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# *Education and Regeneration*

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## Abstract

Public schools in the 21st century are proving themselves to be remarkably impermeable to the efforts of progressive, environmental, and holistic educators. But the industrial growth societies served by these schools are now proving themselves to be surprisingly fragile in the face of a pandemic and a previously unthinkable war in Ukraine, to say nothing of climate change. As this instability persists, spaces will open within which new visions and practices will be able to take root and grow. Our task moving forward is to transform those spaces into sites of regeneration.

*Keywords:* regeneration, environmental education, education for sustainability, place- and community-based education

Humanity faces an unprecedented crisis set in motion by climate change, overconsumption, overpopulation, and the specter of resource exhaustion. In response, more and more people and institutions are finally attending to the challenge of sustaining industrial growth societies in the face of these dilemmas. Few, however, demonstrate much willingness to consider the possibility that efforts to accomplish this goal are coming forty years too late and that what human beings must instead confront is the likely disintegration of most of the complex agricultural, industrial, communication, transportation, and political systems that support the lives of people who have grown comfortable living indoors, working minimally with our bodies, and having most of our needs met by highly energy-dependent technologies.

I first became aware of this collection of potential problems in my late teens and early twenties after being introduced to the implications of exponential population growth and resource use, first by a history professor at Oberlin College and then the publishing of the Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* in 1972. Learning about these possibilities shaped the rest of my adult life, leading me to take on the task of doing whatever I could to, in small ways, reshape modern cultures to become more human and earth-friendly. As a literature major, the most available settings for applying myself to this goal were schools, so I became a high school teacher and then a professor of education, hoping that in this way, I might be able to influence how young people perceive themselves in relation to their society and the natural world.

Now in my early 70s, five years into retirement, Paul Freedman's request for an article provides an opportunity to take stock. When I was in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I was strongly influenced by Michael Apple's belief that schools are a site of ideological struggle that provides a vital location where deep cultural change can be initiated. I was also influenced by Buddhist and environmental poet Gary Snyder's suggestion that I look closely at the work of bioregionalists like Kirkpatrick Sales and Peter Berg as I thought about ways to generate needed change. These perspectives strongly influenced the evolution of thinking that underlay my work in place- and community-based education with its emphasis on inducting young people into a sense of social membership and responsibility for maintaining and strengthening the health and vitality of their own communities and regions.

I wasn't alone in thinking along these lines. Wendell Berry, Chet Bowers, David Orr, David Sobel, Madhu Prakash, Dilafruz Williams, and a few years later, David Greenwood, were all presenting a similar vision focusing on the revitalization and regeneration of the local as the site where people could have the most significant influence over the

quality of their lives and culture. This was good company to be in, and I'm grateful for the opportunities I've had to work with many of these people. I'm also grateful that the educational ideas that grew out of this work, although never widespread, continue to gain the attention of educators around the world concerned about the integrity and well-being of their cultures, environments, and communities.

Given the precarity of our current circumstances, however, it seems justifiable to consider the efficacy of this approach. The influence of environmental education, education for sustainability, or place- and community-based education on common practices in schools has been minimal, overwhelmed by a decades-long preoccupation with student achievement and educational accountability. Although there is some positive evidence of how meaningful experiences in nature can affect students' environmental attitudes and behaviors, little has been done to effectively address the fundamental values and worldviews transmitted by most schools to their students.

In my dissertation, *Educating for Sustainability: The Educational Implications of the Environmental Crisis* (1989) and the book that grew out of it, *Education and the Environment: Learning to Live with Limits* (1992), I asserted that young people in contemporary schools are being prepared to become participants in a competitive market society where their welfare depends not on the ability to collaborate with others but to demonstrate their superiority when compared to their peers. This kind of preparation potentially provides a certain level of security and privilege for a proportion of the population and a rationale for the failure to achieve desirable security and privilege for the rest.

