

Finding Place: Uncovering the roots of place-based educators in southeast Michigan

Erin Stanley

Eastern Michigan University

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Joe Bishop

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### Abstract

Place-based education is a dynamic and innovative pedagogical strategy that aims to actively engage students in gaining local knowledge, forming connections with community members, and participating in social, civic, and ecological activism. Place-based education can help alleviate some of the harm that has been done to local social and ecological systems by the dominant, industrial ideology that separates people from life-giving forces and meaningful relationships and emphasizes a need to be “educated out” of the local place. Educators committed to this pedagogy in Detroit and Southeast Michigan face unique challenges as the city struggles with severe poverty, pollution, and racism, yet place-based education can have a significant impact on educators, students, and community members in the city. Students are often given time to reflect on what it means to be a member of a community or call a place home, but this qualitative research project focuses on the educators involved with this method and their experiences and perceptions of place. This study utilizes data from interviews with Place-based educators involved with the Southeast Michigan Stewardship Coalition to explore the process in which place is made, valued, and used to heal and transform human and more than human communities.

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In our own time, we have invaded foreign lands and the moon with the high-toned patriotism of the conquistadors, and with the same mixture of fantasy and avarice. That is too simply put. It is substantially true, however, as a description of the dominant tendency in American History. The temptation, once that has been said, is to ascend altogether into rhetoric and inveigh equally against all our forebears and all present holders of office. To be just, however, it is necessary to remember that there has been another tendency: the tendency to stay put, to say, “No farther. This is the place.”

Wendell Berry (2002). *The Art of the Commonplace*, (pp. 35-36)

As Wendell Berry alludes to in the above passage, the prevailing message in post-colonial American culture is that the discovery of identity, the acquisition of knowledge, and the definition of success lie outside of one’s own family, home, and community. This outlook and the many escapes it inspires, however, comes with severe consequences, especially as post-industrial urban areas plagued with poverty, racism, and crime bear witness to the flight of their people, and with them the energy, passion, and knowledge that these places have provided them. The proclamation of belonging that Berry (2002) also mentions with the acknowledgement that “this is the place” has a deep historical context and function that thrived long before European colonists “discovered” America (p.36). This tendency to stay and commit to one’s place and community still exists within certain pockets of American society, but the need to reclaim and revalue this mindset has become increasingly more profound given the magnitude of the social and ecological crises generated by the dominant tendency to escape, transcend, and conquer. One such pocket where this need is being directly and creatively addressed is Place-based Education, or PBE. Through this model of pedagogy, the boundaries between teacher and student, school

and community, and city and nature become purposefully blurred as learners become leaders, schools become centers for community change, and the surrounding environment becomes a cherished classroom. Place-Based educators commit to creating opportunities for their students to focus on, learn from, and care for their local place, and both its human and nonhuman residents. Through these efforts, as Gregory A. Smith (2007) notes, place-based educators cultivate in their students the “willingness to attend to the local, the confidence to believe that their efforts can make a difference, and the skills required to take effective action” (p. 192). PBE aims to alleviate the fractured communities left behind by many through placing value on the shared knowledge of these places, creating connections between community members and ultimately inspiring the change needed to reverse the exodus, or re-inhabit. As Smith (2007) continues, “rehabitation occurs when people take steps to restore social and environmental practices that are both beneficent and sustainable over the long term” (p. 192).

Place-based Education has origins in Environmental Education and is commonly associated with rural school settings, but it can have a unique and powerful impact on cities and the complex social and environmental issues they face. Maggie Russell-Ciardi (2006) supports this claim, arguing, “educational institutions in urban settings can use place-based education to interest people in the issues that shape urban life and to spark civic engagement with urban issues” (p. 72). It is precisely this reason that PBE should be an important and meaningful component of both educational and social reform in Detroit, a place that has borne some of the gravest consequences of the American post-industrial climate and where the tendency to flee that Berry wrote about has become more of a survival instinct than a choice for many of the region’s residents. Place-based educators in Detroit and Southeast Michigan face a significant challenge in acquainting their students with the city and surrounding places in a realistic, yet positive and

reflective way, as well as engaging them in meaningful and influential change in their communities. The historical and current context of this region in Michigan is one riddled with severe racism, inescapable poverty, and the institutionally sanctioned domination of local ecosystems in the name of industry and profit, yet there is another side to the story, one that thrives on the resistance, resilience, and reclamation of both human and nonhuman communities throughout the area. This paradox presents Place-based educators with a struggle that is often generates criticism towards Place-based education. As McInerney, Smyth, and Down (2011) contend “place making is inherently political,” and further, “the politics of race, gender, and class strongly influence the degree of attachment that individuals and groups feel towards a particular place and community” (p. 9). Amidst these demands, however, lies a very powerful opportunity for these educators to nurture and foster a sense of healing, commitment, and passion among the youth of a city and region that desperately needs people with these characteristics to say, “no farther, this is the place” (Berry, 2002, p. 36). Given that the mission of Place-based educators in Southeast Michigan is political, difficult, meaningful, and transformative, among other things, how have these educators come to make, know, teach, and value place? More specifically, how do Place-based educators in Detroit describe their own experiences with place and reflect on what it means to belong to a place in the context of their roles as teachers?

