

A School Administrator's Journey through an EdD Program in the Midst of a Global Pandemic

Courtney F. Browning
Radford University
cfbrowning@radford.edu

ABSTRACT

This braided essay weaves together the reflective journey of a school administrator traversing through a doctoral program during the initial stages of the COVID 19 pandemic while considering her Problem of Practice in the current context of her school, local community, and global society. The ongoing challenges of a rural 3rd-5th consolidated school struggling through school improvement to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of all students are examined, while analyzing the place-based education model as it pertains to the current global pandemic and present state of education. While examining the issue of racial discipline disproportionality in the local context, this essay also addresses the potential implications upon both the local school and overall state of education by fostering a strong sense of place within and through the implementation of place-based educational practices.

KEYWORDS

place-based education, COVID-19, school closure, problem of practice, racial disparity

April 30th

Time moves differently now. I often find myself asking questions and reflecting. My questions, sometimes profound, reflective, visionary, and sometimes simply basic, oftentimes don't have answers. This afternoon though they do: "What day is it? Wednesday, Thursday?" I'm just getting home from work. It's my second and last workday of the week. It is my second week of work after being quarantined. Got it, it's Thursday. These days it seems as though we are all trudging our way through COVID-19.

Though it's hard to keep track of what day it is, I can keep count. I know it has been 70 days from the initial inklings of the possibility of something big, 53 days from it knocking on our door, 51 days from realizing like mother like daughter, 49 days from receiving the life altering call, 39 days from the news that changed my place, my purpose and sense of service, and 30 days from the moment everyone's way of life changed. We are on this path, all of us together, yet apart experiencing the highs, lows, and everything in between. Each of us questioning, reflecting, and perhaps discovering truths we didn't know we needed. To think this journey started just over two months ago...

70 days ago, around 7:30 am

The phone rings. "Hi Mom, how's-"

"Courtney, what are you and your school doing to prepare for the Coronavirus?!?"

"What, Mom?" I pause and breathe as I hear panic in her voice. Oh great, she's been watching too much MSNBC again. She's scared. She gets so caught up. I hate to hear this worry, this genuine fear, and to be so far away. I don't try to correct. I listen, "Mom, I think we're okay. I don't think we'll need to shut-"

She cuts in, "They're going to shut everything down!"

I try to calm her, "Okay, honestly if we did have to close for a bit-"

She interrupts, "A long time, Courtney; a long time!" I breathe. This is so real to her. I need to start calling more.

"Okay, but we'll be Okay Mom." I explain that we're wrapping up and heading into state testing season. We have coach books, resources, and lots of review work that can be sent home. We're basically done with new material. I promise her we'll be Okay.

"Well, what about you and Matt? Courtney, you need to stockpile food and prepare. You need to go buy food that will keep. Don't just tell me you'll do it!"

I feel it again. I hate that she's so worried. "Okay, we'll go this weekend. Now, how are you guys doing? How's Dad?" We talk a bit as I drink my coffee, though the initial pace of the conversation has more than woken me up.

I talk to Matt that morning. We agree to make a good faith effort and then let my mom know. She deserves that. I can't help but ask, "What if she's right? Is there any chance she's right?" We tell each other and ourselves that she's just worrying. She's a worrier. I get it honest. But the question lingers, "What if she's right?" Even my



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sister Ellie was preparing. She never prepares. Later that week a package arrives with a note, "Love you guys, here's your COVID care package." We laugh good naturedly as we open it. Yet the questions have been planted, "What if? What will we do?"

A PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

I continue on in my daily life and the questions fade. I am just finishing my first doctoral class and investigating the Problem of Practice: racial disparity among African American and white students for office referrals at Slateville County Elementary School. I have decided that if I am going to remain in Slateville as an Assistant Principal while I complete my dissertation, I will study our discipline and school culture. At times it feels as if meaningful gains are being made, while other days it feels like we're moving backward. I plan to lean into the problem rather than resist. I am about to begin my second doctoral course...Social and Cultural Foundations of Place-Based Education. I have no idea what place-based education is or how poignant this course will become.

