

8-1997

School at the Center: Mending Breaks in the Broken Heartland

Paul Olson

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, polson2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Reading and Language Commons](#)

Olson, Paul, "School at the Center: Mending Breaks in the Broken Heartland" (1997). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English*. 209.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs/209>

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 Faculty Publications -- Department of English by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

ser

The **AcTIVE** **LEARNER**

August 1997
Volume 2 Issue 2

*A Foxfire
Journal
for
Teachers*

IN THIS ISSUE

Turning over Classroom Decision
Making: A Teacher's Experience
over Time

7

School at the Center: Mending
Breaks in the Broken Heartland

10

As They Like It: Shakespeare in
the Elementary School

14

Can't Learn without Textbooks?
We can!

17

Eleanor Duckworth - Connecting
Practice and Theory

24

Alfie Kohn Interview - Part Two

32



Cover - Page 29

**Kids Turn Love of Parade
into Learning Adventure**

The Foxfire Fund, Inc.

Board of Directors

James K. Hasson, Jr., Chairman
Sutherland, Asbill & Brennan, L.L.P.
Atlanta, Georgia
Mike Clark
Greater Yellowstone Coalition
Bozeman, Montana
Donna V. Dunlop
Consultant
Contoocook, New Hampshire
Betsy Fowler
Chief Dietitian
Rabun County Memorial Hospital
Clayton, Georgia
Don Gareis
Senior Counsel to
Coxe, Curry & Associates
Atlanta, Georgia
Rodney Hickox, Treasurer
First Clayton Bank & Trust
Clayton, Georgia
Joe Maxwell
Associate Professor of Education
Graduate School of Education
George Mason University
Fairfax, Virginia
Jan Volk, Secretary
Counselor, Woodridge Hospital
Clayton, Georgia
Isabelle Watkins
Executive Assistant to the
U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations
New York, New York

Community Board

Kathy Blalock	Janet Lawson
Carl Carpenter	Rhonda Lunsford
Kim Crunkleton	Patrick Marcellino, Jr.
Odelle Hamby	Steve McCall
Anthony Lampros	Judy Nix
Laura Lane	Vicki Prater
Walt Lane	Malivia Swanson

Teresia Thomason

Foxfire-Affiliated Network Coordinator Board

Shirley Hills, Coordinator
Soundfire, Washington
Doris Miller, Coordinator
Eastern Kentucky Teachers Network

Foxfire Staff

Bobby Ann Starnes, President
Michael Buchholz, Resource Development Director
Kim Cannon, Program Administrator
Kaye Collins, Community Coordinator
Sara Day Hatton, Communications Manager
Ann Moore, Financial Manager
Mary Lou Morrison, Secretary
Robert Murray, Conservator
Janice Rood, Museum & Sales Coordinator
Christy Stevens, Coordinator of
Teacher Support Services

CONTENTS

FEATURES

- 10 School at the Center: Mending Breaks in the Broken Heartland**
- 14 As They Like It: Shakespeare in the Elementary School**
- 17 Can't Learn without Textbooks? We can!**
Lakota Sioux students and teacher face challenge of no textbooks.
- 29 Kids Turn Love of Parades into Learning Adventure**
- 32 Meet Alfie Kohn**
Part Two of a two-part Interview with the author of *Punished By Rewards and No Contest*
- 36 Photo Essay: Where the Wild Things Live**
Kindergarteners study the rain forest

DEPARTMENTS

- 5 From the Editor**
- 7 Core Practices in Action - Turning Over Classroom Decision Making: A Teacher's Experience over Time**
- 16 For Your Information**
- 20 Children's Work**
- 22 Opinion: Something of Value**
- 24 Connecting Practice and Theory: Spotting Active Learning**
- 28 Reviews**
- 40 Bobby Ann Starnes/On Resisting False Choices**



This issue of the Active Learner: A Foxfire Journal for Teachers is dedicated to the Lettie Pate Evans Foundation in appreciation of their continued support.