### **Relevant Literature**

In her powerful book *Belonging: A culture of place*, bell hooks (2009) shares her journey of coming to know and value her place in Kentucky from her initial resistance of the culture of White Supremacy, to her escape to California where her place-based identity only strengthened with distance, and finally with her return home to the place of her fate. Through this reflection, she confronts and conveys the complexity of place-making amidst an abusive cultural backdrop,

just as Place-based educators in Detroit must do. hooks (2009) reflects on how she learned about place:

Leaving Kentucky, fleeing the psycho-history of traumatic powerlessness, I took with me from the subcultures of my native state (mountain folk, hillbillies, Appalachians) a positive understanding of what it means to know a culture of belonging, that cultural legacy handed down to me by my ancestors. In her book *Rebalancing the World*, Carol Lee Flinders defines a culture of belonging as one in which there is “intimate connection with the land to which one belongs, empathetic relationship to animals, self-restraint, custodial conservation, deliberateness, balance, expressiveness, generosity, egalitarianism, mutuality, affinity for alternative modes of knowing, playfulness, inclusiveness, nonviolent conflict resolution, and openness to spirit.” All these ways of belonging were taught to me in my early childhood but these imprints were covered over by the received biased knowledge of dominator culture, yet they become the subjugated knowledge that served to fuel my adult radicalism. ( p. 13)

Just as hooks does here, the interviews conducted as a part of this study reveal how Place-based educators in Southeast Michigan have come into a culture of belonging through a variety of access points and interpretations, as well as how the experiences that have led them there affect their roles with their students. Douglas Burton-Christie (2009) also argues that contemplation and reflection are central practices in place-making and acknowledges the challenge that presents when the place in question is one that has been both abused and abusive. His work is useful for educators who are attempting to navigate and understand their own place-making journey while attempting to guide their students in forming healthy, knowledgeable, and caring relationships

with their place. Burton-Christie (2009) conveys the complexity in belonging to places marked by struggle and negative perceptions this way:

Such places are dense with feeling, even if we often feel at a loss to say precisely what those feelings are or what to make of them. Nor is it any easier when it comes to determining what these places mean to us, or understanding how they can mean so many different things at once. Often, precisely because the associations with such places are so potent, their meaning is contested. We struggle, individually and collectively, to say what these places mean and what they have to teach us. Sometimes it is difficult to reach agreement, but there is little doubt they mean *something*, and that this meaning includes us and invites our most careful attention and reflection. There is a sense here, as with the Western Apache landscape that “Wisdom sits in places.” The contemplative work of place-making-- of seeing and finding the wisdom of places-- is complex and delicate. (p. 351)

It is the stories that arise from this individual and collective struggle that Place-based educators face in making meaning of the places they live and teach in as well as the passion for place that drives their work that this research is aimed at uncovering and sharing. These educators, as Molly Baker and Cliff Knapp (2005) note, “usually have a broad range of competencies and values, need sound judgment, well-developed personal and interpersonal skills, in-depth knowledge of teaching and learning theory, a well thought-out experiential education philosophy, finely tuned technical skills applicable to a variety of activities and settings, and the ability to interpret natural and cultural environments leading to a deep sense of place” (p. 265). The last part of Baker and Knapp’s description of effective Place-based educators is at the heart of what this research sought to uncover. The teachers interviewed represent a variety of places,

experiences, and involvement in PBE, but their shared commitment to understanding and valuing their own sense of place so that they can lead their students in a journey of belonging that has the potential to transform their schools, neighborhoods, and cities is a story worth sharing.

### **Methodology**

I interviewed four practicing teachers who identify as Place-based educators and practice in Southeast Michigan for around an hour each. These teachers were identified through a snowball sample stemming from my connection with professors at Eastern Michigan University who work with Place-based educators. The participants were identified as Place-based educators through their participation in the Southeast Michigan Stewardship Coalition (SEMI), which seeks to engage students, teachers, and community partners in caring for and strengthening local social and ecological systems. The objectives of the Coalition, as identified by Martusewicz, Edmundson, and Lupinacci (2011), are as follows:

(1) offer sustained professional development for teachers using a model of community-based education within an EcoJustice framework; (2) develop partnerships between schools and community organizations working on social and ecological problems; (3) promote collaboration among community organizations in the service of schools; (4) help these school and community partners to develop community-based learning projects that engage students in addressing critical ecological and social problems in their own neighborhoods. (p. 300)

It was thus assumed that since each of the teachers interviewed were familiar with the above objectives, regardless of their varying levels of participation in the Coalition, that they had a basic understanding of and commitment to incorporating Place-based education into their work. It was also correctly anticipated that since each of the educators work in Southeast Michigan,



that they would have insights and experiences with the region's culture, environment, and challenges. I was introduced to a group of SEMIs educators by one of the Coalition's leaders at a professional development day in which the teachers from the various member schools gathered for a day of learning, collaborating, and networking. After introducing this project to the larger group, I sought out individual members of the Coalition, under the guidance of the Coalition's leader, and received contact information of potentially interested participants.

Due to the project deadline and the full schedules of both me and the teachers I sought out for interviews, scheduling them was not an easy task. I made myself available during non-working hours and informed the potential participants of my flexibility in both meeting time and location. My goal was to conduct all of the interviews in person, but this was not possible due to scheduling constraints and an illness of one of the participants. I met with Megan (all names are pseudonyms), an experienced teacher and SEMIs Coalition member from a city about 40 miles west of Detroit in her classroom after school, and I met with Claire, a first year teacher at a new charter school in Detroit in the backyard of an establishment near her school on a beautiful spring evening. Alison, a first year teacher working through an alternative certification program who is placed at the same new charter school as Claire, spoke on the phone with me for her interview on a Friday evening, and Maria, an administrator at the new charter school, had to cancel her face to face interview and rescheduled a phone interview. However, I was unable to reach her by phone on the selected day, so she was not interviewed. All respondents received written information about the project (see Appendix A) and signed consent forms for both the course project as well as SEMIs (see Appendices B and C). They were asked the same questions regarding their own story of place-making, perceptions of belonging, and connections between their personal journeys and their professional experiences as a Place-based educator in Southeast

Michigan and member of the Southeast Michigan Stewardship Coalition (see Appendix D). With the consent of the participants, I recorded the interviews and transcribed relevant excerpts to be used for analysis (see Appendix E).

