

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Dissertations, Theses, and Student Research:  
Department of English

English, Department of

---

Summer 6-4-2012

# URBAN PLACE-CONSCIOUS EDUCATION: PRIDE IN THE INNER CITY

Tamara A. Zwick

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishdiss>



Part of the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

Zwick, Tamara A., "URBAN PLACE-CONSCIOUS EDUCATION: PRIDE IN THE INNER CITY" (2012). *Dissertations, Theses, and Student Research: Department of English*. 61.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishdiss/61>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Student Research: Department of English by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

URBAN PLACE-CONSCIOUS EDUCATION

PRIDE IN THE INNER CITY

by

Tamara A. Zwick

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Robert Brooke

Lincoln, Nebraska

June, 2012

# URBAN PLACE-CONSCIOUS EDUCATION: PRIDE IN THE INNER CITY

Tamara A. Zwick, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2012

Adviser: Robert Brooke

Many educators are turning to place-conscious education as a means of making students' education relevant and meaningful, as well as encouraging them to contribute to their local communities in positive ways. While many scholars focus their research on place-conscious education on rural areas, a growing body of scholarship examines how place-conscious principles can be applied in inner city schools. Differences in emphasis and approach exist between the rural and urban scholarship, however. This work analyzes some key differences as well as examining why they might exist. Urban students' relationship with place is complicated by societal messages which make fostering a pride of place a difficult but necessary task for place-conscious educators.

For Robert Brooke, Shari Stenberg, and Greg Rutledge, whose help and guidance saw me through the process of writing this thesis.

For my parents, who believed in me and the value of education.

For Nathan, whose unwavering love and support make all things possible.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1.....	3
CHAPTER 2.....	18
CHAPTER 3.....	38
WORKS CITED.....	51

## INTRODUCTION

Nebraska has always been my home. Born and raised in the Cornhusker State, I have learned to appreciate all that it has to offer. I have grown used to being asked if I grew up on a farm when I meet people from the coasts. People are surprised when they learn that I am very much a city girl. Still, as a Nebraska native I know the importance of agriculture, and many of my friends swear by the value of small towns. Because Nebraska is such an important influence on my life, I cannot help but take an interest in rural life.

But the state is not all rural. Lincoln, the state capital, has a population well over 200,000. Omaha, my hometown and the largest city in the state, is home to over 800,000 people when its suburbs are included. These cities have the usual problems associated with urban areas, including city centers with large numbers of low-income families. From pre-school through eighth grade I attended a small, private school in one of these inner city areas. Assumption is located in South Omaha, a traditionally working-class neighborhood which has seen a large influx of Mexican immigrants in the past few decades. The school itself was well over 90% Hispanic, had large numbers of low-income students, and while there were many dedicated teachers there, their jobs were made more difficult by the poverty, racism, and lack of opportunity that many of their students faced growing up in South Omaha. This is the Nebraska I experienced as a child.

When I was first introduced to the idea of place-conscious education, an education which seeks to engage students with their local communities, the authors I

came across—Paul Theobald, David Sobel, Eileen Schell, and others—focused mostly on rural areas, including towns in Nebraska. This concept of education seemed to have great promise, but as I read teachers’ stories of implementing it in their classrooms in rural Nebraska, I found myself thinking increasingly of my own education at Assumption. I wondered if an education tied to place was possible in the inner city, and, if so, what opportunities it might bring to students there.

With this in mind, I began searching for scholars interested in urban education who shared a devotion to the local community. Linda Flower, Ellen Cushman, Mary Soliday, and Sarah Robbins were among the scholars I found. I noticed, however, that distinct differences emerged between the rural and urban literature. This thesis is an attempt at articulating those differences and understanding why they exist. In doing so, I hope to understand the particular difficulties of bringing a place-conscious education to *all* students in Nebraska and beyond, including those who grow up in communities like that of the Assumption students I grew up with.

## CHAPTER 1

In order to understand the differences between the rural and urban scholarship, we must first look at each individually. To begin with, I would like to explore three major themes that I see emerging in the writings of scholars who focus mainly on rural place-conscious education. While there are many scholars who have done work in this area, this thesis will focus on three in particular who are well-known advocates of place-conscious education. These scholars are Paul Theobald, David Sobel, and Eileen Schell. While all three have emphasized that the type of education they recommend for rural schools and communities can be equally effective in urban areas—Schell in particular has noted that “mutual identification” between rural and urban locales is important (*Rural Literacies* 94)—their main concern is with rural communities. Theobald, in fact, argues (along with Paul Nachtigal) that “healthy urban communities will exist only if there are healthy rural communities” and that “the rural school is the proper place to begin the conversation and consensus-building” (Theobald & Nachtigal). Thus, while it is impossible to completely separate the work on rural communities from that on urban communities, these authors have focused their efforts on creating programs that advance the education of rural students.

These scholars, along with others, have argued eloquently for the benefits of place-conscious education in rural schools. As I read their work, I continually saw three themes emerging: democracy, sustainability, and pride in the community. This chapter will examine how Theobald, Sobel, and Schell promote these ideas as the goals of place-conscious education, particularly in rural environments.

### *Democracy*

One of the primary themes that comes up in the writing of many rural place-conscious education scholars is that of democracy. By this, they mean that education should prepare students to become active participants in their communities, working toward the betterment of the community as a whole rather than narrowly focusing on individual success (though community success naturally leads to success for the individuals in that community as well). They encourage students to participate in organizations that have the potential to make positive changes in their communities.

Theobald in particular argues that educating students to take part in democratic organizations is necessary for the success of our nation's communities. He writes, "If we are to avoid further social and environmental deterioration in this society, we need to execute a grassroots-level cultural shift away from a conception of freedom as 'freedom from' to a conception of 'freedom to'" (*Teaching the Commons* 114). The most important part of this "freedom to," in Theobald's opinion is the freedom to help make decisions in the community. Improving the communities in which we live by active participation in them is for Theobald the best measure of our success.

Theobald sees this type of democratic participation as the antidote for an increasingly materialistic society in which individual financial success is privileged over the needs of the community as a whole. He and Linda Tolbert argue that "confining the ends of education to preparation for economic endeavors—for jobs—does a disservice to individuals in the education system and to the well-being of the larger society" (Tolbert

& Theobald). Rather, education should serve the needs of a democratic society. Students should be educated to take part in local community organizations and have a say in the way their communities are run. By doing so, their education will prepare them not merely to achieve financial success, but to achieve meaningful lives in communities that are important to them—if for no other reason than that they have had a voice in creating and defining them.

This kind of work could be done in an urban school as well as the rural schools on which Theobald focuses. The education at Assumption was not necessarily place-conscious, but because it was part of a larger community, including the Catholic parish that ran it and the daycare run by the same parish, students were encouraged to contribute to organizations outside of the school. Most of my female classmates and I were part of a Girl Scout troop that was associated with the school and parish community. Through it, we took on projects that allowed us the kind of participation in the community (albeit only the Assumption community) about which Theobald writes. For instance, we painted the daycare when it was in need of renovations. Troop members also helped plan and put on a Halloween event which allowed local children to Trick-or-Treat in the safe environment of the school gymnasium. Participation in organizations like the Girl Scouts allowed us to actively participate in our community.

Sobel similarly sees the need for educating children to become members of a democratic society. Along with Gregory Smith in *Place- and Community-Based Education in Schools*, he questions a society in which “what’s real for many young people is what happens on their computer monitors, television screens, and MP3 players”

(viii). He wants, instead, to educate children to participate as active citizens in their communities, turning away from computer screens and turning to the real concerns that face them and the places in which they live. Indeed, one of Sobel and Smith's advocated approaches to place-based education is "induction to citizenship." They worry that although "civic education" is often a purported goal of American schools, this generally takes the form of learning abstract concepts of how the government works rather than teaching students how to become actively involved citizens (Smith & Sobel 54). Like Theobald, Sobel wants young people to take active roles in community organizations and movements, even when they are controversial.

