

Sustaining Critical Place-Based Education in K-12 Schools: Lessons Learned from Burlington School District

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To prepare students to better understand and address systemic issues such as racism and climate change, teachers in the Burlington School District in Burlington, Vermont are designing critical place-based education (PBE) projects that provide learners first-hand experience with problems and solutions at the local systems level.

These projects—which run from elementary through middle and high school—offer practical examples of public education that empowers children and youth to build a more just and sustainable world through learning and action. The experiences of the teachers involved also suggest what is needed to sustain critical PBE in public school systems.

This article, which is co-authored by educators at the University of Vermont and Burlington School District, emerged from the School and Society Forum held at the October 2021 John Dewey Memorial Conference in Burlington.¹ The Forum explored the theme of

Education and Social Change through the projects described below. These case descriptions have been co-developed with the educators involved in each PBE initiative.

Through this article we hope to inspire educators who work with diverse learners at public institutions throughout the world to consider critical PBE as a means of fostering meaningful social change. This, we believe, is education worth sustaining. The trick is how to sustain it amidst what Greg Smith calls “the constraining regularities of public school.”² This article will address these challenges while providing a foundation for critical PBE built on rich case descriptions of four different projects.

What the world needs now is more engaged and critically-conscious citizens. This is what critical PBE is designed to foster. *What is worth sustaining?* The kind of education described in this article. *Why?* Because the future of both people and planet depends on it.

Foundations of PBE

The idea of using the local community and environment as a context for teaching and learning—and education as a means for social change—has roots in Indigenous, progressive, and reconstructionist education traditions.

Of these, the Indigenous tradition is by far the most experienced at modeling the integration of self and community and social and ecological ethics of contemporary PBE. The wisdom, legacy, and continued contribution of Indigenous teaching approaches is often ignored in PBE literature, however, which is largely dominated by the contributions of white settlers and colonists.³ Indeed, the origins of PBE are most frequently traced to American progressive

¹ John Dewey attended the Burlington Public Schools and University of Vermont. See George Dykhuizen, “John Dewey: The Vermont Years,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 20, no. 4 (1959): 515-544.

² Greg A. Smith, “Place-Based Education: Breaking through the Constraining Regularities of Public School,” *Environmental Education Research* 13, no. 2 (2007): 189-207.

³ Gardner Seawright, “Settler Traditions of Place: Making Explicit the Epistemological Legacy of White Supremacy

educators such as John Dewey, overlooking Indigenous communities who have been using core ideas that inform PBE long before the birth of the progressive movement. Indigenous communities continue to be leaders in contemporary PBE in ways that challenge the field to move beyond settler-colonial conceptions of place.⁴

From our perspective, Dewey's primary contribution to the foundation of PBE was to advocate for education as a means of addressing social problems, a message that reached large numbers of educators due to his public standing. Dewey encouraged educators to study social problems personally, and as part of the school curriculum, beginning with problems "at home, in what lies closest to them."⁵ Many followed Dewey's lead and designed schools and curricula that focused on meeting community needs and improving relations with community members.⁶ More radical and reconstructionist initiatives introduced students to local activists and socialist conceptions of democratic citizenship.⁷

During the Depression and post-World War II era, PBE principles were practiced at what were known as "community schools." Arthurdale Community School (built 1934-35) in rural Kentucky offered on-site adult education courses, transported children to dental and eye appointments, and maintained a community garden and nursery in addition to studying local history, culture, and environment.⁸ Secondary

students at the school published a local newspaper which served as a weekly reminder to the citizens of Arthurdale of the school's commitment to the community.⁹ All of this was done in collaboration with community partners.

Community schools in urban areas offered a similar array of place-based programs and curricula. At Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem, New York City (1934-1956), Principal Leonard Covello used maps of the surrounding community as a guide for planning service learning and problem-solving projects.¹⁰ The goal of these projects included training students as civic leaders and improving relations among East Harlem's 34 ethnic and racial groups.¹¹ Students collected surveys, carried out observations and interviews, took photographs, and visited homes—generating data that provided a deeper understanding of the dynamics of local problems related to housing, health care, and inter-group conflict.¹²

A Critical Pedagogy of Place

Our interpretation of PBE is rooted in the Indigenous and progressive traditions described above and incorporates additional elements from critical pedagogy. Based in the thinking and writing of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and members of the Frankfurt School, critical

and Settler Colonialism for Place-Based Education," *Educational Studies* 50, no. 6 (2014): 554-572.

⁴ See for example Shawn Malia Kana'iaupuni and Nolan Malone, "This Land Is My Land: The Role of Place in Native Hawaiian Identity," *Hūlili: Multidisciplinary Research on Hawaiian Well-Being* 3, no. 1 (2006): 281-307, Shawn Malia Kana'iaupuni and Keiki K. C. Kawai'ae'a, "E Lauhoe Mai Na Wa'a: Toward a Hawaiian Indigenous Education Teaching Framework," *Hūlili: Multidisciplinary Research on Hawaiian Well-Being* 5 (2008): 67-90, and Summer P. Maunakea, "Toward a Framework for Aina-Based Pedagogies: A Hawai'i Approach to Indigenous Land-Based Education," *Journal of Higher Education Theory & Practice* 21, no. 10 (2021): 278-286.

⁵ John Dewey, "Education and Our Present Social Problems," *School and Society* 37, no. 955 (1933), 475.

⁶ Lee Benson, Ira Harkavy, Michael C. Johaneck, and John Puckett, "The Enduring Appeal of Community Schools," *American Educator* 33, no. 2 (2009): 22-47.

⁷ See for example Theodore Brameld, *Design for America* (New York, NY: Hinds, Hayden & Eldridge, 1945) and Salvatore Vascellaro, *Out of the Classroom and Into the World* (New York, NY: New Press, 2011).

⁸ Elsie Ripley Clapp, *Community Schools in Action* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1939).

⁹ Clapp, *Community Schools in Action*, 268-272.

