

GREGORY A. SMITH

4. NURTURING CIVIC INVOLVEMENT

From Foxfire to Place-Based Education

In its heyday, Foxfire was mostly known for the cultural journalism associated with the magazines and books that emerged initially from Rabun Gap and then in a multiplicity of forms from communities around the country under the guidance of teachers schooled in the Foxfire approach. In the 1990s, I encountered examples of the creativity unleashed during Foxfire workshops in Alaska (*Cama-i*) and in Oregon (*Coastal Geographic*). If I hadn't attended a session at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in New Orleans in 1994, I wouldn't have known about the serious energy the Foxfire organization was also putting into civic education. Hilton Smith, who led Foxfire's extensive professional development efforts, spoke at this session about projects that gave young people the opportunity to become participants in decision-making forums in their own communities. What I heard that day stayed with me and has deeply influenced my own thinking about place- and community-based education. Although I can't remember specifics from what Smith shared, he describes a story in Lee Shumow's 2009 edited volume entitled *Promising Practices for Family and Community Involvement in Schools* I suspect might have been part of his presentation that day.

When Smith was still a high school social studies teacher, he learned from students that a site just across the state line from their own community was slated to become the next storage center for nuclear wastes produced at power plants throughout the South. Smith encouraged students' interest in this topic and incorporated their investigations into the 12th-grade social studies classes he was teaching at the time. With their newfound knowledge, students began attending public hearings about the placement of this waste facility. They raised questions that could not be easily answered in ways that were reassuring to local residents, something that may have contributed to the hearings being cancelled before they were half-finished (Smith, 2009, p. 90). In this chapter, Smith also recounts stories from the School at the Center project in Nebraska. There, in addition to more typical Foxfire projects such as collecting oral histories or preserving local historic buildings, students started small businesses, built new homes or renovated old ones, and took the lead in learning about immigrants who were then finding their way from nearly every continent to the country's heartland. For Smith, this kind of teaching seemed central to meaningful efforts to revitalize the practice of democracy in the United States.

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Over and beyond these civic benefits, Smith also believed that learning experiences like these provided a rich opportunity to integrate the academic disciplines and instill a level of emotional meaning and significance generally missing from the bland diet found in most academic classrooms. He observes that “The students involved in the projects described above were excited—and their excitement served to sustain their efforts and to set what they learned as a permanent habit of mind” (Smith, 2009, p. 98). His observations mirror much of what I have seen in schools where teachers have found similar ways to bridge the gap between classrooms and communities (Smith & Sobel, 2010).

PLACE-BASED EDUCATION – ORIGINS, PRESENT PRACTICE, AND DEFINITION

For more than two decades, a number of colleagues and myself (Bowers, 1987; Gruenewald, 2003; Nachtigal & Hass, 1998; Orr, 1992; Shelton, 2005; Smith, 1993, 2002; Sobel, 2004; Umphrey, 2007) have been encouraging educators to find ways to incorporate local knowledge or issues into the curriculum in ways very similar to the Foxfire movement as a means for nurturing environmental stewardship, citizenship participation, and the work of revitalizing of neighborhoods and communities. This endeavor to ground learning in the local got a strong push in the mid- to late-1990s from the five-year Annenberg Rural Challenge that sponsored over thirty projects nationwide aimed at strengthening the relation between schools and communities through local investigations and projects; the Rural School and Community Trust has continued this work primarily in the Midwest and South. The CO-SEED (Community-based School Environmental Education) Project under the leadership of David Sobel has disseminated and helped implement these ideas in New England, and the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative has for the past eight years been systematically integrating place-based practices with an environmental focus into schools throughout the state of Michigan. Predating the work of the Annenberg Rural Challenge, the Program for the Academic and Cultural Enhancement of Rural Schools initiated projects in schools throughout Alabama that continue to engage students in the publishing a community newspapers, the starting of small businesses, or the construction of low-cost housing, greenhouses, and gardens. In less systematically organized ways, this work goes on in many other schools, some of which will be described below.

