Social geography, space, and place in education

This is the peer reviewed author accepted manuscript (post print) version of a published work that appeared in final form in:

Baroutsis, Aspa, Comber, Barbara & Woods, Annette 2017 'Social geography, space, and place in education', Oxford research encyclopedia of education pp. 1-16

This un-copyedited output may not exactly replicate the final published authoritative version for which the publisher owns copyright. It is not the copy of record. This output may be used for non-commercial purposes.

The final definitive published version (version of record) is available at:
https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.115

Persistent link to the Research Outputs Repository record:
http://researchoutputs.unisa.edu.au/11541.2/136069

General Rights: Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Outputs Repository are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

• Users may download and print one copy for the purpose of private study or research.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
• You may freely distribute the persistent link identifying the publication in the Research Outputs Repository

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

https://search.ror.unisa.edu.au
Social geography, space, and place in education

Aspa Baroutsis, Barbara Comber, and Annette Woods

Summary
Society is constituted by both historical and spatial elements; however, education research, policy and practice often subordinates the spatial in preference for the temporal. In what is often referred to as the ‘spatial turn’, many education researchers have acknowledged spatial concepts to facilitate understandings and inform debates about identity, belonging, social justice, differentiation, policy, race, mobility, globalization and even digital and new communication modes, amongst many others. Social geographers understand place as more than a dot on a map, instead focusing on the socio-cultural and socio-material aspects of spaces. Space and place are core elements of social geography. Schools are comprised of architectural, material, performative, relational, social or discursive spaces, all of which are socially constructed. Schools and education contexts, as social spaces and places, produce and reproduce modes of social interactions and social practices while also mediating the relational and pedagogical practices that operate within. Pedagogical spaces are also about the exercise of power – a spatial governmentality to regulate behaviour. Yet pedagogy can focus on place-based and place-conscious practices that highlight the connectedness between people and their non-human world. A focus on the socio-spatial in education research is able to foreground inequalities, differences and power relations that are able to speak to policies and practices. As such, in this field there is often a focus on spatial justice, where inequalities based on location, poverty or indigeneity are analysed using spatial understandings of socio-economic or political characteristics. This brings together connections between place and space in a powerful combination around justice, equity and critical thinking.

Keywords: social geography, place, space, spatiality, spatial justice, power relations, place-based education, poverty, indigenous, human geography

Introduction
In this chapter, we discuss what has been described as the ‘spatial turn’ (Lefebvre, 1991) in educational research (Gulson & Symes, 2007), incorporating insights and ways of thinking from social geography. The spatial turn refers to an explicit acknowledgement of the spatial, through a considered theorisation of key geographical concepts such as space, place, scale, and mobility or flow. Although, education researchers may have been slower than their social science colleagues to take on these spatial notions, many researchers have turned to working with these spatial concepts to facilitate understandings of the current contexts of education, health, urban geography, mobility and globalization and to inform debates about identity and belonging, social justice, differentiation, policy, race, and even digital and new communication modes (see for example, Bright, Manchester, & Allendyke, 2013; Gulson, 2011; Gulson & Symes, 2007; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2016; Holloway & Valentine, 2001; Nixon & Comber, 2011; Shilling, 1991; Wainwright & Marandet, 2011).

Social geographers understand place as more than a dot on a map. They are concerned with the historical and changing characteristics of locales, including demographic, economic, political, cultural, linguistic, physical, and geological characteristics. They focus on sociocultural spaces defined in part by their ‘local histories and traditions, population features, economic characteristics (especially employment patterns), cultural/linguistic diversity, child and family well-being indices, and their adjoining territories’ (Lawson, 2016, p. 2). As such,
social geography ‘presents neighborhoods, hamlets, towns, suburbs, cities, counties, regions, provinces/states and nations as dynamic entities, ones that are endlessly socially constructed and constituted’ (Lawson, 2016, p. 2). Importantly, these contexts are consequential in the ways in which social and educational policies play out in actual daily lives.

