution create new dilemmas? Do any of these continue to trouble the residents of our county? With skillful pedagogical guidance, the school's place allows children to develop the intellectual flexibility needed to see history as a force in their lives rather than as an exercise in the acquisition of names and dates. All of the traditional "subjects" can reap the same intellectual rewards through a focus on place; and they can be made more powerful by engaging the place with a multidisciplinary approach. The depression era can become a subject that painfully touched real lives—the lives of community elders who come into the school to share their childhood experiences. Excellent songs, like those written and performed by Woody Guthrie, can sharpen student insight into the complex social questions raised by the dire circumstances of that era. Excellent novels such as Lois Phillips Hudson's *The Bones of Plenty* or Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* speak poignantly to the human condition and can thereby enrich the historical understanding constructed by students. Mathematics can enable students to chronicle depression-era outmigration from their own community, and family histories can then bring life to identified numerical trends. Science can allow students to explore the physical conditions that create significant periods of drought as well as those conditions that follow in their wake.

In short, place allows educators to see the artificial nature of subject-area boundaries and understand how this Progressive Era attempt at maximizing efficiency, which ostensibly stems from specialization, has worked to

undermine the quality of the educational experiences offered by the modern school.

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Forrest Gathercoal advocates a judicious discipline that daily reminds students of the interplay between rights and responsibilities. This is first-rate socialization for a democracy. It will quickly sour and backfire, however, if responsibility is trivialized by the adults in the school community.

children want to please
One of the great difficulties with the school experience in this country is that young children, equipped with a wide-eyed idealism and a tremendous endowment of faith in adults, will often go along with trivialized conceptions of responsibility in their willingness to please. They will willingly oblige such familiar requests as keeping their hands to themselves, keeping their line straight, not budging, becoming silent instantly, taking turns at the drinking fountain, and so forth. As students get older, however, many begin to reject what they take to be the arbitrary use of power. After all, they wonder one day, why must a line be straight? Slowly, they come to recognize that submission is asked for more often than anything else, and when this recognition comes, they display the expected deference more grudgingly. Sometimes as early as the fourth or fifth grade, students have learned, in fact, to give the silence demanded by teachers only when their acquiescence will be exchanged for minimal amounts of homework. Many researchers have documented this sad, though pervasive, classroom "compromise."⁶

To avoid this situation, the very opposite of socialization for silence must be cultivated. One of the greatest educational contributions an elementary teacher can make is to socialize students into recognizing that talk—more accurately, deliberation—is and must be a predictable and indispensable part of schooling.

Talk comes naturally to kids. But our unfortunate response has been to subdue it, to curtail it, to train kids to turn it off like a light switch. Until recently, we were convinced that learning required silence so that knowledge could be stored away unimpeded in the heads of our students. The recent work of constructivist theorists enables us to look at knowledge as something socially constructed, and with this understanding, we can see the sense in Deborah Meier's claim that "learning is mostly talking, teaching is mostly listening." Students require socialization to learn the skills of responsible, courteous, and conversational deliberation. This does not come easily. It takes lots of practice. It is, however, a key ingredient in the cultivation of civic virtue. It is worth far more than all the phonetic rules or arithmetic formulas that currently fill our textbooks.

The best way to achieve this sort of socialization is to make elementary explorations of subject matter a matter of inquiry. Answers should not be

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provided by the teacher or the textbook. Rather, they should be deliberated on and thereby constructed by students. The teacher acts as a guide by asking questions, by encouraging research, and by challenging the naive interpretations that elementary-age children inevitably produce.

This suggests that the typical room arrangement, in which the teacher's desk faces straight rows of student desks, ought to become the exception rather than the norm. This traditional configuration was designed to enable students to efficiently record information, and it had the added advantage of facilitating the quick enforcement of silence. If these are no longer the primary goals of the teaching process, then some other room configuration is required. Many elementary classrooms today utilize small groups of desks throughout the room, and this is certainly an improvement. Another configuration that is rare in public schools is the complete circle made out of all available desks. This configuration is conducive to deliberation. There is much to be said for using it as the norm or perhaps as a configuration to begin and end each school day. In between, of course, desks will have to be moved to accommodate a wide variety of learning activities.