Central to place-based educational efforts is providing children with opportunities in the course of their formal education to make genuine contributions to their communities and the local environment. Place-based educators do not see schooling as detached from life outside the classroom but intimately related to it. Also critical is the way teachers in many instances reach out to individuals and organizations outside the school to do their work. Place- and community-based lessons and units can take a multiplicity of forms depending on the opportunities that exist in different locales; they can be incorporated into the work of teachers across the K-12 spectrum

and take place in rural, suburban, and districts. In what follows, I will share a number of vignettes to provide a vision of the possible, moving from smaller scale efforts to some that have impacted entire communities. At the heart of this approach to teaching and learning is a commitment to introducing students and the adults in their lives to the fact that children and youth are citizens and potential stewards right now and that the work they engage in can be both valuable and meaningful. Much as Hilton Smith and the Foxfire Project sought to embed learning in students' own locales with the aim of helping them find their voices and personal power, so, too, do place-based educators seek to cultivate the forms of involvement and attachment critical to the maintenance of healthy democratic communities.

STARTING CLOSE AND SMALL

The first two examples of place-based education are taken from the work of teachers in a suburb of Portland, Oregon. A few years ago, I taught a course on the linkage between sustainability and place-based education to teachers in my local school district. Teachers' final project involved developing a unit they could present later that year that would take their students outside the classroom and invite them to make some kind of meaningful contribution to the school, their neighborhood, or the community as a whole. The projects demonstrate what can happen when educators begin using the school grounds or nearby natural areas as texts with the same potential educational value as books, videos, or websites. Such projects do not need to be overwhelming or costly, and many can be integrated into curriculum requirements by simply determining the kinds of tasks needed to complete a project and then linking these tasks to district or state curriculum guidelines.

The first project was conceived by third-grade teacher and the school librarian who collaborated on the development of a plan to have students write a land use history of property adjoining their primary school that was being transformed into a public park by METRO, the Portland area's regional government. The teacher and librarian had spoken with a local resident who had played a pivotal role in preserving this land, and she had given them a banker's box full of news clippings and other information about the property. The teacher approached her students about this idea, and they were willing to give it a try.

She began by arranging a walk on the property with a METRO staff member who took them to see the sole remaining oak tree on what had once been a large oak savannah. She explained that before EuroAmericans had arrived in the 1800s, the Willamette Valley had been covered by oaks thanks to the burning practices of the Kalapuya Indians, the primary tribe that had cared for this land for centuries. The regular fires kept out Douglas firs and allowed for the spread of the more fire resistant oaks that produced vast quantities of acorns – a primary food source for the Indians – as well as habitat for a wide range of species. The meadows left in the wake of burning also simplified the process of hunting for deer, elk, and other game. She said that METRO as well as other conservation organizations in the state were

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attempting to create more oak savannahs to support species endemic to the region and reverse the widespread clearing of trees that accompanied the introduction of farming by American pioneers.

Coming back from their walk, students decided to tell the history of what was to become the Graham Oaks Park from the standpoint of the sole remaining oak tree. They divided up into six teams tasked with investigating and then writing chapters about the indigenous gatherers and hunters, trappers in the early 1800s, 19th-century farmers, farmers in the 20th century, and then urban development from the 1950s through the 1990s. The final group took their cue from materials in the banker's box and wrote about the two-decade long period during which the fate of the land was being decided. To create illustrations for each of the chapters, students tore pieces of colored paper to represent appropriate images for each of the time periods. The book was then assembled and published and ready to be shared during the dedication of the park the following fall.

I attended the pre-dedication ceremony held at the school on a Friday afternoon. The mayor of Wilsonville was there as well as the director of the local library. A number of students from the class—now fourth graders—sat on the outdoor stage in front of their classmates and many parents. In his opening remarks, the mayor enjoined the students to be the eyes and ears of the park adjoining their school as well as the middle school they would later attend; he explained that they would have more contact with the land than anyone else in the community. He then turned the mike over to a few of the authors of the area's land use history and asked them to read sections from their book that was then presented to the Wilsonville Library. Students were clearly proud of what they accomplished, and their recognition spoke to the value of giving young people a chance to make genuine contributions to their community.

