
Place-Based Education in the Standards-Based Reform Era—Conflict or Complement?

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In this article we discuss the relationship between place-based education and standards-based reforms. Using an initiative in Vermont to include place-based standards into the state's curricular frameworks, we examine state policy makers' and practitioners' views of state standards and place-based curriculum. Furthermore, we explore the ways in which the practitioners view the impact of both of these curricular efforts on their classroom practices. We challenge the common view of incompatibility between state standards and locally responsive curriculum and offer instead a view of complementarity.

Locally responsive or “place-based curriculum” is, and always has been, a feature of rural schools, in part out of necessity and in part out of desire. Often underfunded and distant from easy bureaucratic oversight, rural schools have traditionally made do, constructing lessons around community assets and local resources. Recently, though, rural school advocates and researchers have touted place-based education as a virtue that needs preserving rather than just a practice to be tolerated. In this past year, place-based education has even begun to creep into the attention of the broader educational research community with articles in *Educational Researcher*, *American Educational Research Journal*, and *Phi Delta Kappan*. The growing interest in place-based education has hit rural schools at a time when they are being asked to understand and implement standards-based reforms, including state curriculum standards and state-mandated assessments. To many rural school advocates and researchers, these two initiatives either work at cross-purposes or are completely incompatible (e.g., Gruenewald 2003; Williams 2003).

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These advocates and researchers argue that as external agents such as the state or federal government demand a greater focus on and accountability for curriculum that is designed for all students, curriculum with a local focus will wither. One participant of an e-symposium on standards-based reforms in rural schools summed up this concern nicely: “When standards are set apart from the communities, local initiative is killed, local ownership is killed” (Rural Challenge 1999). To those holding this perspective, standards-based reforms stand in conflict to place-based education because standards require a curriculum that is purposefully decontextualized. Furthermore, because curricular standards are extensive, little opportunity is left for teachers to engage students in curriculum that is tied to a locale.

In contrast to this perspective, Vermont place-based and environmental advocates initiated in the late 1990s a process of revision to embed place-based curriculum in the newly created state standards. The place-based revisions are situated in two separate state standards in Vermont’s *Framework of Standards* document. These advocates not only saw the state’s curricular frameworks as complementary rather than in conflict with place-based education but also as a useful vehicle to legitimize place-based curriculum in schools. We wondered why. Why did these place-based advocates take such a different view from others and see their state standards not as a monolithic force that threatened their ideas but rather as an opportunity to increase interest in place-based education? How do their views differ from others in the field? We also wondered about the influence of these beliefs on classroom practice. How, if at all, did this Vermont initiative to connect place-based curriculum and standards play out with practitioners in Vermont’s classrooms and schools? Is the Vermont teacher community particularly hospitable to place-based ed-

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ucation, making this an unusual case? If so, why did place-based advocates, and then state policy makers, believe that including place-based standards in the state's curricular frameworks would be important? And finally, we wondered whether this initiative in Vermont, at the practice and policy levels, might help us better understand how place-based curriculum and standards-based reforms might coexist in rural schools elsewhere.

To answer these questions, we unpack both perspectives—conflict or complement—in the relationship between place-based education and standards-based reforms. First, we review the literature on place-based education and its relationship to standards. Second, we briefly describe Vermont's efforts to incorporate place-based education into the state's standards-based reforms and the rationale for doing so. Finally, we turn to practitioners in Vermont to examine their understandings of place-based curriculum and standards-based reforms. We look at how they portray standards-based reforms and place-based education, how they see the relationship between the two initiatives, and how they see both initiatives playing out in their practices.

This study examines the ways in which a particular reform idea—place-based curriculum—becomes state policy as well as makes its way into practice. Ultimately this is not a simple story of contending ideas about standards and local forces but rather a complex story of how policy outcomes are shaped by the combination of contending reform ideas, state mandates, teacher beliefs, and local culture. Rural schools in all states are contending with “high-stakes” curriculum, that is, state-mandated standards and assessments. If, at the same time, many rural schools are attempting to create opportunities for their students to learn, appreciate, and protect their local communities, then rural practitioners need to understand better how they might both comply with state mandates and honor local concerns. Merely saying that “high-stakes” and locally responsive curriculum are incompatible is too simple. Although the context of Vermont may be unique, examining why, and how, state curricular standards and place-based education became complementary may help reformers and policy makers in other states understand the possibilities they face.

Methodologies

This study is exploratory, seeking to build a foundational understanding of this policy change in Vermont. It is framed by the perspective that practitioners' interpretations and implementation of policies are instances of professional and organizational learning (Knapp 1997). Cohen and Barnes (1993) assert that all reforms imply new learning. Like all learners, practitioners filter new ideas through their previous experiences, knowledge, beliefs, dispositions,

and the contexts in which they work. These features shape the degree to which practitioners attend to reform initiatives and policy ideas, the ways in which they construe them, and the changes in practice they might engage with in response to the ideas (Elmore 1996; Jennings 1996; McLaughlin and Talbert 1993). This view is particularly useful as we start to inquire into place-based education policies, since such policies specifically ask practitioners to engage their communities—the contexts in which they teach—and to use their communities in their teaching practices.

