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What’s Really Worth Sustaining: Issue Introduction

Simon Jorgenson
University of Vermont

Thirty-five years after the Brundtland Commission Report introduced the concept, sustainability has become the leading global discourse of environmental and social concern.¹

Businesses and industries all have sustainability plans by now, as do colleges and universities, elementary and high schools, towns and cities, national governments—and yet the future seems more compromised, and less bright, for more people every day.

Why is this so?

One reason is that sustainability remains such an empty concept that it’s easily coopted and bent by corporate interests towards further environmental and social decline, often in the guise of “development.”² If anything can be sustained, why not profits? Another is the lack of serious attention among policymakers and the general public to critical and Indigenous perspectives on education, community, and place.³

This issue of the Journal of School & Society seeks to intervene in this discursive muddle with specific stories about what’s worth sustaining and why and the role that education might play in all of this.

We invited stories from place-based educators, community-based educators, culture-bearers, carriers of tradition, progressives, policymakers, administrators, teachers, students, and learners of all kinds—anyone and everyone who is concerned with the sustainability of something, someplace, or someone.

The essays featured here are by authors who responded to our call, and generously so. Each essay offers a clear sense for what’s really worth sustaining. Taken together, they offer a vision for a new kind of society—a more just, humane, and sustainable society—the kind of society that emerges when legacy systems of oppression are gone and care for one another and the land become the guiding principles of education and schooling.

We hope that readers of this special issue will be inspired to think more clearly, more deeply, and more carefully about what their own work is sustaining and how that sits with their soul’s longing for a much better world.

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

Simon Jorgenson, Jessica DeMink-Carthew, Autumn Bangoura, Andy Barker, Elizabeth Clements, Jeremy DeMink, Aziza Malik, & Kate Mattina

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. 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.” 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. Indeed, the origins of PBE are most frequently traced to American progressive

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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.

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.” Many followed Dewey’s lead and designed schools and curricula that focused on meeting community needs and improving relations with community members. More radical and reconstructionist initiatives introduced students to local activists and socialist conceptions of democratic citizenship.

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. 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. 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. The goal of these projects included training students as civic leaders and improving relations among East Harlem’s 34 ethnic and racial groups. 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.

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

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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.

pedagogy centers education and schooling around the lived experiences of “culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised students.” 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. 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). 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. 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.

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. 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.” 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.” Rehabilitation and decolonization begin with acknowledging Indigenous claims to land and the historical injustice experienced by BIPOC communities. Greenwood recommends three guiding questions:

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

**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.

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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. 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.” 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.

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

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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.


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
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

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<th>Table 1. Illustrative examples of key features of critical PBE in each case.</th>
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<td><strong>Community-Based</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Place-Based Education at Champlain Elementary School</strong></td>
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partnership with Abenaki scholar and activist Judy Dow, 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 awasos (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 everything 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 wildlife 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.

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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 class 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,

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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 threefold. 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 Team 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 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: Femmes-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 taxonomy 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

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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, 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

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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, 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 SRJÀ 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

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, 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.

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.

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,

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. 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

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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. 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.
Who Belongs? Rethinking Equity in the Outdoors

Aimee Arandia Østensen
Shelburne Farms Institute for Sustainable Schools

Educating for sustainability is the work of my former urban classroom and the work I now do with teachers and schools. This is work rooted in hope for a healthier future for our environment and our human communities. It is also rooted in a caring connection and sense of responsibility to the natural world. These are characteristics that I likely share with all of you. And I imagine that making such meaningful connections possible for all the young people we connect with is something we each aspire to. After all, given the climate crisis that we face, it is what we need.

So, as educators and community members, how do we do that? Research and experience tell us that a child’s early positive experiences engaging in the natural world is an important factor in that child developing environmental behaviors in adulthood.\(^1\) I would also add that we need to have a sense of belonging to and fall in love with the places in which we dwell if we are to heal them. Let’s pause for a moment to consider how you and I developed our own abilities to be in relationship to place.

I’m a first-generation Filipina-American settler in this land. My parents came here for work in the late ‘60s and raised their four children in the suburbs of Upstate New York while also supporting their extended family back home. We were outsiders there, and I know I never developed a sense of belonging in the place where I grew up, a place and time where assimilation into Whiteness was the expectation, and our schooling did nothing to counter the constant messaging to people of Color that “you don’t belong.” I would later understand that the possibility that someone like me could feel that they belonged was a yet-unimagined possibility, an unexamined conundrum for my peers and the community.

But I had the advantages of growing up in a stable middle-class family, and my parents had the interest and ability to spend time with us outdoors. At home we rode bikes, played in the snow, picked apples, and tended the garden. We went camping and hiking and fishing and swimming in the ocean. We

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had regular picnics and BBQs by the lake with close family friends.