A couple of years later, two other teachers from the same class on sustainability education but at a different school were just finishing a long unit on watersheds. They asked their classes of fifth graders what kind of legacy project they would like to leave at the school. After having learned about non-point sources of pollution and the importance of reducing storm water run-off, they identified an alleyway between two wings of the school that was both an eyesore and a site where water collected during the spring and winter. The alley was covered with asphalt and regularly trapped water during storms despite the presence of two grated drains. The students proposed removing the asphalt and laying permeable paving stones. The teachers approved of this idea but said that students would need to get permission from the district and the city as well as developing a design for the intended improvements, raising the funds necessary to purchase the paving stones, and organizing a workday to complete the project. The students eagerly broke into teams responsible for completing these different tasks, and in early June participated in a work party with their parents and interested community members that transformed what had been a problem area into a small oasis with flagstones and large potted plants that filtered

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water before it flowed into the nearby Willamette River. Students in each of these instances gained an understanding of their own capacity to make things better and contribute to the common good.

Experiences like these give young people a chance to encounter their own voices, their capacity to plan and act, and their ability to collaborate with others in ways that lead to public recognition and validation. Such moments present to young people a vision of their own identities that takes them beyond a narrow vision of individual selves to a sense of the life they share with others. Communities, if not entire societies, depend upon large numbers of people who possess the willingness to connect to and act with others in this way.

INTENTIONALLY INDUCTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH INTO COMMUNITY PROCESSES

Place-based lessons like those described above present children with what it means to be connected to people beyond themselves and their immediate families and begin to develop in them the skills needed to work with others. Cultivating the abilities associated with effective civic participation, however, may require more intentionality as well as more formal partnerships with people outside the school. Neal Maine, now a retired biology teacher from Seaside, Oregon, as well as an early board member of the Annenberg Rural Challenge, worked throughout his career to persuade his fellow townspeople that children are citizens now and not only after they gain the right to vote at 18. He asserted that young people need to be inducted into civic life in the same they learn to play baseball. On Little League or Cal Ripkin teams, beginning players are provided with all kinds of support as they are introduced to the game. The distance between bases is shortened, the kids hit from a T or after a year or so a mechanical pitcher, and interested parents are stationed around the field to provide informal coaching and direction (“Watch what’s happening at the plate so you don’t get hit by a ball.”). As players get older, the bases and games get longer and their teammates start pitching. Maine argued that cities and counties could do something similar to prepare their own children and youth for active citizenship. As a former football coach as well as a teacher, he was able to convince community leaders, some of whom had once played on his teams, to agree to memoranda of agreement between the city and county to seek out teachers and students when they had research needs that could be effectively completed as class projects, research that could then be used to support important local endeavors.

One year, the Parks Commission was interested in improving playground equipment in parks throughout Clatsop County. The Commission approached an upper elementary school teacher about having her students investigate the topic and come up with recommendations. The children visited each of the parks, assessed their playground equipment, took photos, and developed a report that they then shared at a public meeting of the Parks Commission. In doing so, they gained an

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experience that seems likely to make participating in future public meetings less intimidating. Another year, students at Seaside Middle School conducted a survey asking students about the amount of spending money they had access to in a given year and where they spent it. The survey revealed that students spent approximately \$340,000 each year, most of it in Portland rather than locally. Their report was given orally to members of the local Chamber of Commerce with some recommendations about how the town's business people could keep more of that money in Seaside. These students gained an understanding about the power of data and their own significance as economic players. High school students one year were asked to collect information needed to run a software program emergency planners had just purchased to model the impact of tsunamis of different sizes on the local community. The planners, however, didn't have enough personnel to collect measurements of all of the buildings on the tsunami plain, data essential to run the program. A pre-calculus teacher was willing to invite her students to participate in this project, using their knowledge of trigonometry to determine the cubic area of the buildings and then assemble a hard document and CD-ROM with all of the information they assembled. With these figures in hand, planners were able to run the program and gain a better understandings of the conditions they will face when an inevitable tsunami hits in coming decades. These pre-calculus students grasped the way book learning can be applied to critical community issues and the degree to which average citizens may possess exactly the expertise needed to address local problems.

Central to the success of these efforts was a willingness on the part of city and county officials to take young people seriously, recognizing their capacity to effectively gather data and make recommendations worthy of adult consideration. Without these partnerships, the full potential of place-based education is more difficult to realize. When public agencies collaborate with schools in these ways, place-based educators' students have opportunities to both learn and contribute to community well-being. Students involved in these experiences began to understand how they could participate in public processes and effect change, learning under the guidance of interested adults both in and out of schools how to become effective citizens able to give back to as well as take from their community.