Some years ago I was teaching a course called "The Literature of Agriculture," accounts of how farmers and rural people made a living over time. Hesiod, Virgil, Chaucer's rural tales, George Eliot, Great Plains modern farm novels, and Wendell Berry's writings about the unsettling of America were the fare.

One of my students remarked in passing, "Don't know if I can read this stuff. I only went to a small high school." He knew nothing of the literature about smallness and quality in education and had no pride of community. Later I asked the rural class if they planned to stay in rural America. Most answered, "No! No jobs. Nothing to do." Though they thought rural America the place to grow up, they did not see '80s rural Nebraska as survivable. The class came to me during the height of the farm crisis. Among the students were kids whose fathers or uncles had attempted suicide, people who had lost their farms, or had to sell most of their land to consolidate their assets and survive, kids whose parents had lost small town businesses. I found it hard to talk coherently to them about what one ought to do because I did not know myself. At the same time, I saw rural teachers finding the same attitudes in their high and middle school students.

No surprise then that we lost 30% of our rural people and almost all of our rural youth during the period.

Simultaneously the Center for Rural Affairs in Walthill, Nebraska, a rural advocacy group on whose board I sat, was trying to discover ways to counter the farm crisis. They taught some people the development of small sustainable farms and others the creation of microenterprises to keep their towns alive. They encouraged direct and niche farm marketing and rural energy-saving, developed benevolent land transfer arrangements to get young farmers started, and fostered long-range planning for communities. The Center's teachers, administrators, and school board members knew that what the Center was teaching belonged in the schools, that rural students had to know how to create small businesses, community plans, effective civic discourse, and a sustainable relationship to the environment. Hence they created the School at the Center project, designed both to celebrate and critique rural culture. As the project grew and received Annenberg funding, we moved it from the Center to the University of Nebraska, but that

Henderson, NE students begin research of local native grassland and wetland ecosystems as part of their "A Sense of Place: A Sense of Self" study.



did not change our thrust. Out of the breakage in what Osha Davidson has called the *Broken Heartland*, our work with rural education was born in the early to middle 1990s. Mending that breakage is still our task.

School at the Center: mending breaks in the broken heartland

by Paul A. Olson, Co-director,
School at the Center

The School at the Center project does not assume that only teachers and students have to be active learners. Whole Plains communities have to learn and act quickly if they are to become more than ghosts. Some are out of gas literally and spiritually, powerless in the face of declining population, bigger and bigger farming, changes in retail loyalty, and in transportation

patterns. We have no list of essential practices as Foxfire has; we are young. Our work smacks of an *ad hoc*ery; it is designed to keep things alive. Our first task is survival.

Our second is empowerment — creating in the young and the old a sense that they can survive in community. Not only survive but prevail. What we have done with some success is to ask people from all sectors of our communities to learn together and learn by doing (See side-bars on pages 11, 12, and 13 accompanying article).

Originally we had the ambition of Hercules and the common sense of pip-squeak. We now try to encourage one planning

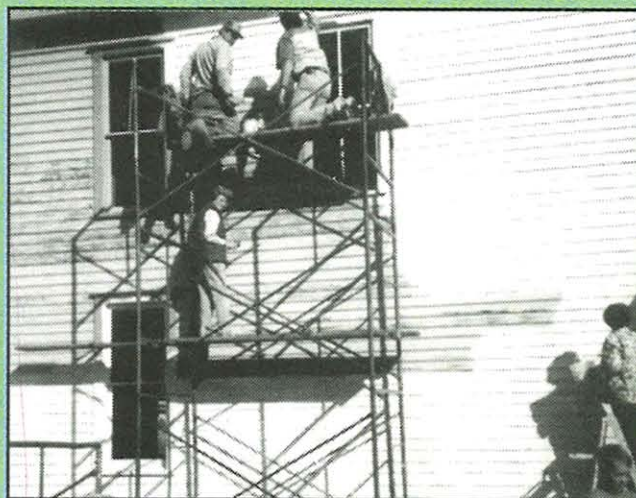
activity and five local curricular thrusts in each community/school, asking community, administrators, teachers, and students to plan together and examine needs in: (1) local housing or historic building reconstruction; (2) local environmental repair through community-based scientific work; (3) microenterprise development; (4) the exploration and continuation of the town's heritage in music, art, literature, history, oral history, and folklore; (5) the creation of technological applications that join adult/child learning, community/school planning and local/regional pride. Three more thrusts come next—sustainable agriculture, wellness, and conflict resolution, all three designed to increase civic literacy and effective planning among school youth and adults in communities after the 80s farm crisis.