My experiences were—and are—a counter-story to the dominant imagination of what kinds of people are recreating outdoors together. When you hear the words skiing and hiking and camping, who appears as the central characters? Despite living these counter-narratives in my brown Asian body, my own media-soaked American mind immediately conjures up images of joyful able-bodied White people communing with nature. Take a moment to recognize that limitation on our collective imagination. In response to an open-ended prompt, we tend to unconsciously reproduce the dominant narrative. If we aren’t intentionally imagining a more diverse narrative, we will reproduce the status quo and continue to limit access to the outdoors. I am grateful to my parents for planting in me the seeds of joy and wonder and reverence for the natural world. Through their actions, they opened a window onto the possibility of deep connection to the mountains, waters, sky, and soil of the places I might inhabit. I am especially grateful because I know that to have this kind of access to the outdoors is a privilege, but it shouldn’t be.

At school, it was a different story. My middle school is just blocks away from the shores of a freshwater lake. Yet throughout my entire thirteen years of public school education, I recall going outside for learning only two times: once in fourth grade, on a field trip to the Erie Canal, and once in ninth-grade Earth Science class to a graveyard down the street from the high school. For me, school was a place that was disconnected from the natural world and all that was happening beyond those classroom windows.

To contextualize this a bit more, the lake closest to my childhood home is Onondaga Lake, a lake that in her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer calls “The Sacred and the
Superfund.” Unknowingly, I grew up on the ancestral lands of the Onondaga people. The shores of the toxic lake where we picnicked and rode our bikes is the site where five Indigenous nations came together as the Iroquois or Haudenosaunee Confederacy and agreed to live by the Great Law of Peace. It is also the site where generations of chemical companies dumped their toxic waste, caking the shoreline with white sludge and coating the bottom of the lake with mercury. In 2006, the Onondaga Nation filed a land rights action with the federal government for the legal title to their homeland, a move that would have enabled them to steward the land and to bring about healing between the land, lake, and all the people who live in the watershed. In 2010, the federal court dismissed this case.

I share this legal story because I see it as a tragic missed opportunity for our schools and our community. When I partner with educators to design learning for sustainability, we use the triple Venn framework, pictured below. What if my schools had centered interconnectedness, sense of place, and the ability for each of us to make a difference? What if, while generations of industrial workers were dumping toxic waste into the sacred lake, schools were also nourishing a love of place and a sense of responsibility to our natural and human communities in generations of school children? Would there have been greater support from the community and within the government for the land rights suit of the Onondaga Nation? How would the outcomes have been different?

As educators and community members, this is our responsibility to our shared future. Public perceptions of who accesses positive experiences in the natural world is limited by racialized
Schools—and childhood—offer us amazing levers for change. Each year we get the chance to reimagine what is possible for our youth today and for the future we are currently creating. Each day is an opportunity to harness the power of school culture and practice to instill a deep sense of community and the actual possibility of belonging for each and every child.

I challenge you to push on the edges of your own vision of who belongs in relationship with the natural world and who the agents of change might be. In the words of Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, who writes about the interplay of race and imagination in literature, to make our world anew requires the emancipation of the imagination itself.\(^5\)

Aimee Arandia Østensen (she/her) is a first generation Filipina-American educator committed to transforming the educational system towards justice and sustainability. She envisions a future in which all children have a deep sense of belonging and love for the places in which they dwell. Aimee’s pathway has been a spiral of diverse experiences in learning, teaching, and being in urban, suburban, and rural spaces. She weaves all of these experiences into her work today as a professional learning facilitator in education for sustainability with Shelburne Farms Institute for Sustainable Schools and adjunct faculty at Antioch University New England.

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Education For the End of the World (as we know it)

Kathleen Kesson
LIU-Brooklyn

Emily Hoyler
University of Vermont

As we consider the field of education for sustainability, and move into an ever-more-uncertain future, questions arise: What are we sustaining? Why? Just what do we mean by “sustainability” anyway? Perhaps instead of asking What is worth sustaining? we might begin with the question What do we need to let go of? Most prescriptions for sustainable culture and education for sustainability presuppose a continuance, in some (perhaps modified) form, of a world in which people in Western industrialized countries continue to enjoy the comforts and prosperity of modernization (a process) and modernity (a social system), the seeds of which “sprouted in the form of a radically new approach to human inquiry in what we now call ‘science’ and the transformation of that science into a marriage with a dynamic technology”—driven largely by the extraction of non-renewable energy stored in the body of the earth for millions of years.

The industrial and technological revolutions that ensued have at their core a brutal centuries-long process of imperialism, invasion, conquest, enslavement, genocide, land theft, removal and relocation, capital accumulation, and the continuing (if shape-shifting) exploitation of global labor in order that an increasingly concentrated group of people might enjoy the promise of a “progressive evolution” and maximize their own comfort, security, and wealth.

Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, in her important book, Hospicing Modernity, is clear that the modern world as we know it is in decline; to be more precise, it is in its death throes. We can tinker around the social and ecological edges of our lives, recycle our plastic, buy electric cars, diversify our corporate boards, reuse our shopping bags, and grow gardens, but the modern system, no matter from whence one dates its commencement or how one defines it, is in need of hospicing—it is beyond reform, beyond fixing, and in desperate need of “palliative care for a dignified death for the old system and assistance with the gestation and birth of new, potentially wiser systems.”

The invitation is to resist the urgency to problem-solve, the haste to fix, the impulse to build a metaphorical seawall to hold back the flood. Rather, in the words of adrienne maree brown, “our temporary and cyclical work is to notice what is broken, clean up the dangerous fragments of the past, and let them go—or re-make them into something beautiful, and then begin again.”

At this juncture, we find ourselves agreeing with Stein and her colleagues in their rethinking of the question of education for sustainability:

Thus, instead of asking how we can reorient education to support sustainable development, we ask what kind of education could prepare people to face the impossibility of sustaining our contemporary modern-colonial habits of being, which are underwritten by racial, colonial, and

2 Oliver, Caniff, and Korhonen, The Primal, the Modern, and the Vital Center, 21.
4 de Oliveira, Hospicing Modernity, 88.
ecological violence. In other words, rather than reimagine “education for sustainable development” we consider how we might imagine “education for the end of the world as we know it.”

Can we educators, eternally optimistic that the right approach to education can solve the ignorance, brutalities, and inequities of the modern world, bear this thought? That we might not be able to fix the world through education (as we know it)? That the assumptions of the capitalist/colonialist/modernist paradigm at the heart of our educational ideas that is, almost without exception, a world/historical hegemonic force, is the engine of annihilation rather than the benevolent force for progress, humanistic values, and continuous improvement that it has for so long claimed to be? That modernity itself denies the violences necessary to maintain it, denies the limits of our bio-systems, and denies the magnitude and complexity of the problems we face?

Perhaps, we must. What if this is the most viable path forward? What will it take to arrive at a place where we can engage in this sober reckoning with the end of the world as we know it?

**Encountering the Shadow**

One way we might begin to grapple with the moment is to learn to see what is often hidden.

In Jungian psychology, the *persona* is the outward expression of the ego, the face we show to the world. There is another side to the personality, however, those aspects that we deny or repress in the unconscious. Jung called this part of us the *shadow*.

The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspect of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for self-knowledge, and it therefore, as a rule, meets with considerable resistance.

We believe it is time for us to face the shadow of modernity, which in Jungian terms has been suppressed under a multitude of outward distractions: narratives of endless economic growth; the myth of universal development towards equality and freedom; continuous improvements in the quality of life for some; pervasive, frivolous, and diverting entertainments; and, now, the pernicious spread of false information and conspiracy theories to confuse and befuddle us even further.

The shadow of modernity is a complex specter, a montage of five hundred years of colonization, exploitation of land and labor, patriarchy, and vast inequalities of wealth. The apparition is no longer merely a shade, but has begun to manifest in undeniably concrete ways:

- There is widespread hunger, oppression, and violent conflict
- The planet is besieged by crippling drought, lowering the levels of rivers as well as underground water tables, threatening agricultural production and the survival of major cities
- Torrential rains have inundated cities and towns in widespread areas in Pakistan, Mississippi, South Korea, Inner Mongolia, and, most recently, Florida
- Dangerous and prolonged heat waves have hit the United States, Western Europe, India, and China
- Wildfires have devastated millions of acres in the United States, Australia, the Amazon rainforest, Indonesia, and Siberia

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Species extinctions continue unabated, with estimates varying from 24 to 150 a day disappearing from Planet Earth.\textsuperscript{9}

This is the very short list. The human social costs are immeasurable, in terms of dislocations, loss of life and home, climate migration, hunger, and conflict—and are likely to only intensify as the ravages to our various systems accelerate.

It is no longer reasonable to doubt the reality that we have entered what some call the Anthropocene (\textit{ánthrōpos}, “man, human” and \textit{-cene}, “an epoch or geologic period”), a period wherein human impacts on the environment related to energy use and other factors are causing a shift out of the relatively stable Holocene period into a new geological era. Some scholars suggest that this period might more accurately be called the “Capitalocene,” as it is not humanity as a whole, but rather the system of empire-building, colonialism, and the accumulation of capital begun in the 1400s that has impacted environmental systems dramatically, culminating in the “Great Acceleration” from the mid-twentieth century onwards, during which the loss of ecosystems due to temperature overshoot and other factors may be irreversible.\textsuperscript{10}

This means, in stark terms, that our generation—those of us born in the mid-twentieth century and forward who have enjoyed the fruits of the scientific/technological revolution—may be responsible for the elimination of life as we know it on our planet. As one philosopher says, “We’re Doomed. Now What?”\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{Facing the Shadow}