Having suggested this, however, I would caution the reader against putting too much emphasis on how the desks are arranged. All things considered, it is a minor point. But it is not unimportant. Messages are sent by the way the classroom is laid out, whether we, as teachers, are conscious of these messages or not. In the case study that follows, I use a circle of twenty-two desks (it could easily be twenty-five, twenty-eight, or thirty-two, or whatever; I fear there are still places in this country where this many students are placed in one elementary classroom) to project an image of how a typical classroom might be changed. Now, for the purpose of providing concrete examples, I would like to build the image even further.

For instance, visualize a first-year third-grade teacher surveying the circle of twenty-two desks that he has just created. It is his first contract day, and the flurry of beginning-of-the-year in-service meetings is still a few hours away. The student desks are arranged. At one point in the circle, he has inserted a chair that will accommodate an adult; he knows that he will be a part of the circle. He has taken the large teacher's desk and fitted it into a corner where he will work when his students are not in the room. The walls and bulletin boards are bare, and he is not at all certain what he should do with them. In a few minutes, he will seek out the principal to reacquaint himself with the school's policies and procedures and to ask several questions regarding curricular issues and a host of other concerns that have kept him awake at night for the past several weeks. He is getting ready to teach.

Because he attended a rural university where the professors were serious about preparing teachers for rural schools, he has latched onto and become committed to certain principles. The first is that he believes knowledge is socially constructed and that his instructional practices, therefore, must in-

clude socializing his students into the habit of courteous conversation and deliberation. He will not function as the provider of answers; he will, rather, facilitate the sound construction of answers by his students. Because he believes the very idea of providing an education for the sake of the economy or the "marketplace" will ultimately limit, even hamper, the intellectual growth of his students (and constrain his own professional growth as well), he has decided he will work for a nobler, more substantive end. He will do what he can to help his students visualize and then attend to the needs of the community of which they are a part. The students' place on earth, in fact, will be central to all of his curricular and instructional efforts.

Our hypothetical teacher is wise enough to know that his agenda is atypical, even countercultural. In his conversations with the other elementary teachers, therefore, he has stuck to traditional topics: "What level of proficiency do you, as the fourth-grade teacher, expect in the area of mathematics?" and "You had this group last year; can you give me any advice?" He plans to share his agenda slowly and mostly through example.

By the time the first day of school arrives, he has prepared a folder in which he will keep selected pieces of work produced by his students. And he has prepared a record-keeping journal in which he will document classroom activities, the subject areas engaged within each of these, and notes for future reference regarding student progress. He knows the names of his students by heart, and he has laminated twenty-two name cards and taped each one to its own desk. Within these desks he has placed the traditional textbooks, those that were used the year before by his predecessor. He is uneasy about these books, however, mostly because of an insight he took away from his university studies.

Like many of his peers entering the teacher preparation program, he considered textbooks and curriculum to be essentially the same thing. He was almost startled by an essay he was asked to read for one of his first elementary-education classes. It was entitled "Seven Reasons Why Textbooks Cannot Make a Curriculum,"⁷ and the discussion that followed in class the next day was even more enlightening. Through that discussion, he learned that what students learn is a secondary concern for publishing houses. Their first concern is the bottom line; that is, they publish textbooks for profit. He discovered, too, that when an occasional textbook is published with careful attention paid to possible learning as opposed to sales, it usually doesn't fare well, for such books pay scant attention to what might make the process of teaching easy for teachers. It is those textbooks that look as if they will minimize the work of teachers that sell the best. This was a hard lesson to swallow, but it left him skeptical of textbooks. Still, the thought of beginning his first school year without them produced more anxiety than he could handle, so he placed them inside the student desks, knowing that they would be there when he needed them. He figured the math text would

be a good source of practice problems, and as far as reading was concerned, his plan was to periodically work one-on-one with his students, asking each of them to read selections from the district's basal series, while he kept careful records of the process.