Until now, the stability of the world in which young people were being prepared to enter was generally unquestioned, so it is not surprising there was little space in which an alternative worldview not predicated on endless economic growth could take root. That may be beginning to change thanks to the voices of youth themselves and the growing inability of their elders to assure them that the future will replicate the conditions that have allowed Homo sapiens to flourish for the previous four or five millennia.

My central motivation for pursuing the possibility of place- and community-based education lay in my suspicion that as industrial growth societies devolve, people will become increasingly dependent on their immediate communities for their support and welfare because it will not be in the interest of large political and economic institutions to do so, just as it is not in the interest of these institutions to marshal the resources and talent needed to address climate change. Suppose climate change, for example, was seen by government and corporate leaders to be the biggest threat our species has ever faced. Would they not transfer wealth devoted to the military and defense industries to efforts to reduce and sequester carbon emissions by transforming the technological infrastructure that underlies life in modern societies? The likelihood of this happening seems slight, indeed.

This means that people at the local level will need to be the ones who initiate the necessary changes. Although this task seems daunting, it is useful to remember that it has been through creative responses to local conditions that our species has managed to survive and thrive prior to the modern era, not with the level of material comfort and security many of us in the 21st century have grown to expect, but with enough food, shelter, and social support to not threaten our perpetuation as a species. My question now is what educators might do to instill in the young the belief that they have the capacity to collectively address these challenges in the way their ancestors did. My current take on answers to that question is that adults in general and educators, in particular, must strive to help the young:

> Grow to love the place where they live and the people who surround them.
>
> Learn how to work as members of mutually supportive communities dependent on one another for their health and well-being.
>
> Discover and cultivate individual talents and proclivities that will contribute to the betterment of their community.
>
> Develop practical skills required to feed, clothe, and house themselves while remaining healthy and vigorous.

Cultivate mental practices that enhance resilience and the ability to tolerate uncertainty and discomfort.

Refine the capacity to communicate in ways that encourage effective problem-solving.

Cultivate observational skills aimed at deepening knowledge of local resources and ways to use and regenerate them.

Gain the skills required to investigate how people in other communities grapple with similar issues and establish collaborative relationships with them whenever possible.

Will it be possible to implement such an agenda in contemporary schools, given the persistence of the worldview and belief structures that underlie them? Probably not. If nothing else, my forty years in education demonstrated the way innovations that challenge the schools' role in preparing the young to participate in a competitive market society will, in time, be pushed out or reworked, so they support that dominant purpose. This is the message Herbert Kliebard lays out in his classic *The Struggle for the American Curriculum* (2005). Rival efforts to sustain a traditional education based on the classics, focus on children's needs and interests, or nudge the broader society toward social justice all became subsumed in the vision of social efficiency and economic competitiveness that became prominent in the early 20th century. Until an economic model premised on unlimited growth becomes unable to deliver its promise of upward mobility, schools seem likely to remain as they are. However, as our society changes, it may be possible to better prepare children for the world they will be inheriting. At issue is finding the gaps where such an education can take place and then getting to work.

A decade ago, I had the privilege to meet Grace Lee Boggs, the legendary civil rights activist from Detroit. She had been persuaded by Bill Ayers to come to a meeting of the educationally progressive North Dakota Study Group in Chicago, a small annual gathering I attended towards the end of my professional career. I'd initially learned about Grace when Bill Moyers had interviewed her on his Friday night "Journal" (June 15, 2007). David Sobel's and my book, *Place- and Community-based Education in Schools* (2010), had just been published, and I gave a copy to Grace. She was enthusiastic, and we were able to stay in touch with one another until she died at the age of 100 a few years later.

After Grace and I met, I learned of Detroit Summer and its impact on some of the young people closest to her. As with the urban farming movement that started in Detroit, Detroit Summer models another way to meet a fundamental human need by uncovering possibilities ignored or unimagined by most people and then pursuing them for the common good. Witnessing the way automation and the outsourcing of American jobs from the Rust Belt were hollowing out the city she had devoted her life to, Grace started a three-week summer program aimed at responding to Martin Luther King's belief that "young people 'in our dying cities' needed programs that were designed to change themselves and their society" (Putnam, 2009, p. 25). Thirty years later, it's not only American cities that are dying, but our rural communities and even suburbs, to say nothing of natural environments threatened by extractive industries and agriculture, drought, wildfires, and a rising ocean.