\textit{We agree with de Oliveira that we must first face the “constitutive denials”—our collective shadow—in the narrative that modernity has shaped for us before we can “begin again” to remake the world. She frames these thusly:}

\begin{itemize}
  \item The denial of systemic, historical, and ongoing violence and of complicity in harm (the fact that our comforts, securities, and enjoyments are subsidized by expropriation and exploitation elsewhere).
  \item The denial of the limitations of the planet and of the unsustainability of modernity/coloniality (the fact that the finite earth-metabolism cannot sustain exponential growth, consumption, extraction, exploitation, and expropriation indefinitely).
  \item The denial of entanglement\textsuperscript{12} (our insistence in seeing ourselves as separate from each other and the land, rather than ‘entangled’ within a wider living metabolism that is biointelligent).
  \item The denial of the magnitude and complexity of the problems we need to face together (the tendency to look for simplistic solutions that make us feel and look good and that may address symptoms, but not the root causes, of our collective, complex predicament).\textsuperscript{13}
\end{itemize}

Arguing against addressing these denials is the objection that we can’t frighten young people

\textsuperscript{9} Ahmed Djoghlaf, “Message from Mr. Ahmed Djoghlaf, Executive Secretary, on the Occasion of the International Day for Biological Diversity,” at the Convention of Biological Diversity, \url{https://www.cbd.int/ibd/2007/}.


\textsuperscript{12} The word entanglement comes to us from the world of quantum physics, and in utterly simplified terms refers to the interdependence of matter and energy systems. As often happens, the term began to surface in social theory, and has come to signify “both the multiplicity of interconnected worlds and our entanglements in multispecies ecologies that include different knowledges, practices, and technologies” (Common Worlds Research Collective, “Learning to Become With the World: Education for Future Survival,” 2020, 8, \url{https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374923}).

\textsuperscript{13} de Oliveira, \textit{Hospicing Modernity}, 23.
with these realities, that we must shelter them from the hard news of the relentless catastrophes that are upon us lest they give up hope. But the shadow is a sneaky ghost; when not acknowledged it makes its presence known in various ways including the epidemic of youth despair, anxiety, and depression.\textsuperscript{14}

Jung outlined in detail the defensive measures individuals will go to in order not to confront the shadow: “he will not see his own weaknesses, but will find causes everywhere else for his inability to accomplish more of what he sets out to do. Always there will be an unfortunate combination of events which works against him, or there will be somebody that is out to get him.”\textsuperscript{15} In this perhaps, we can see the scapegoating of immigrants, the rollback of rights for women, and the racist backlash against the incremental social progress made by people of Color in the United States as the predictable defensive moves of a patriarchy and White supremacy to protect its shadow. But the healing of the social body, much like the healing of the human psyche, must come to terms with its shadow—what “is true for the individual as microcosm, it is surely true for the nation as macrocosm.”\textsuperscript{16}

Young people are certainly aware of the social and ecological challenges facing humanity and are concerned for their futures. Assisting them in understanding the root causes of the present situation and providing opportunities to exert agency can counter the despair and anxiety that so many are experiencing. We will not solve the problems of climate catastrophe or mass extinction, of social justice or inequities, if we cannot at last acknowledge the rot at the core of the modern system and move forward with humility to repair, regenerate, and reconcile the human and non-human relationships that have been fractured by the modern system.

Some might call for a “rethinking” of education and of culture. But it is possible that we cannot even think outside of the parameters of modernity, despite the popularity of expressions that exhort us to “think outside of the box.” What makes it so hard to think outside of the boundaries in which we have been imprisoned, much like the subjects in Plato’s cave who mistake the shadows being cast on the walls for reality?

The discipline of education within modern/colonial societies actively participates in the reproduction of these denials. Our discipline is not well equipped to interrupt denials since it mostly works with modern/colonial theories of Cartesian subjectivity focused on the mastery of content that virtually erase the role of our individual and collective unconscious.\textsuperscript{17}

Descartes does get blamed, perhaps unfairly, for a lot, but to understand him is to place him at the root of modern subjectivity, with its profound rupture between the external world and the internal world. Descartes understood the Self as a rational, unitary subject capable of objectively viewing the world and its constituent parts. The legacy of this split is the victory of logic and analysis over intuition and feeling, the triumph of alienation and estrangement of the human from the world, along with the inclinations and capabilities to master, control, and predict. While Descartes can’t be directly blamed for such modern barbarisms as gulags, death camps, and nuclear war, it is fair to say that he set the conditions for such outcomes with the brutal separation of self from world, and the resultant perception of all that is external to


\textsuperscript{15} Singer, \textit{Boundaries of the Soul}, 224.

\textsuperscript{16} Singer, \textit{Boundaries of the Soul}, 224.

\textsuperscript{17} Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti, “The Task of Education as We Confront the Potential for Social and Ecological Collapse,” \textit{Ethics and Education} 16, no.2 (2021), 146, \url{https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2021.1896632}. 
oneself as “things”—what the Marxists call *reification*.¹⁸

In education, this mastery of the objective world takes the form of the mastery of academic content (most often in the form of decontextualized abstractions and the memorization of sound bites) and a negation of other vital experiences: sensuousness, emotion, imagination, wonder, relationship, and depth of learning.

