

USING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE TO SUPPORT K-8 PLACE-CONSCIOUS EDUCATION

SUSAN SZABO AND FREIDA GOLDEN

ABSTRACT

Children's background experiences not only make them unique individuals, but also impact their interactions with texts because of their varied schema. Teachers who work with children should keep in mind Gregory Smith's (2002) five thematic patterns (cultural studies, nature studies, real world problem solving, internship and entrepreneurial opportunities, and induction into the community process) and use children's literature to engage children in place-conscious education. The purpose of this article is to provide a list of children's books that we believe can be used to develop each of the thematic patterns in order to allow children to develop a sense of place as it relates to where they live as well as to the larger world (Gruenewald, 2003; Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel, 2010).

Our experiences matter. Where we live is a part of what makes us unique and this influences our interaction with text as well as the text genre we like to read. A child who grows up in a suburban neighborhood with housing developments and green spaces will experience quite a different childhood from a child who grows up on a rural ranch. The child on the rural ranch might get up early with parents to feed the animals before school, raise an animal for the local country fair, and have more exposure to vast outdoor spaces. On the other hand, the suburban child will grow up in what Robert Brooke (2015), author of five books and numerous articles exploring urban environments and their impacts on literacy development, calls "Edge City," where families live, work, shop and play without ever venturing into the urban areas from which these cities develop. There are, of course, children who grow up in urban areas far removed from suburban and rural life. These children are familiar with mass transportation, immense human-built features and almost twenty-four hour access to needed services.

Consider each of these children growing up in these different places and the different life experiences they encounter. Our thoughts and beliefs about the world, others in the world, and beyond come from these life experiences, our involvement with our families, our culture, and our communities. "Our places are part of who we are. They offer us lessons about the world, its civics, its politics, its geography, and its whimsical forces of nature and humanity" (Ross, 2003, p. 45). Thus, "place-based education is a community-based effort to reconnect the process of education and human development to the well-being of community life" (Gruenewald & Smith, 2007, pg. xvi).

PURPOSE

Gregory Smith (2002), who has written a plethora of articles on place-based education, states that place-conscious education can help children make connections between school and their lives so they can become valued working community members. He based his five thematic patterns (cultural studies, nature studies, real world problem solving, internship and entrepreneurial opportunities, and induction into the community process) of placed-based curriculum on Dewey's

(1938/1997) ideas of the lived experiences of children and activities of the child in the home and neighborhood (Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel, 2010).

The purpose of this article is to offer a list of books we believe will support Smith's (2002) five thematic patterns in order to engage students in place-conscious education, thus giving teachers a way to connect classrooms to the lives of the students. This type of curriculum confirms for a child that her or his family and culture are important (Gruenewald, 2003). The study of place-conscious education does not involve elimination of a required curriculum as much as the simple inclusion of local happenings (Smith, 2002; Smith & Sobel, 2010). This list of children's literature can be used by teachers or parents to help develop a well-rounded sense of place as it relates to where children live. Children are then able to relate their own place to the larger world (Smith & Sobel, 2010).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article is posited within constructivist learning theory, theory of experience (Dewey, 1938/1997) and intertwined with theory of place-conscious education (Gruenewald, 2003). In addition, Rosenblatt's (1969; 1978) transactional theory and reader response theory as well as Rumelhart's (1980) schema theory are used to bridge place-conscious education to children's literature and literacy.

Constructivist learning theory states that knowledge is constructed through our past experiences which are place bound. This idea is supported by Dewey's experience theory, (1938/1997). Place-conscious education focuses on the relationship of culture and nature that shape communities (Brooke, 2003; Gruenewald, 2003; Smith & Sobel, 2010). Thus, place-conscious education makes sense for children because it builds on their prior experiences and makes use of the spaces around them. It is a way to make classroom lessons meaningful and relevant. Place-conscious education teaches family, local culture, and local history and connects it all to the larger world. An understanding of place-conscious education is beneficial to children as they move to appreciate the larger world, (Ross, 2003). Children construct knowledge on the experiences they have in the places where they live in order to understand the world.