Sobel is also critical of education that seeks only to prepare students for economic success. Together with Smith, he writes, "In focusing primarily on only one element of our common life—the economic—people in contemporary societies run the risk of failing to prepare the young for the forms of collaboration, problem-solving, social commitment, and imagination required to live not merely as individuals but as members of interdependent communities" (Smith & Sobel 101). Their language hints that failing to educate children to take part in democratic organizations is not only detrimental to them as individuals but to the society as a whole. How can democracy survive in America if students are not taught the skills to participate? How can the nation's young people have a say in the future of their communities if they learn only abstract concepts of government but not real-world application? If we limit education to preparing students to hold a job, but not to participate in the community organizations that make decisions that

affect their lives and the lives of their neighbors, how can these communities continue to thrive?

Although Schell does not address the issue of democracy directly, it permeates her writing nonetheless. As she describes a food politics course that she plans to teach, she recognizes that getting students involved in organizations that deal with issues of local foods is a key goal. She wants to not only invite representatives from organizations like the Northeast Organic Farmers Association and the Eastern Farm Workers Association to speak to her class, but to “create opportunities for students to get involved in the work of these organizations and address how to bring opportunities to the university campus for students to buy and eat local foods” (*Rural Literacies* 177). In other words, she wants students to move beyond talking about the issues involved in the farm crisis and food politics and into engaging with them. She wants them to have the opportunity to have a voice in how and where they get their food. This echoes Theobald’s and Sobel’s insistence on teaching students how to get involved directly with community organizations that affect their lives. Schell’s main goal is to encourage her students not to be passive consumers of processed foods from who knows where (particularly at the university where they often have no choice in what food is served), but to be active citizens who have a say in where their food comes from. Along with Kim Donehower and Charlotte Hogg, she advocates for education models that “promote models of citizen participation that will ensure the future of rural communities” (*Rural Literacies* 8). Encouraging students to participate as involved citizens is key to her pedagogy and to her scholarship on rural education.

Though Theobald, Sobel, and Schell each approach the issue of democracy in different ways, the message is the same: education must give students the skills to be active citizens in their communities. Abstract understanding and theoretical knowledge are not enough. If it does not come with opportunities for real-world applications, this kind of knowledge is useless. By actively involving students in local organizations, teachers can teach them all they would learn in a more traditional classroom and more. They will learn the skills needed to shape their own futures and the futures of their communities.

Furthermore, Theobald and Sobel in particular emphasize that these issues do not just affect the students themselves but the viability of their communities as a whole. If democracy is to be preserved, the younger generations will need to become involved in these community organizations. If students are taught that individual financial success is the main goal of their education, they will most likely leave their communities high and dry, forsaking the needs of the places in which they live for their own economic achievement. In other words, the future of these communities—and American society in general—is in large part dependent on an education which involves students in the democratic process, allowing them a voice in conversations about the present and future of the places they live.

As we will see, this concern for the future of communities is one of the other major themes in work on rural place-conscious education. One of the main reasons that these scholars emphasize the need for teaching students how to be involved democratic citizens is that it is necessary for the sustainability of rural communities. With this in

mind, I turn to the next theme which is prevalent in scholarship on rural place-conscious education: sustainability.

### *Sustainability*

Scholars with interests in rural education are naturally concerned with the preservation and sustainability of the rural communities on which their work is centered. There are two main areas of concern when it comes to sustainability: economic and ecological. The two are interconnected in many ways, particularly in rural areas where much of the economic success of the community is dependent on farm- and/or ranchland. Theobald, Sobel, and Schell have all seen place-conscious education as a critical component of encouraging economic and ecological sustainability of rural communities.

Theobald and Nachtigal write in their article “Culture, Community, and the Promise of Rural Education” that “Re-creating communities through the adoption of a new set of cultural assumptions grounded in ecologically sustainable practices will require the redesign of schooling” (Theobald & Nachtigal). The main change that is needed, he argues, is an investment in the local. If students become invested in the rural areas in which they live, it follows that they will seek out ways to remain in these communities. Staying requires finding ways to make the community both economically sound—people, after all, need an income—and ecologically sound. This involves finding ways to turn from an extractive economy to a sustainable one. In his history of rural education, Theobald argues that increasing demand for agricultural produce led to the growing farm size at the expense of community values eventually led to “the slow demise

of the rural one-room school” (*Call School* 176). The turn from agriculture to agribusiness, then, is in large part responsible for the loss of community in rural areas. Environmental exploitation made it impossible for all but a few people to be economically successful in rural communities. If sustainability is the goal, new ways of living in these communities must be found.

The school is where this kind of change must begin, according to Theobald. Sustainability can be promoted in the school, turned into a cultural value that students share. After all, “schools offer twelve years of enculturation for the nation’s youth” (*Teaching the Commons* 114). Theobald argues that rather than enculturating students to work toward individual financial success, this enculturation can be used to advance the interests and sustainability of the community. Place-conscious education can thus lay the groundwork for moving from an extractive economy that damages the local environment to an economy based on principles of sustainability, allowing students the opportunity to remain in the rural areas in which they have become invested.

Sobel also remarks on the need for economic sustainability. With Smith, he argues that a “willingness to limit short-term profits for long-term sustainability” (Smith & Sobel 38) is necessary for the success of rural communities. The concern, then, is to create an economically sound community that will withstand the pressures of time. Like Theobald, Sobel and Smith are aware that economic sustainability is tied to ecological factors as well. They assert that “children everywhere need to be prepared to become collaborators in the creation of communities where economic, social, and political practices enhance the welfare of the human inhabitants and the *integrity of the natural*

*systems that support them*” (Smith & Sobel 40, emphasis mine). Furthermore, Sobel argues in “Building a Three-Legged Stool of Academic Achievement, Social Capital, and Environmental Quality” that a successful community requires all three elements (36). When any one of the legs is missing, a community will be hurt. Schools can help give students the knowledge and skills to create sustainable practices which guard the wellbeing of these economic and environmental systems.

The authors of *Place- and Community-Based Education* argue, moreover, that schools should teach students to value not only human assets, but the natural assets found in their local communities (47). For rural students, this would likely include soil, crops, native species, and more. Sobel and Smith point out that when students are aware of the debt they owe to these non-human components of their home places, they are more likely to value them and to engage in sustainable practices which exploit them as little as possible. In his book *Mapmaking with Children*, Sobel describes ways of fostering this commitment to the environment early encouraging them to explore the areas in which they live. He wants to counter societal messages which tell children, “Important things are far away and disconnected from children” (7), advocating instead “a curriculum based on building a relationship between the structure of local landscape and the shape of the children’s lives” (8). By encouraging these connections to the environment early, Sobel’s pedagogy sets the stage for students who are concerned with the long term sustainability of the natural world they see around them.

Sobel and Smith are not unaware of the economic needs of rural communities, however. They understand that lack of economic opportunities contributes to the demise

of these areas as young people feel compelled to leave to seek jobs elsewhere (Smith & Sobel 51). They argue, however, that once again place-conscious education can play a role in promoting sustainability—this time economic sustainability. For example, one group of students in South Dakota conducted a study of the local economy to identify ways to improve it, such as encouraging residents to shop locally and adding a local ATM (Smith & Sobel 52). They learn that by investing in their local communities they can “craft good lives for themselves” (54), finding ways to remain in the communities that they have learned to love.

Schell is perhaps the most adamant of the three that sustainability measures need to be put into place. Along with Donehower and Hogg, she writes in *Reclaiming the Rural* that neoliberalism has placed the market ahead of the needs of the people, resulting in exploitation both of rural people and the land (8-9). This kind of exploitative view of rural landscapes destroys them and makes it difficult for those who love them to remain in such areas. Her chapter in *Rural Literacies* explores this difficulty at some length as Schell discusses the trend toward larger farms and less people involved in them known as the farm crisis.

What Schell argues, however, is that a new way of talking about these issues is needed. Simple rhetoric of tragedy romanticizes and idealizes rural life. The rhetoric of “smart diversification,” on the other hand, can be useful, but “emphasizes technological innovation within the structure of industrialized agriculture” (*Reclaiming the Rural* 80), turning toward the same neoliberalism that has endangered rural communities. What is needed instead, according to Schell, is a rhetoric of sustainability, which encourages

“rural people to imagine their options and alternatives” (81). This kind of rhetoric differs from both the rhetoric of tragedy and the rhetoric of smart diversification in that it emphasizes the needs of the community over individualism. Doing so requires balancing economic and ecological needs of rural places as well as cooperation with suburban and urban citizens. What is at stake here, according to Schell, is not just the life of rural communities, but everyone. Without sustainable measures being put into place, many of the nation’s resources will be put at risk. Literacy educators should work, then, to change the rhetoric associated with rural areas as “the sustainability metaphor allows us to see the ways literate practices can connect those communities [rural, urban, and suburban] to ensure a stable future for us all” (*Rural Literacies* 155). By discussing these issues in the classroom, educators can encourage literacies that work toward sustainability rather than exploitation.