What might happen, if instead of these negations, we find ways to truly center the curriculum around the “end of the world as we know it”—enabling the new ways of thinking, feeling, doing, and being that we all need to survive, to thrive, and to engage creatively with the remaking of the world?

**Dismantling our Optical Delusions**

Modernity and modernization developed alongside Humanism, a system of thought that attached central importance to human beings, rather than to divine or supernatural forces.

Secular forms of philosophical Humanism helped to free humankind from centuries of superstition and dogma, and supported self-reflection, inquiry, and the advent of human rights. But the liberation of humans from limiting dogmas, coupled with the advance of Enlightenment science, had contradictory effects, as Max Weber proposed over one hundred years ago: a world that benefitted in many ways from rationally-derived explanations, but a world no longer rich with the mysteries and wonder of creation—a disenchanted, alienating place devoid of spiritual and transcendent dimensions of experience.¹⁹

And compounding the long-term effects of this emergent worldview, the new empowerment of the individual resulted in the centering of the human species and an emphasis on the domination and control of nature, rather than an acknowledgement of our entanglement with all of creation.

Many ways of knowing hold that we are comprised of four bodies, or dimensions of being: an intellectual body, an emotional body, a physical body, and a spiritual body. Each of these bodies are essential to our wellbeing and our integral wholeness. Yet schooling concerns itself primarily with building and fortifying the intellectual body, while denying the other three. Through suppressing the physical body (containing bodies to chairs, single file lines, and personal space), taming the emotional body (through things such as social-emotional curricula that foster compliance), and banishing the spiritual body altogether (as the system cannot discern between religion and spirit), we further diffract the human experience and exacerbate the sense of fragmentation pervasive in Western thought and ways of being.

Humanism is closely related to the forms of education still dominant on the planet today. Such distinctions as those between the knower and the known, the mind and the body, and the separation of reason from emotion might be said to have descended from Humanistic philosophy. The Cartesian concept of the “I” as a bounded entity, surrounded by stable substances and objects in space that constitute separate “others” to manipulate, utilize, and transact with, is at the heart of Modernity/Humanism.

Is it possible that this construct no longer serves the needs of survival? Can we live with the reality that life itself is flux, and the solitary individual, with its sense of separation, mastery, and control in concert with an economic system predicated on resource extraction, endless growth, and needless consumption, has led us to

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Reconceiving the very nature of what it means to be human has implications for all aspects of human experience. Reconceptualizing the aims and purposes of education has significant philosophical dimensions and correlative practical implications.

As such, we pose the following questions:

- What if our educational processes were devoted to unlearning the “optical delusions” of modernity?  
- What if we devoted ourselves to helping young people understand the world as a living, breathing organism rather than a great machine that can be programmed and calibrated to meet our human needs?
- What if schools (or whatever we create to replace them) became spaces where young people could realize their full, multidimensional humanity, rather than merely how to become cogs in an economic machine predicated on the demolition of the planet?
- What if we opened up the hidden treasure of epistemological pluralism to our young, and encouraged them to delve into the possibilities of narrative and myth, of ancestral knowledge and intuition, of embodied knowing rather than restricting them to the narrow versions of reason and logic we have been so successfully indoctrinated with?

Such questions highlight the pedagogical need, emphasized by de Oliveira, to “expand our existing sensibilities, affective landscapes, and constellations of knowledge and relationality,” an expansion that might prepare us all “with the stamina and strength to face the difficulties of unlearning our investments in a dying system.”

This multi-faceted task brings us to the questions posed by the editors of this journal: What is worth sustaining and why? What cultures? What ecologies? What traditions? What knowledges? Which human needs are worth sustaining? Which are not? And of great importance to readers of this journal, What role should education play in all of this?

If, then . . .

If we are capable of letting go of the deeply embedded assumptions that structure educational thought in our modern world, then we might be able to assist young people in learning to live with uncertainty, paradox, and complexity, and with the truth that there is no holding on, nor letting go, because by its very nature, nothing is permanent. We might begin to realize the ontological need for an educational philosophy and practice that is relational—that understands there is no separation of self and other, of knower and known, of subject and object, but rather endless flows of being and becoming in which we are deeply entangled with everything in creation, visible and invisible, material and molecular, objective and subjective.

20 The quote is from Albert Einstein and can be found at Rabbi Jonah C. Steinberg, “Beyond the Delusion of Separateness,” (1950/2016), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/beyond-the-delusion-of-se_b_13219428.
21 Steinberg, “Beyond the Delusion of Separateness.”
22 Steinberg, “Beyond the Delusion of Separateness.”
24 Adrian Ivakiv, Shadowing the Anthropocene: Eco-Realism for Turbulent Times (Goleta CA: Punctum Books, 2018).
We apologize for adding more questions than answers to these provocations. But we are not without prescriptions and possibilities that could enable a truly “post-modernist/post-Humanist” education to emerge, one that refuses the “fixed horizons of certainty” and moves us toward “engaging with what is viable yet unimaginable.”