In order to tell the story of a specific instructional policy in Vermont and to begin to see what Vermont teachers know and understand about place-based education and the place-based policies themselves, we employed a two-fold approach to our inquiry. First, we constructed a history of the development of place-based standards and the implementation of state standards and place-based curriculum in Vermont. Second, we surveyed teachers, attended rural school conferences, and interviewed teachers as a way to tease out the role of place-based and standards-based education in the lives of Vermont's school practitioners.

Following the constructionist and inductive modes of historical case study design, our data collection and analysis for the policy history were context dependent (Creswell 1997). In this case, we examined the varied social and political contexts that shape Vermont's state-level policy making in the development of the two place-based standards. We identified and interviewed key players who represent groups involved in developing these standards. These include individuals from sustainable agricultural advocacy groups such as FoodWorks, "informal" educators from Shelburne Farms, educational officials in Vermont's State Department of Education, faculty in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at the University of Vermont, and a consortium of formal and informal educators called Cultivating New Partnerships.

We interviewed a total of 12 participants at least once. Each interview lasted from one to two hours. These interviews were taped and then transcribed. For these interviews we used an open-ended interview format that revolved around key ideas: a chronology of events leading up to the standards revisions, the participation of individuals and various groups in the revision efforts, the relationships among these individuals and groups, and, finally, the views of consequences of standards policy in general and the two place-based standards in particular. We also examined publications and official documents from the time the place-based standards were designed, such as state board of education minutes. From these sources we were able to construct a detailed, interpretive time line of the development of the place-based standards as state-level instructional policy.

Our second goal was to explore practitioners' thinking about place-based education and Vermont's standards-based reforms. For this we developed a

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survey and interviewed teachers. We surveyed fourth-, eighth-, and tenth-grade teachers in each of the state's 12 supervisory unions (Vermont's term for school districts). These are grades assessed in Vermont's statewide testing. The survey instrument contained 40 questions that addressed three areas: the extent to which practitioners believe in or practice place-based education; practitioners' familiarity with and use of Vermont's state standards, and particularly of the two place-based standards; and practitioners' ideas on the possible effects of standards on classroom practice. Two of these questions included open-ended responses for which we asked teachers to define "place-based" education and what they do that could be construed as place-based practices. We sent these surveys to school principals to distribute to their fourth-, eighth-, and/or tenth-grade teachers. We mailed two rounds of surveys, first to principals in all schools in spring 2002 and a second round four months later, in October, to principals in schools from which we had received no responses. From the two rounds we received responses from 226 teachers from 125 different schools.

Because there is no available statewide list, or even an accurate count of Vermont teachers identified by grade level and school, we were able only to estimate the total number of teachers of grades 4, 8, and 10 within the state. By taking the total number of students completing standardized tests for these grades and dividing these numbers by the average teacher to student ratio, we concluded that the total population of teachers teaching grades 4, 8, and 10 was around 1,700. Although our survey response rate was thus pretty low (12.6 percent of the estimated total population), we did receive surveys from 125 different schools, amounting to 37 percent of all schools in Vermont. We received responses from all geographic areas of the state and from schools whose demographics and wealth reflect the state's diversity. Since the goal of the survey was to identify the range of practitioners' beliefs and classroom practices about place-based education and standards-based reforms rather than to draw definitive conclusions about Vermont teachers, the survey responses allow us to make generalizable statements concerning the diversity of terms and practices used by teachers to describe place-based education, the extent that place-based education has permeated many schools in Vermont, and the ways in which many teachers across Vermont are thinking about and using the state's standards in their teaching.

In addition to the surveys, in fall 2002 we attended professional development workshops on state standards and place-based education, interviewed workshop practitioners, and interviewed 10 practitioners from four schools who had been identified as engaging in place-based education. We interviewed practitioners about their understanding and use of standards and place-based education generally. We reviewed interviews and case studies of practitioners on place-based education and service learning that researchers from the Uni-

versity of Vermont conducted in the last four years (Koliba 2003; Koliba et al. 2002). This combination of methods helped us gain insight into the impact of standards and place-based education on teaching practices in Vermont. All quotations from practitioners that are cited in this article are taken from interviews we conducted or from those conducted by University of Vermont researchers.

Place-Based Education and Standards-Based Reforms—Conflict?

For some time now, rural school advocates and researchers have voiced concerns over how standards-based reforms will play out in small rural schools. Most of the critique does not focus on setting rigorous standards for children (Kannapel 2000) or even holding schools accountable for reaching rigorous standards (Rural School and Community Trust 2000). Rather, the critique focuses on who determines standards, to what ultimate end they point children, and how they are measured (Gibbs and Howley 2000; Kannapel 2000). As Marty Strange (personal communication, November 2003) from the Rural School and Community Trust commented, “We embrace standards, not standardization.”