Together, space and place are at the core of social geography and central to sociology (see Urry, 2008). Regardless, teaching and learning are often identified as temporal processes. That is, they are ‘expected to take place and progress over and through time, even if sometimes in specific spaces and places’ (Paechter, 2004, p. 449). However, Soja suggests ‘everything in society is spatially and historically constituted. There are no spheres, realms, systems, perspectives, rationalities, relations, ideologies, identities, etc. that are aspatial’ (Soja, 2002, p. 116). As such, recognising the spatial dimension of education tends towards an enhanced understanding of the interplay of materials, structures and environments, both inside and outside school spaces. Keith and Pile (1993) provide a useful distinction suggesting that ‘space is constitutive of the social; spatiality is constitutive of the personal and the political’ (p. 222). These perspectives adopt a ‘critical spatial thinking’ that suggests, while everything exists in time, socially produced spaces have a spatial element that is equally significant to the historical and social dimensions.

Additionally, Cresswell (2004), in his short introduction to ‘place’ suggests a working definition of place as being ‘a meaningful location’ (p. 7). Cresswell identifies how place has been understood from different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives – from various traditions in geography to ecology, planning, architecture, to newer formations informed by globalization. Massey (1994) adds that when the spatial is understood in the context of space-time and as formed through social interrelations, then place, and the uniqueness and meaningfulness of a place, can be viewed as ‘a particular articulation of those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings’ (p. 5).

Space, place and social geography are huge arenas for research; in this chapter, we take a ‘space and equality’ perspective, postulating that for educational researchers one key insight in foregrounding the social nature of spaces and places is its integral relationship to justice. Hence, we are informed by theorists who have uncovered the ways in which educational inequalities are produced in relation to the production of space (Harvey, 2009; Massey, 2005; Soja, 2010; Lefebvre, 1991). In our discussion, therefore, we foreground studies which help us to understand the nature of schools in particular places ‘serving’ particular populations of students and their communities.

We start our discussion by providing a brief outline of social geographies, a field that connects the geographical concepts of space and place. This is followed by a discussion of the key theorists and scholars whose influential work has been instrumental in shaping the ways in which spaces and places are understood and operationalised in studies of education. We provide seminal examples of educational research that demonstrate the affordances of spatial approaches for studying educational problems in distinctive ways and define key concepts that underpin their analysis. We recognise that these fields are broad and here we are only able to provide an introduction to key concepts as a beginning point for readers in the field.

Social Geography

Social geography is not a new term although its more recent emergence across a diverse range of disciplines may provide the illusion of ‘newness’. Smith, Pain, Marston, and Jones (2010a) attribute the first use of the term to French geographer Elisee Reclus in 1895. As one strand of the more general study of human geography, social geography highlights the social elements of human experience and space. The term is conceptualised in a variety of ways across a diverse range of research disciplines and by calling on a diverse range of theoretical
frameworks. Consequently, it is not a singular study. In its most general form, the term refers to the study of people and the environment in which they engage, with a focus on social factors. The field is interested in socio-spatial life and its connections to power and access. By this we mean that social geographies are an area of study concerned with the ways that space mediates the (re)production of social disadvantage and advantage in society (Del Casino Jr, Thomas, Cloke, & Panelli, 2011).

When utilising a social geographies perspective, there are implications for social classifications such as class, gender, culture, sexuality, race, language, and socio-economic status on the connection between social relations and space (Smith et al., 2010a). Social geography is always tuned to understanding the ‘socio-spatial differences, power relations, and inequalities that shape every person’s life’ (Del Casino Jr, et al., 2011, p. 3). So as Smith et al. (2010a, p. 3) have commented, ‘one of the key achievements of social geographies … has been to speak powerfully to the policies and practices that have made experiencing different kinds of spaces – at home, at work, in cities, in rural communities, in schools, hospitals and prisons – so divided and unequal’, to include some and not others. In this way, social geographies bring together connections between place and space in a powerful combination around justice, equity and critical thinking.

It is not within the scope of this chapter to trace the connections between society, humans and geography by situating social geography within its complete history. This task has been attempted in a variety of recent full handbooks and collections (see for example, Panelli, 2004; Smith, Pain, Marston, & Jones, 2010b; Del Casino Jr et al., 2011). Instead we wish to briefly map several key debates – or turns of thought - that have occurred in the fields of geographies over recent decades and that we believe demonstrate the important role of social geographies. In many ways, these debates parallel similar debates in other social science disciplines such as sociology and education more generally.