We are fully aware that such grand experiments have been tried before and come up against the modernist brick wall built of centuries of hierarchies, domination, exploitation of people and planet, of grand schemes of reason and universalities, and of the compelling promises of security and certainty. The centuries-old philosophies of modernism brought us an educational model premised on individual achievement, the acquisition of increasingly abstract forms of knowledge, the myth of meritocracy, and the sifting and sorting of humankind according to narrow definitions of ability.

This model has spread across the planet, and conventional wisdom states that the more educated one is, the better, and the more people who have access to this form of education, the better off we will all be. However, we must acknowledge that much of the damage being inflicted upon the planet in the forms of chemical pollution, climate change, species extinction, and sophisticated weaponry has been implemented by highly educated people.

How is this possible?

**Shadows on the Cave Walls**

Modern education values literacy and numeracy above all, and in our urgency to indoctrinate children into the modern economic system, we have attempted to hasten the acquisition of these skills by ever-younger age groups to the point that we now apply “remediation” and “reading recovery” techniques to children as young as five and six years of age. Meanwhile countries such as Finland who have a much more relaxed attitude towards early academic achievement continue to surpass the United States in international measures of school achievement, despite fewer school hours, no standardized tests, long recesses, and free lunch.

The transition from immersion in the sensory world of early childhood to the world of abstract signs is a major event in the life of a child and should be approached with the reverence it deserves. The origins of alphabets lie in pre-history, with pictorial representations of plants, animals, serpents, and events in the lives of people. David Abram reminds us that “the glyphs which constitute the bulk of these ancient scripts continually remind the reading body of its inherence in a more-than-human field of meanings . . . they continually refer our senses beyond the strictly human sphere.”

Educated people often divide humans into binary categories: literate/illiterate; modern/primitive; smart/dumb. These categories embed some deep cultural assumptions: that history is a linear narrative of material progress, that humans are getting smarter, and that our lives are improving immensely with rapid developments in science and technology that make our lives safer and more comfortable. Cultural groups that have not developed a written text are considered inferior, less intelligent than modern, text-based cultures. However, pre-text societies did manage to survive and thrive for many tens of thousands of years prior to the invention of

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such modern artifacts as paper and written alphabets, printing presses, cameras, and now, the binary coding of the digits 0 and 1 to represent words and images, along with the storage of enormous amounts of information on tiny digital devices. With the advent of these technologies, some cognitive capacities have atrophied, including orality and memory, capacities that pre-text societies developed to a high degree.

What has also diminished with the advent of text is our inclination to engage sensorily with the animate and inanimate worlds, the capacities that once made it possible for the kinds of deep relationships and connections that created the sense of universal love for and connection with all beings, including the non-human world. As we struggle now to reweave some threads in the animistic fabric of the world, we need to examine some of the assumptions about the role of text in our individual and social development.

Text-based reading and writing are indeed vital ways of learning about the world, but in the early years, and continuing on up through the grades, language needs to be given expression in multiple creative ways, thus becoming a living thing rather than mere marks on a page. As language becomes a living thing, so the world is animated. The Earth begins to breathe, and if we listen carefully and attune to the more subtle energies of the living world, we might begin to comprehend the speech of the more-than-human-others: the call of the crow, the rustle of the deer through the grasses, and perhaps even the electric waves of vibration amongst the chattering mycelium, the songs that connect the trees of the forest at their most elemental level. As David Abram says so eloquently: “Only if words are felt, bodily presences, like echoes or waterfalls, can we understand the power of spoken language to influence, alter, and transform the perceptual world.”

In many Indigenous societies, some of which have lived in relative balance with their bi-osystems for since time immemorial, language, memory, and information are deeply connected to place. The landscape itself is often linked to vital intelligence, which might be further encoded in song, dance, myth, story, or ceremony. It is difficult for modern rootless people to understand the tragedy of land loss, such as what Native American people (and others) experienced when they were forcibly relocated away from their homelands onto reservations. The loss of ancestral burial locations and sacred ceremonial sites contributed to a loss of cultural memory and identity, which has taken generations to begin to recapture. Some pre-text people used the skyscape as a memory device; you have probably heard of the navigational feats of island people who used information from the stars, wind patterns, bird migrations, and a strong oral tradition to guide their long ocean voyages—and this, for thousands of years. The prodigious memory skills of many Indigenous people are well documented; one study, for example, shows that Navajo elders memorize and classify more than 700 insects, including their identifying features, habitats, and behaviors.