### **Participant Background and Researcher Bias**

Although each of the teachers who were interviewed work in the same region and incorporate PBE into their practice, they each have different journeys towards developing a sense of place, and the purpose of this study was to collect and analyze those various stories. For instance Megan was raised in a close suburb of Detroit in what she described as a “working class neighborhood,” which had certain implications for her as a child interacting with her space, as she explained,

your lawn and the care of your lawn became like symbolic for the tidiness, I guess, that you kept your life in and everyone wanted to look the same so our lawns were always super tidy and if we ripped them up in any way with our shoes or our games or whatever my dad got really upset, and he wanted things to look properly groomed so that was kind of a problem for us because it kept us from running on the lawn much.

Megan, who is now very interested in watershed care and study as a Place-based educator, shared her initial encounters with the water she grew up around,

We had a creek by our house which nobody but the kids who want to smoke cigarettes would go to because it was so hideous. It was a greenish color, kind of glowing. And I lived one mile from the Detroit River but people were afraid to go there. It smelled bad, people said the fish were toxic and so people felt often that if they went close to the river, they would get sick, because it looked sick. So I grew up in this wetland with a creek and a river and so much possibility and we didn't engage with it at all. So, it was concrete and

it was people and cars and family events and church and school and not a lot of nature. I remember squirrels and birds, but I did not know the names of anything.

Whereas Megan has spent most of her life in the state of Michigan, Claire lived in a few different states and moved to Michigan in the sixth grade, but still views Detroit as home, as she described,

It's weird, so in the summers I would go back to Alaska to see my mom and it was strange because going back, and there was a stint of time where I hadn't been to Alaska in eight years, and going back was just like nothing had changed, so that always felt the most like home, but the transitions that I did have when I was younger, you know, like switching schools, it wasn't often enough to really affect me that deeply. So, Detroit has been like my longest home. Michigan has been my longest home.

Of the three interview respondents, Alison is the newest to Michigan and has lived in a few different states. Alison does not have as much history in each of the places she has lived, but has been able to make meaning and find value in each place. She explained further,

I think I've been able to find some sort of identity in each place that I've lived, from, you know, little small town Ohio to, you know, the south, and Detroit, and I think finding all of those identities has kind of led me to really understanding who I am as the different hats I wear, like, as a woman, as a teacher, as a friend, and a sister, and a wife, and like all these different things. The places that I've lived have really helped me, helped me to identify who I am and have kind of added like a piece to the puzzle.

She also reflected on her ability genuinely appreciate each place for what it is,

Every where's been different, you know, but I think as far as like beauty goes, I've really found beauty in the people I've encountered and the stories that I've heard. I love the

project that you're doing about, you know, wanting to find peoples' stories because I think that's what makes, has made each place so beautiful for me is just interacting with people, like hearing their struggles, hearing the great things that they've done and feeling encouraged and even like feeling sad, you know what I mean? Feeling sad and like grieving with them, with the struggles they've had, but also rejoicing in the great things that have happened, and that's really, I think what sticks out to me most in making each of the places I've been so beautiful.

As the researcher, it is important to acknowledge any bias that I approached this project with and how I have attempted to reduce its impact on my findings. I posed this research question because place-making is very challenging, yet important to me, and it is something that I am constantly thinking about and looking for guidance with. I was raised on the east side of Detroit as a white female with a mother who was very purposeful about our family's choice to remain in the city and fight "white flight." I was exposed to both Detroit's beauty and brokenness many times throughout my life, which has led me to have a very serious commitment to issues pertaining to social and ecological justice. My relationship with Detroit has also caused a deal of frustration and confusion, however, as I struggle to make meaning of the harm it has caused my family throughout the years and inspire healing in myself, my loved ones, and my city. I fell for the notion that success was only obtainable outside of the city, so I moved to Chicago for college, but left a significant piece of myself in Detroit, which I struggled to retrieve for the five years I was gone. I eventually answered the calls of the piece of myself that remained in Michigan, and I moved back, and since have been grappling with the concept of place-making and the complexity of belonging. With this project, it was essential to find balance between my personal interest in it and the data itself, which was a helpful and successful exercise for me. I

approached each of my interviews with passion and excitement to collect the data and found it surprisingly easy for me to collect and accept the experiences and stories that were shared with me with minimal personal influence. This was probably the case because of my genuine interest in the topic and my willingness to learn from others as they reflect on their own journeys of belonging. In this sense, I feel as though the researcher-participant relationship was as mutualistic as it could be since both parties seem to gain from the experience. For instance, as Alison shared at the end of her interview, “it’s been fun talking about it, thanks for letting me do this, like, I love talking about what I do and Detroit, I mean it’s super fun talking about something you’re passionate about, you know?”

### **Findings**

The various histories and journeys of these educators that have led them to practice Place-based education in Southeast Michigan illustrated and articulated the following central themes: (1) being open and honest with students about personal experiences of belonging, (2) their involvement in the SEMIs Coalition and PBE is not just professional, but also intensely personal, and (3) they are passionate about the city of Detroit and its surrounding environment.

Sharing past experiences as well as intentions with PBE was important to the participants as a source of inspiration, relationship building, and mutual respect with their students. For instance, being explicit with the students about past experiences was both a natural practice for Claire, as well as an intentional effort to help her students relate to her and feel accepted in her classroom. Sharing her own story came easily to Claire but became useful to her in building connections between her as a teacher and her students. As she shared,

I think there’s certain personal experience that is relevant to what they go through, deal with, you know experience. Also, just the fact that I’m pretty interested in those kinds of

experiences too, like the more negative sad things you don't want to talk about stuff, like, I've gone through a lot of it, in different places though, you know and it's just like trying to relate the situation to the place. Detroit's a very specific place, however a lot of the issues that these kids see, deal with, you know, hear about, or are exposed to at such a young age, you know, I've seen it.... So, I'm really big into telling stories. I've got a lot of stories from, throughout my life, it's not a long life, but I have a lot of stories and it's something I like to do. It's always been a big part of me is sharing stories.