TACKLING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES AS WELL AS PRACTICAL NEEDS

Everything that happens in the public domain, however, is not as apolitical as the projects described so far. Much of the work that Neal Maine inspired in seaside tended to be non-controversial in nature, an important factor to keep in mind in many communities. But citizen participation by its nature can often be conflictual, as was the case with the investigation of the nuclear waste site students in Hilton smith's social studies class conducted. The next example describes a project in a school in Boston, Massachusetts that required students to confront both the city and one of its most powerful agencies in an effort to address damage being inflicted on

a low-income community because of the lack of oversight and disregard by public officials.

Dealing with issues of social or environmental injustice often demands persistence and a willingness to stay with an issue over the long haul. The next place-based projects are something that students and their science teacher at the greater Egleston community high school (Gechs) in Roxbury were able to accomplish between 1997 and 2004. Gechs was founded in the early 1990s with the help of a grant from the us department of labor. Parents concerned about the attractions of street life hoped that a charter school focused on preparing youth to become community leaders would have the strength to point their primarily black and Latino sons and daughters in a different direction. In a few years, Gechs became part of the Boston public school district as one of its pilot schools, institutions given more flexibility in terms of budget, hiring, curriculum, and schedule.

When a science teacher, Elaine Senechal, came to the school a few years later, she wanted to find ways to integrate the school's community leadership mission into her own classes. She began attending meetings of local environmental non-profits to find out more about local issues and to determine whether there were any contributions her students could make. She quickly learned about the epidemic of asthma in Roxbury and residents' suspicion that the high volume of truck and bus traffic helped contribute to this. At one of the organizations, alternatives for community and environment, Senechal met two community organizers who were eager to support her and volunteered to come into her classes to teach students how to be community organizers, themselves. Based on what she had learned and the support she had been promised, Senechal created a course on environmental justice. Initially, she and students helped out with a campaign to raise money to purchase air-monitoring equipment for local public health agencies. Data gathered from these devices clearly indicated higher levels of pollutants and particulates tied to diesel exhaust. Students then conducted a survey aimed at learning how much residents knew about asthma and the relation of the disease to air quality; they also designed and implemented a system to inform the public about that quality using different colored flags displayed outside the school.

At one point early into the partnership, staff at the environmental non-profit learned that a city statute restricted the amount of time vehicles could idle at a single location to five minutes. The statute, however, was not being enforced. Given the fact that the bus lot for the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA) was located a half dozen blocks from the school, this failure to enforce the law was contributing significantly to the amount of diesel exhaust released into the local airshed. For a number of years, students from the environmental justice class helped organize anti-idling rallies, wrote public service announcements, demonstrated in city streets, and spoke at city council meetings. In 2004, the issue was brought to trial, and the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority was forced to obey the anti-idling law and convert its buses to burn natural gas. Importantly, the city began enforcing this law

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for all vehicles. Instances in which student activism result in changes this dramatic are few in number, but that they happen at all speaks to the significant role young people can potentially play in their community's life.

The residents of Roxbury and all of Boston, for that matter, were the beneficiaries of students' efforts to address this important community issue. Students, too, were beneficiaries. Senechal observed that youth who participated in her environmental justice course experienced a reduction in alienation and isolation; increased engagement, motivation, and skill mastery; enhanced self-concept; and the acquisition of social change strategies (2008, p. 103). By connecting learning to students home places and giving them the opportunity to work with others to attempt to improve environmental conditions for their families and neighbors, students began to see themselves as people with value and competence. Over and beyond this, they learned a set of skills with regard to community development and change that they will now possess for the rest of their lives. Using Neal Maine's baseball analogy, thanks to their opportunity to work shoulder to shoulder with youth developers from Alternatives for Community and Environment, they had been inducted into what it means to be a participating citizen. Reflecting on her experience at the Greater Eggleston Community High School, one young woman wrote:

I am proud of my accomplishments in environmental justice this trimester. More importantly, I have been able to gain confidence to speak in front of large groups of people. Before presenting to the City Council, I was very nervous. But after watching them and my classmates somewhat debate I realized they are regular people just like my family, my teachers, and my friends, and I should not be nervous when it comes to speaking my mind. (in Senechal, 2008, p. 100)

I would argue that democracies, especially during a period as tumultuous and uncertain as our own, need citizens with this young woman's confidence and commitment. In the years since this project, Senechal moved to different school after inheriting her family home in another part of the state, and GECHS became less community-centered under the leadership of a new principal. The environmental non-profits, however, continued to work with students from other Boston schools providing similar opportunities for young people to become effective change agents and activists (Smith, 2012). The partnerships with local organizations that arose during Senechal's tenure at GECHS demonstrate the power that this kind of alliance can have for a teacher concerned about giving her students opportunities to both learn about their local community and address injustice in whatever forms it takes. Her experiences points to the value of collaborating not only with governmental agencies, as Neil Maine did in Seaside, but reaching out to a multiplicity of groups able to help students deepen their understanding about local issues and then ideally take action to address them, especially when these could potentially become a source of conflict.

NOT EVERY PLACE-BASED PROJECT HAS A HAPPY ENDING

The difficulty when dealing with controversial issues is that the outcome may in the end not be as positive as the results Senechal and her students encountered in Boston. The Boston City Council could have ignored the data and protests, and the judge could have decided in favour of the MBTA. Results like these could become a source of discouragement for students and possibly lead teachers to never embark on projects as significant to a community as this one. A final example from Philadelphia shows how even when this happens, the benefits of engaging students in this kind of work can be substantial. Anne Spirn, a professor of urban studies at the University of Pennsylvania and then MIT, was involved for several years in an effort to correct decades of misguided development decisions in a Philadelphia neighbourhood called Mill Creek that had treated an urban watershed as something to be built over rather than cared for (Spirn, 2005). The consequences included houses and streets collapsing into sinkholes, the regular flooding of basements, and the deterioration of an historic neighbourhood. Not surprisingly, urban blight was quick to follow. Spirn believed that beneath all of these problems was a failure to read landscapes, and to address this failure she and her graduate students began a program at a neighbourhood middle school aimed at teaching students how to read their home environment, analyze the factors that led to its current state, and begin to take action to correct this. They figured that what students learned would spread throughout the community.

Starting out in the classroom of a willing teacher, they engaged students in a variety of learning activities. Spirn's graduate students met weekly with students. They took their young charges on fieldtrips to identify the built-over Mill Creek, showed them historical photographs to acquaint them with what their neighbourhood had looked like in the past, and presented them with primary documents including texts and tables of statistics that became the focus of questions aimed at helping these eighth graders draw meaning out of the data. Spirn notes of this process that

Only after the children had identified potential explanations for what they had observed, did my students tell them about background information that they had gleaned from their own reading and from our seminar discussions. The idea was to encourage the children to form the habit of looking for significant detail, framing questions and reasoning out possible answers. (2005, p. 404)

After establishing this historical background, the middle school students were broken into small groups that investigated a 1961 cave-in, a redevelopment plan for the neighbourhood created by the famous architect, Louis Kahn, and the redlining of the neighbourhood by city banks that prevented homeowners and business people from gaining access to loans. They then had the opportunity to interview staff members from the West Philadelphia Empowerment Zone and the City Planning Commission where they asked hard questions like "Why did you let those new houses be built on

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the buried floodplain?” and “ Did you warn the people who bought there?” (Spirn, 2005, p. 405). Throughout this time, the participating teacher would integrate topics from the Mill Creek workshops into other subject matter, creating a well-coordinated set of educational experiences for students.

In the spring, the middle school students made a presentation at the University of Pennsylvania about what they had learned, and during the summer additional teachers and students from the school attended a four-week summer program that gave participants the opportunity to interact with local gardeners and community activists, construct a model of the local watershed, build a water garden and outdoor classroom, and learn how to use software and the Internet to share information about their neighbourhood. In subsequent years, the school was divided into four learning communities consisting of approximately 250 students each that would focus on community and watershed issues. Spirn describes how each of these communities was “required to design and carry out a community service project every year: to identify problems in the community and to bring these problems and potential solutions to public attention” (2005, p. 406).