PLACE-BASED EDUCATION

Place-based education is a progressive model hinging upon connecting instruction to the local community and environment as a means of engaging students, staff, and the community to partake in authentic, problem-solving, hands-on learning. Students learn to view themselves as active members of society who can and should impact change. The goal is to promote their development into socially and environmentally conscious citizens of their local and global communities (Gruenewald & Smith, 2010; Smith & Sobel, 2010). Place-based education is rooted in many earlier progressive models of education connecting directly to Dewey's three foundations of education: environment, experience, and democracy (Jayanandhan, 2009). Through this holistic approach, learning extends beyond the school building and out into the community (Smith & Sobel, 2010). Teachers and community members engage students in problem solving regarding local, global and environmental issues to become citizen activists and stewards of the world around them (Gruenewald & Smith, 2010; Jayanandhan, 2009; Smith & Sobel, 2010). Smith and Sobel explained, "Rather than seeing teaching and learning as being located primarily within the school, place-based education requires potentially all mature citizens to take responsibility for inducting children and youth into the obligations and possibilities of adulthood" (p. 23).

53 days ago, around 9:30 am

Typically, Mondays are busy, and this Monday hits like a tidal wave. Already frustrated, a plethora of questions run through my head: "Why are so many people always out? Why can't our teachers just be here?" Our kids don't handle subs and our subs don't know how to handle our kids. I can sense we will have many issues with discipline today. A few of my frequent fliers have already rumbled and the school day has only just started. I can feel my pulse quicken and the pain move to my chest as anxiety builds. It is just so hard. Too many of our kids have too much trauma in their lives coming to school wound tight and ready to snap. Their anger surfaces quickly. School-wide discipline data shows a spike in referral totals, aggression, and racial disparity for the first half of our school year.

This is a contrast to last spring when we proudly realized a reduction of referrals and suspensions, while at the same time began to close the racial disparity gap. Again, questions swirl through my mind: "What are we doing wrong? Why can't we fix this? Why can't we reach our kids?"

As the assistant principal, discipline and school culture are my primary zones. I am a fixer by nature who is profoundly troubled by not being able to fix this. More questions whisper in my ear: "How can we help our kids cope? Why are so many of them ready to lash out so quickly?". Our school counselor always reminds me that hurt people, hurt people. It seems as if so many of our kids are hurt. Everyone is trying. The teachers, the poor overworked teachers, try despite the time demands and push to teach more, teach better, and teach to close the gaps. They start their mornings with a speedy greeting to the class to then juggle taking attendance, helping their kids reset from the night before, and shuffling everyone to their first classes. Every minute counts when you are in school improvement.

I am in problem-solving mode when our receptionist approaches me. "Mrs. Browning, I need to go," she tells me with urgency.

"Okay, let me see what I can do," I respond. She stares at me quietly. I assure her, "Don't worry, we'll get it taken care of. Are you Okay?" She gives a vague non-answer and prepares to leave. She never leaves like this. It's so hard when we're short staffed, and today we are definitely short.

The following morning our receptionist texts my principal and me, "The doctor thinks I may have the coronavirus, but they won't test me." Our text chain takes off as we try to offer support, advice, and ask questions. My mind spins, "What? How in the world? She can't have it, can she?" This beast, this quiet, scary beast is lurking. It may be right outside our door. A question rushes in, "Could it have snuck into our school?"

SCHOOL BACKGROUND

Slateville County Elementary School opened its doors in August of 2012. After many years of discussions, debates, and renovation, the division restructured its entire K-5 educational system in an effort to provide more equitable and higher quality education to all preschool through 5th grade students in rural Slateville. Four small community schools were closed. In their place, the Slateville County Primary and Slateville County Elementary (SCES) schools were opened at a newly renovated shared campus. The beautifully designed complex has space for a community garden, frog bog, fields, and many playgrounds. It has many open learning spaces, a composting system, solar tubes for lighting, and community meeting areas. Local resources were woven into the design. Each grade had science labs dedicated to them before the school opened. However, the school quickly became overcrowded, causing the labs to be pulled and used for regular classrooms. The vision for these schools was to foster problem-solving, citizenship, community involvement, and healthy lifestyles, to provide more equity and improve student achievement. In many ways, the entire complex was designed to support place-based education. Unfortunately, as I would learn in time, simply designing and providing the physical structure and resources does not establish a strong sense of place or enable a school to implement place-based education.