Although Claire seemed to get a lot of joy and fulfillment out of sharing her stories with her students, she also revealed it as an explicit and unique pedagogical strategy by claiming

I'm not there to try and tell them what to do, I'm there to help them learn something and, you know, my way of teaching and my interests are very heavily based on me and so I bring that into the classroom and I think it's a lot different than what they've had until now.

Similarly, sharing family histories and stories was both a tool for Place-based education and a source of personal satisfaction for Megan. As she shared how her connection to place reveals itself through her role as a Place-based educator, she said:

I feel a really strong sense of place when we do something like the Detroit River Cruise and the floating classroom because I mean it literally, the boat leaves from the dock, from Elizabeth Park, that I grew up playing in that park as a girl. And, so, I can tell the kids this is where I was when I was a girl. This is the water I stared at as a girl, even though it's not exactly the same water, but I just, I feel like I am being a good mentor, you know?... I feel strongly about it, I don't just know it's good for them, like *I know*.

Just as Claire felt some sort of calling to sharing her stories, Megan also viewed the practice as rewarding and described it as “just finding ways to share what I love, and make it sort of natural, the sharing natural.” Alison, on the other hand viewed honesty as a key strategy in reaching her potential as an educator while more meaningfully reaching and motivating her students. As a Detroit teacher who is new to the city, she found being open to be a necessary step to forming relationships with her students and encouraging them to relate to her. As she elaborated,

We talk realistically about the fact that they live in a very violent city and they live in a very, you know, their neighborhoods are not safe, you know, and x,y, and z happens in your neighborhood, and we talk about, we’ve had very honest conversations about that, and I think by them understanding that I’m not coming in as a young white woman, you know, I’m not coming in, saying that I understand your struggle as a black kid in Detroit, or as a Hispanic kid in Detroit. I don’t get it, I don’t, and I never will, so like coming in and saying, you know, I believe in you, and like letting them know daily that they have potential and that they have to work hard, probably harder than most kids, to be successful, and they can do it. I think, just like constant encouragement and just those very real and hard conversations have really opened up a lot of doors.

The participants all made it clear in their interviews that they not only embrace their personal journeys of belonging and place-making in Southeast Michigan, but that they share them with their students and view this approach as essential to both Place-based and urban education.

Another theme that emerged in this study was that the teachers interviewed find professional value in their participation in Place-based education and the SEMIs Coalition, but are connected and committed to it on a deeper, more personal level as well. These educators expressed gratitude and recognition to SEMIs for connecting them to resources necessary to

practice this pedagogy and for guiding them in the implementation process. As Alison remarked, “that’s really where the beauty I think comes, or has been evident with our role with SEMIs, is, you know, them educating me, so I can go educate my students and help them be aware of EcoJustice and what that really means.” Similarly, Megan reflected on the implications of her SEMIs involvement in the classroom, “the other influence there with SEMIs is you know those open ended questions, so it’s not necessary for teachers to have all the answers, it’s just really necessary that we allow the space for the questions.” It became evident, however, that although participating in the Southeast Michigan Stewardship Coalition and practicing Place-based education affected their roles in the classroom, and this commitment also had a profound impact on the personal lives of the participants. As Megan claimed, “there’s this really deep, deep learning that you get with Place Based Ed, you know, watching a place change over time, interacting, forming relationships.” For Alison and Claire, their work as Place-based educators has helped them look forward and grow in their knowledge of their place and the issues facing it, whereas Megan’s involvement has provoked a look back and profoundly influenced her understanding of the history of her family and place. Alison values SEMIs not only for its impact on her teaching, but on her personal choices and awareness of important social and ecological issues, as she described it:

they’re showing me how to be a good example and how to be a good steward and then I can help to pass that on to my students, and it can be like a chain, and so SEMIs has definitely changed my mindset about so many things and I’m excited to like pass those on.

Claire also reflected on how being a Place-based educator has helped her navigate her own relationship with place, as she discussed it:



I'm learning so much just through doing this. It's like I'm learning more about the city myself. You know, it's like I might have lived here for this long, but it's the same thing as I was saying with the kids, you don't know it until you see it or hear about it, and you can't 100% know anything unless it's you experiencing it, but it's not maybe necessarily about understanding in like a really personal sense for me, it's more about being knowledgeable, being aware, and like being concerned, or happy, or excited, or disappointed, you know just having these kinds of emotions about where you're at and knowing that that's good and that's ok.

The SEMIs Coalition has not only been an important resource for Megan as an educator committed to teaching and valuing place through immersing her students in their ecosystem, but it has also provoked an emotional reaction to her family's place in the context of both its history and present. She recalled a transformative experience that occurred during a bus tour of Detroit during a SEMIs Summer Institute,

The bus stopped and we got out and people were just talking about how we felt and we walked up to the river and it just all looked so sad. I felt like I was in some sort of fantasy novel where it was like Armageddon and this was like the land beyond people because it is, and then there we were and [the directors] like, "what's up? What are you thinking about?" And I said, "My grandpa was a boy here and they took care of this place, they loved it. My grandpa told me stories about walking in his little knee high socks up this road to his school and I heard about where he played baseball and I can't even see him, like I can't see my grandpa here at all." And it's just so upsetting, you know, like what humanity can do to a space. It's so demoralizing, and what we choose to build up, like you turn the corner and there's the casino, and I'm thinking, like how does that help

humanity? How does that help the earth? You know, how does that help this landscape? So, you know the contrast in Detroit is just, wow, profound. And how do you belong to a place that doesn't sort of exist anymore? You know, how does that change your history and your family's history?