Rosenblatt's (1969; 1978) transactional theory and reader-response theory argued that a reader interacts with text using background experiences. Thus, the suburban child and the rural child, due to their different backgrounds, will interact with a text differently. This is supported by Rumelhart's (1980) schema theory, which states that existing schemata formed by background experiences serves as the base for interacting with new knowledge and constructing meaning. Thus, the suburban child and the rural child will most likely organize their knowledge into different patterns.

FIVE THEMATIC PATTERNS

Smith (2002) recognized that place-education looks different in each community. However, he believes the experiences that each community organizes is developed around five thematic patterns. Knapp (2005) states that "all five patterns form a conceptual umbrella commonly called experiential learning, because they are situated in the context of community life and involve active student engagement" (p. 280). These five patterns are abstract ideas which only become concrete through application or learned through experiences (Dewey, 1938/1997).

CULTURAL STUDIES. Cultural studies provide opportunities for students to learn about the history and culture of their community and to present their work to the community (Smith, 2002). When children hear stories similar to those of their own families in books, it builds pride in the child's home environment (Gruenewald & Smith, 2007; Knapp, 2005). From the local stories of culture, family, and place, it is then easy to move outward to the larger communities and the world.

There are a plethora of books that can be used to help children not only celebrate their cultural experiences but to find out about the diversity of communities in which other children live. Listed in Table 1 are books that we believe are appropriate for K-8 children and can be used not only in the classroom but also in the home to engage children in a variety of cultural studies. This list consists of books we and other teachers have used in the classroom as well as those available in both the school and public library. We have included both old and new books that are appropriate to help students learn about themselves as well as value the similarities and differences of others within their community and beyond.

Table 1
Books to Promote Cultural Studies

K-3 List of Books	4-8 List of Books
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oni's Good Hair Day by M. Boden, C. Nicklaus, P. Samara & S. Unger • The Sandwich Swap by J. Abdullah, K. DiPucchio & T. Tusa • The Colors of Us by K. Katz • Whoever You Are by M. Fox • The Skin I'm In by P. Thomas • Same, Same but Different by J. Kostecki-Shaw • What I Like About Me by A. Nolan • One of Us by P. Moss • We All Have Heritage by S. Holman & L. Kometiani • Children Around the World by D. Montanari • A Color of His Own by L. Linonni 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Long Walk to Water by L. S. Park • In the Footsteps of Crazy Horse by J. Marshal III • Funny Bones Posada and His Day of the Dead Calaveras by D. Tonatiuh • El Deafo by C. Bell • American Born Chinese by G. L. Yang • Monster by W. D. Meyers • The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian by S. Alexie • The House on Mango Street by S. Cisneros • Unusual Chickens for the Exceptional Poultry Farmer by K. Jones

We encourage teachers to read these books to children and hold discussions around them, as they help to teach about diversity and acceptance by looking at similarities and differences. It is important for children to learn that families and communities are diverse but their members can work and play together in order to form an effective and nurturing community.

NATURE STUDIES. Nature studies take advantage of children's curiosity about things they find in the physical world as they explore their back yards and other natural phenomena such as rivers, mountains and forests (Smith, 2002). This is important, as "we are becoming more and more ignorant of the things we need to live sustainably on earth" (Lesley & Matthews, 2009, p.525). One example is found in Oregon where students take frequent field trips to the local water source to conduct water quality tests. Another example is students working in an urban community garden, such as the Deep Ellum Urban Gardens in Dallas. Visiting nature centers or arboretums and

creating classroom vegetable garden areas or butterfly gardens are all ways to bring nature to children, especially urban and suburban children.

Nature studies not only allow our students to learn about our world and its habitants, but also ways in which we can care for the environment (Smith, 2002). Taking children to the park, picking up litter, recycling, and tending to a garden or a compost bin are all ways to introduce children to nature studies. In addition, there is an assortment of books that can help children learn about our planet and ways to take care of it. Table 2 contains a list of old and new books that we believe are appropriate for K-8 children and can be used not only in the classroom but also in the home to engage children in a variety of nature studies.