¹⁰ Benson et al., "Enduring Appeal of Community Schools," 25.

¹¹ Benson et al., "Enduring Appeal of Community Schools," 25.

¹² Benson et al., "Enduring Appeal of Community Schools," 26.

pedagogy centers education and schooling around the lived experiences of “culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised students.”¹³ From a critical PBE perspective, the place most in need of problematizing is school itself and how issues of colonization, race, culture, class, and gender structure students’ experience there.¹⁴

Critical pedagogy frames education and social change in terms of liberating students from legacy systems of oppression. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire describes this as a process of becoming conscious of the reality of oppression (unveiling) and then transforming that reality through reflection and action (praxis).¹⁵ Freire recommended a “problem-posing” and dialogic method of education in which students and teachers worked as “critical co-investigators” on problems they experienced in their daily lives.¹⁶ Critical pedagogy also serves as a foundation for approaches such as culturally responsive pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy which seek to honor learners as cultural beings, draw on the rich funds of knowledge and identity they bring to school, and promote the development of critical consciousness as a vital educational outcome.¹⁷

The synergy between critical pedagogy and PBE became most evident in 2003 when *Educational Researcher* published a seminal article by

David Greenwood on a critical pedagogy of place.¹⁸ In this article, Greenwood integrated what he termed the “ecological place-based education” tradition, a rural tradition geared toward exploring natural places, with critical pedagogy’s emphasis on studying places “as political praxis for social transformation.”¹⁹

Greenwood proposed two goals for a critical pedagogy of place—*reinhabitation* or “learning to live well socially and ecologically in places” and *decolonization* or “learning to recognize disruption and injury and to address their causes.”²⁰ Reinhabitation and decolonization begin with acknowledging Indigenous claims to land and the historical injustice experienced by BIPOC communities.²¹ Greenwood recommends three guiding questions:

- What happened here? (historical)
- What is happening here now? (socio-political)
- What should happen here? (ethical)²²

Key Principles of Critical PBE

To guide our own work as critical place-based educators, we have drawn on the literature and traditions described above and developed key principles for critical PBE.

¹³ Antonia Darder, Marta P. Baltodano, and Rodolfo D. Torres, “Critical Pedagogy: An Introduction.” In *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*, ed. Antonia Darder, Marta P. Baltodano, and Rodolfo D. Torres (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 9.

¹⁴ Seawright, “Settler Traditions of Place,” 561.

¹⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2007).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 79-86.

¹⁷ Gloria Ladson-Billings, “But That’s Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” *Theory Into Practice* 34, no. 3 (1995): 159-165; Django Paris, “Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice,” *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 3. (2012): 93-97; Moisés Esteban-Guitart and Luis C. Moll, “Funds of Identity: A New Concept Based On the

Funds of Knowledge Approach,” *Culture & Psychology* 20, no. 1 (2014): 31-48.

¹⁸ Formerly Gruenewald. David A. Gruenewald, “The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place,” *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 4 (2003): 3-12.

¹⁹ Gruenewald, “The Best of Both Worlds,” 7.

²⁰ Gruenewald, “The Best of Both Worlds,” 9.

²¹ See bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), Alexa Scully, “Decolonization, Reinhabitation and Reconciliation: Aboriginal and Place-Based Education,” *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 17 (2012): 148-58, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation,” *Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 3 (2014): 1-25.

²² Greenwood, “Place, Land, and the Decolonization of the Settler Soul,” 364.

The first principle is that our projects are community-based. This means that they happen in locations (places) and geographical levels that are most meaningful and relevant to students' lives (e.g., school, neighborhood, city, bioregion). Our interpretation of community includes both human community (people) and ecological species.

Second, we design our projects to include community partners. We look for individuals and organizations that can serve as sources of knowledge related to the issues and problems we are studying. We try to ensure our partnerships are reciprocal ones, that our partners feel they have received as much or more than they give. This includes our ecological partners.

Third, we design our projects to empower and give voice to our youth. We do this because we think youth deserve to be treated as equals in the educational process and because youth are particularly attuned to injustices happening at school and in the community.

Finally, we design projects to be critical of existing social structures and the injustices they perpetuate—projects that purposely seek to transform local society to be more just, equitable, and sustainable.

Context

This work takes place in the Burlington School District in Vermont, a district that is nestled in the Champlain Valley alongside the shores of Lake Champlain.

The city of Burlington is on the unceded territory of the original inhabitants of this land—the Abenaki people. We acknowledge the

harmful history of colonization and eugenics in Vermont, which resulted in descendants of the Abenaki fleeing or assimilating into White colonial society, resulting in a contemporary Vermont that is predominantly White. Given this history and legacy, we recognize the importance of critical PBE in our context as an educational approach that aims to foster criticality and in so doing, decenter Whiteness and engage youth in learning about historically marginalized perspectives.

While Vermont is predominantly White, Burlington has been a refugee resettlement community since 1980. As a result, Burlington has seen an increase in racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity that is in sharp contrast with the racial demographics of the larger Vermont population.²³ Due to its rapid shift in cultural demographics, although Burlington remains a predominantly White district within a predominantly White state, it can also be considered to be “urban characteristic.”²⁴ The new strategic plan (2022-2027) for BSD is inclusive of this diversity:

Burlington School District will be student-centered and responsive to the full range of identities, abilities, cultures, and languages in our community, such that every student is challenged, empowered, and engaged in their learning throughout their time in our schools.²⁵

In service of this goal, the strategic plan includes the following priority areas: deeper learning for every student, which in turn includes objectives such as inclusive and affirming curriculum, culturally responsive teaching, equitable systems, and empowering student voice. As such, it is important to note that while the origination of the

²³ In 2021 Burlington demographics were 94% White, 1.5% Black or African-American, 2% Asian, 2% Hispanic or Latino, 2% two or more races, and 4% American Indian and Alaska Native while Burlington School District demographics were 61% White, 16% Black or African-American, 12% Asian, 8% two or more races, and 2% Hispanic or Latino.