Being a Place-based educator meant something much more significant than what a professional title conveys to these participants, as their work in the classroom and professional development challenged and stimulated them as individuals and members of a family, community, city, ecosystem, and culture.

A final theme that surfaced in this study is that the participants are passionate about Detroit and the surrounding region as a place, an environment, and a community of people. The translation of their commitment and willingness to engage in Place-based education was especially strong when they were discussing their own interest in Southeast Michigan and Detroit in particular. Megan, originally from a suburb of Detroit, has come to cherish the natural world in Michigan and has found meaning in the idea of nature "reclaiming itself" in Detroit, using her lack of interaction with the environment in this region as a child to motivate her dedication to it as a teacher. As she mentioned, "the idea of reclaiming yourself before you even really felt like you knew yourself was something that really struck me," and later noted

I eventually did end up building a relationship with nature but it's important that they hear from me that it's, it's not worth waiting for. It's something that could really be fundamental in creating who they are and I hope that they'll learn how to value it from a very early age, and I really do think that the only way to learn how to value something is to interact with it.

Whereas Megan has formed a deep connection with the eco and water system in Southeastern Michigan, Claire and Alison expressed their sense of place through their relationship to the city of Detroit. As Claire shared with regard to both her history and current focus in this place,

I had my fun with what was around me, and I've got out of it what I wanted to get out of it, and now I'm trying to put something back into it. So, I guess that's through working with these students and trying to expose them to as much of their community as possible because we're so stuck in our neighborhoods in this city because it's a huge city and it's so separated by neighborhood.... I just try and let them know as much as possible about different places and different things that are happening in this place because it is all interrelated whether we're really separated or not, it's still the same city. You have to accept it and you have to kind of, you know, pull yourself into it a little more instead of trying to push yourself out because so many people just want to run away from here, but if you continue running like that then what are you going to get out of any place you live. Unless you put some sort of effort into your surroundings, you're not going to get anything out of it. If you just keep jumping from place to place, you're never going to feel that sense of belonging, that sense of home; you know you've got to get to know people around you.

Alison's passion for Detroit arises out of her efforts to get to know the school community and the vision she has for her students and their engagement with the city. As she explained,

I think it's important to embrace your place and embrace your city for the good and the bad, and I think the ultimate goal for my students, that I have for my students, is that they will, you know, whether they go to college or whatever they do after high school, that they will come back to Detroit and they will be leaders in their city, and so

understanding their city and understanding what it's about is important if they're going to do that, and Place Based Education speaks directly to that.

### **Discussion**

The participants in this study have diverse professional, personal, and educational experiences, but they have shared in a journey as Place-based educators that has led them to develop in knowledge and awareness of self through sharing this growth with their students, has nurtured a connection between their professional roles and personal interests, and has ignited in them a deep and regenerative passion for the human and more than human communities of Southeast Michigan. Through sharing their reflections on making place and accepting their rootedness, the participants justified their professional commitment to Place-based education and exemplified the profound impact it can have on the schools, neighborhoods, and ecosystems in Detroit and its surrounding region. Through the themes that the participants discussed, involving openness with their students, personal change through working as a Place-based educator, and a strong commitment to their place, a central theme of belonging as essential to both the participants and their students emerged. Their understanding of what it means to belong to a place, and specifically to Southeastern Michigan as a place that presents unique beauty and challenges, served as a way to engage with PBE on an intimate level as well as a source of motivation and meaning in the goals, projects, and hopes they created with their students. As Alison considers how her own history of place-making affects her role as a Place-based educator,

I love where I grew up, I liked so much about it, you know, again, surrounded by a lot of farmland, and a lot of Amish, I just, I felt accepted, and I felt like I belonged....I love the place that I grew up and I think that everyone should have something they love, right?

Megan also offered a profound narration of the power of belonging in the context of her work with SEMIs and personal connection to Michigan,

I guess the word belong really is reciprocal, so, so if you belong to a place, you have a place in the place. You are a part of the experience, things depend on you, you depend on things, and there's this feeling that you're recognized and you recognize things....

There's this one poem I have at my house about at the end of your life, I'm just paraphrasing because I can't remember even though I look at every day, at the end of your life, what you really want, or what we really yearn for is to love and be loved and I think belonging builds trust and I think once you have trust then you can really, you know, be your best self, and really shine. It's like being noticed.... It's what we long for.

### **Conclusion**

Through their discussions of what it means to belong, their honesty in the classroom, and their willingness to be transformed by their work, the participants in this study were able to contextualize Place-based education as not only a pedagogical tool for engaging students and improving communities, but also as a deep and personal process for educators that begins before they are in front of a classroom and continues to evolve even after years of service. In a culture where the discourse and analysis of educational practices centers around the quantifiable performance of students, this process and the resulting narratives are rarely given a voice. For instance, in the literature review I conducted for this study, I noticed a lack of research on the practitioners of PBE and how they make meaning of place and of their work. Rather, in the scholarship available surrounding PBE, the impact it had on students of this pedagogy seemed to be the primary focus. While engaging students as stewards and activists was certainly a driving force in the dedication and commitment of these teachers, as this study found, their own histories

and sense of place remained an essential component of their personal and professional relationship with Place-based education. This study is just a preliminary exploration of the theory that Place-based educators do not just randomly commit to such pedagogy, but rather, that they have made meaning of certain experiences in their lives, their families, and their communities and are able to incorporate this meaning into their roles as educators of future citizens, leaders, and stewards. This innovative and solution-based educational practice blurs the lines between educator, learner, researcher, activist, and environmentalist, and has a deeply rooted impact on local human and more than human communities. As David Gruenewald (2003) noted, “Place-based pedagogies are needed so that education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit” (p. 3). It is through this pedagogy and the healing it inspires that the participants in this study, their students, and their communities have gained the vision and the strength to declare, “no farther, this is the place” (Berry, 2002, p. 36).