Language, for modern people, is decontextualized. It has been torn from its home in the rocks, in the stars, and in the waters. Many modern people do not experience a deep sense of connection to place. Easily transportable languages such as English are unequal to the task of helping people to establish relationships with the natural world that lead to long term regeneration and sustainability. With the click of a finger on a keyboard, people in Vermont, Kenya, and Singapore can “communicate” at a basic level. But as theorist Chet Bowers highlighted so well, the transmission of words and facts via computer is not a neutral technology, but rather has

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29 Abram, The Spell of the Sensuous, 89.

culturally-transforming effects in which certain human capacities are amplified and others are diminished. Amplified are the reinforcement of individually-centered relations, decontextualized ways of knowing, and the centrality of commodified relations. Diminished is local and intergenerational knowledge, human and other-than-human communal contact, and forms of communication mostly unknown to modern people but a part of everyday life of many Indigenous people.

What do we have to learn from the wind? What are the whales singing about? What about the intelligence of mycorrhizal fungi? Can we learn to “think like a tree”?

Our challenge, then, is that we need to slough off the logo-centered biases of our modern worldview, and then reconstruct and reintegrate the positive aspects of this tradition with the folk cultures and wisdom traditions of the world that have sustained a reciprocal relationship with the many other-than-human species with whom we share the planet. We need to cultivate ways of knowing, feeling, doing, and being that respect the texture and immediacy of reality as well as the power and elegance of abstract thought. We need to create meaningful stories and rituals of enactment for (modern) people who have lost their deep sensory engagement with the natural world—people who mistakenly see decontextualized bits of information as the central road to truth and wisdom. With the cultivation of such relational ontologies and epistemological pluralisms, we may, as a species, begin our emergence from our modern cave and its shadows into the bright light of an animated and enchanted world, one in which the human species is entangled, embedded in a multiplicity of interconnected worlds.

Midwifing a New Paradigm of Education

The modern vision of reality is a fragmented one in which relationships have been fractured—relations between people, between people and animals, between people and the plant world, between people and their labor, and between people and the mysterious energies of the cosmos that sustain the coming-into-being, the sustaining, and the perishing of life.

We believe there is a new vision of reality emerging, a vision grounded in relationship, the cultivation of deep relationship with all of creation and between the past, the present moment, and the future, and between the visible and the invisible worlds. We believe that young people are sensing these new possibilities, and that it is up to us, to all of us who care about young people and value learning, to support their desire for an education that is relevant, meaningful, and purposeful and which satisfies their longing for a future that is just, sustainable, and joyful.

But as de Oliveira reminds us:

Before anything different can happen, before people can sense, hear, relate and imagine differently, there must be a clearing, a decluttering, an initiation into the unknowable; and a letting go of the desires for certainty, authority, hierarchy, and of insatiable consumption as a mode of relating to everything. We will need a genuine severance that will shatter all projections, anticipations, hopes, and expectations in order to find something we lost about ourselves, about time/space, about the depth of the shit we are in, about the medicines/poisons we carry.

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What may not be worth sustaining is the very notion of sustainability itself, along with comforting ideas of certainty, security, and stability. “Hospicing modernity” implies that we provide palliative care and harm reduction for the dying system as we move into rebirthing something new, something not yet imagined. de Oliveira notes a number of pitfalls, as modern people come face to face with the realities of what must be surrendered: that “diversity, equity, and inclusion” may be but “form(s) of currency consumed by the dominant groups without a substantial commitment to changing the systemic conditions of suffering,” that “oppression Olympics” can become a convenient way to divide and conquer, that critique, while useful, “leads only to cosmetic rather than to substantive changes,” that we place too much trust in idealized leaders; and last, and perhaps most important, as systems really do begin to collapse, that people in the dominant group look toward authoritarian leaders who will establish order and fix the chaos, and restore their privileged place in the social hierarchy.

Pitfalls notwithstanding, we must not allow them to paralyze us. Dedicated educators meet with young people daily, and circumstances require that we engage. If we can bring ourselves to “let go” of the apparatus of the educational paradigm brought us by the old German Republic of Prussia, a quasi-military state, which gave the West compulsory schooling, educational technologies of surveillance and control, the idea of a prescribed national curriculum, and regular testing we can humbly begin to explore educational correctives, alternatives to the constituent denials that de Oliveira poses.

In Vermont, where we live and work, we see evidence on the ground of the new thinking, feeling, doing, and being that might enable us to survive and thrive: people forming communities of mutual aid; engaging collectively in agroforestry and planting permaculture gardens in their communities; working together to establish wetlands and other adaptive measures for flood protection; establishing eco-communities; creating time banks and alternative currencies; attempting to redistribute land to underserved communities; learning to forage and discovering local plant-based medicines.

These efforts represent a commitment to localization, a framework best developed by Helena Norberg-Hodge and the local futures movement her work has sparked. Young people often complain that their schoolwork has no relevance; transforming the curriculum to engage students in the meaningful work of a just transition to a way of life with the capacity to provide a more stable and enduring social and ecological context for the flourishing of human and non-human species is truly relevant to the historical moment.