²⁴ Richard H. Milner, IV, "But What Is Urban Education?," *Urban Education* 47, no. 3 (2012): 556-561.

²⁵ Burlington School District, "2022-27 Strategic Plan," Burlington School District, 2022, <https://www.bsdyt.org/district/2022-2027-strategic-plan/>.

critical PBE initiatives described herein pre-dates this strategic plan, these initiatives are situated in a district that has articulated goals such as deeper learning, cultural responsiveness, and youth empowerment, all of which are in alignment with critical PBE.

The authors of this paper are a mix of classroom teachers, district leaders, and university professors, all of whom are invested in critical PBE in the Burlington School District. Simon Jorgenson and Jessica DeMink-Carthew are professors at the University of Vermont (UVM) who engage in teaching and research connected to critical PBE. Aziza Malik and Kate Mattina are grade 5 educators at Champlain Elementary School. Elizabeth Clements and Jeremy DeMink are the lead educators for Youth Participatory Action Research at Edmunds Middle School. Andy Barker was the Project Director for the Burlington City and Lake Semester from 2018-2022 and Autumn Bangoura is the Equity Instructional Leader for Burlington School District and the Director of the Summer Racial Justice Academy.

It also feels important to note that the initiatives described herein did not originate from an organized effort to create a K-12 critical PBE focus in the district. Rather, each of the initiatives originated separately and while we, the co-authors, are aware of each other's work across the district and at UVM, the October 2021 John Dewey Memorial Conference was the first formal gathering of this group around our shared focus on critical PBE, offering a unique opportunity to capture and reflect on the work.

Case Descriptions of Critical PBE

In this section, we offer case descriptions of four examples of critical PBE across one school district: (a) Place-Based Projects at Champlain Elementary School, (b) Youth Participatory

Action Research at Edmunds Middle School, (c) Burlington City and Lake Semester at Burlington High School, and (d) the Burlington School District Racial Justice Academy. Each case was written by one or two co-authors who also serve as project leaders for the place-based work. We have also included Table 1 as a summary of the ways in which each case illustrates key features of critical PBE.

Critical Place-Based Education at Champlain Elementary School

The critical PBE work at Champlain Elementary School is driven by the concepts of exchange and social change. At the start of every new school year, we ask ourselves this question: How will our learning enrich not only our students' lives but also our greater community?

For PBE to be genuinely impactful, we believe it is necessary to examine how our projects and partnerships positively influence both our own students' learning and the well-being of our wider community. In addition to this foundational goal, we also examine potential partnerships through the lens of equitable representation and furthering the goal of creating a culturally affirming space throughout our school.

In each of our projects, we have four criteria: (a) the culmination of learning must include the wider community, (b) our students need to creatively "give back" to the community, (c) the experts that we work with must be representative of the families in our school, and (d) the work we do must be culturally affirming. In this way, both our planning of critical PBE experiences and the resulting projects are designed to amplify marginalized perspectives in our community and in so doing, engage students in contributing to local social change efforts.

We believe that it is critical for place-based teachers to be curious and engaged community members themselves. We've found over the years that the most meaningful projects have arisen out of our curiosity and engagement—a

Table 1. Illustrative examples of key features of critical PBE in each case.

	Community-Based	Partnerships	Youth Empowerment	Criticality and Social Change
Place-Based Education at Champlain Elementary School	Projects are inspired by critical issues in the community in which Champlain Elementary School resides.	Example partners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abenaki community of Vermont • University of Vermont • City of Burlington • Local artist collective, Juniper Creative Arts 	Projects require youth to actively engage in and lead initiatives aimed at bettering their community.	Projects are driven by the goal of enriching the greater community by learning about critical issues and engaging in critical action. For example, students learned about nature-based solutions for climate change and created a native tree nursery.
Youth Participatory Action (YPAR) Research at Edmunds Middle School (EMS)	The focus of YPAR at EMS research and activism is the school community with a specific focus on the perspectives of historically marginalized groups.	Example partners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University of Vermont • Spectrum Youth and Family Service of Vermont • Outright Vermont • Preservation Trust of Vermont • VT Racial Justice Alliance • Local artists 	Activism is youth-led with adult facilitation. YPAR teachers play a supportive role but do not identify or lead initiatives.	YPAR at EMS uses research and activism to identify, critically examine, and disrupt injustices within their school community. For example, recognizing gender oppression in their school, they designed and taught lessons about gender identity.
Burlington City and Lake (BCL) Semester at Burlington High School	BCL meets in the city to directly investigate community issues through multiple lenses such as city systems, people and nature, and community thriving.	Example partners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abenaki elders • Burlington's Sustainability Manager • Wildways Coalition • Community Justice Center • Local artists 	Students have increasing ownership of daily facilitation, unit investigations, learning outcomes and action projects to address issues that they identify.	The BCL semester engages students in understanding and improving the health of their social-ecological community. For example, students analyze city systems through interviews with diverse stakeholders and propose solutions to relevant leaders.
Burlington School District Summer Racial Justice Academy (SRJA)	The work of SRJA is focused on local school district policies, practices and procedures.	Example partners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up for Learning • Vt Racial Justice Alliance • Clemmons Family Farm • Conscious Homestead • All Heart Inspirations 	The youth in SRJA identify and deliver critical racial justice recommendations to district leadership.	The youth in SRJA are focused on identifying racial injustice as it manifests in the local school district, propose critical recommendations, and lead initiatives to create more racially just schools. For example, the youth in SRJA advocate for increased mental health support and asked the district to identify two equity advisors in every school building

spontaneous conversation at a local event, an overheard conversation between students, an email exchange with a parent about their passions, or from being known as the people who will always say “yes!” to an opportunity to connect with the community. In some cases, we can hook into existing and established partnerships and programs. For example, we have worked with students at the University of Vermont to monitor the quality of our schoolyard stream and upload our findings to a citizen science database, and we’ve made use of our local solid waste management organization to learn about compost and recycling and to improve the waste management system in our lunchroom.