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**Appendices**

A. Project Description

B. Course Project Consent

C. Southeast Michigan Stewardship Coalition Consent

D. Interview Questions

E. Interview Transcriptions



## Appendix A. Project Description

### **Brief Information**

I am a student in the Social Foundations of Education Program at Eastern Michigan University. The final project for my course, EDPS 687: Qualitative/Interpretive Research is an interview-based qualitative research study in which I explore how place-based educators in Detroit, MI have come to know and value place. The Study involves one audio-taped interview of approximately one hour in which I will ask you questions about your perceptions and experiences of becoming a member of a place and with your agreement, may request to meet with you for a second short follow-up interview for further clarification. Participation in the study is completely voluntary and you will be assured of complete confidentiality if you choose to participate.

### **Benefits of the Project**

This research project will provide me and the students in the course with opportunities to develop our research skills and reflect on our own learning through the interview process. The benefits to you as participant may be an opportunity to reflect on your own perceptions about and experiences of place-making in Detroit as you describe them in the interview process. There are no foreseeable risks to participating in the project.

### **Dissemination of Results**

Findings from the research project will be shared with my professor and peers at Eastern Michigan University, as part of the requirements of the course; and if you would like to see the final report, a copy will be sent to you as well. The findings may be written up for presentation at the Graduate Research Fair at Eastern Michigan University, or used in later professional presentations at Conferences or submitted for publication. Any dissemination of findings will be anonymous and complete confidentiality will be ensured

If you would like to participate in the research study, please read and sign the consent form on the following page:

## Appendix B: Course Project Consent Form

I agree to participate in one or more interviews conducted by Erin Stanley as part of a research study about how place-based educators in Detroit reflect on belonging somewhere. I understand that the interview(s) will last approximately 60 minutes and that the interview(s) will focus on my perceptions and experiences of place-making. I will be asked questions about my upbringing and any other issues that I would like to discuss about being a place-based educator in Detroit.

I understand that my participation in the interview(s) is completely voluntary; that I may choose not to answer certain questions, and that I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time if I choose to do so. I further understand that my confidentiality will be protected at all times and that a fictitious name will be assigned to me after the interviews are completed, and that any identifying characteristics about me or (insert my family here or name of organization, workplace etc) will be deleted. The transcripts of the tapes will be assigned a numerical code and kept in a locked filing cabinet in and in a password protected computer file. I further understand that if I decide at any point after the interview that I do not wish to participate, my tapes and transcripts will be destroyed and no material will be used from the interviews. I agree to allow anonymous research findings from my interview(s) to be included in Eastern Michigan University presentations and/or disseminated in future publications, conferences, and professional settings.

Interview Respondent's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

For further questions or concerns, please contact:

Erin Stanley

[Estanle4@emich.edu](mailto:Estanle4@emich.edu)

Tel: (313) 550-3833

OR contact the Course Professor

Dr. Joe Bishop

Teacher Education Department

314G College of Education

Eastern Michigan University

Ypsilanti MI 48197

Tel: (734) 487-3185

[joe.bishop@emich.edu](mailto:joe.bishop@emich.edu)

*This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University COE Human Subjects Review Committee. If you have questions about the approval process, please contact Dr. Beth Kubitskey (734.487.0042)*

## Appendix C: Southeast Michigan Stewardship Coalition Consent Form

**Southeast Michigan Stewardship (SEMIS) Coalition****INFORMED CONSENT****FACULTY AND STAFF**

**Program Summary:** The purpose of SEMIS is to facilitate school-community partnerships in the development and implementation of Sustainability Education (SE) for K-12 students. Sustainability Education teaches students to examine the network of interdependent relationships that exist between nature and human communities. Students learn to protect nature and work in their community for a healthier future.

This program involves research. Evaluation of the program will involve surveys, interviews and observations for the purpose of:

- 1) analyzing the effectiveness of the program in:
  - a) increasing students' responsibility toward the natural world and within their communities
  - b) improving students' creativity knowledge and skills
  - c) improving students' academic performance
  - d) improving the quality of the school's/district's relationship with community organizations
- 2) assessing:
  - a) current and developing programming related to sustainability education in the district/school
  - b) current and developing programming related to eco-arts education
  - b) the extent to which there are efforts within the participating schools to communicate information about their particular SE projects to other school professionals.

**Procedures:** As part of the evaluation, information about attitudes and practices around sustainability education and eco-arts projects will be gathered through interviews, surveys and observations. If you choose to participate, it may involve one or more in-depth interviews and one or more comprehensive surveys. Each interview and survey will take up to approximately 1 hour. In addition, we will be collecting observational data in regular meetings that you may attend. Evaluation team members may also ask to participate in events, meetings and projects. We may also ask you for samples of student work as well as artifacts from your teaching such as lesson plans. Information gathered from the interviews, surveys and observations will be analyzed by the evaluation team and then shared with the SEMIS program team and members of the school community. No names or other information that could identify you will be revealed in any shared information. You may choose to use the SEMIS or SEMIS partners' websites to disseminate your SEMIS project. In the case that you would like to post documentation of your project, you will be identified as the author of this project.

**Voluntary Participation:** Participation in any of the evaluation procedures is completely voluntary. Your participation is not a condition of enrollment in any of the related events in this project. You are under no obligation to answer any questions. You can choose to withdraw yourself from any information discussed or observed, and any interview audiotapes or photographs or videotapes from the evaluation at any time. You are under no obligation to allow observations or to invite the researchers to participate in or attend events, meetings, and projects. There will be no negative consequences for your refusal to participate in any of these procedures. If you agree to participate, you may withdraw your agreement at any time with no negative consequence.