Concerns about who determines standards are twofold. First, critics fear that externally designed standards erode local control and deny a community the opportunity to determine what its children should know and be able to do. The process of developing standards within a local community rather than “from away” would make school goals explicit and increase the likelihood of community members coming to a shared understanding of those goals (Rural School and Community Trust 2000). Second, critics are concerned that externally derived standards discount local needs and interests and, because they often demand that teachers cover an extensive amount of content, they also drive out whatever locally derived curriculum teachers previously have used (Jennings 2000; Rural School and Community Trust 2000).

Concerns about what the aims of standards-based reforms are have a more singular focus. Critics in this area worry that state standards homogenize what gets taught in schools and emphasize a curriculum geared toward teaching children what they should know and be able to do to compete in the global marketplace rather than the local arena (Kannapel and DeYoung 1999). Gibbs and Howley suggest that the very purpose for state-level standards is to “assure that schools—no matter where they are located—produce graduates who can compete in national and even global markets” (2000, 2). They point out that this focus on producing competitive workers in the global economy is why standards advocates are so keen on calling their work “world class.” Gruenewald (2003, 6) writes that education should have “some direct bearing on the

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well-being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit.” To the extent that standards-based reforms draw practitioners’ attention away from local needs and leave unexamined the impact that educating students toward externally derived standards has on local economies, standards-based reforms become incompatible with educating children to understand and sustain their own communities.

Concerns about how standards are measured focus on the accountability aspects of standards-based reforms. Critics here fear that standards and their accompanying tests may diminish incentives for teachers to teach content that is not tested and encourage direct instruction over experiential or student-centered learning opportunities that make use of local settings. Gruenewald writes, “The current educational reform era of standards and testing that began nearly 20 years ago with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* is perhaps reaching a climax in No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. One result of new federal mandates for accountability is an increasing emphasis on standards, testing and classroom pedagogies that ‘teach to the test’ while denying students and teachers opportunities to experience critical or place-based education” (2003, 3). To critics such as Gruenewald, standards-based reforms drive out locally responsive curriculum because it is not included in high-stakes assessments. Furthermore, high-stakes assessments restrict the amount of time teachers have to engage in pedagogies focused on local concerns.

Although place-based learning is not a uniquely rural school phenomenon, it is at the center of many rural school reform efforts. Since the 1950s, rural schools have faced persistent threats of closure and consolidation. A closed school is often the first step in a community’s demise, so it is understandable why a curriculum that highlights the importance of a local school to its place and highlights for students the importance of sustaining their local communities would be a rallying cry for rural schools. Given the ways in which many rural education advocates and researchers describe place-based education, it is easy to understand why there is a putative conflict with standards-based reforms. The Rural School and Community Trust (2004) portrays the concept of place-based education this way: “Place-based education is learning that is rooted in what is local—the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art of a particular place. The community provides the context for learning, student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning.”

Paul Theobald (1997) says place-based education helps students see the intradependence of their lives and their communities and environments. The aim of place-based education is to increase students’ appreciation of their local environments with an ultimate end of helping students learn ways to sustain their local environments. Therefore, what students learn in Newark, Vermont,

may be similar to what students learn in Newark, New Jersey, but the learning will have different characteristics and different aims because the context for learning differs. Smith writes, “The primary value of place-based education lies in the way that it serves to strength children’s connections to others and to the regions in which they live. . . . By reconnecting rather than separating children from the world, place-based education serves both individuals and communities, helping individuals to experience the value they hold for others and allowing communities to benefit from the commitment and contributions of their members” (2002, 594). In this view of place-based education, curriculum not only uses place as a context for learning but has the support and sustainability of place as a goal. Given this focus, state standards and assessments are almost by definition antithetical to place-based curriculum.

Brooke, in his book on writing instruction in rural schools, provides a slightly different focus for place-based curriculum. He not only emphasizes the value of place-based education in helping students understand and sustain where they live but also in making learning more meaningful:

Learning and writing and citizenship are richer when they are tied to and flow from local culture. Local communities, regions, and histories are the places where we shape our individual lives, and their economic and political and aesthetic issues are every bit as complex as the same issues on the national and international scale. . . . If education in general, and writing in particular, is to become more relevant, to become a real force in improving societies in which we live, then it must become more closely linked to the local, to the spheres of action and influence most of us experience (2003, 4–5).

Because this view of place-based education constructs it, in part at least, as a pedagogical tool rather than solely as a learning outcome, the conflicts with standards are less obvious. Although Brooke still asserts that curriculum should be tied and connected to local culture—something difficult to achieve with state standards—it should do so because it makes learning more relevant, not because the learning itself should be about the local context. In this way, it conflicts less with standards in that the outcomes may not be incompatible.

Although this second view of place-based curriculum may offer some common ground with standards, in most rural school literature, the view that rural school educators are beleaguered by standards is prominent. Critics whose views are already cited are examples of this. In this view, standards place heavy external demands that are at best inappropriate and at worst destructive to efforts to design a worthwhile curriculum for rural schools, leaving rural practitioners as somewhat powerless players reluctantly complying with external demands to teach certain content. These critics say that the balance of power clearly favors national and state authorities over local authorities.