Modeled on Mississippi Summer in the 1960s, when students went to the South to register voters, she, her husband Jimmy, and a community of adult volunteers immersed young people in experiences that demonstrated their capacity to act, problem solve, think, and collaborate. They gave Detroit's youth a chance to engage in activities like gardening, rehabbing houses, painting murals, marching against crack houses, participating in peace vigils for youth lost to gun violence, and organizing art and music festivals that brought people together to experience the joy that can be found in shared creative experiences. Dialogue with their peers and elders was central. Participants were multi-generational, multi-racial, and came from different class backgrounds. Grace, herself, said of her vision of Detroit Summer: "Encouraging [young people] to exercise their Soul Power would get their cognitive juices flowing. Learning would come from practice, which has always been the best way to learn" (quoted in Putnam, 2009, p.25).

One of the first participants in Detroit Summer, Julia Putnam, became one of its organizers as she grew older and then became a public school educator herself. In time, frustrated with how the mainstream education system failed to offer learning experiences that genuinely engaged

students in her city and showed them their value and capacities, she created a small charter school based on what she had encountered in this outside-of-school context. In an article she crafted while she and her colleagues were imagining what this "education center" would be like, she wrote:

Instead of the message that children are merely empty vessels that must be filled with facts, the community of the Boggs Education Center will tell our children: "You are of use, you are important, we need you. You can learn anything you need in order to be the best person you can. Since we are all counting on you for our very existence, we need you to be your best self—to be healthy and kind and committed. And you can do it. We are here to support you. We love you." (2009, p. 28)

The K-8 Boggs Education Center has been in existence for nearly a decade and has strived to embody lessons Julia learned during the years she participated in Detroit Summer. In the same article, she observed that ". . . I had to remember that real education is not about jobs and increased class status. I remembered Jimmy's idea that 'The chief task of human beings is the struggle for human relations rather than for material goods'" (Putnam, 2009, p. 28). Strikingly on the banner at the top of the school's webpage (http://www.boggsschool.org/) is a quote from King: "Our ultimate end must be the creation of the beloved community." It will be such beloved communities that will allow human beings to adapt to and live through the social and environmental challenges we are now facing and will face even more dramatically in coming decades, just as such communities allowed our predecessors to survive prior to the 20th and 21st centuries.

What both Detroit Summer and the Boggs Education Center demonstrate is how people, despite the social and economic constraints of a politically and economically divided country, can create educational experiences that push beyond the boundaries of contemporary schools to prepare young people to be leaders like Julia Putnam, leaders capable of reshaping institutions in ways that will contribute to the regenerative activities required to contain and hopefully reverse the damage caused by industrial growth societies. These institutions must be truly transformative and revolutionary in nature, aimed at building a new society within the shell of the old, as members of the early 20th-century International Workers of the World (Wobblies) would have said. Consider, for example, the impact the core values of the Boggs Education Center might have if they were to become widely adopted and brought to bear in a multiplicity of communities:

Equity within both human relationships and the natural world

Nurture sense of place and commitment to a better Detroit [or your own community]

Grow our souls by developing a connection to ourselves, each other, and the earth

High levels of critical thought, creativity, and learning

Excellence in teaching

Authentic trusting relationships

Community empowerment

Provide the tools to achieve ambitious goals and live lives of meaning (http://www.boggsschool.org/)

A recent podcast interview conducted by the Detroit Justice Center involving the three founding administrators at the school and a university ally—Julia Putnam, Amanda Rossman, Marisol Teachworth, and Ethan Lowenstein—offers examples of what this kind of education looks like in practice. One of the most important lessons Julia learned from Grace Boggs was that young people can become empowered when adults stop giving them all the answers and instead ask them what they think about common problems, genuinely listening to their responses, asking questions, and helping them refine their analyses and suggestions. This process also requires moving the conversation beyond simply raising objections and demanding things to imagining and experimenting with creative solutions. In doing so, staff at the school are putting into practice a lesson Grace Boggs learned after the riots that shook Detroit in the late 1960s, lessons that led her to recognize that revolution, in contrast to rebellion, requires evolution, a change in perspective and practice that moves both the individual and society in new and more humane directions.