These are established connections and meaningful experiences that we provide for our students yearly. In addition, however, we also seek to make a connection that is unique to the specific year we are in, and that is responsive to the current events in our community, nation, and world. These types of place-based projects are less predictable, less formulaic, and require more creative energy from all partners. We also find, however, that these types of projects are the

ones that have the most impact both on students and the wider community because they are the most authentic.

Over the past few years, many projects have arisen out of this commitment to being connected, curious, and engaged community members. For example, one project was sparked when we overheard students chatting and claiming that they were members of Vermont’s Indigenous community because they went to a summer camp that shared the same name. We realized that we needed to address this misconception, which we took to be a symptom of a lack of understanding about, and relationship to, the local Abenaki community. As a result, we initiated a collaborative project with the Abenaki community of Vermont, including leaders, storytellers, and musicians.

Under their guidance, students created Abenaki land acknowledgments for all schools in our district. We offer an excerpt from one of these land acknowledgments, created in

partnership with Abenaki scholar and activist Judy Dow,²⁶ here:

The blush of spring,
Blossoms that fill the air
The wild garden gives us the gift of shade.
In the garden, we welcome the newcomers like
dandelions and apples.
Down in Englesby Brook, the water flows from
a rippling stream to a consistent flow,
The Green Mountains and Adirondacks hold the
layers of the land
Our relationship with the land has grown and
deepened like the roots of a tree.
Always growing.
We strive to protect every animal, from *mikwa*
(squirrels) to *amasos* (bears).
And keeping balance means an ecosystem where
everything thrives together.
There are seven directions: north, south, east,
west, up, down, and the way you are going in life.
In the words of Judy Dow
“When you pull on nature, you figure out every-
thing is connected.”
Thank you Judy, and thank you to the land.

Students also performed in the Abenaki language at the State House and our local theater and engaged in work with Abenaki scholars to address climate change. Each of these projects not only exposed students to the rich history of the Abenaki people, but also their ongoing legacy, resulting in learning that we hope they will carry with them throughout their lives.

Another critical PBE project arose from a casual conversation that we had with a parent about our shared wish that an exclusive private nature-based program available to some students in our school was an opportunity available to all students. This conversation led us to initiate a partnership with the City of Burlington in service of their resolution to enact nature-based solutions for climate change.

Our students helped relocate over 100 trees displaced due to construction and, together with the city land steward and arborist, created a wild-life corridor for animals to safely navigate the city. They also partnered to create a native tree nursery to provide more shade and therefore cooler temperatures in our city. Through this project, our students not only contributed to a genuine betterment of their community, they also took with them lasting knowledge that will inform how they engage with their environment and the realities of climate change.

Our final example is one that was initiated by a community member who was aware that we were open to community partnership opportunities. When a local contact reached out to see if our school might be interested in hosting a mural when its original location was rejected, we jumped at the opportunity. As a result, we united with local Black and Dominican family artist collective Juniper Creative Arts to give a home to their mural, *Kelis the Afronaut*. Together, we created a mural four times the original size with each student making a unique piece of art that was incorporated into the design. The resulting mural serves as a visual reminder that we are committed to creating a safe and anti-racist space for all, fostering community, and building equity.

Each of these examples illustrates how critical PBE at Champlain Elementary School introduces students to culturally affirming work with local community members who are actively engaging social and environmental justice issues, including Indigenous educators and artists. These experiences will prepare them to become social change leaders as they move into middle and high school.

²⁶ Judy Dow is an Abenaki scholar and activist. See <https://www.gedakina.org/news/vermont-visionaries>.

Youth Participatory Action Research at Edmunds Middle School

The Edmunds Middle School Youth Participatory Action Research (EMS-YPAR) Collective is an innovative approach to positive youth and community development in which young people are supported in conducting action research aimed at improving their lives, their communities, and the institutions intended to serve them.

EMS-YPAR is a collaborative effort of the University of Vermont and Edmunds Middle School students, teachers, and staff. YPAR is a process of learning through research *and* critical action—research is done not just for the sake of it but to inform solutions to problems that young people themselves care about. Our EMS-YPAR Collective is committed to interrupting and breaking down institutional barriers experienced by students in our school community due to racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, ableism, and other forms of oppression.

EMS-YPAR begins in sixth grade with all students participating in a social justice humanities curriculum, which is designed to teach central concepts such as perspective, identity, privilege, power, liberation, equity, and more. The curricular approach is guided by a set of culturally and developmentally responsive teaching agreements that are informed by social justice education literature as well as teacher, student, family, and leadership input. This includes, for example, a commitment to use rich multimedia texts as the foundation for classroom exploration rather than relying on students' personal experiences. To ensure that students are not just learning about social inequity but also have opportunities for action, opportunities for students to share their learning and raise awareness are

included throughout. Curriculum development, implementation, and troubleshooting are supported by UVM faculty and students through regular meetings and resource curation as needed.

As seventh graders, EMS students can opt into a YPAR Research Skills class. Students in this course earn an exploratory credit as they learn how to analyze research, question what they know, and test hypotheses in self-directed research projects. Students work closely with UVM partners and community mentors to choose an area of interest to study, define an issue or problem to investigate, create or revise data collection tools, and gather data from students and staff to better understand their issue/problem. Areas of interest often form around experiences of a marginalized group of people at school such as those experiencing racial, LGBTQIA+, gender, or ability discrimination at school. This class is also committed to strengthening the sense of community within the EMS-YPAR Collective through relationship building and a learner-centered, restorative approach to class that keeps the environment highly supportive and joyful while students engage in challenging, important work that can at times be heavy.