We outline three ‘turns’ (Del Casino Jr et al., 2011): the cultural, relational, and material. To begin with, in what might be described as a cultural turn, the broader disciplinary field of human geography has struggled to balance recognition of cultural elements of human life and the visibility of the social. While this is recognised by many to have been difficult (see for example, Gregson, 2003; Panelli, 2004; Philo, 2000), it would be inaccurate to suggest that the social no longer matters. As such social geography has had an important role to play in ensuring that a continued focus on the implications of social demarcations are possible as we aim to understand inequality in new 21st century contexts. Additionally, the ‘critical’ edge of work in the social geography field, for the most part, ensures that the political elements of how spaces limit and facilitate human experience is foregrounded. This, matched with a continued focus on the connection between people within spaces and places has come to be known as the relational turn. Here, the socio-spatial connections are foregrounded. Finally, some (see for example, Philo, 2000), have also highlighted the importance of social geographies in ensuring that a focus on the material elements of social difference are visible. This mirrors what has come to be termed the material turn more generally, and reminds us that while language and discourse are important elements of how society is stratified, social geographies can provide useful insight into the material effects of spaces of inequality being created.

Social geographers have contributed to education particularly through the strands of children’s geographies and geographies of education. A continuing debate in the field has been to consider the focus of study as either inward or outward looking (see as one example Hanson Thiem’s 2009 rearticulation of Bradford’s (1990 cited in Hanson Thiem, 2009) original conceptualisation of the field as one example). According to this way of thinking, inward looking studies provide insight into the local configurations of education places and how these might be related to everyday lives, while outward looking studies are more
interested in broader social, economic and political processes and the impact of education spaces on these. Configuring the field in this binary has been called to task by other leading social geographers. For example, Holloway and colleagues make a case for including children, young people and families in research to blur boundaries between ‘inward and outward’ looking research in geography (Holloway, Hubbard, Jons, & Pimlott-Wilson, 2010). This plays out in research led by Holloway on the digitization of curriculum and use of information technology in Britain’s schools (Valentine & Holloway, 2000; 2001). A key feature of this research has been to uncover the global influences on national policy decisions, and to follow how these play out for different children in different ways within local interactions. What is innovative in this theorisation, informed by understandings of space and place, is that the reciprocal push and pull of global influence and local uptake is highlighted in a ‘non-dichotomist’ approach to local and global scales. As Holloway and Valentine (2000) remind us, ‘children’s worlds of meaning are at one and the same time global and local, made through “local” cultures which are in part shaped by their interconnections with the wider world’ (p. 769).

We now elaborate on the domain of social geography by turning our discussion to space, followed by place. We provide an initial discussion of the key theorists and scholars. Some works are selected amongst the diverse range available as we believe that they provide interesting intersections between scholarship of social geographies, space, and place. We recognise that such selections are themselves situated or placed in that, what we have nominated to feature here is shaped by our own experiences and academic histories.

**Space**

Educational spaces, including architectural, material, performative, relational, social or discursive spaces, are socially constructed (Gulson & Symes, 2007; Soja, 1996). Lefebvre (1991) suggests every society ‘produces a space, its own space’ (p. 31). Additionally, socially produced space has a relational component; that is:

- Space is not … a reflection of society but one of society's fundamental material dimensions and to consider it independently from social relationships, even with the intention of studying their interaction, is to separate nature from culture. (Castells, 1983, p. 311)

However, with relational practices, educational spaces can also be gendered and raced (Farrare & Apple, 2010). Educational spaces such as classrooms are social spaces that ‘produce’ and ‘reproduce’ modes of social interactions and social practices (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005) while also mediating the relational and pedagogical practices that operate within. This perspective is far removed from the typical understandings of school spaces characterised as ‘containers’ or ‘backdrops’ where education occurs (Green & Letts, 2007; McGregor, 2004a).

Lefebvre conceptualised a multidimensional notion of space as the perceived-conceived-lived triad of social practice, representations of space, and representational spaces (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). Soja elaborated on Lefebvre’s work identifying a trialectic of *firstspace, secondspace, and thirdspace* that loosely aligned with Lefebvre’s triad (Soja, 1996, 2000). A brief integrated discussion of these perspectives outlines the main ideas.