Vermont's Place-Based Curriculum and State Standards—Complement?

It is hardly surprising that a policy initiative to protect place-based education would happen in Vermont. The state has long been known for its rural character, its beautiful environment, and its fierce belief in local control. A grant proposal to fund the initiative to include place-based standards in Vermont's curriculum framework begins with the following description of Vermont: "Vermont has a rich tradition linking its people and rural communities to its working lands. Our history of family farms and our strong commitment to natural resource protection, linked with our participatory, town meeting style democracy, are signs of Vermonters' deep-rooted sense of independence. At the same time we share a profound understanding of our interdependence with each other and with our natural resources. Vermont's state motto, 'Freedom and Unity' epitomizes this ethic" (Camp 1997, 1).

In 1992, Vermont adopted the Common Core of Learning, a state curriculum guideline that outlined expectations for high school graduates. Like many states' guidelines written in the early 1990s, Vermont's were general, offering broad expectations for the kinds of knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes that people in the state wanted their children to hold. When the Common Core was completed, the state board of education agreed with the general perspective of the document but asked the state department of education to develop stronger subject area guidelines. In transforming the document to state standards, those involved wanted to preserve the cross-discipline learning objectives nature of the Common Core as they added more subject area specificity. These two requirements resulted in the current structure of Vermont's curriculum frameworks. The Vital Results section incorporates many of the big ideas from the Common Core. The Fields of Knowledge section provides more detailed disciplinary guidelines. For instance, standards for personal development and social responsibility are included in the Vital Results, whereas the Fields of Knowledge has standards for science, mathematics, technology, arts, language, literature, social science, and history. The state board of education adopted the first version of *Vermont's Frameworks of Standards and Learning Opportunities* in June 1996.

The frameworks incorporated an official process for revision. Tim Flynn, a former state department of education staff member who was instrumental in orchestrating the development of Vermont's framework, commented:

We knew people weren't absolutely satisfied with the extent of what was in the framework but we figured that it—I mean at some point you have to say, "This is it" and then put a process in place to revise it. So that's what we did and the State Board adopted it. One of the areas that we just weren't ready to include in the first version was coming

more or less from an environmental perspective. There were lots of comments about it, but . . . there was no coalition of thought around what we really wanted to put in here, so we didn't put anything too specific in the framework.

As Flynn indicated, the absence of stewardship or environmental issues in the frameworks was noted, particularly by the numerous groups in the state whose missions included looking after Vermont's environment, history, and agriculture. Some of these groups were state funded—like *Ag in the Classroom*, which develops curriculum to sustain local agriculture. Others were grassroots organizations such as *Shelburne Farms* and *FoodWorks, Inc.* These groups became instrumental in the effort to revise the standards.

In 1997, a small group of environmental and place-based education advocates organized an umbrella group called *Cultivating New Partnerships (CNP)* whose mission was threefold. First, the group wanted to build stronger collaboration between state agencies and nongovernmental, nonprofit educational organizations. Second, they wanted to increase the awareness of Vermont's Framework of Standards on the part of educators working in nongovernmental educational organizations. Finally, they wanted to examine and possibly revise the framework to include standards on environmental and place-based issues. *Cultivating New Partnership* took off. Two things are noteworthy, and perhaps unique, about CNP. The first is the diversity of the agencies that participated. The small group of environmental and place-based education advocates who started CNP quickly engaged partners from the University of Vermont; Vermont Agency of Natural Resources; Vermont Department of Agriculture, Food, and Markets; Vermont Department of Education; and Vermont *Agriculture in the Classroom*. This mix of state bureaucracy, higher education, and grassroots/nongovernmental educational and environmental groups was key to giving CNP legitimacy in the eyes of a wide range of people, from traditional policy makers to academics to environmental advocates. The second important feature of the organization was that it facilitated sustained conversation among these diverse groups on educational and environmental issues. Although these conversations were not always harmonious—for example, there were countless debates over the meaning and use of the term “sustainability”—they provided a forum for people who have differing perspectives on environmentalism and place-based education to talk to each other. What resulted were proposed revisions that represented a compromise between ideological extremes. This was their strength.