Our teacher had been a part of more whole language versus skills debates in his teacher preparation program than he cared to recall. He approached these with interest, but without passion. He could see strengths and weaknesses on both sides of the issue. Now that the time had come for him to make a decision, he found that it was more his view of education's ultimate purpose that moved him in a certain direction than the persuasiveness of a particular theory of learning. The same was true for other issues, including assessment. He was determined to be what he and a few of his undergraduate colleagues jokingly referred to as a "pointless" teacher. That is, arbitrarily created and assigned points would not be a part of his assessment procedures. If education was to be made relevant, if it was to be a seamless part of life itself, the constant reduction of information to its lowest skill or lowest conceptual elements would have to be eliminated. A fan of Howard Gardner's work,⁸ he was interested in assessing the sophistication of the understandings his students would produce. The idea that this could somehow be done by assigning points seemed hopelessly shallow.

When the twenty-two students filed into the room, it was not difficult to discern their surprise on seeing the circle of desks. They whispered quietly as they searched the laminated name cards in search of their places. Once seated, they listened somewhat anxiously as their teacher introduced himself. The feeling of surprise in the room was even greater when he began to speak about the U.S. Constitution, asking how many had heard of it, how many knew what it was, and so on. He encouraged individual students to vocalize their responses. The discussion turned to individual rights and when those rights might be fairly restricted in the interest of the group.

Taking Gathercoal's "judicious discipline" to heart, he spent a great deal of time making sure his students possessed reasonably sophisticated conceptions of rights and responsibilities. He asked them to write down all the rights they thought they possessed as U.S. citizens. He wrote many of these on the board. Next, he asked them to write down all the rights they thought they possessed at school. Although it was clear from their expressions that the students thought this was a strange beginning to the school year, they did their best to do as their teacher asked. After writing the second responses on the board, he encouraged his students to talk about the overlap and the fact that school is not a separate experience, something unconnected to "real life."

Many students were eager to answer his queries—so much so that they frequently shouted their responses. It was clear that he would have his work cut out for him if he was going to make this kind of deliberation a central

feature of the classroom. He persevered, however, with gentle reminders that everyone could not talk at once. Gradually, by asking questions and soliciting responses, he felt comfortable that his students were grasping the wisdom undergirding the idea that individual rights must be balanced by attention to responsibility for the group. He was pleased to see that this flowed naturally into a discussion of rules for the classroom. He surprised his students once again when the subject turned to gum chewing. One student, eager to please, suggested that there ought to be a rule against chewing gum in their classroom. But when he asked how one student's right to chew gum might prove to be a problem for the group, no one could come up with any answers. After supplying a few of his own, for the sake of argument (that gum sometimes ended up under school desks or bubble blowing sometimes became a distraction), he indicated that if the students wanted to try it as a classroom rule, gum chewing would be allowed. He made it clear, however, that this rule, like all others, was subject to periodic review and revision. m
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After a recess break, the morning was spent constructing copies of the classroom rules. They were posted at the front and back of the room, and all the students signed both copies, in the process indicating that they would do their best to abide by the rules they had generated.

Sitting at his desk at 4:00 P.M. after his first full day with students, our teacher reasoned that although everything had not gone perfectly, he had made an important, reasonably successful first step at socializing his students into life in a democracy. They had been a part of the rule-creating process, and he knew that the students felt that it had been a special experience, a different kind of first day.