The impact of all of these activities was stunning. The school and the Mill Creek project began gaining state and national attention. Students presented testimony at the State Legislature, the school was featured on a NBC nightly news broadcast, and President Bill Clinton visited the school in 2000. For a time, it looked as though all of these efforts would lead to an amelioration of the conditions that had been so devastating for the neighbourhood. In 2002, however, the management of the Philadelphia School District was transferred to a private corporation whose policies led to the resignation of key staff members at the school. And in 2004, Spirn discovered that city planners had chosen to ignore recommendations they had been on the edge of adopting to improve the watershed and water quality in the area. For Spirn, this unfortunate ending of a story that had such promise was counterbalanced by the impact this learning experience had on students’ sense of themselves. Through their investigation of the landscape, they had learned that they and their loved ones were not the reason for the poor living conditions they had to endure, but were rather bystanders to poor decisions both in the past and in the present made by people who lived elsewhere. The middle school students taught Spirn that

To feel both at home in a place and ashamed of it is harmful. It saps self-esteem and can engender a sense of guilt and resignation. Before the students at Sulzberger Middle School learned to read their landscape more fully, they read it partially. Without an understanding of how the neighbourhood came to be, many believed that the poor conditions were the fault of those who lived there, a product of either incompetence or lack of care. Learning that there were other reasons sparked a sense of relief. (2005, p. 409)

After being exposed to current positive neighbourhood redevelopment efforts, students came to see their neighbourhood as full of potential. With this sense of

possibility, they then were willing to speak up in the presence of public officials and participate in efforts to affect their own world.

Despite the outcome, students in Philadelphia gained a sense of the power of their own voices as well as their capacity to look at community problems and think creatively about what could be done to solve them. It can be easy for average citizens with few ties to local political leaders to assume that whatever they have to say will be disregarded, that their ideas count for little. What is clear from both the place-based education examples from Boston and Philadelphia is that when given the appropriate supports and opportunities for participation, young people can be helped to set aside the sense of powerlessness that can result in civic disaffection and anomie. During a historical period when the practice of democracy is being threatened by economic as well as political forces, finding ways to develop in the young a belief in citizen activism and the skills required to work collectively for the common good may be among the more critical strategies we can adopt to preserve a governmental system in which the voices of the many are valued over the power of the few. Even when some of these projects result in failure, what students will learn is the importance of resilience, patience, and ongoing problem-solving, things students at the Greater Egleston Community High School must have grappled with over the six years they worked to deal with air quality issues in Roxbury.

A SIMPLE SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE

The work that Hilton Smith and Foxfire began in the 1970s and '80s rekindled an interest in local culture and local activism that was once part of the fabric of community life across the United States. Judging from Alex de Toqueville's account of his visit to America in the early 1800s (Toqueville, 1904), people at that point in our history felt empowered to do what they could to create the institutions and social networks needed to live secure and meaningful lives. Much of what they accomplished was due to their willingness to form small associations that pooled their talents and labor in ways that brought into being a new country. Foxfire demonstrated first in Rabun Gap and then throughout the nation ways that students could once again do something similar. Now in the 21st century, educators who are directing students' attention to the phenomena, knowledge, and issues of their own places are creating opportunities for similar forms of creativity and action to come to fruition. Although their efforts are still marginal when compared to a national preoccupation with test scores, accountability, and international competitiveness, the growing interest in project-based learning and support from organizations like the Lucas Foundation (Hall, 2015) and the state of West Virginia (www.wvde.state.wv.us/teach21/pbl.html) are promising.

An educator in Tillamook, Oregon who oversaw the implementation of an Annenberg Rural Challenge project in his district observed that underlying the changes that happened in schools there was a simple shift in perspective. Teachers

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and community members began seeing learning as something that was closely linked to students' lives outside of school as well as the issues faced by people in this small coastal town. They also discovered that when schools entered into a more reciprocal relation to the broader community, they became the recipients of more public support. That shift in perspective is something that can spread rapidly as people begin to experiment and then experience the meaning and engagement that can accompany learning that is grounded in what is immediate and important to the young and their families. The Foxfire experiment is still spreading, still catching hold of peoples' imaginations. My hope is that some of what readers encountered here will inspire them (you) to do the same.

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