We are trying to reform teacher and administrator education and rural school accreditation, and we have begun to look at the tax structure in our state, a structure that penalizes the small school and sparsely populated areas. We conduct workshops, develop technological connections among our schools, develop collaborative work in the clusters, and work to create a more fluid use of time and a less standardized curriculum in our small schools.

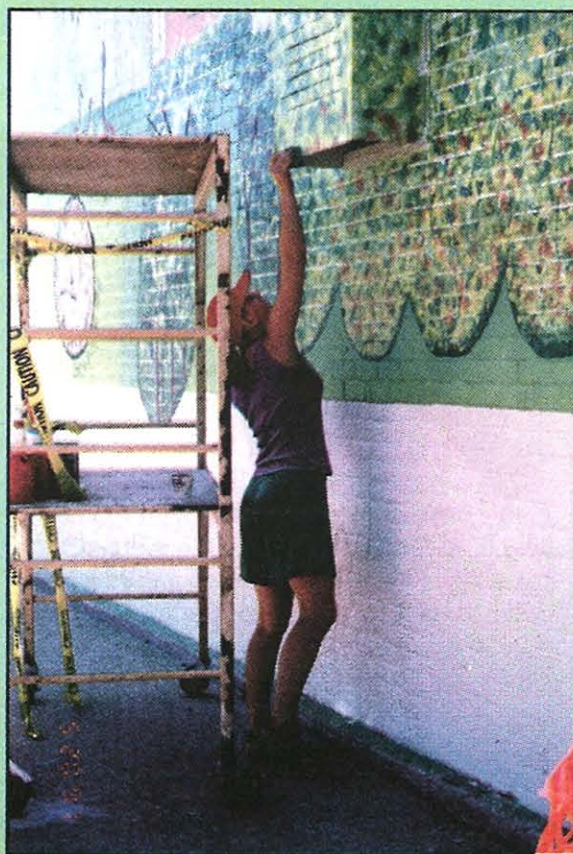
Providentially, Nebraska has one of the least centrally controlled school systems in the country, no centrally mandated textbooks or curricula, and a slow pace of consolidation. The Nebraska Department of Education, all branches of state government dealing with rural areas, and many private non-profits and foundations have helped out. We have tried to fence in our efforts, but they seem to get out of hand and branch out to any area of community concern or need. Though we may not want it that way, that is how things end up being.

What we saw in many communities in the 1980s was a kind of death of hope far more devastating than the economic squeeze that the Plains endured. The teachers, administrators and students in the School at the Center project are essentially engaged in the construction of hope as they reconstruct houses or businesses or historical monuments or histories or small businesses. It may be that we are playing a charlatan's role—as rain-maker in a dry land—but we sense a bit of drizzle in these parts where rain is so often uncertain. Or to change the metaphor: if Osha Davidson is correct in his picture of the heartland of America as broken by the farm crisis and other long term historical trends, we think that teachers and students with the help of their communities, especially informal community and school planners, may be beginning an angioplasty. The healing will take time. □

In Big Springs, Nebraska...