First, *perceived space* or the social practices of a society can be understood by deciphering the formal and informal spaces of that society (Lefebvre, 1991). That is, ‘the spatial practice of a society secretes that society’s space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 38). For example, the everyday act of schooling children in purpose-built box-like physical spaces produces and reproduces social formations, and ensures a continuity of this mode of education. Such regulated disciplinary spaces are organised through actual
and symbolic practices and material forms. These include timetables, bells, rules, and rows of individual desks that both subordinate children while also maintaining and reproducing existing power relations (Foucault, 1995). Perceived space aligns with Soja’s notion of firstspace, focusing on the ‘measurable and mappable’ spatial practices associated with materials (Soja, 2000). It is in interpreting these physical forms of space or the ‘things in space’ (Soja, 2000). These can be identified as the ‘real’ space (Soja, 2002) that the spatial practices of a society can be identified.

Secondly, while perceived space identifies material forms, conceived space or secondspace is a conceptual or symbolic space. It identifies a representation of space or an ‘imagined’ space that emphasises the ‘mental or ideational representations’ of those material forms (Soja, 2002, p. 113). That is, a society’s ‘thoughts about space’ (Soja, 2000). These spaces are dominant spaces in a society and are linked to ‘the relations of production and to the “order” which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33).

For example, when schooling children, the spaces of knowledge accumulation and production are often derived from our thinking and ideas about children. If children are perceived as competent and capable agents in their own lives who have something meaningful to say (Danby & Farrell, 2004) it stands to reason that they are more likely to be consulted about their education and the spaces of learning would be less regulated.

Finally, the lived space or representational space, ‘the space of “inhabitants” and “users”’ that is experienced through ‘coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). It is ‘a fully lived space, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and virtual, locus of structured individual and collective experience and agency’ (Soja, 2000, p. 11). Soja explains:

> Everything comes together in Thirddspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history. (Soja, 2002, pp. 56-57)

This is a constructed social space that seeks to address the inequalities and injustices of a society. There is a rejection of the values and perceptions that these spaces were constituted by, instead seeking to develop new values based on equality and justice. For example, spaces that redress schooling practices of exclusion or disengagement from learning or spaces that foster a sense of identity and belonging.

As well as drawing on Lefebvre’s (1991) concept of ‘lived space’, Soja’s (1996) notion of ‘thirddspace’ also draws on Foucault’s (1986) observation of ‘heterotopias’. Unlike ‘utopias’ that represent a ‘perfected form’ of society, ‘heterotopias’ are ‘real places’ in society (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). These heterotopic spaces are:

> … something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (Foucault, 1986, p. 24)

Heterotopias function to ‘create a space of illusion that exposes every real space … their role is to create a space that is other’ (Foucault, 1986, p. 27).
Schooling spaces

Perhaps the most common understanding of schooling spaces relates to the architectural and material elements of schools (Oblinger, 2006). The built environment, such as the architecture of the buildings and classrooms as well as the objects and technologies of learning, all mediate pedagogic practices. McGregor (2004b) suggests that ‘teachers and students are mutually constituted with the materiality of schooling’ (p. 348). Despite this, it is often suggested that conceptually, little has changed in the educational architecture of the indoor spaces such as classrooms nor is spatiality foregrounded in the decision-making processes unless it relates to student behaviour and surveillance (Fisher, 2004; McGregor, 2004b). Additionally, while the need for spatial variety in schools is acknowledged, the tendency is to make these accommodations in outdoor spaces such as playgrounds for children in the early years of schooling (Dixon, 2004). Benade (2016) questions outmoded education practices and spaces, while stopping short of identifying classrooms as obsolete; instead advocating for flexible and mobile learning spaces that are innovative and technology-rich. This signals an increasing pedagogical and research focus on cyberspaces in education (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; McGregor, 2004b).

Another example of schooling spaces refers to the curriculum taught within a school. Alison Lee’s (1996) work in the area of gender and geography demonstrates how space is a constructed through the curriculum. Her early research applied feminist critiques to the geography curriculum suggesting there was no interrogation of gender within the discipline. Lee (1996) suggests that typically, space is constructed through binary oppositions such as masculine/feminine, skills/content, process/product, speaking/writing, or public/private (p. 405-406). Lee (1996) states, ‘binary linearities were merely initial points of structural intelligibility around which and against which the specificity of this local classroom micro-space could be configured’ (p. 419). Often, these binary typographies privilege the masculine perspective maintaining and reproducing these perspectives through the curriculum and practices.

Therefore, by utilising the built environment and the curriculum, teachers and school systems are able to engage with space in meaningful ways. Here, the classroom becomes more than a ‘container’.