From April to October 1998, CNP held numerous workshops with educational groups to do a “gap analysis” of what might be missing from Vermont's frameworks. Although CNP's agenda for revising the framework to include environmental and place-based standards must have been clear to workshop

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participants from the beginning, asking participants to examine the state's framework closely and to make a case that important learning standards were missing created a great deal of familiarity with the frameworks that participants might not have developed otherwise. This in turn gave the participants language and a sense of the issues that matched school practitioners'. The CNP workshop ran concurrently with those that the state department of education was holding for school practitioners on the state's frameworks, so there was much conversation in the air over standards at this time. From October 1998 to February 1999, CNP held 38 focus groups across the state to discuss the possibility of revising the state framework to include standards for place-based/sustainability curriculum. Many people participated, and in October 1999, CNP proposed to the state board of education two new standards, one on sustainability/environmental issues and one on civic responsibility and community awareness. The board in general was in favor of the revisions but rejected them because of two concerns. The first was that some board members did not approve of conceptualizing ecosystems as inclusive of humans because it sounded too progressive and environmental. The second was a perceived lack of "science" and input from the scientific community in the sustainability/environmental standard. The CNP immediately began revising their proposed changes. They took out the term "ecosystems" and replaced it with "human and natural communities." They also got help from the state's scientific community to put more science content into the sustainability standard. In March 2000, CNP proposed two revised standards to be included in the Vital Results section of the state frameworks. They are:

1. *Sustainability* (3.9 in the Personal Development standard): Students make decisions that demonstrate understanding of natural and human communities, the ecological, economic, political, or social systems within them, and awareness of how their personal and collective actions affect the sustainability of these interrelated systems (Vermont Department of Education 2000).
2. *Understanding Place* (4.6 in the Civic/Social Responsibility standard): Students demonstrate understanding of the relationship between their local environment and community heritage and how each shapes their lives (Vermont Department of Education 2000).

The Board approved the revisions unanimously.

Embedding place-based curriculum into state standards happened in Vermont for two reasons. First, place-based advocates in Vermont saw state standards as being both amendable to reflect their concerns and useful in championing them. Rather than railing against or ignoring standards-based reforms in the state, these place-based advocates saw state standards as a given. Therefore, they perceived their best path to be finding ways to use standards to enhance and sanction place-based curriculum's legitimate school practice.

Megan Camp, director of Shelburne Farms and a key player in this movement, recalled a conversation she had with a writer from the *Christian Science Monitor* at the very beginning of CNP's effort. The writer told her that state standards were nothing but a passing phase and that Camp should not channel her efforts into revising them as a way to protect environmental and/or place-based curriculum. But Camp felt that for too long environmental educators had chosen not to engage in what was important to schools and that as long as this was the case, they and their issues would be marginalized.

Second, as with many state and national standards designed by a diverse set of partners (i.e., national U.S. history and English/language arts standards), the two place-based standards that were ultimately adopted reflected the compromises that formed them. Little strong or ideological language is used (e.g., change from "ecosystems" to "human and natural communities"). Specific learning goals or outcomes are not included (e.g., "sustainability," although used in the standards, is not defined). Vermont's advocates chose more inclusive rather than inflammatory language and somewhat loosely defined terms in order to gain support.

The Vermont story, then, stands in contrast to a more commonplace view of a conflicting relationship between standards-based reforms and place-based education. Place-based advocates deliberately chose to avoid confrontation with more traditional education and noneducation groups in the state by portraying place-based curriculum as similar to other disciplinary curriculum—for example, mathematics, history—and therefore legitimately a part of the state's curricular framework. They also chose to cast place-based curriculum as something valued by a wide range of people, not merely by environmentalists. The choices these advocates made achieved the outcomes of revising the state standards to include something about place and to better situate place-based advocacy groups in Vermont's educational policy world.

Practitioners' Perspectives on Place-Based Curriculum

As reformers, policy makers and officials dealt with place-based ideas at the state level. What was the range of ideas about place among Vermont teachers? It may seem straightforward to ask teachers their views on place-based curriculum, but it is actually quite difficult because there is no common agreement about a term that describes it. In the teacher survey practitioners used more than 35 terms to describe curriculum that is grounded in local issues or played out in local arenas. They also put a wide range of activities under whatever label they used. Teachers cited such projects as knitting mittens for low-income families in the community, community mentoring programs, researching graves in local cemeteries, studying the health of a local river, learning about

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maple sugaring, and starting recycling centers. The most common terms used by Vermont teachers were service learning, community-based education, environmental learning, and place-based education—although some teachers avoided using any of these terms and just called this type of curriculum “social studies” or “science.” We suspect that teachers from different states might use many of the same terms and might also add others.

To further complicate the picture, terms teachers used did not correspond to unique types of activities or curriculum. For instance, one teacher called it “service learning” when his students read Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* and then interviewed local Vietnam veterans, whereas another teacher described a very similar project as “community-based education.” Practitioners used the term “environmental education” to describe such diverse activities as hiking a local mountain to study different biomes, planting and watering gardens, and developing a walking tour for the local historical society. In some cases, teachers’ language and ideas about place-based education were closely tied, and perhaps limited to, recent professional development experiences, many of which were given by the organizations that were active in the effort to revise Vermont’s standards. A few teachers used the term “curriculum of place,” a phrase they learned at Vermont Rural Partnership workshops and cited as examples of “curriculum of place” only practices they learned in the workshops. Other teachers talked about multiple sources over time as shaping their language and ideas about place-based education and cited a variety of instructional activities that they do. One teacher used the term “experiential education” to talk about projects he does in the local woods and community. He attributed his commitment to and understanding of this type of practice to his training in early childhood education.