**Confidentiality:** Your specific answers and comments will be kept confidential. Your name and/or any personal information that could identify you will not be revealed in any report or presentation that may be disseminated. The names or other identifying information that are associated with your answers or comments will be contained in a secure data file that only evaluation team can access.

**Dissemination of Results:** Results of this evaluation may be disseminated in any of the following forms: informational meetings with participants, websites, conference presentations, published articles and or books. Your

name and/or any personal information that could identify you will not be revealed in any dissemination of research and evaluation results.

**Risk:** There is no foreseeable risk in your participation.

**Benefits of Participation:** Participation in the evaluation will help to inform other educators, students, parents and community leaders of the benefits of Sustainability Education and eco-arts education, and help us to modify and improve our work together.

**Consent:** I have read this consent form, understand what this evaluation involves, and agree to participate. I understand that I have the right at any time to choose not to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Photographs/Video Images:** During meetings, events and projects we may take your photograph, a group photograph that includes you, or we may videotape a class, meeting or event that you are involved in. These images and videos will be used to document and communicate our work to the public including parents, stakeholders and policy makers. You may also choose to include photographs and/or video in dissemination of your SEMIS projects through SEMIS' and SEMIS partners' websites. If you do not want to be photographed or videotaped, or do not want to include video/photographs in your dissemination of your SEMIS projects, you may opt out at any time. You may do so by removing yourself from the filming or group photo, or asking any the SEMIS Program Evaluator or any SEMIS Steering Committee member not to include your photograph in any dissemination.

**Photograph/Video Images Consent:** I have read the above paragraph and agree to have photographs and/or videos of me included in dissemination of SEMIS projects. I understand that I have the right at any time to opt out of this agreement as described above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

This research protocol and informed consent document has been reviewed and approved by the Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee for use from November 8, 2013 to November 8, 2014. If you have questions about the approval process, please contact the EMU UHSRC at 734.487.0042 or [human.subjects@emich.edu](mailto:human.subjects@emich.edu)).

## Appendix D: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about the place or places you have lived and the impact they have had on your life.
  - a. Are there specific stories that are particularly memorable?
  - b. How has working with SEMIs related to those experiences?
2. What are some experiences that stand out for you as an educator in Detroit and with the Southeast Michigan Stewardship Coalition and how have you made meaning of these experiences?
3. What do you think it means to belong to a place and community?
  - a. What do you think it means to belong to Detroit or southeast Michigan?
4. How does your own history of belonging to a place affect your role as a place-based educator?
5. Can you reflect on the significance of place based education in Detroit/SE Michigan?
  - a. What unique challenges and potential exist in this place and how do you understand them?
  - b. What does it mean to be work as someone who is/ is not from here?
  - c. What steps have you taken to make place here and how do you help your students do so?

## Appendix E: Interview Transcriptions

Megan

00:58 your lawn and the care of your lawn became like symbolic for the tidiness, I guess, that you kept your life in and everyone wanted to look the same so our lawns were always super tidy and if we ripped them up in any way with our shoes or our games or whatever my dad got really upset, and he wanted things to look properly groomed so that was kind of a problem for us because it kept us from running on the lawn much. 1:25

1:35 We had a creek by our house which nobody but the kids who want to smoke cigarettes would go to because it was so hideous. It was a greenish color, kind of glowing. And I lived one mile from the Detroit River but people were afraid to go there. It smelled bad, people said the fish were toxic and so people felt often that if they went close to the river, they would get sick, because it looked sick. So I grew up in this wetland with a creek and a river and so much possibility and we didn't engage with it at all. So, it was concrete and it was people and cars and family events and church and school and not a lot of nature. I remember squirrels and birds, but I did not know the names of anything. 2:25

15:10 The idea of reclaiming yourself before you even really felt like you knew yourself was something that really struck me. 15:20

18:01 Just finding ways to share what I love, and make it sort of natural, the sharing natural.

26:49 There's this really deep, deep learning that you get with Place Based Ed, you know, watching a place change over time, interacting, forming relationships. 26:57

28:51 I guess the word belong really is reciprocal, so, so if you belong to a place, you have a place in the place. You are a part of the experience, things depend on you, you depend on things, and there's this feeling that you're recognized and you recognize things.... There's this one poem I have at my house about at the end of your life, I'm just paraphrasing because I can't remember even though I look at every day, at the end of your life, what you really want, or what we really yearn for is to love and be loved and I think belonging builds trust and I think once you have trust then you can really, you know, be your best self, and really shine. It's like being noticed.... It's what we long for. 30:10

38: 58 The other influence there with SEMIs is you know those open ended questions, so it's not necessary for teachers to have all the answers, it's just really necessary that we allow the space for the questions. 39:16

34:39 The bus stopped and we got out and people were just talking about how we felt and we walked up to the river and it just all looked so sad. I felt like I was in some sort of fantasy novel where it was like Armageddon and this was like the land beyond people because it is, and then there we were and [the directors] like, "what's up? what are you thinking about?" And I said, "my grandpa was a boy here and they took care of this place, they loved it. My grandpa told me stories about walking in his little knee high socks up this road to his school and I heard about where he played baseball and I can't even see him, like I can't see my grandpa here at all. And

it's just so upsetting, you know, like what humanity can do to a space. It's so demoralizing, and what we choose to build up, like you turn the corner and there's the casino, and I'm thinking, like how does that help humanity? How does that help the earth? You know, how does that help this landscape? So, you know the contrast in Detroit is just, wow, profound. And how do you belong to a place that doesn't sort of exist anymore? You know, how does that change your history and your family's history? 36:11

37:04 I eventually did end up building a relationship with nature but it's important that they hear from me that it's, it's not worth waiting for. It's something that could really be fundamental in creating who they are and I hope that they'll learn how to value it from a very early age, and I really do think that the only way to learn how to value something is to interact with it. 37:33