In eighth grade, students who have completed the YPAR Research Skills class²⁷ are invited to continue into the YPAR Action Team. The focus of this class is to use what they have learned from their research to advocate and implement critical actions in the EMS community and/or local communities. The public and celebrated action steps that result are essential to the impact of the EMS-YPAR Collective since they move research into critical action, which is the goal of the work. Students use the research they completed in seventh grade to design, propose,

²⁷ There is a history of allowing some students to join as eighth graders who have not completed the seventh grade class.

and implement initiatives and policy changes in their schools.

The goals of these critical actions are three-fold. First, they serve to amplify the voices of those within our school who are traditionally silenced. Second, the critical action phase is designed to disrupt oppressive policies and practices with the hope that actions such as public events, policy changes, and critical student-led lessons will result in lasting systemic change. Third, they aim to inspire other students and staff in the school community to notice and take action to address oppression and inequity they experience or witness in their community. The work of EMS-YPAR, therefore, aims to not only empower the youth who are conducting the research and leading the critical actions but to ultimately lead to community and school transformation.

With these goals in mind, the critical action phase has a special focus on addressing the root of systemic injustices with an eye for change that will directly impact the present and future students at EMS. As they engage in critical action, the students organize themselves into youth-led teams that, in collaboration with a wide variety of relevant local partners, lead justice-oriented initiatives within their schools. To illustrate this work, we offer the following four examples from the 2021-2022 academic school year.

Disrupting racism. The Racial Equity Team, which conducted research on racism in their school, found that around 50% of Black students and 50% of White students saw or experienced racism within their school the previous year. Through further research, they were able to identify that one of the root causes of this racism within the school was a lack of resources available to teachers to support school-wide anti-racist practices in classrooms. This led to this group working in partnership with school leadership to

design a resource-rich rubric to support teacher learning related to anti-racist teaching. EMS-YPAR students met with teachers to share this resource, which has continued to develop into a living document of resources as well as a map for a restorative accountability tool for administrators to use when discussing racial harm at EMS. This resource is now being used school-wide to support teacher goal-setting and professional development.

Disrupting ableism. The Ability Discrimination Team identified that 60% of students with learning disabilities felt that they were missing opportunities at school because of their disability. Through further research, this group identified the following root cause: Current special education policies and practices create inequity for students of the global majority, with lower income, and who are a part of the LGBTQIA+ community because their voices are often unseen or ignored by those in power. To engage in critical action, they then researched how special education is funded and organized and designed a two-page pamphlet for families to explain their rights, who to contact, and how to ensure that their student receives all their entitled special education services from the school district.

Disrupting gender oppression. Through their research, the 2SLGBTQIA+ Equity Team²⁸ learned that many students and staff were unaware of the basic information about pronouns, gender identity, and sexuality. Through further research, this group identified the following root cause: Many teachers, administrators, staff, and students in the Burlington School District are unaware and uneducated on how they are complicit in the discrimination and harm that is felt by members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. To engage in critical action, they designed and taught a lesson that all students and staff experienced. These lessons were so effective that they

²⁸ The 2S in 2SLGBTQIA+ is a reference to the term “two-spirit” used by Indigenous communities and was

included by this group to recognize the intersectionality of their issue and solidarity with Indigenous communities.

were shared with other schools and community organizations around the city.

Disrupting sexism and period shame. Through interviews, the Gender Equity Team learned about numerous incidents of teacher-initiated sexism towards femme-identifying students at their school. Through further research, this group identified the following root cause: Femme-identifying students and those with uteruses do not have a platform in our community to speak up and gain support for the barriers they face. The group addressed this through three critical actions, which were funded in part by a mini-grant that students wrote. First, they collaborated with a local artist, Hailey Rockwood, to create a mural and amplified the voices of these femme-identifying students in a student-led rally for solidarity, connection, and change. Second, in partnership with school leadership, they created new school policies for how and when femme-identifying students can leave the classroom when they feel uncomfortable. And lastly, they gained approval and funding for the installation of cabinets in all bathrooms to house feminine products of all types for EMS community members to access for free.

Each of these examples illustrates how the EMS-YPAR Collective engages youth in (a) the identification of social justice issues within their school community, (b) investigation of the root causes of these issues, and (c) critical action to create change. We feel that they also illustrate the amazing capacity for youth to lead social change, including concrete institutional changes in their school.

Burlington City and Lake Semester at Burlington High School

The Burlington City & Lake Semester (BCL) is a place-based, multi-disciplinary course offered at Burlington High School.

It is a multi-credit, immersive, off-campus program for a diverse cohort of 20 juniors and seniors that uses the city of Burlington as its

classroom and curriculum. Students meet at a community center downtown for two or three full days each week, where they encounter authentic local dilemmas and pursue projects with community partners from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. The ultimate goal of BCL is to empower young people to understand and improve the health of our social-ecological community.

The curriculum is loosely structured around five core units. Specific experiences and learning outcomes are emergent and change each semester depending on the opportunities presented by community partners. We begin with an Onboarding unit, which focuses on building authentic relationships among students and faculty through play, individual student-to-faculty meetings, activities designed for social-emotional learning, and facilitated conversation. We also explain key program elements (e.g., morning meeting), orient students to place, and introduce BCL's essential question: What does it mean for a community to thrive? Onboarding establishes that personal development and group dynamics are a central part of our curriculum in their own right, not only as a means to create a positive learning environment. As a PBE practice, we are attempting to dissolve the divide between the learner and the city as an object of study. Students come to recognize that they are themselves part of the place we are studying.

Then we turn to City Systems, teaching the concept of systems thinking and bringing a critical lens to existing systems in Burlington, such as transportation, energy, food, housing, and government. We share critical frameworks for thinking about equity, sustainability, and place and invite students to reflect on their experiences as users of these systems. We then use field visits (e.g., to food markets, new housing developments), interviews with stakeholders (e.g., Burlington's sustainability manager, homeless advocates, longtime residents), and primary source documents (e.g., maps and photographs) to surface needs and potential solutions within

these systems. We have taken different approaches to concluding this unit: sometimes with a roundtable discussion with Burlington city councilors; sometimes with workshops or focus groups with transit leaders, architects, or urban planners and other decision-makers.