51 days ago, around 6:00 am

I realize I have been ghosting my mom this week. I know why. I didn't want to call when I wasn't sure if our receptionist had COVID-19. I decide to make a quick call before school. I feel like I can let her know what happened with our receptionist, that she is quarantined while she awaits results, but she's feeling better already. I feel more confident calling because I have optimistic news, rather than worry. When my mother answers, I fill her in. With even more conviction she dives into questions about what my school will do when we close. She warns that it is just a matter of time and a question of how long. Again, I breathe and listen. It had been over a week since we'd talked. I want to be supportive, but I hate to hear her worry. That's when I realize, I hadn't been the only one ghosting. Once I can get a few words in, I ask how she and my dad are doing. They've both been very sick, but she swears they are Okay. No, they haven't been tested, but they are recovering. It had been almost two weeks, but they were both doing better and my oldest sister was bringing them food. At that moment, fear creeps in. My parents live in a small Connecticut town, and they were sick. They are in their mid-70s, and I am so far away. If our receptionist has COVID-19, I absolutely cannot visit during our spring break. The questions begin: "When will I see them again? Will they be Okay? What will happen?" I am struck by the irony of the moment. My mother and I are so alike. We protect those we love to prevent them from worrying. Yet, we both still worry. Like mother, like daughter.

Our conversation shifts to how things are going with my EdD program. My mother asks how I will keep up with it when we start state testing. She segues into a short, half-hearted lecture on asking for help with handling discipline and my site testing coordinator duties. She often encourages me to look elsewhere for employment because of the amount stress I endure from my job. She has seen the toll it has taken on me emotionally as I've worked tirelessly with my team trying to discern how to turn the school around. Despite her lectures, she and I both know that I am not leaving my school, my place, right now. I am just not ready.

SCHOOL ACCREDITATION

Since opening its doors, Slateville County Elementary School (SCES) has struggled to gain and maintain state accreditation. After scores in reading and math plummeted in the spring of 2013, SCES moved into comprehensive school improvement status. Because SCES was newly formed, it could not rely upon a three-year average to offset the significant score drops. Previously, all of the small schools were fully accredited and performing well above state benchmarks. Had the schools not merged, each would have used their strong three-year averages, as most schools in the state did, in the spring of 2013. Overall reading and math performances across the state dropped by double digits when new, more rigorous tests were rolled out (Reporter for Major Newspaper, 2013).

PLACE-BASED EDUCATION AS CHANGE

Place-based education takes time and buy-in to implement (Gruenewald & Smith, 2010; Smith & Sobel, 2010). Change will be slow as educators embrace a mind shift and change their approaches to instruction while simultaneously working to build trusting relationships with community members and agencies. Our nature in education and as humans to emphasize time over place

can become a barrier when implementing place-based education (Dickson, 2011). With high levels of state and federal accountability and high stakes testing, the use of time by teachers and students becomes a source of pressure. This pressure impacts the willingness of teachers and administrators to take the risk of engaging students in many of the authentic, hands-on, place-based education practices that would motivate and engage students, staff, and community members (Gruenewald & Smith, 2010; Smith & Sobel, 2010).

49 days ago, around 3:00 pm

It's our only PD day this semester. In the ninth hour, plans changed. All reading teachers are required to attend the PD while also creating learning packets that will be due next Tuesday. Our presenter is fantastic and the teachers are trying to be engaged, but this the third PD on this topic. Yet once again they are stressed, torn, and feeling beat up as teachers in a school that remains in comprehensive school improvement status, always "needing" more PD, coaching, or direction from the outside to fix what we must be doing wrong.