According to these scholars, a move toward sustainability is needed if we are to preserve rural communities. Economic and ecological factors must be placed in balance with one another. Extractive and exploitative economies damage not only the environment but the potential for future economic viability of these communities. Will our children and grandchildren be able to make a living in rural areas or will they be forced to move to new areas to support themselves, contributing to the growing “brain drain” in rural communities? Schools can help ensure sustainable measures are put into place, allowing those who love these communities to remain by creating economic opportunities that do not rely solely on exploiting the land.

This kind of action, however, rests on the assumption that there is something good and worth preserving in these rural communities. Thus, the third theme found in Theobald, Sobel, and Schell's works is that of pride. Indeed, the concept of place-conscious education is based largely on the assumption that it is good to be proud of and invested in one's place. This brings us to our third and final section on the rural scholarship of place-conscious education.

### *Pride of Place*

At the root of the rural scholars' pedagogy of place is the need to instill a sense of pride in place in students. While blind celebration of place is unwarranted—it would negate the need to teach democracy and sustainability—there is nonetheless a need to help students view their communities with pride, making them want to invest in the communities' futures.

Theobald argues that place-conscious education can be used to motivate students to learn because it centers around people and places that are already important to them. He says this way of teaching “make[s] students want to show up, . . . want to achieve, . . . [and] give[s] them a sense of pride in who they are and what they can do to improve where they are” (Tolbert & Theobald). He further argues that teachers (and students) need to recognize the learning opportunities that surround them “no matter how deteriorated the neighborhood may be.” These communities still have history, art, literature, and so on. The challenge is to make students aware of these opportunities.

Pride, in fact, is such a crucial part of Theobald's pedagogical views that it is a major part of the title of his book, *Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride, and the Renewal of the Community*. The message here is clear: pride is a crucial ingredient to reviving communities and community values in America. He states unequivocally that the argument he makes is based on the assumptions that "rural schools...have an indispensable role to play" and that "schools ought to attend more consciously to their physical place on earth" (1). Both of these assumptions make it clear that Theobald's pedagogy is based on the fact that important things are happening *in the rural communities where students live*. Emphasizing that fact will make students more invested in their communities, thus paving the way for the democratic society for which Theobald argues so strongly.

He is not alone. David Sobel also argues for the importance of developing pride of place in students. With Gregory Smith, he points out that "attention to the local can nurture a sense of pride about one's community and a deepening connection to the people there and the place that supports them" (Smith & Sobel 88). This sense of pride allows students to see the value in their rural communities, despite cultural messages which often tell students that their communities are unimportant. Sobel and Smith even point out that students can often be embarrassed to be from such areas. Place-conscious education can change that.

Indeed, when Sobel advocates mapmaking as a productive classroom practice, it is largely because students become familiar with and develop pride in their local surroundings. It is important to create "big maps of small places," which serves to

emphasize the importance of these local places, places like the school playground or the student's block (*Mapmaking with Children* 22). Making maps of such places allows students to feel that their neighborhoods are important. As they grow older, this feeling will likely lead them to become invested in improving their communities through involvement in local organizations and sustainability efforts. Pedagogical practices which encourage a sense of pride of place are thus crucial to the other efforts of place-conscious educators.

But pride of place is particularly important when it comes to rural areas, according to Eileen Schell. She remarks that "rural students may presume that their professors bring to the classroom a mindset that rural students are uncultured and subliterate and have little to contribute in the way of knowledge" (*Rural Literacies* 161). This comes of years of enculturation in which rural students have been told that their homes are somehow inferior to urban or suburban areas. They are "nowhere" (*Reclaiming the Rural* 2). It follows, then, that these students must in some way be inferior. But this cultural logic overlooks an important fact, as Schell points out. Rural residents and urban/suburban residents' interests overlap. Rural communities provide many of the resources that other areas rely on. In *Reclaiming the Rural*, Schell, Donehower, and Hogg critique claims that rural communities are energy inefficient and that they deplete federal resources unnecessarily (2). Such assumptions overlook the fact that the nation depends on these communities for its very sustenance. Thus, one role of place-conscious education should be to challenge negative conceptions of rural areas and emphasize their importance to the nation as a whole.

What Theobald, Sobel, and Schell have in common here is their belief that education should encourage pride of place in students. This pride in both the people and the physical features of the rural landscape encourages an investment in places that are often deemed unimportant but in reality serve a crucial function in the United States. This investment on the part of students is critical if they are to find ways to participate in democratic community organizations and work toward sustainability. Before students commit to investing themselves in a community, they need to believe that the community is worth investing in. Place-conscious education can help advance that goal.

These are three of the main focuses of place-conscious education as described by scholars who are primarily concerned with rural areas. Note that all three—democracy, sustainability, and pride—are interrelated, and particularly that the former two rely on the latter. Again, I want to emphasize that Theobald, Sobel, and Schell all recognize that rural concerns and urban concerns are related and that much of what they advocate for rural schools would be equally beneficial in urban schools. Nonetheless, the themes that arise do so because of the scholars' concern with rural areas.

When the conversation turns to urban areas, the emphasis shifts. If this is how we discuss the role of place-conscious education when we talk about rural areas, how might conversations about urban areas differ or be similar?

## CHAPTER 2

I greatly admire the work of these rural place-conscious scholars, but my concern here is primarily with education in inner city schools. As I turned to urban scholars, I found that they were interested in similar ideas, although they did not always term their work “place-conscious” or explicitly identify themselves with this school of thought. Nonetheless, there are several scholars who are doing important work in urban education. I would like to take a look at four of them here. Linda Flower’s work in Pittsburgh focuses on intercultural communication, particularly in inner city youth and the adults with whom they work. Ellen Cushman’s book *The Struggle and the Tools* explores how African Americans in Quayville use rhetorical strategies to gain access to the resources and social institutions on which they rely. Meanwhile Mary Soliday is primarily concerned with issues of access to higher education for urban students. Finally, Sarah Robbins and her colleagues in the Keeping and Creating American Communities program are perhaps the most like the rural place-conscious scholars in their concern with creating connections between K-12 classrooms in Georgia and their local communities.

Though they approach urban education from different angles, however, their concerns are similar. They value the people who reside in these urban spaces and hope to aid these residents in improving their lives and their communities. Also noteworthy is that their concerns echo those of rural place-conscious scholars in many ways. Indeed, three themes that I see in the work of Flower, Cushman, Soliday, and Robbins are remarkably similar to those discussed in the first section in the work of Theobald, Sobel, and Schell. While the emphasis is slightly different (as it should be since they are dealing

with a different kind of place and a different group of people), the urban scholars examined here ultimately have the same core goals in the education of young inner city residents as rural scholars have for their students.

With this in mind, as I turned from rural scholarship to urban scholarship I was interested in examining not only the differences but also the similarities. Urban schools do face unique challenges that need to be addressed in unique ways, but many of the problems are the same. The message students receive is often that success equals leaving the community, for example. Thus it should not be surprising that the themes I see emerging in the work of Flower, Cushman, Soliday, and Robbins parallel those of Theobald, Sobel, and Schell, while still approaching them in unique ways that address the distinctive problems of the places with which they are concerned. These major themes are, as I see them, agency and liberation, economic justice, and cultural and ethnic pride.

### *Agency/Liberation*

While rural scholars are concerned with democracy—encouraging students to use their voices to address community problems—urban scholars recognize that their students' voices are often not valued. Thus much of their work centers around the idea that the voices of urban, minority, working-class people are valuable, but often silenced due to systematic oppression. I use the term “liberation” in the Freirean sense; that is, urban scholars are not trying to sweep in and solve the community's problem for it. Rather, they want to work with the community to help it liberate itself. The people of the community, including the young people and students, need to liberate themselves, finding

ways to break the silences which have often been forced upon them and take action in their communities.