The People and Nature unit invites students to develop a deeper relationship with Lake Champlain and the city's varied natural communities. We begin by acknowledging different ways of knowing a place through Abenaki oral history and written sources, scientific research, embodied experiences, and other modes. Students then engage in field work inspired by a need in the community or a partner. We have done participatory research on Lake Champlain investigating fish reproduction, microplastic pollution, invasive species, and food webs. We have also worked with Burlington's land steward and other partners to remove invasive species and restore native trees as a part of Burlington's investment in natural climate solutions. Students also enjoy the lake in longboats, paddleboards, and sailboats.

Our Community Thriving unit explores the opportunities and challenges presented by living in a dynamic, pluralistic community. We focus on organizations and individuals working to strengthen the community in Burlington. Through interviews, shared meals, and other experiences, students connect with elders, preschool children, New Americans, and people experiencing homelessness, among others. We engage with partners working directly to strengthen the community, such as the Burlington Police Department and the Community Justice Center. One BCL cohort created a video exploring racial equity in Burlington, featuring their own voices and dozens of interviews with local leaders and activists, including the mayor. Other cohorts have pursued service learning

projects. We also have made global connections to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals with other Vermont students and United Nations University, as well as groups of Danish and Puerto Rican students who visited Vermont.

Arts and Community Vitality has been the concluding unit for each of our BCL semesters. This unit begins with an investigation into the role and function of the arts in our community and a close look at socially engaged art. With leadership from professional artists, students explore public art in Burlington and elsewhere and then create a collaborative work of public art together, which they unveil at a public celebration event. Notable projects included an original work of outdoor projection art on the theme of thriving; a permanent installation of large-scale idealized student portraits celebrating the diversity of the Burlington High School community; and a story slam exploring vulnerability. These art projects give students broad leeway to design, create, and publicize their work to an authentic audience.

At the heart of BCL is the idea that everything we encounter is a part of "place" and therefore part of the curriculum. To the extent that BCL has a formal curriculum, it is designed, but often unscripted and emergent. It invites students to bring critical lenses and their own lived experience to the question of what makes our community thrive; and then to reach beyond the ladder rungs of Bloom's taxonomy²⁹ to active engagement in their community.

Burlington School District Summer Racial Justice Academy

The Summer Racial Justice Academy (SRJA) was created in the summer of 2021 to respond to the ways in which the pandemic created increased racial inequities within our schools, our

²⁹ Patricia Armstrong, "Bloom's Taxonomy," <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/>.

community, and society at large. After a year and a half of virtual and hybrid learning and on the heels of a national reckoning with police brutality after the murder of George Floyd, schools were feeling as far from “back to normal” as anyone could imagine.

BIPOC students in our district were feeling the emotional labor of existing in schools with only 6% BIPOC teaching staff, which did not mirror our student demographics. Indignant at so many injustices, students started to courageously call out experiences of curricular harm and racial microaggressions in the classroom from peers and teaching staff. In addition, district data consistently painted a story of Black students being at risk in our school systems: more likely to be suspended, more likely to be disciplined, more likely to have low achieving academic scores, less likely to be in AP or honors classes, and so on.

Our Black students were not okay and the SRJA was born out of this pressing need to create a space for racial healing. The original idea was to use demographic data to identify students who have been chronically absent under the overwhelming nature of schooling during a pandemic. However, as the academy came to fruition, it evolved into a place-based, project-based experience where students were hired and paid as consultants to Burlington School District to make recommendations for changes in policies, practices, and procedures with the ultimate goal of creating more racially just schools.

The following mission statement, developed by students in the Summer 2022 cohort, best expresses the goals and commitments of SRJA:

At the Burlington School District Summer Racial Justice Academy, we represent student leadership. We speak out for the needs of ourselves, our peers and our community. Every student, teacher, and staff brings a unique gift to this space. We bring authentic experience,

brilliance, diversity, and meaningful engagement. We value racial justice, honesty, deep learning, change, and healing. We work to build connections, organize for action, and share in collective power.

We will share power with adults in authentic ways.

We will share hard truths to uncover and expose racial bias in school systems.

We will create transformative change and work towards a more just future.

We will insist that school leaders listen to us and value the work of the youth.

We will disrupt white supremacy power structures in our schools.

We will work to dismantle oppressive systems, policies, and practices.

We will use our power to create culture shifts to bring about positive change in the Burlington School District.

We will be seen and we will be heard.

Building capacity for student leadership is a major component of the academy and this is done with an intentional focus on youth-adult partnership.

A key partner in this work is Up for Learning,³⁰ who facilitates the youth-adult partnership piece and recruits students from SRJA to continue the work by serving as youth facilitators at BSD and beyond. This is reflected in the structure of a typical day at SRJA, which is focused on student-centered discussions, many of which are facilitated by students. In addition, students at SRJA are used to sitting across from the superintendent, calling out things they have experienced and calling in soft demands for change.

Imagine a typical day at SJRA. Around fifty middle and high school students of the global majority enter a middle school building on a hot summer day. They clock in, as they are paid per hour, and they grab their journals and check the daily prompt. They write with purpose and

³⁰ Up for Learning, “About: Up for Learning,” <https://www.upforlearning.org/about-us/>.

audience in mind, knowing that what they write could potentially be used on our websites, in professional development sessions, or in the annual equity report. A few students volunteer to identify prompts and facilitate a restorative practice circle focused on one of the day's topics.

Students then engage in explorations of deeper learning topics such as power, White supremacy culture, oppression, the intersectionality between racism and homophobia, and more. Topics emerge organically from students who may one day see a need to explore microaggressions experienced by Asian-identifying students and another day choose to explore the hierarchical systems of power within school systems. Further learning is based on passion projects in the form of capstone project choices. Choosing from either Social Justice Education, Arts, Documentation, or Youth Organizing, students prepare a capstone project presentation that engages district leaders in discussion and ultimately leads to moving slam poetry, captivating visual art, and drafting a set of recommendations to present to school district leaders.