Space, power, and relationality

Foucault (1984) identifies a relationship between knowledge, power, and space; suggesting that ‘space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power’ (p. 252). Space, particularly political and pedagogical spaces, are about the exercise of power (Edwards & Usher, 2008, p. 136). Take for example the concept of a national curricula, the composition of the curricula and the topics selected, and the links with dominant power relations. Whose interests are being served within such practices and selections? Is there a notable investment in a religious or ethical perspective or perhaps a civic or economic focus within curricula? (Edwards & Usher, 2003). Within these curricula spaces, power relations circulate ‘within and against the play of dislocation and difference’, forming various identities (Edwards & Usher, 2003, p. 136).

Foucault (1995) suggests that ‘discipline proceeds from the distribution of individuals in space’ (p. 141). Schools, through a type of spatial governmentality, utilise ‘disciplinary technologies’ to control space and time and govern the subject (Foucault, 1995). For example, school rules are inherently spatial as they control bodies, movement, talk, noise, learning, space, and time (Gordon, Holland, & Lahelma, 2000). School rules are governed by a push for the uniformity and standardisation of time, space, materiality and bodies in schools and can lead the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others (Jones et al., 2016).
Space is dynamic and relational. Relationality can be spatially articulated in that space is ‘performed’, ‘enacted’, or ‘practiced’ as relations of power (Rose, 1999). Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Rose (1999) observes ‘relationalities as performed, as constituted through iteration rather than through essence’ (pp. 247-248). By this, she suggests that space is not pre-existing, but rather ‘a doing’ that is an ‘articulation of relational performances’ (Rose, 1999, p. 248). That is not to say that certain forms of space do not reoccur; rather the repetition is a demonstration of the exercise of power (Rose, 1999). Given this, particular performances produce particular spaces and other performances of relationality will produce different kinds of spaces (Rose, 1999).

Spatial justice and education
In calling on social geography to help consider social justice, the key connection is between space, place and location and how these relate to access and advantage or disadvantage. Geographical thought in this area puts under the spotlight the arbitrariness of our starting social group and how this is connected to place and space. In studying this, the critical elements of social geography come to the fore as the unevenness of the distribution of material and social resources across spaces and places is studied (Waterstone, 2010), and notions of recognition and power are illuminated. However, social justice is always more than a push for more equitable distribution of goods. The production and reproduction of relational spaces such as schooling reinforce the interests and power of the dominant group, and in this way such power differences are likely to contribute to injustices.

Spatial justice (Soja, 2002, 2010) is not a new form of justice as such, rather, a spatial focus on familiar ideas can enable new insights to be foregrounded. That is, social injustices take place within societal spaces. These societal spaces tend to:

… express and perform the interests of the dominant class according to a given mode of production and to a specific mode of development. They will express and implement the power relationships of the state in a historically defined society. They will be realized and shaped by gender domination and by state-enforced family life. At the same time, spatial forms will also be marked by resistance from exploited classes, oppressed subjects, and abused women. (Castells, 1983, pp. 311-312)

It is in understanding the socio-spatial interactions of a society that better enables that society to reduce, and potentially eliminate, practices that support and legitimate inequality. Here, it is important to note that spatiality and temporality are intertwined in that spatial relations and identities develop across and within time (Massey, 1994). Societal spaces, including schools, can be such where participants are confronted by, experience, and must learn to navigate a multitude of social, economic, political, and material inequalities. For example, a study by Karlsson (2004) shows how school spaces in South Africa were one place where children learnt to position themselves within the hierarchy or apartheid while Shilling (1991) studied how school space was used as a resource in the production of unequal gender relations.

Harvey (1989) noted the economic element of space and how this was used to produce and reproduce distributions of social power (p. 227). Therefore, injustice can include the effects of ‘poverty, income inequality, racism, xenophobia, sexism, misogyny, and heterosexism’ (Jones et al., 2016, p. 1153) or ‘patriarchy, homophobia and violence’ (Mains, 2006). Other injustices associated more specifically with schooling spaces include the locality of the school, whether urban, rural or remote (Green & Letts, 2007) and how geographies amplify social exclusion (Symaco, 2013); school density associated with locality (Maxwell, 2003); migration and other forms of mobility (Urry, 2007), some of which are externally imposed such as exclusion from school based on behaviour (Thomson, 2007). These practices are often institutionalised through government policies relating to economic investment or
social infrastructure and the representation of place and culture through media images. However, as these spaces are socially constructed, ‘they are not immutable or naturally given. This means that they can be changed, made into something better than they were through collective action’ (Soja, 2011). That is, the members of a society can exercise their agency in choosing to either comply or resist (Thomson, 2007), reproduce or subvert (Mains, 2006) the practices of injustice.