Table 2
Books to Promote Nature Studies

K-3 List of Books	4-8 List Books
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • And then it's Spring by J. Fogliano • Farewell to Shady Glade by B. Peet • A Seed is Sleepy by D. Aston • A Butterfly is Patient by D. Aston • Dig Worms by M. McGuire • Big Earth, Little Me by T. Wiley • What Do You See? by S. Krensky • The Earth and I by F. Asch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The River by G. Paulson • Lost on a Mountain in Maine by D. Fendler • Keeping a Nature Journal: Discover a Whole New Way of Seeing the World by C. W. Leslie • Girls Who Looked Under Rocks: The Lives of Six Pioneering Naturalists by J. Atkins • Heroes of the Environment: True Stories of People Who Are Helping to Protect Our Environment by H. Rohmer • No Summit Out of Sight: The True Story of the Youngest Person to Climb the Seven Summits by J. Romero • Darnell Rock Reporting by W. D. Meyers

Nature can be a great teacher, and these books help children learn about their environment. Nature books can also promote curiosity and help children to understand their place in the universe. We believe using these books either as an introduction to a topic or discussion starters about what the class might find in different environments will engage young minds and provide a powerful opportunity for learning about our world (Carr et al., 2001).

REAL WORLD PROBLEM SOLVING. This theme provides students an opportunity to explore various school and community issues (Smith, 2002). Critical thinking skills used to solve problems which are related to places and things children are familiar with is authentic and significant to children. For example, the school playground might be poorly maintained and the teacher and students brainstorm ways to repair and restore it. They organize a “Fix Our Playground Saturday,” and ask the PTA for funds and ask parents to help. Fixing the playground equipment creates both a safer place to play and an inviting and colorful space.

To be responsible citizens young children need to approach issues with wisdom based on a foundation of knowledge (Abruscato & DeRosa, 2010). Teachers and parents will find a surplus of books to help children become critical thinkers and problem solvers of real world problems. These books are found in Table 3.

Table 3
Books for Problem Solving

K-3 List of Books	4-8 List Books
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Crayon Box that Talked by S. Derolf & M. Letzig • Ladybug Girl and Bumblebee Boy by D. Soman and J. Davis • Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs by J. Barrett • I Want That by E. Crary • A Bad Case of Tattle Tongue by J. Cook • I'm Lost by E. Crary • I Won't Share by H. Wilhelm • David Goes to School by D. Shannon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Henry Reed's Think Tank by Keith Robertson • Mad Scientists' Club by B. R. Brinley • They Stood Alone! 25 Men and Women Who Made a Difference by S. M. Humphrey • Girls Think of Everything: Stories of Ingenious Inventions by Women by C. Thimmesh • Brainstorm the story of Twenty American Kid Inventors by T. Tucker • Real Kids, Real Stories, Real Change; Courageous Actions Around the World by G. Sundem

These books help students to solve problems constructively. When using these books as read alouds, the discussions allow children to engage in the problem-solving process and develop several possible scenarios for solving the problem (Forgan, 2003). This allows children to learn that there may be several solutions to consider when solving problems.

INTERNSHIP AND ENTREPRENEURIAL OPPORTUNITIES. This theme provides students a chance to think about local vocational and entrepreneurial employment opportunities (Smith, 2002). As students grow, they are encouraged to find or create economic opportunities within their community, rather than to go elsewhere. Thus, they are making a difference in the community by making it stronger and more diverse (Gruenewald & Smith, 2007).

Based on current research and conventional wisdom, financial education should begin at an early age (O'Neil-Haight, 2010). Children should be taught to save money for things that are important to them as well as learn the difference between needs and wants. School service projects where children bring in their pennies to buy food for a local animal shelter, books for a local children's hospital or coats, gloves and hats for a local agency help children think beyond themselves.