Linda Flower, for example, dedicates a chapter in her book *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement* specifically to discussing empowerment. She questions “why our dominant educational paradigms have so much trouble supporting an *intercultural* empowerment—one focused on solidarity, speaking with others, and speaking for values” (124). In other words, she wants to know why “empowerment” is often seen as something teachers or programs give to students rather than something that students achieve. True empowerment must instead come from the students themselves, working in conjunction with teachers and others. Flower advocates evaluating education in a way which “shifts the locus of agency from the program to the young people” and “translates the conventional indicators of success (in which empowerment is equated with meeting behavioral norms) into acts of personal decision making, reflective understanding, and rhetorical action” (*Community Literacy* 149). If agency comes from the students, then they will be equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to make changes in other environments. They must liberate themselves. Teachers and mentors can only facilitate the process.

Flower reiterates this point in another article as she examines service-learning at the university level. She emphasizes that any liberation of the community members must come from the community itself. Students conducting service, she argues, “[come] prepared to act; they really [need] to inquire” (“Intercultural Inquiry” 182). Simple charity is not the same as service-learning which works to aid community members in

their work toward agency. When service to the community fails to engage in a dialogue with the members of that community, we often “find that ‘they’ fail to fit our schemes for them” (“Intercultural Inquiry” 184). While Flower is here specifically addressing service-learning courses at the college level, her words can be applied to work in the elementary and secondary schools of urban neighborhoods. These young students need more than charity work. They need educators who are prepared to discover the true needs of students and the neighborhood, prepared to let students take an active role in developing their own sense of agency.

Cushman is perhaps the most ardent of the urban scholars in her assertion that if community members are to break the binds of oppression and take action in their lives and communities, they must do it in their own way. Her study of one inner city community in *The Struggle and the Tools* emphasizes that the people living there have found their own ways to use language as a tool with which they fight oppression that silences them. She gives as an example the story of Lucy, who arrives at the DSS with paperwork to help get her daughter support. Lucy begins by speaking Standard English as a way of earning the government worker’s respect, but when she is turned away because she is missing a document—one that is already on file in a different part of the building—she reverts to Black English. She says quietly, “Get me every time,” using her language to both placate the worker (who thinks that Lucy is referring to her own forgetfulness) and to express her protest to Cushman (who understands that she is referring to government workers) (15). Cushman tells this story as a means of demonstrating that people in these communities have their own ways of gaining agency,

including code-switching between Standard and Black English depending on which will get them what they need.

Obviously, more than this is needed, however. Cushman also writes that the emancipatory pedagogy of Freire can provide a means of helping students to liberate themselves—but only if it is reinterpreted and rewritten to fit the specific situation of the places where educators hope to employ it (*The Struggle and the Tools* 29). Moreover, it needs to move beyond the classroom, into the community itself. If these conditions are satisfied, though, Cushman agrees that liberatory teaching can help community members to gain agency. Indeed, she critiques activism which does not engage in a dialogue with community members: “Intervention without invitation slips into paternalistic imposition” (*The Struggle and the Tools* 29). If we treat oppressed peoples as if they do not have the intelligence to develop their own agency—as Lucy clearly does—then any activism is merely another form of oppression and prejudice.

Soliday similarly advocates an education which allows students to develop their own agency. In particular, she writes in “Translating Self and Difference through Literacy Narratives” that “literacy narratives can expand students’ sense of personal agency when they discover not only that their own stories are narratable, but also that through their stories they can engage in a broader critical dialogue” (512). Such assignments in the classroom allow students to recognize that their own lives and stories have meaning. This is particularly important when dealing with students who may have been silenced in the past, who may feel that being from the “ghetto” means that they have nothing important to say and that they are incapable of taking action because they think

their background makes them ill-equipped to do so. Soliday emphasizes that these narratives help open the door to representing difference in the classroom. Crucial to note here, though, is that while Soliday assigns the literacy narratives, it is students' voices that ultimately need to be heard and their plans that can ultimately help solve the problems they identify. She creates a vehicle for students to express themselves, but students themselves supply the message.

Soliday's literacy narratives, of course, remain largely in the classroom. Robbins, on the other hand, specifically advocates getting students out of the classroom and into the community. She writes, "Instead of merely being objects of others' analysis, students become empowered agents using literacy to make meaningful contributions to the places where they live" (Robbins & Dyer 8). Throughout her book *Writing America*, which she edits with Mimi Dyer, teachers in the Keeping and Creating American Communities (KCAC) project focus on engaging their students with the local community and asking them to consider potential solutions for problems they see. For example, Leslie Walker's students tour the local cemetery in Smyrna, Georgia and develop storyboards that focus on the confluence of old and new in their city or the missing names on many of the cemetery tombstones, both of which address the fact that the city's history is not being well-preserved as new people move into the area (Robbins & Dyer 81). Robbins emphasizes that the KCAC has two goals: keeping and creating. The creating aspect, she emphasizes, "is equally important, because it encourages students to see themselves as active composers of their communities' identities" (Robbins & Dyer 10). Rather than

accepting things as they are, students are encouraged to enact their own agency, influencing and shaping the community.

Clearly, agency is a primary goal urban education researchers. It is important to create opportunities for students whose voices have been silenced to make them heard and, moreover, to take action in their communities in ways that they decide. Indeed, it is difficult to find a work on community-based urban education that does not cite Freire and his liberatory pedagogy.

In many ways this emphasis on making voices heard parallels rural researchers' concern for having students actively participate in the community, having a say in what goes on in the places in which they live. Unfortunately, in urban areas, students must often fight much harder to gain agency. While the students at Assumption Elementary in South Omaha were bright, intelligent young people, society did not value them as such. Though they were full of opinions, the opportunities to express them were few. Complaints were often silenced, as they are in many urban schools. Prejudice and oppression have taken their toll on these areas. It is of the utmost importance, then, that vehicles are created which allow students to act, and that when they do act their ideas and actions are treated with genuine interest and concern.

And what might they say? According to Flower, Cushman, Soliday, and Robbins, one of the main concerns of urban residents is that economically the deck is stacked against them. It can seem impossible to get ahead when one starts out so far behind. These four researchers recognize that economic injustice plays a crucial role in the

education that urban children get, and therefore each dedicates a portion of her scholarship to explaining and examining the issues at hand.

### *Economic Justice*

Urban educators are just as concerned with the economic vitality of a place as the rural scholars we have looked at. They understand that a lack of jobs and various forms of economic injustice perpetuate the cycle of poverty in inner city areas. Education is one way that this cycle can be broken if it contributes to students' ability to create economic opportunities for themselves and their community and to fight back against the various factors injustices that work to keep the urban poor in poverty.

Flower recognizes that poverty is one of the major challenges urban students face. She points out that socio-economic status is a better predictor of who will get various major diseases than any medical test (*Community Literacy* 69). The students she works with at the Community Literacy Center in Pittsburgh have few options to overcome the poverty that they are born into. They are trying to "become somebody," but their only available survival strategies lead them to become part of what society deems the problem; they are forced to turn to gangs and illegal activity in order to survive. The issue of having no voice contributes directly to the problem of economic injustice. Flower writes that "policies in health, education, and social services...fail to offer teenagers productive roles in the larger community or to position them as responsible agents of change" (*Community Literacy* 70).

Flower attempts to change this by asking teenagers to help problem solve along with the rest of the community, using the student agency she has advocated before to combat this problem. For instance, in *Learning to Rival* she describes one student who asks “Does the socioeconomic status of an individual affect his proficiency in the classroom?” (126). While she wants Dean to further develop his question, moving beyond yes-no dichotomies, it is clear that students are willing and able to engage with complicated issues related to the community’s economics if given the opportunity. And they *must* be given the opportunity if they are to end the cycle of poverty. Flower summarizes economist William Julius Wilson who challenges the practice of blaming the “culture” of those in the inner city. Flower then argues that if the culture itself does not perpetuate the cycle of poverty, then “the logic of charity is short-sighted” (*Community Literacy* 104). In fact, she goes so far as to call it arrogant. A much more practical solution, and one that truly values the people we are trying to help, is to listen to community members’ ideas and work with them to combat economic injustices in whatever form they present themselves.