The outcomes of this work across the past two years have been impactful and expansive. After the inaugural SRJA in 2021, four SRJA student leaders led the entire school district in a professional development at the fall in-service district kickoff. They shared their recommendations district-wide, which included, for example, "revamping discipline policies in our schools to create equitable outcomes," "holding adults who cause harm accountable," and "hire and support BIPOC teachers." These recommendations informed BSD's new strategic plan and BHS leadership asked their teaching staff to use the recommendations to inform their own personal and professional goals. Students from SRJA also became known as district champions and volunteered to lead virtual equity workshops, served as student representatives on the superintendent steering committee, became members of EMS-YPAR, led a Social Justice Club at Burlington High School, served as student representatives

on the Vermont Principals Association Equity Practitioner Network, and more.

In the Spring of 2022, as we prepared to launch a second SRJA, over 80 students applied and interviewed for the coveted 50 spots. Students with chronic absenteeism during the school year showed up for SRJA every day. At the heart of the SRJA work is the student capstone projects. Youth organizers from the 2022 academy focused on "The Real Support Students Need" and pushed for increased mental health support and asked the district to identify two equity advisors in every school building. Another group offered "A New Insight into Anti-Racist Teaching Practices," asking for more anti-racist professional development and designing a lesson to address racial microaggressions in the classroom. Other groups explored themes of staff accountability and recommendations for establishing peer mediators at Burlington High School.

With its focus on criticality, youth empowerment, and social change, the SRJA is creating systemic changes within our district. We have already seen the ripple effect of this work in shifts in district policy and power dynamics, which we view as further evidence of the capacity for critical PBE approaches such as this one to disrupt the status quo and transform school systems through youth-adult partnerships and youth activism.

What is Needed to Sustain this Work

As we have developed these cases of critical PBE across our district, it has also presented an opportunity to reflect on the social and environmental conditions that can help to sustain this type of critical PBE work within schools.

We recognize that the key features of critical PBE, which make it so powerful and distinct, are also in conflict with some of the prevailing norms of public school education. In this way,

critical PBE calls on educators as well as school and district leaders to disrupt the status quo by valuing different educational priorities.

In the following sections, we offer three social and environmental conditions that we believe could help sustain critical PBE in public school systems such as ours: (a) synergy between district, state, and federal priorities and critical PBE, (b) redefinition of the power dynamic between adults and youth in schools, and (c) school environments that value collaboration, criticality, and responsiveness.

Synergy Between District, State, and Federal Priorities and Critical PBE.

Our reflections have helped us see the value of having a strategic plan in our district that values outcomes such as deeper learning, cultural responsiveness, and youth empowerment. If used to drive decision-making and leveraged to create change, strategic plans such as these can create conditions under which approaches such as critical PBE can thrive. For those educators and leaders who are fortunate to work in districts with similar explicit priorities, we encourage you to draw connections between your critical PBE work and your district's strategic priorities as a way to recruit support. If these priorities are not explicitly reflected in current district policies, protocols, and written mandates, we recommend searching for synergy between existing priorities and your initiatives while also advocating for their inclusion moving forward.

While having clear alignment between critical PBE initiatives and district priorities can help with momentum, we also wish to emphasize that its absence does not preclude engaging in critical PBE at the classroom, team, or school level. Indeed, the initiatives described herein pre-date the creation of our district's current strategic plan

and were championed by passionate educators, youth, and district leaders nonetheless. That being said, we also wish to underscore the ways in which a clearly articulated strategic plan with evident synergy with critical PBE can reduce barriers and help initiatives such as these gain momentum and validity within the broader district.

We also recognize the ways in which district priorities are impacted by the broader educational policy at the state and federal level. For example, in our context we have seen the ways in which Act 77 legislation,³¹ which offers flexible pathways for credit earning towards graduation within the state of Vermont, has facilitated innovation such as critical PBE in our district. The legitimization of alternate pathways to graduation credits in our state has allowed educators and leaders within our district to think creatively about learning opportunities such as those described in this article.

Additionally, Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funding made it possible for the dream of SRJA to be made into a reality. This funding will no longer be available after 2023, illustrating the need for reliable funding streams to support critical PBE innovation within public education. If critical PBE initiatives such as those described in this article are to become mainstream educational opportunities offered to all, school districts will need the support of innovative state and federal educational policies designed to fund and facilitate critical PBE.

Redefinition of the Power Dynamic Between Adults and Youth in Schools.

Although it is a key feature of critical PBE, we recognize that promoting authentic youth empowerment is countercultural to dominant approaches to traditional public school

³¹ General Assembly of the State of Vermont, *An Act Relating to Encouraging Flexible Pathways to Secondary School Completion (FLEXIBLE PATHWAYS INITIATIVE)*,

Act 77, S. 130, <https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2014/Docs/ACTS/ACT077/ACT077%20As%20Enacted.pdf>.

education. In many ways, however, this feature is the heart and soul of critical PBE, without which it loses much of its potential to promote important outcomes such as civic learning, empowerment, and social change. Critical PBE thrives when adults recognize the tremendous potential and power of youth engagement in social change movements.