Robi Kroger and her students restored an old hotel as a bed-and-breakfast, using advice from the state historical society. Now they are endeavoring, with the advice of hydrologists, to unplug the "big spring" that gave the town its name. In Silver Creek, a similar scientific water project is proceeding apace with the cleaning up of a local lake's water and its rebuilding as a recreation area. Meanwhile, school and town are beginning a documentation of the history and character of the Polish heritage of the area, Poles being the one major ethnic group in Nebraska who have no histories or studies of their folklore, art, and architecture.

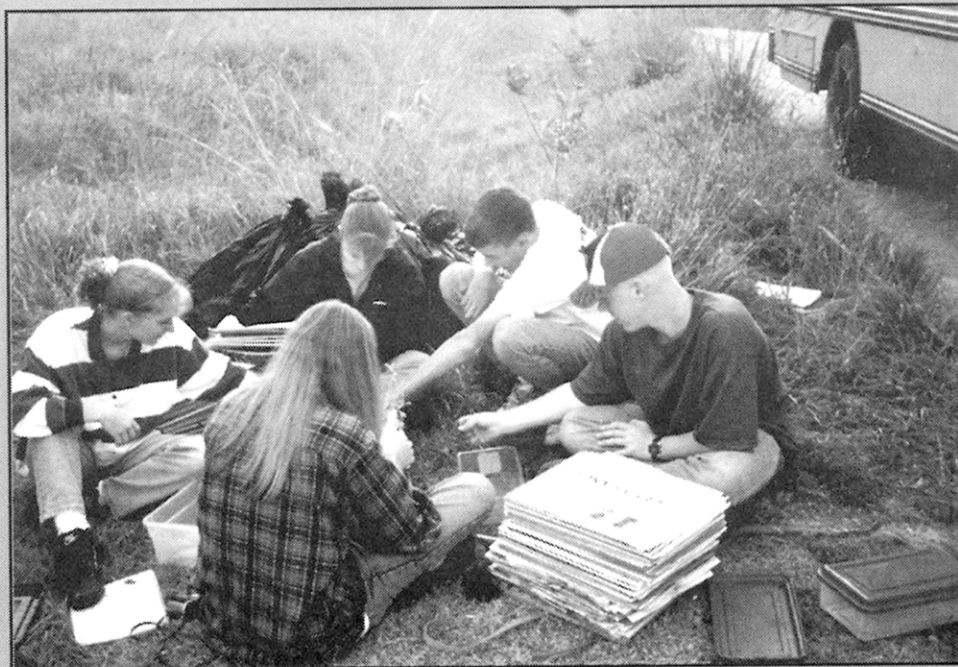


In Palmer, Nebraska...

...all the teachers have undertaken work in community-based learning. The technology students wired the school for technology so the school could be a center for community planning with business. They saved the school \$8000. At the same time they researched the town's history, business practices, and religious structure for a web site. One teacher and a small group of students, working with local elderly folks, oral historians, businesses, donors, and volunteers, have done research on the history of the town and put together a mural that decorates the main street. And active learning involves a reconstruction of the history of the area through research in school and out, for example, on area Pawnee environmental practices and on the nearby Mormon trail that Mormons are walking this year during their centennial.

Henderson, Nebraska...

...is a Mennonite community in east-central Nebraska that has moved from a technologically conservative position to one where deep-well irrigation controls the environment. Here the students in a "Sense of Place: A Sense of Self" study, headed by Marc Regier and Sharon Bishop, analyzed



human and animal effect on four environments: Sandhill crane sandbars in the Platte (where the whoopers also land), local native grasslands' ecosystems, adjacent wetlands, and the deep well irrigation areas. They conduct scientific experiments on the environments at the same time as they read area literature: Aldrich, Cather, Johnsgaard, Janovy, Kloefkorn. They created their own works in poetry and prose to express their sense of their place and its sustainability. For example Jill Baubach wrote:

A journey to the prairie is like a voyage to the past. The qualities of the wind and sun help convey the true characteristics of a prairie. When the wind is gusty, it is as though the pioneers are upset because we are destroying the prairie.