Selfishly, I am feeling the pressure of trying to get out a bit early so I can pick up my oldest from a sleepover and then race to drop our dog at the groomer on time. I'm running a sprint yet again. I try to tamp down feelings of worry and guilt for leaving by reminding myself I have permission to leave, I work late most nights, and I come in on weekends. I see my superintendent urgently take a call and rush to her car. It seems so important that she doesn't even look in my direction as I leave.

I pull up to my daughter's friend's house impatiently waiting for her to finish her goodbyes. I replay the conversation with my principal about the mad dash to make distance learning packets. It seems unlikely that we will need them right away or even at all, but we agreed it's good to be prepared. As I wait, my phone rings and our superintendent's voice begins. The governor has closed all schools for the next two weeks. My mind isn't absorbing this. Questions spin: "What? We were just told that the governor's office said they weren't planning to close. How can they? What does this mean? I have to get back to school. How will we get it done?"

After the whirlwind of dropping everyone off, I call Matt to ask him yet again to cover our home life because I don't know how long I will be gone, but I have to go back to school. He understands; we take turns stepping up for one another when our schools need us. It's what you do when you commit to your path of service and each other.

When I arrive back to school, I see my team, my miraculous team, working away. They are moving mountains to get their packets done before leaving. Not one person complains, grumbles, or leaves without making sure each student is set. When I look across the parking lot, I am choked up realizing what an incredible team I have. Our parking lot is full. These people, my people, love our place and kids just as much as I do.

The next week is surreal. I begin watching the news, checking for updates on positive case counts in our area, calling and texting my family up north, spending time with my girls, working on classwork for my doctoral program, and trying to wrap my head around what is happening. I remain optimistic that we will reopen in 14 days, while trying to connect with each student and family I see during food distributions.



I am getting into my next course and can't help but find the irony of the school closure while exploring place-based education. Noticing myself becoming more reflective about my own school, its design, and our instructional practices, different, more existential questions begin to run through my head, "Could we be doing it wrong? Have we lost sight of what is truly most important in educating our children? What is my place? Is my school suffering from a state of non-place?"

PREPARING FOR PLACE-BASED EDUCATION

Prior to embarking on implementing a place-based education model, it is critical to determine the readiness level of the school and community (Smith & Sobel, 2010). Gruenewald and Smith (2010) reminded us "it is necessary to work with, while trying to change, what we have" (p. 350). A thoughtful assessment of readiness requires a "supportive institutional and cultural environment at the school—and ideally district" (Smith & Sobel, 2010, p. 114). As Smith and Sobel found through their study of the Vinalhaven School, it is necessary to embrace the "first-things-first mindset" when implementing place- and community-based education. Administrators and teachers must allow for the time needed to create significant and sustainable change (p.135). The School Hierarchy of Needs, modeled after Maslow's theory, can be an effective tool to assess readiness. The hierarchy is founded on the premise that the physical space, social fabric, and staff coherence needs of a school must be met before an extensive and effective curriculum and place- and community-based education model can be fully applied. It is necessary to develop a strong sense of place within the school environment (Smith & Sobel, 2010, pp. 150-151). Jayanandhan (2009) noted that, "Place does not only refer to physical landscapes, landmarks, buildings, towns, cities, and ecologies; place is also differentiated from space by the meanings it signifies for people ... and societies" (p. 104).

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT RELATIVE TO STATE STANDARDS

Though Slateville Elementary has made gains and is accredited with conditions, it has not rebounded to the levels previously attained by the smaller schools. Before the restructuring, all primary and elementary schools in the county were fully accredited and had three-year average pass rates in the 80s or above in all tested subjects. SCES has made gains in math, performing at our above state standards with a current 74% pass rate from the spring of 2019 after a two-year decline in state assessment scores. In Science, SCES has experienced a three-year decline in performance and moved to level 2, performing near the state standard for the indicator, with a three-year average of 67% and current pass rate of 62% from the spring of 2019 (State Department of Education, 2020). This slow decline in Science showed promise of a turn-around for the spring of 2020 based on mid-year assessment data, as teachers delved into more inquiry-based and hands-on learning approaches.