In the final section of the chapter, we elaborate on the domain of social geography by turning our discussion to place. Following an initial discussion of the key concepts, we identify selected works we believe provide interesting intersections between scholarship of social geographies, space, and place.

**Place**

There are a number of ways in which ‘place’ in educational research, policy and practice matters and variations in terms of how it is conceptualised. Most obviously, place has been the subject of knowledge in the geography curriculum and its derivatives, such as social studies. For example, a review of journals in education quickly indicates ‘place-related’ titles, either in abstract formulations, such as *Urban education* or the *Journal of Research in Rural Education*. Others name the location of the journal in the title, such as the *London Review of Education* or the *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*. These place-related naming practices are a taken-for-granted part of the way scholars come to know the world of education, modifying our orientations and interpretations. However, here we are more concerned with the ways in which ‘place’ as a concept has been generative in studies of education.

Jan Nespor’s seminal ethnography of an elementary school (Nespor, 1997) demonstrates that schools need to be considered in relation to what connects them beyond the school into neighborhoods and beyond. He explores the politics of the neighborhood, class, racial, ethnic and gender affiliations and the impacts on everyday lives of children and parents. Importantly he shows the dynamic ways in which children need to negotiate being together in the various spaces of the school and neighborhood and the limits of their mobility. Nespor argues that (1997, p.195) that ‘the problem of inquiry is not to find patterns of intersection that generalize across settings but to trace flows of practice that organize widespread social relations, to expand maps of these networks, and to show how the intersections we begin our research with are connected with other intersections across time and space’. Nespor’s work problematizes the notion of the school as a neutral container. We explore how ‘place’ has been operationalised and foregrounded in research, policy and practice, exploring four main areas: place-based education, rural education, poverty and education, and Indigenous education. While there are distinctive overlaps across these areas, we argue these remain central due to their considerable implications for policy and practice.

**Place-based education**

Place-based education has a long tradition of scholarship and action concerned with environmental and social justice (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). Gruenewald and Smith (2008) recognised the potential of bringing together educational research on cultural diversity and environmental decay and abuse as ultimately it is actual communities who stand to lose when multi-national businesses exploit the resources of people and places for their own gain, without concern for the long-term effects on life and livelihoods of residents and ecologies. Their edited volume includes many of the seminal contributors to place-based education. In summary, they write:

Just as the new localism can be understood as diverse acts of resistance against the ravages of globalization and rootlessness, place-based education
can be understood as a community-based effort to reconnect the process of education, enculturation, and human development to the well-being of community life. (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. xvi)

Authors describe how young people investigate problems such as diminishing fish stocks, poor air quality, along with the cultural meanings and histories of local places and in the process become key knowledge workers, activists, innovators and artists in the local area. Starting with local knowledge and issues does not mean restricting students to the locale or to traditions which require change; it does mean starting with place- and community-based knowledges in the quest for understanding, sustaining and improving knowledge of the human and more-than human worlds we inhabit (Smith & Sobel, 2010).

Place-based education does not ignore the standard authorised curriculum of public schooling. However, it does argue that all curriculum goals of subject areas can be met through the study of place. Rather than concepts, skills and disciplines being taught in an abstracted and isolated fashion deep knowledge and understandings can be accomplished through researching real-world problems and phenomena (Smith & Sobel, 2010). At the same time as students become knowledgeable in particular domains, they become a resource for the local community, which they argue provides ‘a way to foster the sets of understanding and patterns of behavior essential to create a society that is both socially just and ecologically sustainable’ (Smith & Sobel, 2010, p. 22). As Dewey noted, a disconnect between school and society serves no-one. Indeed, for students who are not privileged, due to their language, ethnicity, location, religion and other social and cultural differences, a curriculum totally removed from their experiences results in unequal access to education.