Another difference in practice at the school involves the message students receive about the nature of success. Julia had been an excellent student at one of the best high schools in Detroit when she was growing up in the 1990s. Then, she was encouraged to succeed in school to go to a good college and leave the city with the eventual prospect of a well-paying job. As Julia observed during the podcast:

> . . . [this was] opposed to success meaning you have the skills to contribute to the community and contribute to making it better. And we wanted our kids to feel the sense of responsibility to the city and the place in which they grew up. And even if they left it, it was not because they had to do so in order to be successful, but because they decided to leave because it contributed to their own selves and their sense of what they need to do to be successful and contribute to the well-being of their community, whatever community they chose that to be. And also the idea that a four-year college degree is not necessarily the end-all-be-all definition of success—that there are many ways and many paths to success for many different kids. (https://www.freedomdreamspocast.com/episodes/ep-5)

With that vision in mind, the teachers at the school strive to introduce students to experiences beyond what they might otherwise encounter in classrooms or even in the city. Marisol spoke of how this perspective comes into play:

> . . . one of the main purposes of school is to better know yourself. What am I good at? What are my strengths? What am I challenged by? . . . And so most of my work deals with how to bring these experiences to kids just so our little people can grow into older people who can do lots of things. . . . We go to a winter camp [where] they learn how to build a fire or ski or use the compass. . . . We have a roots and fruits program. Why do we grow own food? How do you grow your own food? Cooking our own food. I mean, these are things that traditionally don't fit into school. But I think that at this school it's important for our young people to be exposed and to have those experiences. . . . If we provide these opportunities for our young people, then they'll better understand who they are and what will make them successful or how they want to become successful in the future. (https://www.freedomdreamspocast.com/episodes/ep-5)

When it comes to the required curriculum, teachers start with the state of Michigan's standards and then tie them to the way the school otherwise looks at culture, history, and geography, using the local neighborhood and city as a touchstone. As Julia observed, ". . . how do we help the kids love their place and love the environment of their place, so they feel some stake in preserving it and taking care of it?" (https://www.freedomdreamspodcast.com/episodes/ep-5).

Linking science to this endeavor is one of the best ways to integrate what's local into the curriculum. One of the middle school teachers, for example, has students track air quality data in the community. Another teacher works with the Detroit River International Wildlife Refuge in their effort to eliminate invasive species. As part of their work with the wildlife refuge, students were invited to participate in a contest that involved developing a proposal to deal with phragmites, an exotic grass found throughout the refuge and region. They proposed using goats to eat the plants down to the roots so they couldn't regenerate. After presenting and answering questions about their plan to a forum of scientists and farmers grappling with the same issue, they won the challenge.

Casey Rocheteau, one of the interviewers from the Detroit Justice Center, had himself been a teacher at the Boggs School before taking his present position. He recalled another unit about trash disposal that took shape after a primary student raised a question about the Detroit incinerator located just blocks away from the school. "It pollutes the air. Why is it here?" (Rahn, 2018). A detailed description of the unit can be found on the People in Education website, a project of Allied Media Projects (https://www.peopleineducation.org/trash-life-1), another organization that grew out of Detroit Summer. Teacher Kelly Reickert began by inviting students to take photographs of open fields close to the school. They then went on walks around the neighborhood, picking up trash and investigating what happened to it. After partnering with a willing filmmaker associated with Allied Media Projects, Kelly encouraged students to imagine how they might present what they were learning to others. After picking up litter and discovering what happens to garbage, they came up

with a plot and characters for a 21-minute film that focuses on a girl who dreams of alternately dropping a Styrofoam cup on the ground, tossing it into a recycling bin, or finding some way to reuse it. One of the film's most amusing scenes involves a boy dressed as a cup bouncing in front of a wall of black plastic bags as he is taken to the incinerator. Students also had a chance to visit the incinerator and the Detroit recycling center; listen to interviews with the CEO of Detroit Renewable Energy and local environmental activists; and watch videos of people striving to minimize their own trash. Chris noted that since this project and the making of the film, local activists have successfully gotten the incinerator shut down:

> . . . that's the kind of work I find inspiring. It's beyond just like a civics class or civic engagement. It's really about a framework that is more of a liberatory practice than it is like teaching to a test . . . . and not about rote memorization, but instead about how to be curious about the world and how to love the world and be committed to the world and to community by first being curious about it and learning how to follow that curiosity. (https://www.freedomdreamspocast.com/episodes/ep-5)

When a teacher takes a student's question and devotes this kind of time and attention to exploring its import, the impact can be the same as the impact Julia Putnam felt when Grace Boggs truly listened to her.

Could such an education better prepare the young for the need to work creatively with others to assure their own security and well-being during a period of profound societal change? Maybe. Is it likely to become widespread in mainstream schools? Again, probably not. But if more formal and non-formal educators alike were to explore the learning possibilities inherent in their communities, it could be possible to prepare more youth and young adults to take on two critical tasks of our era: restoring mutually supportive human communities and decoupling them from the extractive industrial, agricultural, and technological practices that are threatening us all. Such an education will better match the necessities of a world where community reliance once again becomes the foundation for human survival.

In a recent issue of The Monthly Review, editor John Bellamy Foster is interviewed about his perspective on our current circumstances (Foster, 2021). While not shying away from the extreme weather events and fires that have brought the impacts of climate change home to more and more people, he argues that embracing doom and gloom is not a helpful response when there are possibilities that could enable humanity to create systems that better meet human needs while at the same time preserving and restoring the natural systems upon which we depend. His preference is for an ecosocialist vision concerned primarily with achieving equity and sufficiency, but other visions not yet articulated could potentially do so as well.

Paul Hawken's new book, *Regeneration: Ending the Climate Crisis in One Generation* (2021), presents a checklist of questions that humans at this point on the clock of the universe need to be asking themselves both individually and collectively. He asserts that our answers will either perpetuate the business-as-usual of our extractive economy or lay the foundation for the regenerative economy required to reverse the impact of decades of runaway industrial growth. These questions do not posit a specific system, but they could guide our descendants and us as we attempt to build new ways of living that support both people and the earth. His yes or no list includes:

> Does the action create more life or reduce it?
>
> Does it heal the future or steal the future?
>
> Does it enhance human well-being or diminish it?
>
> Does it prevent disease or profit from it?
>
> Does it create livelihoods or eliminate them?
>
> Does it restore land or degrade it?
>
> Does it increase global warming or decrease it?
>
> Does it serve human needs or manufacture human wants?
>
> Does it reduce poverty or expand it?
>
> Does it promote human rights or deny them?

> Does it provide workers with dignity or demean them?
>
> In short, is the activity extractive or regenerative? (p. 249)

Our task as educators—as adults—is to recognize that things as they are are not working and then begin with the young to clarify and enact a vision appropriate for human communities and a planet that require care rather than exploitation. Nothing short of societal transformation will be enough to move through the challenges currently facing humanity. And nothing short of a fundamental transformation of how we educate the young will be required to support that metamorphosis. Detroit Summer and the Boggs Education Center, born out of the insights of a true American revolutionary, offer a glimpse of what such an education could be. They are like dandelions growing in the sidewalk cracks of modernity, demonstrating nature's own resilience and capacity to find spaces where life can still root and propagate. Seeds released from the Boggs Education Center and other schools that ground learning in community and place could serve to jumpstart the humane and environmentally friendly institutions demanded by the future.

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### Acknowledgment

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