39 days ago, around 2:00 pm

I am texting with my critical friend group from class when the press conference comes on and it happens; the governor announces schools will be shut down for the rest of the year. I freeze. My brain

refuses to register this. I fight back tears. Questions begin to race through my head: "How can this be? What does this mean? What will happen to our kids? Who will take care of them? How will our school recover?" I numbly text my group, "This is so scary..." Jeremy from my group responds, "Yes, it is." Enough said.

As I continue silently watching, questions continue: "Will I see my family in Connecticut again? What will happen to my students? What will happen to my school?" My oldest daughter comes into my room with tears streaming down her face. With each tear I feel her loss, no 8th grade formal, no track team, no drama performance, no gymnastics, no visiting her cousins and grandparents, no sleep overs, and no chance that her big crush will become her first boyfriend any time soon. We sit there while I stroke her hair, reminding her that I love her, and it will all be Okay, eventually. She's a worrier as well, like mother, like daughter. As I hold back my own tears questions pound within: "Will my family be Okay? How will our kids who come from such sad places make it through? What will happen to them? What will happen to my school, my place?"

Non-Place in Place-Based Education

Place-based education rests on a foundation of establishing buy-in from stakeholders and community members, facilitating collaboration, and fostering a strong sense of place. Merely having the physical structure and resources will not eradicate the effects of non-place within a context (Bertling, 2018; Smith & Sobel, 2010). Non-place is the lack of connection to one's environment, community, and one another. In a state of non-place, we are collectively driven toward individual, technologically-based, temporary experiences to further our wants and needs. It is a place devoid of real contact and authentic relationships. There is limited attachment to the environment, lack of reverence for the diversity within, and limited, if any, regard for the rich history of the context (Bertling, 2018). It is a placeless place (Gruenewald & Smith, 2010). To combat non-place, it is crucial to incorporate shared values and a strong vision that define the sense of place within the school and community. It is critical to learn about the local context, its rich history, and the natural world around us. Fostering an authentic shared sense of place shapes school and community culture, buy-in, and collaboration among school staff, students, community members, and families (Gruenewald & Smith, 2010; Smith & Sobel, 2010).

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN READING

SCES initially made strong improvements in reading after dropping to a pass rate of 56% on the state assessment in the spring of 2013 and rising to 66% in 2015 (School Division, 2020). However, scores have become stagnant with a current pass rate of 67% in both the spring of 2018 and 2019 (State Department of Education, 2020). In addition, SCES, as a level three school, is performing below the state standard for gap group achievement in reading with black students, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities performing far below the overall achievement rate. SCES has implemented a multi-tiered reading approach to meet students where they are and tailor instruction to their needs. Following two years characterized by inadequate resources and lack of teacher professional development, 2019-2020 would have been the first full year of implementation of this model with adequate



teacher support, materials, and curriculum. Preliminary mid-year data pointed to strong growth among below-level students and an increase in projected pass rates.

30 days ago, around 2:00 pm

I anxiously await the governor's weekly press conference. We have been instructed to socially distance, many businesses are closed or fundamentally shifting the way they do business, crowd sizes and gatherings have been limited, and I am at my school finishing up a workday with teachers. Yet again, they are a machine getting student packets ready to be mailed while including special notes and touches. They are here with optimism, passion, and energy. Those who cannot come in remain home, but their colleagues are making sure they are covered. We have just finished our first faculty Google Meet. I feel a sense of connection again. On the days the school is closed, I struggle with feeling detached and sensing a loss of purpose and direction.