As with the place-based advocates and state policy makers who developed the place-based standards, practitioners did not clearly define or define in uniform ways their ideas about place-based curriculum. Practitioners we interviewed used a variety of terms to describe a variety of instructional practices and content that used or focused on local resources. We suspect that a larger sample of practitioners in different geographic areas might uncover an even greater array of terms and practices. Although some scholars recently have tried to map out the terrain of place-based education and have given some examples of what it looks like in classrooms (Gruenewald 2003; Koliba 2003; Smith 2002), examining practitioners’ various responses to our questions on place-based education shows that these maps are far from complete. After listening to practitioners talk about place-based education, we wondered what, if any, common threads there are among these diverse responses and how, if at all, practitioners’ terminology and practices fit with rural school advocates’ and researchers’ views. This is an issue that warrants continued study.

TABLE 1

Teacher Perceptions of the Academic Value of Place-Based Education

	Frequency	%	Valid %
“Place-based education has important academic value for students”:			
Strongly agree	70	31.1	31.1
Agree	118	52.4	53.2
Neutral	26	11.6	11.7
Disagree	5	2.2	2.3
Strongly disagree	3	1.3	1.4
Total	222	98.7	100.0
Missing	3	1.3	
Total	225	100.0	

Practitioners’ Perspective on the Value of Place-Based Curriculum

As practitioners used different terms and employed different practices under the rubric of place-based education, they also revealed different reasons for incorporating it into their teaching practices. As tables 1 and 2 demonstrate, practitioners we surveyed believe that place-based curriculum has both academic and social value for their students, although more assert the social value for both students and community members over the academic value. This was true as well for the practitioners whom we interviewed. The most often mentioned reason interviewed teachers gave for using place-based curriculum was that it taught students social responsibility. Teachers cited as examples of socially responsible projects ones that studied—with an eye to protect—local environments, that made baby bibs for the local day-care center, or that started recycling projects. One teacher who brought her students to sing at local nursing homes said the following about teaching social responsibility:

We teach a lot about community in elementary schools, and the classroom being a community and everybody has . . . their responsibility to themselves and to everybody else. And, as we get older, we’re expected to be responsible in our communities. . . . I think the time to begin education is with small children because . . . they have such generous spirits. They are so willing to help each other and to help someone that they think might be in need. . . . I think that you have to teach it. I think that you have to show students that a simple thing like singing to an older person is an incredible thing to do. . . . They wouldn’t know that, ordinarily, if you don’t give them that experience.

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TABLE 2

Teacher Perceptions of the Social Value of Place-Based Education

	Frequency	%	Valid %
“Place-based education has important social value for students”:			
Strongly agree	89	39.6	40.3
Agree	107	47.6	48.4
Neutral	21	9.3	9.5
Disagree	1	0.4	0.5
Strongly disagree	3	1.3	1.4
Total	221	98.2	100.0
Missing	4	1.8	
Total	225	100.0	

Another teacher said that place-based projects helped her students realize that adults other than their parents respected and cared about them. She created opportunities for her students to interact in meaningful and sustained ways with adults in the community to help them break down stereotypical images that each group may have of the other. A principal of a rural school talked about strengthened community/school relationships that come from place-based curriculum:

We had people come in [to the school] and we went out [into the community] and it went well. And that has been developed to the point where they [community members] began to see the school as a resource. And that has only really happened in the last couple of years. Now they see kids as a resource. . . . They didn't before. It took forever to get them to that point. But now . . . there will be a job at the historical society or the selectman [will] have something that needs doing, and they will think to include kids.

Yet another principal agreed that place-based projects are often great ways for community people to feel good about school and to feel valued by teachers and administrators. He said, “In these times of tight budgets, this feature may not be unimportant.”

In addition to teaching social responsibility, practitioners cited place-based curriculum as valuable in helping students develop an appreciation of their local community and habitat. Teachers in this group talked about projects to catalog local flora and fauna, to understand the value of a pond or the woods for a community, and to research contributions town members have made to the state and country in various periods of history. The teachers who cited

this value were quite passionate about the importance of this kind of learning for their students. Many expressed concerns that their students knew very little about and had very little appreciation for their local environments. One teacher commented that even though they live in Vermont she was not sure that all of her primary grade students knew that the cheese made in their town came from cows in the fields and that maple syrup came from the trees. She planned outdoor experiences, particularly on local farms, so that her students could better understand and appreciate agriculture. Another teacher who taught an extensive unit on local sources of water was surprised that so few of his students had been to any of the ponds and rivers in the community: “The actual contact that these kids have with water sources in the town is quite small . . . and the number of people who take their children to natural places, to hike or to bird watch—I don’t think the local people do a whole lot of that. It’s the people who have recently moved up here who tend to do it . . . One of our goals is to help children appreciate their environment to do both bird watching and hiking, and hunting, fishing, and trapping.” So, for many Vermont educators, teaching place-based curriculum is important because it helps students learn about and appreciate their local communities as well as help them become responsible citizens in their communities.