Ellen Cushman is also concerned with the economic injustices faced by residents of urban neighborhoods. She points out how the deck can be stacked against inhabitants of the inner city from the very beginning. She points out that job options are limited in Quayville, and often in other inner city communities, because of issues of transportation (*The Struggle and the Tools* 51). Jobs that are close enough to get to without a car are low-paying and often offer unreliable hours. Even these jobs are limited. Moreover, even if there are jobs available nearby, women in the community “could only apply if all

their kids were school-aged, if their health permitted, if they could save enough cash to dress for an interview, if their own parents were looked after, and if the jobs paid enough of a hourly wage to insure [sic] they could find a sitter” (*The Struggle and the Tools* 51). Facing so many obstacles, it becomes almost impossible for Quayville residents, and particularly the women with whom Cushman speaks, to break the cycle of poverty in their community.

Soliday is also aware that socio-economic status is one of the key problems that must be dealt with in education, and one that is often overlooked. She is particularly concerned with giving poor students the opportunity to go to college because, as she points out, “the BA degree determines whether individuals will perform physical or mental labor, and it also determines the amount of autonomy they will have over their work” (“Class Dismissed” 401). It allows people to move from the working class to the middle class, to improve their socio-economic status. But it is not easy to get a bachelor’s degree when one comes from a poor, urban neighborhood. Not only do they face issues of being able to pay for college—they must work more hours which limits their time dedicated to schoolwork (403)—but even getting into college is more difficult because their secondary schools have often not prepared them well enough to meet admissions guidelines. Soliday argues that “tests like the WAT, mandatory remediation, extensive testing and counseling, penalties for withdrawing from courses, and course sequencing function as barriers; they are a less visible means of selection within many open admissions institutions” (“Class Dismissed” 407). In other words, colleges put up barriers that intentionally or not work to make it more difficult for working class students

to earn a bachelor's degree. Financial pressures limit students' ability to receive the very education that will help them relieve that pressure.

Indeed, Soliday's claims hold true not only in New York, but also in places like Nebraska. Students who graduate from South Omaha schools often find that earning a four-year degree is nearly impossible because of the financial pressure. Of the students that attended Assumption with me, two of us earned BA degrees in four years. One more student eventually earned a BA after additional time; one is in his sixth year of working toward his BA. The others either did not attend college, dropped out, or are working toward Associate's degrees (which Soliday says do not offer the same class mobility as bachelor's degrees). Could a place-conscious education have helped my classmates to create economic opportunities? Would it have made it easier for them to earn a BA and thus improve their financial well-being?

Soliday raises a valid point when she demonstrates how difficult class mobility is due to institutional barriers at many colleges and universities. This is yet one more reason why an education which emphasizes student connections to the community is important. Soliday's impassioned plea for university policies that allow urban students access to the education they need for class mobility may well be read as a promotion of a move up and out of the inner city. But what Soliday emphasizes is that *all* these students need access to the education that will allow them to achieve economic success. She notes that open admissions policies and institutional support allowed "thousands of working-class students" to "find and keep white collar jobs, to obtain post-graduate degrees, and to contribute to the overall growth of an educated urban class" ("Class Dismissed" 408-9).

If access to this class mobility allowed financial success for thousands, it stands to reason that some at least will contribute to the urban neighborhoods in which they grew up, particularly if their earlier education has developed strong ties to the community. This “educated urban class” will only grow if urban students are given more access to higher education as Soliday advocates. With a good education under their belt, these students can help further develop their urban neighborhoods. But first, the economic injustices which keep them out of college in the first place must be addressed.

KCAC teachers, meanwhile, often use education to help students engage with the presence of economic injustices in their own hometowns. Though Robbins does not explicitly outline the economic injustices faced by urban students, she clearly understands economic pressures as one of the forces of history that she wants students to understand as they engage with their local communities. As she and her colleagues developed their own projects, economic pressures often come up. Robbins describes their examination of the Cherokee removal by noting that they looked into the “political, social, economic, racial, and class based” forces that caused it (Robbins & Dyer 15). A study of Atlanta’s development similarly explored the “economic, cultural, and political developments” of the city (Robbins & Dyer 15). If economic pressures form one of the factors that students must look into as they engage their communities, poor, urban students will certainly take note of the injustices in their own communities. Unlike the other urban scholars here, Robbins does not focus on documenting the economic injustices faced by inner city students in Atlanta. But the pedagogy she advocates necessitates the examination of the

economic pressures that these students and their communities face and how they shape their urban neighborhoods.

The different approaches of these scholars to economic concerns nevertheless reveals that economic distress is a major dilemma that must be faced if we hope to aid community members in improving their inner city communities. While the residents of urban areas find their own ways of dealing with these injustices, including both negotiating governmental institutions that sometimes offer support and turning to illegal activities that provide economic support (see Cushman), it is clear that other options are needed. The entrepreneurship and focus on economic sustainability found in the work of rural place-conscious scholars is one example of how these injustices might be countered. While the urban scholars we have looked at have focused on the injustices of the system, it is clear that they believe an education that embraces the community rather than rejecting it is a good place to start. As Cushman illustrates, good, available jobs in the neighborhood could make quite a difference in the lives of many urban residents who are unable to travel long distances to find work. Students should be encouraged to address the difficulties faced by not only themselves but the community as a whole, as they do in Flower's work. Place-conscious education offers a way for students to pose these problems and seek solutions that work for them and that they are able to begin implementing on their own, perhaps working with institutions like local universities and governments. Nonetheless, these solutions to economic injustice should ultimately come from within the community rather than from without. Just as large corporate farms are

not the solution for the economic difficulties faced by rural people, gentrification will not solve the problems faced by poor urban residents.

In order for students to create these opportunities, however, a certain level of pride in the community must be developed. This pride can give students the motivation to seek out solutions and encourage them to believe that they and their communities have the ability to create things of worth and solutions that can work. As we have seen, our rural educators emphasize pride in the rural landscape and community. In the urban scholarship, however, this focus on pride often concentrates on cultural and ethnic pride.

#### *Cultural/Ethnic Pride*

Many if not most of the urban areas discussed by Flower, Cushman, Soliday, and Robbins have a high concentration of ethnic minorities. Indeed, this is the case in inner cities throughout the nation. As a result, urban educators who focus on the community argue that a good education should work to instill pride in the cultures of these students by welcoming these cultures into the classroom and community centers as valuable contributions to the work being done there.

Flower, for example, insists that mutual respect for each other's cultures is key for working with urban students. She advocates what she calls "intercultural inquiry," which is more than "the attempt to understand the nature of difference for its own sake. Rather the partners in an intercultural inquiry attempt to *use* the differences of race, class, culture, or discourse that are available to them to understand shared questions" ("Intercultural Inquiry" 186). Thus cultural differences which may have previously left

students feeling discriminated against become the key to posing and solving problems in their communities. Their experiences as members of a community and a cultural group bring new knowledge to the table. As Flower, Long, and Higgins write in *Learning to Rival*, “Inquiry recognizes the unique kinds of expertise that others can bring to a problem” (300). While the authors are careful to stipulate that people should not be “predefined” by their race, their contributions to inquiry are nonetheless shaped by their experiences, which include their experience as a minority living in an urban area. Taking pride in their culture or ethnicity allows students to contribute because they recognize that their experience is important and needs to be shared. The knowledge that comes out of their experience as a minority—whether African American, Mexican American, or otherwise—adds something to the conversation that needs to be said. Flower notes that the “special voice” of minorities who live in two worlds simultaneously—the world of the dominant culture and their own—“is the grounding for individual liberation” (*Community Literacy* 129). To make her point she quotes Gloria Anzaldúa at length: “I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language I cannot take pride in myself” (129). One might add that she cannot take pride in her community either until she takes pride in her culture, including her language. Thus, cultural pride is essential to positive identification with an urban community.

As I read Flower I cannot help but contrast her argument with my experience in South Omaha where there were only a few perfunctory nods to the Mexican American culture. At Christmastime a “posada” was staged by the first graders. The annual festival included a taco stand. But ethnicity was never at the center of the curriculum as

it is in Flower's book. There weren't even Spanish classes, despite the fact that over ninety percent of the students came from a Hispanic background and many of them still spoke Spanish at home. The education still centered around white authors and American norms. Success in many ways meant assimilation. Although students often developed their own sense of cultural pride it took place off school grounds. Students could be Mexican (or Salvadoran or what have you) at home, but at school they were learning to fit in with the status quo.