42:52 I feel a really strong sense of place when we do something like the Detroit River Cruise and the floating classroom because I mean it literally, the boat leaves from the dock, from Elizabeth Park that I grew up playing in that park as a girl. And, so, I can tell the kids this is where I was when I was a girl. This is the water I stared at as a girl, even though it's not exactly the same water, but I just, I feel like I am being a good mentor, you know?... I feel strongly about it, I don't just know it's good for them, like *I know*. 43:45

Claire

4:15 It's weird, so in the summers I would go back to Alaska to see my mom and it was strange because going back, and there was a stint of time where I hadn't been to Alaska in eight years, and going back was just like nothing had changed, so that always felt the most like home, but the transitions that I did have when I was younger, you know, like switching schools, it wasn't often enough to really effect me that deeply. So, Detroit has been like my longest home. Michigan has been my longest home. 4:45

15:51 I'm not there to try and tell them what to do, I'm there to help them learn something and you know my way of teaching and like my interests are very heavily based on me and so I bring that into the classroom and I think it's a lot different than what they've had until now. 16:16

19: 43 I think there's certain personal experience that is relevant to what they go through, deal with, you know experience. Also, just the fact that I'm pretty interested in those kinds of experiences too, like the more negative sad things you don't want to talk about stuff, like, I've gone through a lot of it, in different places though, you know and it's just like trying to relate the situation to the place. Detroit's a very specific place, however a lot of the issues that these kids see, deal with, you know, hear about, or are exposed to at such a young age, you know, I've seen it... So, I'm really big into telling stories. I've got a lot of stories from, throughout my life, it's not a long life, but I have a lot of stories and it's something I like to do. It's always been a big part of me is sharing stories. 21:28

25:14 So I had my fun with what was around me, and I've got out of it what I wanted to get out of it, and now I'm trying to put something back into it. So, I guess that's through working with these students and trying to expose them to as much of their community as possible because we're so stuck in our neighborhoods in this city because it's a huge city and it's so separated by neighborhood. 25:32... I just try and let them know as much as possible about different places

and different things that are happening in this place because it is all interrelated whether we're really separated or not, it's still the same city. You have to accept it and you have to kind of you know pull yourself into it a little more instead of trying to push yourself out because so many people just want to run away from here,26:49 but if you continue running like that then what are you going to get out of any place you live. Unless you put some sort of effort into your surroundings, you're not going to get anything out of it. If you just keep jumping from place to place, you're never going to feel that sense of belonging, that sense of home, you know you've got to get to know people around you 27:09

28:56 I'm learning so much just through doing this. It's like I'm learning more about the city myself. You know, it's like I might have lived here for this long, but it's the same thing as I was saying with the kids, you don't know it until you see it or hear about it, and you can't 100% know anything unless it's you experiencing it, but it's not maybe necessarily about understanding in like a really personal sense for me, it's more about being knowledgeable, being aware, and like being concerned, or happy, or excited, or disappointed, you know just having these kinds of emotions about where you're at and knowing that that's good and that's ok. 29:32

Alison

7:45 I think I've been able to find some sort of identity in each place that I've lived, from, you know, little small town Ohio to, you know, the south, and Detroit, and I think finding all of those identities has kind of led me to really understanding who I am as the different hats I wear, like, as a woman, as a teacher, as a friend, and a sister, and a wife, and like all these different things. The places that I've lived have really helped me, helped me to identify who I am and have kind of added like a piece to the puzzle. 8:19

9:27 Everywhere's been different, you know, but I think as far as like beauty goes, I've really found beauty in the people I've encountered and the stories that I've heard. I love the project that you're doing about, you know, wanting to find peoples' stories because I think that's what makes, has made each place so beautiful for me is just interacting with people, like hearing their struggles, hearing the great things that they've done and feeling encouraged and even like feeling sad, you know what I mean? Feeling sad and like grieving with them, with the struggles they've had, but also rejoicing in the great things that have happened, and that's really, I think what sticks out to me most in making each of the places I've been so beautiful. 10:05

12:18 That's really where the beauty I think comes, or has been evident with our role with SEMIs, is, you know, them educating me, so I can go educate my students and help them be aware of EcoJustice and what that really means. 12:34

13:54 And they're showing me how to be a good example and how to be a good steward and then I can help to pass that on to my students, and it can be like a chain, and so SEMIs has definitely changed my mindset about so many things and I'm excited to like pass those on. 14:15

18:09 We talk realistically about the fact that they live in a very violent city and they live in a very, you know, their neighborhoods are not safe, you know, and x,y, and z happens in your neighborhood, and we talk about, we've had very honest conversations about that, and I think by them understanding that I'm not coming in as a young white woman, you know, I'm not coming in, saying that I understand your struggle as a black kid in Detroit, or as a hispanic kid in Detroit.



I don't get it, I don't, and I never will, so like coming in and saying, you know, I believe in you, and like letting them know daily that they have potential and that they have to work hard, probably harder than most kids, to be successful, and they can do it. 18:54 I think, just like constant encouragement and just those very real and hard conversations have really opened up a lot of doors. 19:09

22:57 I love where I grew up, I liked so much about it, you know, again, surrounded by a lot of farmland, and a lot of Amish, I just, I felt accepted, and I felt like I belonged...I love the place that I grew up and I think that everyone should have something they love, right? 24:28

27:46 I think it's important to embrace your place and embrace your city for the good and the bad, and I think the ultimate goal for my students, that I have for my students, is that they will, you know, whether they go to college or whatever they do after high school, that they will come back to Detroit and they will be leaders in their city, and so understanding their city and understanding what it's about is important if they're going to do that, and Place Based Education speaks directly to that. 28:23

30:08 "it's been fun talking about it, thanks for letting me do this, like, I love talking about what I do and Detroit, I mean it's super fun talking about something you're passionate about, you know?" 30:15