In contrast to teachers’ articulate and at times passionate talk about the social or affective value of place-based education, the talk about academic value of place-based curriculum was less vigorous and primarily centered on motivating students to learn. Place-based curriculum, particularly hands-on activities, gets students engaged. An elementary school teacher said about her decision to use place-based curriculum, “It’s more real. If it isn’t connected to anything, if you are just reading about something and you don’t connect it to anything real, especially for my kids, I mean, it’s way too abstract.” Another practitioner articulated his theory of learning in which place-based education was a critical piece: “It’s the concrete connections that are so important. It makes learning authentic and meaningful. The authenticity comes from the relevance. Learning about China isn’t going to be as real as learning about buildings in their hometown. Students have no frame to put information about China. You have to start with what they know. It’s a natural progression from infancy that starts with the child at the center and then moves outward. Especially in elementary school, place-based experiences are how students should learn.” This teacher planned multiple units in language arts, science, social studies, and math that used the local environment or were about the local environment. He said he thought most of what was in elementary curricula could and should be taught through place-based instruction.

Practitioners in our study articulated three distinct reasons for using place-based curriculum in their classrooms: first, to teach social responsibility; second, to teach appreciation of the community; and third, to teach a wide range

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TABLE 3

Teacher Perceptions of Framework of Standards and Teaching Practice

	Frequency	%	Valid %
“The [Vermont] Framework [of Standards] is helpful to my teaching practice”:			
Strongly agree	43	16.2	16.6
Agree	140	52.8	54.1
Neutral	46	17.4	17.8
Disagree	23	8.7	8.9
Strongly disagree	7	2.6	2.7
Total	259	97.7	100.0
Missing	6	2.3	
Total	265	100.0	

of subject matter using a motivating and hands-on instructional strategy. As with definitions and practices surrounding place-based education, we suspect that with a larger sample size of teachers in different geographic locations, we might find more reasons for teaching a place-based curriculum.

Practitioners’ Perspectives on Vermont’s Framework of Standards

Even with incomplete survey data, it appears safe to say that most teachers in Vermont are familiar with the state’s curriculum standards. Every teacher we interviewed knew about the standards and had seen and read at least part of them. As table 3 shows, the majority of practitioners who responded to our survey said they saw Vermont’s standards as helpful to them in their own teaching and generally contributing toward improving teaching practices in the state.

Talking to teachers at conferences and interviewing teachers helped us begin to understand better the ways in which teachers find standards helpful and how they use them in their practices. Although the number of practitioners we talked with was limited, we saw two distinct ways in which practitioners have begun to use Vermont’s standards, particularly in relationship to their use of place-based curriculum.

First, practitioners use standards to support, and perhaps justify, what they already teach or what they want to teach. This way of using the standards starts with the curriculum and moves to the standards. For example, a teacher who taught experimental filmmaking classes in rural high schools, after she designed the curriculum for the class, wrote out all the content standards that

the class addressed. She commented, "When I looked through the Vital Results and Frameworks I saw that many of the standards were being achieved through the class. I was really impressed." Given that her filmmaking class was not tied to a particular content area, used nontraditional pedagogy, and was very demanding of students' time, the teacher thought it was important to show how the class helped students achieve the skills and knowledge outlined in the standards. A Title I teacher who is a strong advocate for locally responsive curriculum says she uses the state frameworks all the time to convince classroom teachers with whom she works to incorporate place-based activities into their reading instruction. In fact, more than half the teachers who responded to our survey said that the standards support their existing use of place-based practices.

The second use of standards was as a guide for curriculum. Practitioners talked about using the standards to help them design curriculum, particularly nontraditional or interdisciplinary curriculum. The starting point for these teachers was the standards. The curriculum followed from them. For example, a middle school teacher stated that the state frameworks were critically important to her as she and other teachers developed a multi-grade-level, thematically designed curriculum project. "Without the frameworks, we'd be lost. Sometimes when I'm in the middle of a unit and I don't know where we should go next, I look at the frameworks for some guidance." An elementary teacher who often teaches units that incorporate the local environment said that he uses his local curriculum guide, which was derived from the state frameworks, to give him clarity on content when he has his students hiking through the woods or looking at birds. He said that curriculum guides and state frameworks help teachers develop substantive place-based curriculum and help them avoid the common teaching problem of the activity becoming an end in itself rather than a means to teach particular ideas or skills.

In contrast to practitioners' widely held knowledge of Vermont's frameworks overall, very few practitioners were familiar with the two place-based standards within the frameworks. Both of these standards are in the Vital Results section of Vermont's framework, that is, where the overarching, interdisciplinary goals of the framework are established. The sustainability standard (Vermont Department of Education 2000, 3.9) suggests that students' understanding can be made evident by their collecting "data in order to investigate and analyze how personal consumption patterns affect the sustainability of natural and human communities" or by their identifying and practicing "ways to repair, re-use, recycle (e.g., collect and redistribute leftover household paint)." The Understanding Place standard (Vermont Department of Education 2000, 4.6) suggests that students demonstrate their understanding in such ways as describing "the role of agriculture, forestry, and industry in the development of their local community over time" or by evaluating and predicting "how current

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trends (e.g., environmental, economic, social, political, technological) will affect the future of their local community and environment.”