Because of this very split between what is "acceptable" in the world of school and what is practiced in students' own homes, Cushman argues that the culture of students needs to make its way into the classroom. With Barbier, Mazak, and Petrone, she writes, "through their attitudes toward their students' experiences and language—whether transmitted overtly or tacitly—teachers have the power to either draw students into the educational system or push them away from it" (Cushman et. al. 205). When teachers reject or ignore the culture and language of students, they cause students to become resistant to the educational system. The authors go on: "Conversely, students whose home languages, cultural experiences, and literacy practices are valued and used as resources in academic contexts are more apt to succeed in school" (205). Minority students have much to contribute, including linguistic abilities that may be different from standard academic discourse but are nonetheless valuable. When these abilities along with other aspects of the students' culture are welcomed into the classroom rather than ignored as they were in South Omaha, students can contribute in meaningful ways to the knowledge being shared in the classroom and ultimately find academic success.

Of course, academic success is not the only goal worth having. Cushman's work in *The Struggle and the Tools* explicitly affirms the linguistic ability of African Americans in Quayville. Black English is explicitly valued both by Cushman and in the community, though community members are able to switch into the dominant discourse when necessary. She writes, "African Americans in this area believed talking Black was important to show solidarity" (*The Struggle and the Tools* 57). In other words, language is used to indicate membership in a cultural group. African Americans who refuse to speak Black English or avoid being associated with other blacks are looked down upon. Such a person is "chastised...as someone who sold out her identity" (*The Struggle and the Tools* 58). Cushman indicates that this pride in Black culture and language is a means of bringing the community together. It helps community members to struggle as one to overcome shared problems. Cultural pride becomes a means of resistance in a neighborhood where systemic pressures trap residents in poverty.

Soliday, on the other hand, sees cultural pride as a means of making students feel welcome in college classrooms. The distinction between who students are at home and who they are at school is at the center of Soliday's article "Translating Self and Difference through Literacy Narratives." She gives several examples of students and writers who find themselves struggling to "confront life choices about their identity in relation to dominant discourses" (516). Facing one culture at home and another at school, they find that they need to embrace one or the other. Students who hope to be successful in college often find themselves having to do away with pride in their own culture in order to embrace the dominant culture in the academy. Soliday argues,

however, that home culture needs to be brought into the classroom. She advocates literacy narratives as “sites of translation in our classroom” (516). This practice allows students to examine the ways that they move from one discourse to another as they move from school to home to the neighborhood and beyond. In doing so, it validates all of these experiences. The language of home is just as important than the language of school. Literacy narratives encourage students whose cultures do not reflect the dominant discourses to cope with important questions such as “how to enter one discourse world without losing the words and values of another” and “how...to translate self and difference between language worlds without becoming ‘a stranger to yourself’” (“Translating Self and Difference” 519). These important questions can only be answered, however, when students are invited to take pride in their home cultures and bring them into the classroom and when those cultures are acknowledged by teachers and others at the school as equally important. For Soliday, then, cultural pride is primarily a means of helping students to be successful academically without losing sight of their identities. One might argue, though, that while her primary concerns is gaining access to academia for urban students, that an education which fosters pride in one’s home culture encourages students to contribute to the communities which have fostered that culture in the long run.

Of course, Robbins also actively advocates for bringing students’ home cultures into the school—and vice versa. The KCAC promotes projects that allow students to create ties between their local communities and their classrooms. Robbins gives as an example a teacher who did research on Spelman College, seeking oral histories of

Spelman students who were leaders in the African American community (Robbins and Dyer 9). After sharing her research with her students, the class developed a plan to collect and share their own oral histories of their families. Projects like these promote pride in the diverse cultures students in Atlanta schools partake in. They work to bring new voices, voices that reflect their own cultures and experiences, to the table, recovering histories that might otherwise be lost. By taking pride in their community's history, they are able to engage in "cultural stewardship" (Robbins and Dyer 10), ensuring that the histories of their own people are not lost.

Flower, Cushman, Soliday, and Robbins—along with many other urban educators—all agree that students' culture and ethnicity have much to offer the classroom environment as well as the community as a whole. Education ought to encourage students to develop pride in their home cultures. When it does, students are able to find not only academic success as they learn to build bridges between the discourses of their communities and the discourse of the academy, but are also able to use this pride as a motivator in contributing to finding solutions for the problems their communities face.

As stated above, the concerns of agency, economic justice, and cultural and ethnic pride are quite similar to those of democracy, economic and environmental sustainability, and pride of place found in the work of rural place-conscious scholars. Yet as I read the urban scholars I noted a difference in tone. The rural scholars seemed to take for granted the inherent value in their rural areas. Although they are aware that students from these places face societal messages which tell them they must move away to find success, they

also know that there is a nostalgia for rural life which they can count on most Americans feeling as they contemplate the demise of rural life. Even those who have never lived in a rural area have often inherited a national mythos which advocates rural life as an ideal form of living. This mythos dates back as far as Thomas Jefferson, if not farther. These scholars can wax nostalgic for the times when rural life was the norm if they like because they know that their readers will sympathize, at least to some degree.

Our urban scholars, on the other hand, can expect no such sympathy. The United States has a long and complicated history with urban centers. Almost no one views the inner city as an ideal place to live. Though recent trends have led to the gentrification of some urban neighborhoods, this only pushes inner city residents to other poverty-stricken areas. This distinction causes these urban scholars to take on a somewhat defensive tone. They recognize that before they can do anything else, they must first make the case that these places and the people that inhabit them are important, despite the fact that there may be little that seems valuable in these neighborhoods at first glance. In my final section, I would like to explore this complicated relationship with place and the need for encouraging pride of place in students—even (or perhaps especially) when they come from places that are seen primarily in a negative light.

## CHAPTER 3

A crucial element in urban education should be encouraging pride of place. The very inner city neighborhoods that students live in and are often trying to escape can be the inspiration for positive self-identification. If you come from somewhere valuable, then you must be valuable as well as a product of that place. The challenge, however, is convincing students that those neighborhoods are, in fact, valuable. In 1998 and 1999 students living in urban environments in a town in England were asked to photograph their neighborhoods (Morrow 234). While the photographs included their homes and schools, they also focused on negative aspects of their neighborhoods such as signs that read “No Ball Games.” The most striking thing about the project, however, was that when students were offered copies of their photographs, not a single student wanted them (Morrow 234). Clearly, there was little pride taken in their urban environments.

What does it mean to be proud of a place that is most often associated with poverty and decay? Is such a thing even possible? The work of Flower, Cushman, Soliday, and Robbins may lead us to see that the pride of place advocated by Theobald, Sobel, and Schell is complicated in an urban environment because of pressures by society and other difficult circumstances faced by residents of the city. Whereas the rural scholars often begin with the rural landscape—a lovely thing indeed—urban scholars may find this more difficult since at first glance the urban landscape is not innately beautiful. We need to reexamine pride of place and how we can best advocate for it in urban spaces.

Unfortunately, the focus is all too often on the problems in the neighborhoods to the exclusion of the positive aspects. When we forget to appreciate what the places have to offer we lose out on something. We see only desolation and poverty. While these problems certainly need to be addressed, there is also a need to instill pride from the very beginning. Otherwise, students may see little reason to combat the problems of a place they plan on leaving far behind them. What our urban scholars remind us is that though the inner city residents have a complicated relationship with place, there are still foundations for pride. A concept of place that highlights a combination of physical features, history, and culture can lay the groundwork for establishing pride of place in urban students.

In the South Omaha community, for example, there is a tradition of working class residents of various ethnicities. Presumably, at one point they took pride in their backgrounds and their ability to survive in a difficult world. After all, the local high school's mascot is the Packers, a reference to the meatpackers who worked at the Stockyards for generations. Choosing such a mascot to represent their children and their school surely indicates that community members were at one point proud of their work, proud of the kinds of work the community did. Regrettably, this association is often lost on younger generations. I was a teenager by the time I knew what a "Packer" even was. (The image of a bull on sports jerseys led me to believe that it was some sort of bovine animal.) The Stockyards, long since closed, with their lingering smell were merely a place you should plug your nose as you drove by. I had little idea what their history was and what a crucial role they had played in the history not only of the local neighborhood

but of the United States as a major source of the nation's food. Education in South Omaha rarely if ever mentioned these kinds of things, however. In doing so, it missed out on a great opportunity to show students a wonderful part of their community's history and the importance South Omaha had to the rest of the nation.