Engaging children in helping others is one way to build self-esteem and a sense of self-worth. Many books can be found with stories about economics and the power of helping others. Books that will help students learn about money and projects are listed in Table 4.

Table 4
Books that Promote Entrepreneurial Opportunities

K-3 List of Books	4-8 List Books
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Billy Sure Kid Entrepreneur and the Invisible Inventor by L. Sharpe • Random Acts of Kindness by Conari Press • A Home for Bird by P. Stead • Because Amelia Smiled by D. Stein • The Gold Rule by L. Cooper • Have you filled a Bucket Today? By C. McCloud • The Giving Tree by S. Silverstein • Bernstein Bears: Think of Those in Need by J. & S. Bernstein • Give Thanks by K. Bostrom • Why Should I Help by C Lewellyn & M.Gordon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Henry Reed, Inc. by K. Robertson • Toothpaste Millionaire by J. Merrill • President of the Whole Fifth Grade by S. Wilson • Be a Changemaker: How to Start Something That Matters by L. A. Thompson • The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind. Kamkwamba, B. Mealer & E. Zunon • The Kid's Guide to Social Action: How to Solve the Social Problems You Choose and Turn Creative Thinking into Positive Action by B. Lewis • How to Be An Everyday Philanthropist: 330 Ways to Make a Difference in Your Home, Community, and World – at No Cost ! by N. B. Boles • Kids Who Are Changing the World by A. Jankeliowitch

Charitable giving and helping others might be a difficult concept for young children to understand; however, these books promote free thinking and emotional intelligence as they learn how to be good citizens in their community, state, and world (Crippen, 2012; Norton & Norton, 2010).

INDUCTION INTO THE COMMUNITY PROCESS. This theme helps students learn about and be active members in their communities (Smith, 2002). In kindergarten through third grade, children read books and discuss various jobs that are found in communities, such as mail carrier, fire fighter, doctor, dentist, and school teacher. At the higher grade levels, the community leaders may come to school to talk about their jobs or students might shadow a community leader for a day to learn about the responsibilities related to that career.

By doing this, community members feel they are partners in education (Smith, 2002). Family members may also have experiences to share. When members of the community are actively involved with the education of their children, children come to see them as people who not only make a difference within the community but are also truly concerned about them and their education (Bishop, 2004). The books found in Table 5 encourage children to learn about a variety of communities.

Table 5
List of Books to Examine Community

K-3 List of Books	4-8 List Books
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is a Community by R. Rissman & S. Smith • Community Soup by A. Fullerton • Can we Help? Kids Volunteering to Help Their Community by G. Ancona • On the Town: A Community Adventure by J. Caseley • Where Do I Live by N. Chesanow • My Neighborhood: Places and Faces by L. Bullard • Me on the Map by J. Sweeney • Community Helpers from A to Z by B. Kalman • The Little Engine That Could by W. Piper 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 160 Ways to Help the World: Community Service Projects for Young People by L. L. Duper • Generation Fix: Young Ideas for a Better World by E. Rusch & P. Hobbs • Community Building: What Makes It Work: A Review of Factors Influencing Successful Community Builders by P. Mattessich & Barbara Monsey • Everyday Leadership Attitudes and Actions for Respect and Success (A Guidebook for Teens) by M. G. MacGregor • The Essential Student Government Guide – High School & Middle School Edition by E. Williams • Now What? The Young Person's Guide to Choosing the Perfect Career by N. Lore • Young Leaders 3.0: Stories, Insights, and Tips for Next-Generation Achievers by J. L. Ma

Reading these books can help to build a child's understanding of self, self within the community and how one can help her or his community grow and strengthen. These texts also show that the community shapes who we are and gives us a sense of belonging (Knapp, 2005).

CONCLUSION

We grow outward like a tree increasing our growth rings from the tight center of "I," which has a home, a town, a state, a country, a planet. From that center we reach out to understand the ever-expanding circles of experience. But first, we need to start in those places closest to our hearts" (Ross, 2003, p.45).