As the governor begins, it is clear he has an important point to make. He swiftly issues a stay-at-home order. It feels like we are being scolded for not heeding his recommendations last Friday. Gatherings took place, parks were filled, and places were busy. In this moment, it feels like this new official order is because, as a society, we were unable to think locally or globally last weekend. We hadn't acted as stewards and caretakers for one another or our community. It feels like a reprimand and, perhaps, one that is needed. New questions swirl: "What if we had all stayed home? What if each one of us had a strong sense of place and community? What if we had been able and willing to put our individual wants and needs aside for one another?"

PLACE-BASED EDUCATION PRINCIPLES AS A RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

Place-based education strives to foster a strong sense of community, social and environmental responsibility, and leadership among students. This shared accountability and connection can equip students and adults with the tools they need to make it through the many challenges we face during the current pandemic. Gruenewald and Smith (2010) foresaw this global struggle when they cautioned:

One of the central flaws in the drive to globalize the economy and culture, however, lies in the illusion that the economic and political managers of the massive, centralized systems that now govern the lives of most people are in fact able to predict and control events outside their immediate domain...the beginning years of the 21st century are serving as an object lesson in humility and the dangers of hubris. (p. XXII)

Students will carry on traditions and sustain our common values when they become actively engaged in problem-solving within their communities and the world around them (Misiaszek, 2016). This shift in disposition and behavior can become the thing that ensures we both grow and prosper even during times of struggle.

DISCIPLINE DISPROPORTIONALITY

Slateville County Elementary School has experienced an ongoing struggle with school culture and discipline. Though SCES has made improvements in closing the discrepancy between short term

suspensions for African American and white students from 2016-2017 through 2018-2019, the disproportion remains (State Department of Education, 2020). Preliminary school culture and discipline data for 2019-2020 indicates an increase in the overall number of office referrals, number of office referrals for verbal or physical aggression, and an increase in the racial disparity for office referrals and instances of out-of-school and in-school suspensions between African American and white students as compared to 2018-2019 data.

Despite the efforts to build in a social emotional curriculum, offer more support to students from a social worker and behavior interventionist, equip teachers with professional development and coaching in classroom management and positive behavior interventions, discipline and school culture remain an area of struggle. SCES administrators, teachers, and staff have not been able to foster the problem solving, self-regulation, communication, coping, and empathy skills among their students to prevent the anger-driven outbursts and aggressive behaviors that disrupt learning and harm the well-being of the school overall. SCES has not been able to recreate the community feelings that were once part of the culture of each small school before the merger.

Today, April 30

It has been 70 days since COVID-19 began to creep into my realm of possibilities, 51 days from its knock on the door, 49 days since mountains were moved, 39 days since the doors closed, and 30 days since staying home became a requirement, not a choice. It has been 27 days since COVID 19 snuck in and quarantined my family and two weeks since I returned to work. State testing would have otherwise started nine days ago. It would have been just six days before our hopes of finally making the needed gains in reading and science to become accredited or facing the realization that we were still missing something. I can't help but wonder, "Would we have made it? Was the turn-around about to happen?" Like many of the questions that course through my head and heart, these remain unanswered.

I'm getting into a new "new normal" now. Going back has helped restore some of my sense of purpose that had been slipping away. I am connecting with parents and teachers more, but the loss and fear remain. I find myself struggling to remember the names and faces of all the kids I know I need to worry about, the kids who seemed to have regular unscheduled appointments with me, the children who aren't logging on for video meets. I long to know, "Is Okay? Does ... have enough food? Is ... safe?" Yet again, these questions cannot be answered. While many of the answers to the questions I ask elude me, I know this reflection is critical to my journey. In times of struggle, we have an opportunity for growth, for building resilience, and for finding our way. I am using this time to lean into the questions, "What can we do differently to prepare ourselves, our communities, our schools, and, most importantly, our students to be the caretakers, change agents, and leaders we so desperately need? Could the answer be in embracing place-based education? What if we worked together to foster a strong sense of place and community in our schools? What if we looked beyond test scores and efficiency to serving the whole child and community?" We are at a crossroads. Perhaps, as Robert Frost (1916) poeticized, we, as educators, should take the road less traveled by.



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