Due to the pervasiveness of teacher-centered curriculum and compliance-oriented school environments,³² sharing power with youth can feel like a disorienting and threatening shift for adults who were raised in and have long worked in the traditional system. Authentic youth empowerment, however, requires a willingness to push past this discomfort into a vision of teaching and learning that dismantles hierarchies between adults and youth. Indeed, when a panel of students was asked what would help sustain initiatives such as these, Morgan Davis, an eighth-grade activist in YPAR at EMS responded swiftly: “Flatten hierarchies between adults and youth.” If the focus on youth empowerment within critical PBE is to be authentic, it necessitates the willingness of adult partners to give up some of their power so that youth leaders can step into theirs. When adults take control and make the majority of decisions themselves, opportunities for empowering youth are limited.³³

Youth partnerships that aim to promote criticality and social change also require a special kind of power sharing, especially when the initiative is seeking to critically examine school practices and policies. The adults facilitating these approaches to critical PBE must be prepared for youth to surface critical feedback that may call to question those who traditionally have had power

in schools and communities, including adult partners themselves. For this reason, adult partners in critical PBE must be willing to be critically reflective, vulnerable, and humble, viewing youth insight and critical feedback as an integral part of the work. As the adult facilitators of this work, they must also be prepared to serve as co-conspirators to youth as they seek to promote social changes in a system in which youth traditionally have little power. In this way, adult partners in critical PBE must also be prepared to, as Bettina Love says, “put something on the line” (e.g., social capital, perceptions of likability, etc.) to support the social change initiatives that youth are leading.³⁴

School Environments that Value Collaboration, Criticality, and Responsiveness.

Our reflections on the case descriptions offered herein have helped us better understand the ways in which the constraints of traditional public school education can present barriers to innovative approaches such as critical PBE. Conversely, it has also helped us more clearly see the learning environment conditions that could reduce these barriers and thus better sustain critical PBE.

We believe that school environments that aim to sustain critical PBE must value collaboration, criticality, and responsiveness while seeking to amplify marginalized and/or Indigenous perspectives on education, culture, community, and place. Viewed diametrically, this also means that learning environments that aim to sustain critical PBE must move away from structures and practices that promote siloing, urgency, scarcity,

³² Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne, “What Kind of Citizen? The Politics of Educating for Democracy,” *American Educational Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (2004): 237-269.

³³ Jan Cincera, Barbora Valesova, Sarka Krepelkova, Petra Simonova, and Roman Kroufek, “Place-Based

Education from Three Perspectives,” *Environmental Education Research* 25, no. 10 (2019): 1510-1523.

³⁴ Bettina L. Love, “Ally vs. Co-conspirator: What It Means To Be An Abolitionist Teacher,” Lecture presented at We Want to Do More Than Survive, C-SPAN, 2019, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4844082/user-clip-ally-vs-conspirator-means-abolitionist-teacher>.

unquestioning compliance, standardization, and rigidity.

Since critical PBE requires the development of authentic community partnerships, it necessitates time to collaborate and plan new curricula that are responsive to the community and sociocultural moment.³⁵ In other words, critical PBE curricula are necessarily emergent and ever-changing. As such, schedules and expectations that require educators to deprioritize collaboration and curriculum planning present barriers to critical PBE.

Conversely, schedules and expectations that create spaciousness for creative thinking, partnership development, and responsiveness would help sustain the work. In addition, prioritizing collaboration and partnerships also requires fiscal resources to compensate community partners, especially those who represent historically marginalized perspectives, for their labor and expertise. In this way, school-based decisions about scheduling, teaching expectations, and resource allocation can have real implications for critical PBE.

Beyond structural needs, we are also struck by the ways in which critical PBE calls on educators and school leaders to think differently about the purpose of education. The belief that youth empowerment, criticality, and civic engagement are essential outcomes of public education, for example, remains countercultural. Creating school environments that are designed to sustain critical PBE, therefore, requires nothing short of a cultural shift within schools.

The commitment to criticality, for example, requires that schools reject prevailing compliance models of education to move towards those that promote justice-oriented engagement. This requires shifts in not only teaching and curricula, but also disposition and belief. In other words, educators must be supported in learning not

only how to teach criticality but also how to continue to grow their own.

Similarly, the co-development of a curriculum that is responsive to the sociocultural moment, to the youth who are leading the initiative, and to community partners requires dispositions such as flexibility, open-mindedness, curiosity, and courage. This work thus also requires that schools be willing to deprioritize standardized curricula and rethink narrow, rigid definitions of content and teaching. Beyond the curricula and the learning outcomes associated with critical PBE, sustaining critical PBE also requires a critical rethinking of the working conditions and priorities of the school environment itself.

Conclusion

Critical PBE is an approach to education defined by the following features: (a) community-based, (b) partnerships, (c) youth empowerment, and (d) criticality and social change.

As has been illustrated by the cases of critical PBE across Burlington School District, critical PBE has the capacity to engage young people in creating tangible social change within schools, districts, and communities. In this way, critical PBE also has the potential to prepare youth with the skills needed to address some of the most pressing social justice issues facing our global and local communities. With the goal of preparing future generations to create a more socially just future in mind, this is truly education worth sustaining.

We believe that any school in any location can find and forge similar opportunities for their students and communities—and leave both stronger because of it. We also recognize that critical PBE is countercultural and labor-intensive and is thus more likely to thrive in a system

³⁵ Amy L. Powers, "An Evaluation of Four Place-Based Education Programs," *Journal of Environmental Education* 35, no. 4 (2004): 17-32.

that honors and intentionally makes space for this important work. It is our hope, therefore, that school leaders, educators, youth, and community members can use the examples and ideas shared in this article to advocate for and strengthen critical PBE in their own communities. And that in so doing, we might find new ways to collectively move towards the goal of a socially just society.

The authors of this paper are a mix of classroom teachers, district leaders, and university professors, all of whom are invested in critical PBE in the Burlington School District. Simon Jorgenson and Jessica DeMink-Carthew are professors at the University of Vermont (UVM) who engage in teaching and research connected to critical PBE. Azizya Malik and Kate Mattina are grade 5 educators at Champlain Elementary School. Elizabeth Clements and Jeremy DeMink are the lead educators for Youth Participatory Action Research at Edmunds Middle School. Andy Barker was the Project Director for the Burlington City and Lake Semester from 2018-2022 and Autumn Bangoura is the Equity Instructional Leader for Burlington School District and the Director of the Summer Racial Justice Academy.