Children start from the comfortable and familiar viewpoint of self and grow so that they are able to see the viewpoint of others. Helping young children discover family stories, notice community landmarks, and take pride in where they live will give them experiences that help them construct a sense of self (Dewey, 1938/1997).

"Place identifies us" (Bishop, 2004, p.65), as place gives us our varied experiences. By using the five thematic patterns to pick books that engage children in learning about their family culture, their

family story, their community landmarks, history and attractions where they live, we help children build a stronger sense of self. These five thematic patterns are intertwined and build a variety of experiences, helping us to look beyond ourselves and build a better understanding of others as well as a sense of community (Bishop, 2004).

Children's literature provides a wonderful non-threatening and positive way to help children explore the experiences of others and how all these experiences are important in building a strong supportive community (Carr et al., 2001; Crippen, 2012; Forgan, 2003; Norton & Norton, 2010). Books encourage us to look beyond ourselves in order to understand and help others. When this happens, diversity issues disappear. What a great idea to promote for the 21st century learner.

REFERENCES

- Abruscato, J., & DeRosa, D. (2010). *Teaching children science: A discovery approach* (7th ed). New York City, NY: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bishop, S. (2004). The power of place. *English Journal*, 93(6), 65-68.
- Brooke, R. (Ed.) (2015). *Writing suburban citizenship, place-conscious education and the conundrum of suburbia*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Brooke, R. (Ed.) (2003). *Rural voices, place-conscious education and the teaching of writing*. New York City, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Carr, K., Buchanan, D., Wentz, J., Weiss, M., & Brant, K. (2001). Not just for primary grades: a bibliography of picture books for secondary content teachers. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 45(2), p146-153.
- Crippen, M. (2012). The value of children's literature. Retrieved from <http://oneotareadingjournal.com/2012/value-of-childrens-literature/>
- Dewey, J. (1938/1997). *Experience and education*. New York City, NY: Touchstone.
- Forgan, J. (2003). *Teaching problem solving through children's literature*. Westport, Connecticut: Teacher Ideas Press.
- Gruenewald, D., & Smith, G. (2007). *Place-based education in the global age: Local diversity*. New York City NY: Psychology Press
- Gruenewald, D. (2003). Foundations of Place: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Place-Conscious Education. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40(3), 619-654. Retrieved from <http://www.istat.org/stable/3699447>
- Knapp, C. (2005). The I - thou relationship, place-based education. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 27(3), 277-285.
- Lesley, M., & Matthews, M. (2009). Place-based essay writing and content area literacy instruction for preservice secondary teachers. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(6), 523-533.
- Norton, D., & Norton, S. (2010). *Through the eyes of a child: An introduction to children's literature* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Prentice-Hall.
- O'Neil-Haight, M. (2010). Educator teams up to teach finance to young children. *Journal of Family & Consumer Sciences*, 102(2), 43-47.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1969). Towards a transactional theory of reading. *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 1(1), 31-49.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transaction theory of the literary work*. Carbondale, ILL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Ross, P. (2003). A geography of stories: helping secondary students come to voice through reading, people and place. In R. Brooke (Ed.), *Rural Voices, place-conscious education and the teaching of writing* (44-63). New York City, NY: Teachers, College Press.
- Rumelhart, D.E. (1980). Schemata: The building blocks of cognition. In R. J. Spiro, B.C. Bruce, & W. F. Brewer (Eds.), *Theoretical issues in reading comprehension: Perspectives from cognitive psychology, linguistics, artificial intelligence, and education* (pp. 33-58). Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Smith, G. (2002). Place-based education: Learning to be where we are. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83(8) 584- 594.
- Smith, G., & Sobel, D. (2010). *Place- and Community-based Education in Schools*. New York City, NY: Routledge.

AUTHORS

Susan Szabo, Texas A&M University – Commerce, Susan.szabo@tamuc.edu

Freida Golden, Texas A&M University – Commerce, Freida.golden@tamuc.edu