Not every city has a Stockyards, but most—I would venture to say all—have something worth valuing. This something is all too often overlooked when we look at our nation's inner cities, however, because we cannot look beyond the run down homes and businesses or the poverty its residents face. The people may be valuable, we say, but this place? We should just bulldoze it and start over.

This, naturally, is not the best recourse when it comes to encouraging pride of place. If any good is to be done, we must first begin by discovering what is to be valued about our urban neighborhoods. When Deborah Martin surveyed how local community organizations in Frogtown framed their places, she paid attention not only to calls to action, but also to how they described the physical features of their neighborhoods (Martin 737). Of note is the fact that these descriptions highlight not only the cultural and economic diversity of the neighborhood, but two of the four organizations also pay particular attention to the presence of "homes having architectural and historic significance" (Martin 737). They place specific value on Victorian homes and brick railroad houses in the neighborhood. It is only after establishing that these physical features of the neighborhood (and the history they represent) are worth protecting and restoring that they are able to deliver a call to action to residents to improve Frogtown. As Martin points out, the "motivational frames" of these organizations took care to

“clearly [define] the neighborhood as a places with certain landscape features that were distinctively ‘Frogtown’” (Martin 739). To motivate residents to take an active role in improving their community, they highlighted unique physical features, implying that their neighborhood has value because there is no other place quite like it.

While Martin’s research focuses on community organizations, such a practice should be adopted in urban schools as well. Just as the rural scholarship focuses on highlighting the importance of small towns and farms, urban educators must emphasize the importance of urban neighborhoods. Many are finding ways to do so. This can take many forms. Urban teacher Leslie Walker asks her students to map their neighborhoods while using “I belong to this place” as a class motto (Winter & Robbins 10). Sylvia Martinez’s students took pictures of meaningful places in their community and analyzed the connections between place, people, and community (Robbins & Dyer 33). These and other projects demonstrate that education can help students to see the many things in their urban neighborhoods that are valuable. As Theobald asserts, “Teachers should recognize the fact that no matter where they are, no matter how deteriorated the neighborhood might be, math, science, music, art, literature, and history surround them” (Tolbert & Theobald). Even in the neighborhoods hardest hit by poverty, there is no paucity of neighborhood features that can be used as learning materials. What is key here is that pride of place be given a central role in the curriculum, allowing students to become aware of and celebrate these materials.

Why is it so important that students feel pride in their urban neighborhoods? Because all the other goals of a place-conscious education—democratic education and

agency, sustainability, cultural pride—depend on it, at least to some degree. Pride is the foundation of a place-conscious education. If students do not feel a connection to their urban environments, if they do not respect and value their neighborhoods, then a place-conscious education in the schools will struggle to win the students' engagement, dismissed as irrelevant or unimportant to their lives.

In my own experience, students want to be proud of the places from which they come. The students at Assumption initially exhibited some level of pride at being from this neighborhood. "South O" was their home, and they would gladly proclaim it to anyone who asked. But with little to foster this pride occurring in school or in society, the move from pride to action was hard to make. Eventually, most of my classmates moved to the nearby suburbs, following the path of "success" that society had dictated to them.

What breaks my heart is that our class in particular was committed to the community at first. We volunteered to help at local and school events when asked. We took part in the annual Cinco de Mayo parade when given the opportunity. We used part of our class funds—which we had earned through fundraisers we put on ourselves—to purchase DVD players and other technology for the school in hopes that we could improve the education of those students who would follow after us. All this was done because we desperately wanted to love South Omaha and the Assumption School community in particular.

But Assumption failed us in one crucial way: it rarely encouraged us to get involved in the neighborhood in any meaningful way. We never developed the

connections with the community outside of the school that would keep us committed to the neighborhood. And so after graduating from eighth grade, and certainly by the time we finished high school, there was little to tie us to South Omaha. To my knowledge, not a single member of our class remains in the neighborhood today. And while I recognize that not every student can or should be expected to remain living in the neighborhood in which they grew up, I cannot help but feel sad that a group of students who loved the place so dearly has virtually no connection to it ten short years later.

Aside from the brain drain that happens to inner city neighborhoods when there is a failure to instill pride of place in students, the liberatory education that urban education scholars advocate depends upon pride of place. If the goal of liberatory education is to make students' voices heard and give them power to act, it stands to reason that they must first have something to say and want to take action. One of the many problems that schools, including urban schools, face today is disengagement in the classroom. Theobald writes, "we have crowded out the ways of teaching and learning that make students want to show up, that make them want to achieve, that give them a sense of pride in who they are and what they can do to improve where they are" (Tolbert & Theobald). Focusing on local places can help to increase engagement in the classroom, but only if students *want* to engage with their local communities.

I am reminded of one English teacher at Assumption, in most circumstances an excellent and beloved teacher. However, she had a deep love of Willa Cather that was not shared by most of her students. Year after year, she taught several of Cather's novels

to different classes, convinced that a Nebraska author should hold their attention. Unfortunately, Cather rarely did. I think this was due in large part to the fact that students were rarely proud of coming from Nebraska. It was seen as a place they had to escape. I imagine learning that Cather herself eventually moved to the East Coast only served to deepen this feeling with many students. Place is not enough by itself; there first needs to be a connection to that place that teachers cannot in today's world simply assume is there.

In my own classroom, a section of freshman composition at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, I learned this lesson the hard way. I asked students to engage with an issue in Lincoln, to inquire into its causes and potential solutions. I wanted to leave the topic relatively open to encourage them to choose a topic that interested them. I advised them to read the newspaper or ask professors, friends, and family for ideas. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that even students who had lived their entire lives in Lincoln found it difficult to come up with a topic. They simply weren't interested. They didn't care about Lincoln, their home for the next few years at least. I realized (perhaps too late) that we should have spent more time in class specifically developing pride in Lincoln. In fact, I found that those students who had lived outside of Nebraska for any length of time often found it easier to choose a topic because they had thought more deeply about their connection to place and whether they were or were not proud of living in Lincoln, NE. If college students find it so difficult to interest themselves in their communities, how much more so will younger students, particularly those living in

neighborhoods that they have heard are unimportant or worthless? Simply talking about place is not enough to encourage engagement.

This is problematic for many reasons, not least of which is that it makes a liberatory or democratic education nearly impossible. How can students develop agency in their lives and their communities if they simply do not care about them? If we encourage the mentality that “I’m just going to leave this place as soon as I can anyway” there seems to be little reason for students to discover the “legally sanctioned democratic processes [that] make life better for their parents, grandparents, neighbors, and friends” (Tolbert & Theobald). No matter how many opportunities exist for students to get involved in their communities, no matter how many organizations beg for members and encourage the neighborhood’s youth to join, students will not take action for the simple reason that they have no desire to do anything. This is why the community organizations in Martin’s article first needed to frame their place by pointing out its positive aspects. This is why educators, especially urban educators, need to take time out of their busy days to instill pride of place in students. Cirone and Margerum write, “we must teach [students] the obligation we all have to reach beyond ourselves” (223). But this obligation comes only when students are dedicated to the places in which they live because of the pride they feel in them. Only then can they move on to encouraging students to speak up and be heard on issues in their community. Only then will students heed the call.

This motivation to act similarly affects educators' goals of working toward economic justice and sustainability in a neighborhood. As stated earlier, the message many urban students receive is that if they are intelligent and successful, they will leave the community. And they will move again and again, without committing to a community. Successful people, students are told, "follow a mobile career path. That is, they go where they see opportunity for ever-greater material gain" (*Teaching the Commons* 47). I can attest to the presence of this mentality among the South Omaha students I knew, who dreamt of graduating and moving to faraway states and never looking back. There was no talk of building a home in the same neighborhoods where they grew up. At times, this pressure to leave can be even stronger in urban environments than in rural ones. Rural students often feel that they would like to stay, but economic pressures make it impossible for them to do so and "make something of themselves" at the same time. Urban students, on the other hand, feel these same economic and societal pressures but oftentimes without the nostalgia.