On day two, his students generated lists of the things that interested them the most, and these, too, went up on the walls. Furthermore, he took one list home with him and put it up on his bedroom wall. Beneath it, he hung a blank sheet of butcher paper on which he intended to make notes related to interests that were common, interests that were in some ways intellectually interdependent, interests that seemed to lend themselves to collaborative student work. Next to that, making a kind of triangle, he placed a shorthand, "at-a-glance" curriculum guide that captured the essence of what the district expected in terms of third-grade "content." In no time, he had drawn arrows that went from student interests to district curriculum to the butcher paper, and they served as the incubator for all of his creative ideas. He was determined that the lists the students created would become an integral part of everything he did during the school year.

On the first day of school, the walls of his classroom had been completely bare. He recognized the skeptical look when a teacher or two strolled in during one of the in-service days before the students arrived. Anticipating this reaction, he quickly explained that his plans were to use student work

to decorate the room. After a week of school, in fact, there were plenty of things on the wall, but it was also becoming apparent that without some careful attention to this matter, the room could quickly take on a cluttered, displeasing appearance. Instead of taking things down and rearranging them, however, he decided to discuss it with the students. Corrective suggestions were offered, then written on the board, and then the students were turned loose to make the changes. It made a difference. From that point on, the question of how additions to the walls might affect the overall appearance of the room, shared as it was by everyone, became a topic for discussion and deliberation.

Initially, our teacher used the math texts in a fairly traditional manner, except that students were divided into heterogeneous groups and were allowed to help one another with their work. As his confidence grew, however, he took his first steps toward community-oriented curricular integration of a very holistic sort. Having first been divided into three inquiry groups, the entire class took a field trip to examine local plant life. They went to a vacant lot in town, to the school's football field, and to a nearby farm pasture. In each location, one of the groups inspected a 10"x10" plot. The number and kinds of plants within each plot were counted. The students cut samples of the different plants and were able, back in the classroom, to identify differences between grasses and various weeds. The analysis was basic but accurate. The students were intensely interested in their work.

Although he had not yet introduced fractions, multiplication, or division, our teacher found that the plot work presented a perfect opportunity to do so. He proposed a number of mathematical problems for the class to solve: If the three football-field plots contained three weeds each, how could we arrive at the total number of weeds? What would we do if we wanted to analyze smaller plots the next time? He encouraged the students to vocalize their responses to questions that allowed clear conceptions of these principles of arithmetic to emerge, all before any time was spent on rote memorization.

The plant study naturally led to the concept of palatability, and that, in turn, led to the concepts of carnivore and herbivore. One of the students had an older brother in Future Farmers of America (FFA), and our teacher encouraged him to invite his brother to speak to the class about differences in the nutritional value of various plants, including those found in their plots. Through this process, the students learned a great deal about how food animals are raised, because the guest speaker told the students that many grazing animals never have a chance to eat the plants discovered in the pasture plots. Many are raised in feedlots, he explained. This sparked a flurry of questions from the students, and the FFA member found himself describing the practices of large-scale beef feedlot and hog confinement operations. He spoke of the advantages in terms of producing large amounts of food relatively cheaply, but he also warned of the environmental con-

cerns that shadow these operations—things like polluted air and water. Our teacher was proud of the insightful questions raised by the students.

As he lay in bed that night, he knew that he was beginning to live out the principles to which he had professed allegiance during his undergraduate studies. The community was at that moment debating the pros and cons of large feedlots, for there were rumors that negotiations were under way with local landowners and that the county zoning board would soon have to consider a proposal for the variances that would allow a large meatpacking corporation to create a huge feedlot near town. His students could be a part of this community deliberation.

Many discussions ensued throughout the week. It was finally decided that the class could help the community by producing a poll that would tap resident attitudes toward the possibility of a large feedlot near town. The teacher allowed the students to determine what questions would be asked, but he encouraged them to solicit the age and gender of each respondent. This way, the students would have a chance to mathematically manipulate the data they collected. The editor of the local weekly newspaper was asked to respond to the poll. He was so struck by what the third graders were doing that he decided to do a feature story on the project. He photographed a group of students poring over the poll results, and he interviewed several of them to relay their reactions to being a part of the project. As if this were not enough attention, a television station some fifty miles away picked up on the story in the local paper. A reporter and film crew spent the better part of one morning with the class, intent on producing a two-minute human-interest clip for the nightly news.