Some students found poetry in the Platte riparian areas or the grasslands. For example, Michael Wall told of the cranes, ducks and geese in Bolshoi motion in the fields and on the sandbars:

The sophistication of it all
Is like a ballet
The birds glissade
Like dancers across the stage.

Steve Epp commented on the paradoxes implicit in some grassland sun patterns at winter's end:

As the sun rests its warming hand,
A cold wind sparks up
Howling around the browning
prairie.
As the sun wakes again and warms
the winter winds
The beautiful symphony draws to
its close.
The popping of the fresh sprouts
And wildflowers begin their reign.
The winds close their final notes.
This tune dies, and a new one
begins.

Students also interviewed elders who remembered the impact of deep well irrigation on the community, its creation of prosperity and destruction of a world where "[w]ork was life and fun was simple...problems were had by all." To recover this community sense, Henderson teachers, administrators, and students brought their school and community improvement plans together to reform local economic practice, encourage microenterprise, and develop curricula sensitive to the heritage of the town. A former teacher mediates

between community and school learning, and the whole community/school group plans the rebuilding of its first Ukrainian settlers' immigrant house. Students now attend Chamber meetings, and seven work with a team writing the community's future blueprint.



In Albion, Nebraska...

... senior Paul Myers has the key to the Boone County Historical Society. His teacher, Ellen Kohtz writes, "Paul was entrusted with the key to the Historical Society building because he knew, 'This is work that we can do. We will protect our community's heritage.' Paul and fellow students started their efforts in the summer of 1996, meeting with local Society members. Though Society President Mel Andrews at first demurred, he also saw that the only way to work was with students. Once his group agreed the students could organize and use the Historical Society, Paul and I sought and got help from the Nebraska State Historical Society's John Schleicher in training the students in categorizing artifacts. As Paul Myers noted to me, the nomenclature took a little getting used to: 'A hat is not just a hat but headgear first, then hat, then color, then description. The system is not only training in history but in logic.' Soon thereafter the school board granted the Museum extended classroom status, and students were able to spend an hour a day at the Museum. Work also included: research into such topics as the death of Logan Fontanelle, the 19th century Omaha tribal leader killed near Albion; storytelling projects such as that by sixth graders concerning the mysterious murder of two police officers in 1937 in a nearby pasture; and student historical preservation



efforts such as that of the White Star Service Station, one of the first businesses in Albion, as part of the museum site. As humanities students revisited the town's history and identity, science classes restored a native grassland, tested local water quality, and established a weather station."

For Albion cultural and natural restoration are inseparable.

In Wakefield, Nebraska...

...like Palmer, the teachers work to build houses, to establish microenterprises, to create community-based art, and to recall through dance and story older citizens' experiences of the 1930s. Out of the latter came notions of what factors eroded the main street business sector. The students combined this information and a niche survey to create business plans for a daycare center, a welding shop, and other microenterprises they hope to found after college and tech school.

In Maxwell, Nebraska...

...students at schools twelve miles from a commercial center have started small microenterprises from cattle operations to a store. They have also done accounting for the six area businesses, written their annual reports, given them advice on the allocation of funds (advice that was taken), and created their graphic images. The students have also created many of the supplies and graphic images for their school.

In Wayne, Nebraska...

...schools have many community-based projects on the Internet, a thriving construction block class that repairs older homes and remodels other buildings, and a business management and ownership course that works with the Chamber of Commerce helping local businesses grow. The school system teaches career development beginning at the fourth-grade level, culminating in high school curricula structured in six areas of career exploration germane to the local community: engineering; technology; health and human services; business; arts and humanities; and communications. Middle school students explored the role of women in Civil War history, especially those who are the ancestors of people in Wayne. This has also led to middle school exploration of family chronologies and family trees based on oral history presentations by extended family members and grandparents.