Brooke (2003) credits the emergence of the term, ‘place-conscious education’ to Paul Theobald. Theobald (1997) argued that: ‘Beginning at the elementary level, students must be socialised into the practice and habit of researching and deliberating answers that vex their communities at the moment’ (p. 137, italics in original). Brooke (2003) identifies three guiding principles:

1. Place-conscious education requires active students, and hence builds on pedagogical movements for student engagement and community inquiry;
2. [P]lace-conscious education centers schooling in a deep understanding of local place, spiralling out to include more distant knowledge in all areas of the curriculum; and
3. Place-conscious citizens should be people who know enough about their natural and cultural region to fashion lives that enhance the communities located there. (p. 13)

Theobald stresses the importance of students learning about the intradependence – that is the connectedness between people and also between people and the more than human world (also see Nespor, 2008). The three guiding principles emerge from this position of intradependence.

Rural education
Rural educators have been some of the most active in developing models of place-based and place-conscious education. Some of the early work in the US emerged in connection with the national writing project, for example the Rural Voices Country Schools Program (Brooke, 2003). This program fostered teacher-research and student writing that positively represented their knowledge of and, sense of, place and community. Despite such programs, Donehower and colleagues (2011) have observed that often ‘rurality’ is constituted as a deficit when it comes to education. Or, alternatively the rural is constituted nostalgically as reflecting an idealised unchanging world. However, taking literacy as a key capability they demonstrate how rural students both in schools and in further education are frequently positioned as
lacking. Such depictions of rural people as illiterate also predominate in fiction and media and come to circulate in the public common sense. Donehower and colleagues (2011) have no wish to protect local practices as sacred and indeed they exemplify the ways in which they both interrogate and celebrate different aspects of rural communities ways with words.

A major issue associated with the portrayal of rurality as deficit and rural communities as backward is that education becomes a key element in what Corbett (2007) has described as ‘learning to leave’. Corbett explains that the abstract and disconnected standardised curriculum actually prepares young people for further outwards migration as success at school leads to further study elsewhere and ultimately taking their educational capital away from the local community. Such processes are often associated with the changing nature of work and limited opportunities to earn a living in rural and or coastal fishing communities.

A recent transnational collection addresses some of the challenges (Green & Corbett, 2013) in the relationships between ‘rurality’ and education, particularly with respect to literacy by drawing on theories and studies of place-conscious education, New Literacy Studies and eco-social justice. Importantly, the editor’s note that a recent policy study in the US confirms that rural districts have the highest incidence of student poverty. A recent study in Australia identifies a similar correlation (Vinson & Rawsthorne, 2015). The challenge is to contest the reproduction of deficit discourses about rural education, whilst addressing in policy and practices material experiences of economic insecurity and related educational disadvantages. The writers in this collection work with and against a ‘place of deep discomfort’ (Green & Corbett, 2013, p. 8) as they trouble the stereotypes of the ‘rural’ and offer counter-stories of the complex work and literate practices that are accomplished in many communities.

Poverty and education
The relationship between poverty, place and education is not restricted to rural places. Indeed, in many nations the city, the urban and the urban edge are also key sites of poverty as populations are drawn closer to the ‘centre’ in search of work, economic opportunities and the provision of services. Yet, in affluent nations, the location of pockets of poverty frequently remains unchanged over time, suggesting the need for long-term policy and resource investments and changes to make any significant difference (Vinson & Rawsthorne, 2015). There are also statistically predictable relationships between social disadvantage and educational achievement.

Significantly, in nations such as the United States a child’s well-being, school quality, postsecondary education access and completion, and life course trajectory can be predicted in part by the delivery codes used by the nation’s postal system. (Lawson, 2016, p. 2)

While these patterns do vary across nations, they are similar in the UK, Australia and New Zealand to name just a few of the countries where strong correlations have been identified with socio-economic status and educational results (OECD, 2015). Recent research conducted in England suggests that ‘area-based initiatives’ (Kerr, Dyson, & Raffo, 2014, p. 131) are needed, where interventions to redress poverty are designed based on ‘an ecological understanding of place’, and underpinned by a multidisciplinary approach. ‘[S]patial differences in educational provision’ (Kerr et al., 2014, p. 133) mean that the solutions are not wholly resolvable within schools, but need to involve families, the wider community and government services over extended periods of time. As social geographer Massey (2005) observed ‘place demands negotiation and invention’ (p. 141). The histories of people ‘thrown together’, as Massey puts it, in particular places that requires ongoing analysis and consideration. Nowhere is this clearer than in Indigenous
education, where schooling itself is part of the broader colonising project which has ‘displaced’ and dismissed the ‘land rights’ of whole populations.