The problem with this mentality is that it leads to the neighborhood's best and brightest moving away, along with the social and financial capital that they have earned. If each generation's best move away without reinvesting in the community, however, the system perpetuates itself, and the same economic injustices occur over and over again. What these communities who are hit hard by poverty need are people who invest both their money (through purchasing locally or starting businesses that can provide good jobs) and their knowledge in the community. It would be nice if people outside the community would do so, but encouraging the community's youth to reinvest in it as they

grow up and achieve financial success seems like a much more likely course of action. It also keeps some control of the economic situation in community members' hands.

Such reinvestment is not unheard of. Take a listen to any number of rap songs on the radio today, and you'll hear rappers boasting that they have achieved financial success, but still maintain their roots in their old neighborhoods. Though their music careers keep them on the road or in studios, they have been known to use their newfound wealth and fame to help people in their old neighborhoods. Obviously, the kind of wealth music stars can accrue is not feasible for every student in the inner cities of America. But the lesson here is that when "staying true to your roots" or being proud of where you come from is valued (as it is in hip hop culture), young people who attain any modicum of financial success are willing to contribute to the neighborhoods where they were raised. What if schools actively worked to encourage a culture in which pride in and contributions to the local community were encouraged?

Place-conscious education offers opportunities to help students develop the skills necessary to become entrepreneurs or to find gainful employment within a larger business. But if it is to be focused not only on improving the situation of the individual but of the community as a whole, encouraging students to take pride in coming from an urban neighborhood is essential. This kind of commitment to a community requires students to truly appreciate the neighborhood and what it has to offer—which means that students must have the opportunity to learn what it has to offer, both in- and outside of school. The message needs to change; we need to teach our young people that success does not mean moving away and achieving individual financial prosperity. Success

means establishing yourself in a community and using your talents toward the common good of the neighborhood. Such a change in mindset, however, requires that the school and the community work together to encourage students to take pride in being part of their community.

Of course, pride of place is not the only form that pride can take. Many scholars have argued eloquently for the need to encourage cultural and ethnic pride in students, particularly in minority students who face a great deal of racism. My goal here is not to undermine these arguments. I would argue, rather, that cultural and place pride should go hand in hand, especially in urban neighborhoods where cultural and ethnic pride is already a focus for many educators.

Place and cultural pride, when taught together, can mutually support one another. Neighborhoods that have a large population of any one ethnic minority tend to express the culture and history of that ethnicity in the physical features of the place to some extent anyway. When this is the case, trying to separate the two completely is artificial. Rather, it makes more sense to draw students' attention to the ways their ancestors have celebrated their culture and how they have left their mark on the area. Tying culture to place rather than celebrating a dislocated sense of pride in one's culture can help to alleviate symptoms of rootlessness. Particularly when working with immigrant communities, it can be important to emphasize that their people have a history in the place in which they currently live rather than only having one mile and miles away in some distant land. In doing so, celebrating place also recognizes the contributions that

one's culture has made to society, including in the urban neighborhoods in which one might live.

Moreover, allowing pride of place and culture to go hand in hand recognizes that cultural groups experience diversity within said groups, and there are often new traditions or variations on old traditions that are unique to each place. As Steven Schnell points out in his essay on Swedish culture in Lindsborg, Kansas, "Ethnicity...is a tool....The traditions that provide its symbolic framework, rather than being handed down in an unbroken line from the past, are also constantly shifting" (25). They are altered and "reinvented" to serve new purposes and new meanings. It is important to celebrate not just some distant understanding of what a culture is or does but a specific manifestation of that culture in a unique place that allows students to connect to their culture on a personal level.

When I think of my experience at Assumption, I realize how important this truly is. While occasional nods were made to Mexican culture, there was little discussion of the unique contributions that Mexican Americans had made in South Omaha. Although El Museo Latino, an excellent museum celebrating Latino culture, was a mere three minutes away from Assumption, my class visited it a grand total of one time in ten years. I recently asked some of my former classmates if they remembered the trip. Some had vague recollections of it, but one young man in particular told me, "I remember it vividly. My great great grandma had a photo of her in the exhibit." Clearly the connection between his culture and his own personal history in South Omaha made an impression on him. When Latino culture and the history of South Omaha are celebrated together,

students can develop a unique sense of pride in both, which only serves to strengthen that sense of pride.

Thus, pride of place serves an important purpose in education. It allows educators to guide their students toward liberation, help the community create economic sustainability, and foster cultural and ethnic pride that has real meaning to students. Any attempt to achieve these goals should have pride of place at its foundation, as it supports them and makes them possible. Fostering this pride can be a long and difficult process. There are too many negative stereotypes about urban neighborhoods out there, and students have heard too many negative messages about the places in which they live. Society has told them that if they want to be successful they will run far and fast. Such powerful and omnipresent messages can be difficult to counter. But we must try. Place-conscious education has so much to offer students in urban neighborhoods. But for it to be effective we must first help students to see that their place has much to offer them, much in which they can be proud.

## WORKS CITED

- Cirone, William J., and Barbara Margerum. "Models of Citizen Involvement and Community Education." *National Civic Review* 76.3 (1987): 217-23. *WorldCat*. Web. 30 Oct. 2011.
- Cushman, Ellen, Stuart Barbier, Catherine Mazak, and Robert Petrone. "Family and Community Literacies." *Research on Composition: Multiple Perspectives on Two Decades of Change*. Ed. Peter Smagorinsky. New York: Teachers College, 2006. 187-216. Print.
- Cushman, Ellen. *The Struggle and the Tools: Oral and Literate Strategies in an Inner City Community*. Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1998. Print.
- Donehower, Kim, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell. *Reclaiming the Rural: Essays on Literacy, Rhetoric, and Pedagogy*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2012. Print.
- Donehower, Kim, Charlotte Hogg, and Eileen E. Schell. *Rural Literacies*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2007. Print.
- Flower, Linda. *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008. Print.
- Flower, Linda, Elenore Long, and Lorraine Higgins. *Learning to Rival: A Literate Practice for Intercultural Inquiry*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000. Print.
- Flower, Linda. "Intercultural Inquiry and the Transformation of Service." *College English* 65.2 (2002): 181-201. *Academic Search Premiere*. Web. 14 Feb. 2012.
- Martin, Deborah G. "'Place-Framing' as Place-Making: Constituting a Neighborhood for Organizing and Activism." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93.3 (2003): 730-50. *Academic Search Premiere*. Web. 17 Sept. 2011.
- Morrow, Virginia. "'No Ball Games': Children's Views of Their Urban Environments." *J Epidemiol Community Health* 57.4 (2003): 234. *Google Scholar*. Web. 17 Sept. 2011.
- Robbins, Sarah, and Mimi Dyer. *Writing America: Classroom Literacy and Public Engagement*. New York: Teachers College, 2005. Print.
- Schnell, Steven M. "Creating Narratives of Place and Identity in 'Little Sweden, USA'" *Geographical Review* 93.1 (2003): 1-29. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 30 Oct. 2011.
- Smith, Gregory A., and David Sobel. *Place- and Community-Based Education in Schools*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2010. Print.

- Sobel, David. "Building a Three-Legged Stool of Academic Achievement, Social Capital, and Environmental Quality." *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms & Communities*. Great Barrington, MA: Orion Society, 2005. 36-70. Print.
- Sobel, David. *Mapmaking with Children: Sense-of-Place Education for the Elementary Years*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998. Print.
- Soliday, Mary. "Class Dismissed." 1999. *Relations, Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers*. By Peter Vandenberg, Sue Hum, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2006. 400-13. Print.
- Soliday, Mary. "Translating Self and Difference through Literacy Narratives." *College English* 56.5 (1994): 511-26. *Academic Search Premiere*. Web. 13 Feb. 2012.
- Theobald, Paul, and Paul Nachtigal. "Culture, Community, and the Promise of Rural Education." *Phi Delta Kappan* 77.2 (1995): 132-35. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 20 Jan. 2012.
- Theobald, Paul. *Call School: Rural Education in the Midwest to 1918*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1995. Print.
- Theobald, Paul. *Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride, and the Renewal of Community*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997. Print.
- Tolbert, Linda, and Paul Theobald. "Finding Their Place in the Community: Urban Education Outside the Classroom." *Childhood Education* 82.5 (2006): 271-74. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 20 Jan. 2012.
- Winter, Dave, and Sarah Robbins. *Writing Our Communities: Local Learning and Public Culture*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2005. Print.