Fewer than half of the teachers who responded to our survey recalled these two standards, and only one teacher with whom we talked knew about them. In fact, many of the teachers we interviewed thanked us for pointing out the two standards and suggested that they would use them as justification for their place-based units in the future!

Practitioners may lack familiarity with the two specific place-based standards for many reasons. First, they are relatively new, only becoming part of the standards in 2000. Second, they are not embedded in the part of the frameworks—the fields of knowledge—that are currently being assessed. All of Vermont’s standards are relatively recent, as are the assessments aligned to them. Given the short period of time that teachers have had to incorporate any of the standards into their classroom practice, it would make sense that they would first turn to the standards on which they know their students will be tested, namely, language arts and mathematics. This suggestion is supported by the fact that in our surveys, teachers reported significantly higher degrees of familiarity with the language arts and mathematics sections of the frameworks than the social studies and history section. Currently, Vermont policy makers are considering designing assessments for the Vital Results section of the frameworks. If the two place-based standards are incorporated into these new assessments, teachers’ interest in the two standards would most likely increase.

Although practitioners were not terribly familiar with Vermont’s two place-based standards, they were very knowledgeable about state standards in general and were positively disposed toward them. This was true even among practitioners who believed in and used place-based curriculum extensively in their practices. In contrast to the idea that the two initiatives conflict with one another, the practitioners we surveyed and interviewed portrayed the two as compatible and even complementary.

Conclusion

What have we learned from Vermont rural school advocates and practitioners about the relationship between standards-based reforms and place-based education? In both the teacher survey and interviews we found no examples of practitioners saying that Vermont’s frameworks stood in the way of their attempts to incorporate place-based education in their classroom practices. In fact, for Vermont practitioners, the state’s curriculum framework—not just the two place-based standards—helped legitimize place-based curriculum and protect the prominent status of these units in the general school curriculum. Standards also supported practitioners who developed nontraditional pro-

grams and curricula, including place-based curriculum. Although we found that the two place-based standards did not do much to increase the use of place-based curriculum in schools, we did not find instances where standards drove out already existing place-based curriculum. Nor did standards prevent practitioners from initiating place-based curriculum. On the contrary, we found examples of educators using the resources generated by standards initiatives to achieve their own ends. Because of the nature of our study, we cannot say that this perspective is shared by all Vermont teachers. We can say that no conflict between standards and place-based education was evident at the policy level and in the classroom in our research thus far. This study suggests that the conflict between standards and place-based curriculum may be more rhetorical than real.

We think the notion that standards and place-based curriculum are complementary is both helpful and generative and may assist people who are committed to teaching and learning to avoid a standoff between standards-based reforms and good pedagogical practices like place-based education. Figuring out not only how to incorporate but use standards to institutionalize and enhance place-based curriculum may be the only workable strategy for rural school practitioners. Our findings suggest that creating complementarity between the two initiatives may require allowing, if not honoring, practitioners' diverse perspectives regarding what place-based education is, what it might look like in classrooms, and what its ultimate goals are. Listening to why practitioners do not feel a tension between the two initiatives in Vermont and how they think about place-based education as both a learning objective and as a pedagogical tool provides us with a more complex view of the two initiatives than is often portrayed in the research and advocacy literature. In this way, Vermont policy makers and practitioners offer some ideas about how the two initiatives may be compatible in schools outside of Vermont.

Some may view the story in Vermont to be one of policy failure. Although there is much place-based education going on in Vermont, few teachers even knew about the two place-based standards, and none talked about these standards as being important in their decision to teach a place-based curriculum. We suggest that this may be too quick and too simplistic a conclusion. The idea of place-based curriculum did not originate with this policy. Place-based advocates, policy makers, and practitioners held—and hold—a variety of ideas that they label place-based education. These ideas shaped both how the policy developed and the milieu of practice in which the policy was implemented. What this policy has done is instantiate and legitimate place-based curriculum as important to classroom practice. As practitioners said to us, although they were not familiar with the two place-based standards, they will use them to justify their practices in the future. As the nature and consequences of state standards and assessments evolve, in part because of No Child Left Behind,

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it is an open question as to whether practitioners will continue to feel that they can teach their children about place or use place to teach content and still prepare students to excel on state tests. The sad irony that this study reveals is that federal policy makers' attempts to mandate standards-based reform in states that are not sensitive to the role that place-based methods play in practitioners' work may ultimately create a tension that did not previously exist between teachers' implementation of standards and their beliefs about good pedagogy, including place-based curriculum. Vermont's adoption of place-based standards may prove valuable in reserving the place of place-based education in classroom practices.

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