**Indigenous education**

As many place-conscious educational researchers have observed place is also very much about race (Green & Corbett, 2013; Gruenewald, 2008; Somerville 2013). Indeed, Indigenous educators have identified one of the greatest barriers in Western education is its imbrication in the history of colonisation of their place. In other words, having taken over their country, white Western educators then proceed to set up schools to civilize the original inhabitants through education, assuming empty lands, lack of knowledge, and lack of language (Nakata, 2007a). Such assumptions allowed for Western colonisers to appropriate the territory and its resources. Similar forms of standardised education have obliterated Indigenous people’s relationship with country, their stories and their meaning-making practices. Indigenous scholars argue how different ways of making meaning of places and people, and places and times are crucial to proper education (Nakata, 2007a; Somerville & Perkins, 2010) and, to environmental policy-making (Bignall, Hemming, & Rigney, 2016). Similarly, Smith (2014) advocates for Indigenous methodologies to be use used in research communities and the need for developing ethical research spaces that are culturally appropriate and establish deep engagement opportunities with Indigenous communities. In such a worldview, the relationships between education/research environments and places are inseparable. At this cultural interface (Nakata, 2007b), the contested space between two knowledge systems such as Western and Indigenous it may be that Western education and social and economic policy more broadly have much to learn from Indigenous ways of ‘thinking through country’ (Somerville, 2013).

Colonisation therefore relates to the usurpation of Indigenous lands. Tuck & McKenzie (2015) refer to this as ‘settler colonialism’ as ‘a form of colonialism in which outsiders come to make a new home on the land that is already inhabited by other humans’ (p. 635). Settler colonialism does not consider land or place, and is characterized by an ‘ongoing displacement and dispossession of people in relation to land’ and an ‘ignorance toward land, water, environment, and sustainability’ (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015, p. 635). Similar histories have been experienced by Indigenous peoples around the world. The intellectual contributions of Indigenous scholars engage with issues of land and place through ‘conceptualizations of tribal identity, sovereignty, and treaty rights’ (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015, p. 633). Drawing on the work of Patrick Wolfe, Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernandez (2013) argue that settler colonialism seeks to ‘destroy’ in order to ‘replace’, disavowing the Indigenous people’s histories of their lands.

**Concluding Comments**

Educational research on space and place has properly gained new momentum in the face of climate change, over-population and the wanton destruction of ecologies that sustain life (Bowers, 2005; Gruenewald, 2003). Bowers has noted that critical and socio-cultural theorists of education frequently ignore the importance of local knowledge and relational cultural ecological practices in imagining school reform for social justice. He argues that the major underpinning metaphors which underpin many models of school change are rooted in Western epistemological assumptions concerning concepts such as ‘freedom’ and the ‘individual’. Bowers, along with others, posits the need to move towards ‘eco-justice’ in designing curriculum and pedagogy.

The theories and approach in social geography, space and place are significant for the field of education. Similarly, educational institutions and contexts are of considerable interest to social geographers due to their centrality in town planning and the organisation of the
everyday lives of families. Education as a social institution plays a central role in the production and reproduction of social boundaries, categories and both economic and cultural capital. Education spaces are a major feature in everyday life. ‘They are one of the few institutions that can be found in almost every urban and suburban neighbourhood’ (Collins & Coleman, 2008). As such education is an important geographical concern. Understandings from social geography, space and place can also have considerable impact on educational policy and resourcing. For example, as population mobility (Urry, 2007) increases and the work of education is partly done in ‘virtual’ learning spaces, nothing can be taken for granted about the students, the classrooms or the technologies and media brought together in places of education. It is the relationships between people, places, and spaces and justice that have significance for educators and educational scholars.

Despite continued pontification by politicians, the disparities between privileged and disadvantaged communities remains significant. While liberal democracies deny local circumstance should impact on a child’s life chances there is evidence to suggest that what schools can do in helping overcome reproduction of different educational trajectories has been over-estimated (Lawson, 2016, p. 1). Lawson (2016) argues that globalization challenges ‘assumptions about a placeless school system’ (p. 2). That is, when life course trajectories can be predicted by childhood postcodes, social geography, space and place do matter. Hence it follows that policy-makers, curriculum designers, teacher educators, and educational researchers – indeed all those who contribute to decisions about which educational practices are authorised, resourced and implemented – need an educational imagination informed by spatial understandings of the work required to achieve a quality and equitable education system.

Bibliography


References