After only three months of teaching, our teacher had begun to develop a reputation for innovation and being able to generate excitement. Whereas the parents of his students seemed thrilled with what was going on, his efforts did not go over as well among his colleagues. Although he had developed what he took to be a very good relationship with a few teachers, he could not mistake the air of resentment that seemed to emanate from others. He knew that behind his back several colleagues talked openly about merely having "fun and games," when the students were supposed to be learning mathematics and reading and science, and so forth. He was hurt by these indirect, sometimes very subtle, complaints from his peers. Although he had originally thought that he had landed in a perfect place to teach, he sometimes found himself wondering if he might not fit in better at another school.

The matter bothered him enough to broach it with one of his former professors at Christmas break. The professor reminded him of the many seminar discussions, of which he had been a part, that had focused on school culture and on what happens when it experiences the forces of change. He was clearly a change force, which was exactly what the teacher education

program had prepared him to be. If he were to leave, the professor explained, the culture would go on as before. And, in any case, the chances of finding a job in a school that would not exhibit the same dynamics were slim indeed. What the teacher needed to do, the professor surmised, was to learn to share and collaborate in an unpretentious, uncontentious way. He advised, "Be an advocate for a more cooperative culture within the school and among the teachers."

The message was far from comforting, but our teacher came away better equipped to see himself as a part of the school's future and with greater ability to withstand the slings and arrows directed at his unconventional practices. He would stay the course.

* * *

Although this story is hypothetical, it was pieced together from real incidents. It is obviously not a far-fetched story, for these kinds of learning activities occur in rural classrooms all across the country on a regular basis. Few *schools* have embraced these ideas, however. If such a learning experiment takes place in your neighborhood, it is most likely the result of the school's having secured the services of the right teacher. The educational power that could result from an entire school acting on shared principle is enormous indeed, but achieving this requires the arduous work described in the previous chapter. There are no radical ideas motivating community-oriented pedagogy such as this, just deep thinking about what education is for and how teachers can best facilitate the construction of significant student understanding. Such thinking leads to considering the matter of relevance as a crucial component of learning, and it also leads to recognition that reconstituting community on an educational foundation may well be our best available solution to the violent culture that follows an excessive emphasis on individualism.

St. Augustine, the great Catholic bishop of North Africa, recognized, as Roman culture was disintegrating around him, that a significant contribution to the Roman predicament had been the failure of Rome's educational system to encourage students to go beyond Roman cultural assumptions.⁹ If we make the same mistake, we can hardly expect a different result.

9

Place-Conscious Secondary Classrooms

Our present "leaders"—the people of wealth and power—do not know what it means to take a place seriously: to think it worthy, for its own sake, of love and study and careful work. They cannot take any place seriously because they must be ready at any moment, by the terms of power and wealth in the modern world, to destroy any place.

—Wendell Berry, 1991

I have a colleague approaching her retirement years who was born and raised on a farm in South Dakota. She attended school and church in a small community that has since lost its school and churches. I have heard her tell a childhood story a couple of times now, a story that I think says a lot about American culture. When she was a small girl, there was an enormous amount of farm tenancy in South Dakota (and across the trans-Mississippi West, generally). Pickup trucks and wagons loaded down with beds, dressers, and sometimes farm implements such as plows were a common springtime sight. Families on the move like this were on their way to another farm, where they hoped to find better rental terms, thus increasing their chances for farm ownership sometime in the future. My colleague was one of the fortunate ones. Her parents owned their farm, and thus she was always a spectator of the springtime moves, never a participant. She laughs about it now, but as a girl, she felt cheated out of the excitement that must have come with being on the move—with seeing new sights, eating at a restaurant in town, meeting new children at school. From a distance, it all seemed very exciting.