An emerging movement for “community schools” is beginning to embrace this more robust understanding of the entanglement of young people and their families, schools, natural surroundings, and community organizations, including non-profits, farms, forests, parks, and businesses. Current legislative policy and some state funding supports the development of a new model of schooling with deep connections to local resources and expertise. Communities in Vermont have much to offer the education of young people in this time of transition, with their emphasis on local and participatory democracy (town meetings and many activist groups), the hundreds of worker- and consumer-owned cooperatives, its well-developed organic agriculture sector and farm-to-plate initiatives, its deep commitment to careful land use, its vast

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35 de Oliveira, Hospicing Modernity, 182.
36 de Oliveira, Hospicing Modernity, 183.
37 de Oliveira, Hospicing Modernity, 183.
alternative health care community, and its wealth of creative resources in the form of artists, craftspeople, musicians, and performance spaces. The COVID pandemic sparked the creation of outdoor learning spaces in many schools in Vermont, and there is a thriving forest school movement in the state.40

Recent policy has laid a strong foundation for a structural transformation of schools. Carnegie units have been discarded. Grades are not required (schools develop systems of “proficiencies” that students can meet in multiple ways). Credit-bearing learning can occur in school or out of school, and young people can identify mentors in the community to work with. The system is far from perfect—there are pockets of genuine innovation, there is backlash in some places to innovation, and there is a portion of the education community that is more or less “stuck” in the status quo. But there is movement, and a growing awareness that business as usual will simply not suffice given the enormous social and ecological challenges we face.41

Only when we can acknowledge the scope of the modern crisis, admit to ourselves that the social, political, economic, and ecological systems we have taken for granted are in various stages of breakdown, can we begin to administer the palliative care needed to lessen the agony of mortality and engage creatively with the possibilities of a new birth. “Hospicing modernity” will require engaging in service to ease the suffering that will inevitably accompany the passing of an outmoded way of life. Though we concur with the observation that White supremacy culture tends to rush to fix problems without adequate attention to uncovering the root of the problem,42 one of the main themes of de Oliveira’s work, we do believe (perhaps optimistically) that palliative care and midwifery—the birthing of the new—can be creatively coupled to meet the challenges of our time.

To that end, in the above table, we propose several “pedagogical possibilities” that could be reanimated and reoriented to disrupt de Oliveira’s denials. Relying on the status quo (the continuance of modernity) for our survival is magical thinking—the idea that the systems created by highly-educated people that have got us into this mess can get us out of it. We have sketched here an outline of the deep ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions that must be challenged and reconceptualized if we are to have any hope of cultivating a new civilization, one that might be truly “sustainable”—in the sense of providing a stable and enduring social and ecological context for the flourishing of life.

We are heartened by the appearance of a recent report commissioned by UNESCO that affirms many of the propositions we have explored here, including the important idea that attempts to achieve sustainable futures that continue to separate humans off from the rest of the world are delusional and futile. The report asserts the centrality of education in a pivotal role of radically reconfiguring human place and agency within this interdependent world, and boldly states the necessity of a “paradigm shift: from learning about the world in order to act upon it, to learning to become with the world around us.”43 The report affirms that our very survival depends on our capacity to make this shift.


We agree with Donald Oliver, in his important treatise on the limits of modernity, that we must:

begin by reclaiming or creating living places and renewing genuine cultures both without and within our own being and in the oneness where that being seems to belong. This effort will require many of us to quiet the noise of much of our immediate modern reality and enter continuing, sustained, and significant living places in which we can participate and negotiate and engage simply what in the moment of our history seems right and meaningful.44

Somehow, we have to find appropriate ways to unravel a way of being that, in recent years, has accelerated around the world at a dizzying rate. It is impossible to address the problems in education or propose new models of sustainability unless the crisis of modernity—its shadow—is addressed head on. The transition from a dying society to an as-yet-undefined future will not be painless. It will not be without conflict. But it is necessary.

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44 Oliver, Caniff, and Korhonen, *The Primal, the Modern, and the Vital Center*, 324.
Kathleen Kesson is Professor Emerita of Teaching, Learning and Leadership (School of Education at LIU—Brooklyn). She is the former Director of Teacher Education at Goddard College and was the founding Director of the John Dewey Project on Progressive Education at the University of Vermont, a research and policy organization. She has published numerous books and articles on democracy and education, arts in education, critical theory, curriculum theory, and spirituality and education. She is currently a Global Affiliate with the GUND Institute for Environment at the University of Vermont and is a contributing member of the Great Transition Initiative, a project of the Tellus Institute at Harvard University.

Emily Hoyler is the managing director at the University of Vermont’s Tarrant Institute for Innovative Education, as well as a professional affiliate with Shelburne Farms. She is also a doctoral student in the University of Vermont’s Transdisciplinary Leadership and Creativity for Sustainability program. Her current interests include unsettling self/systems, community resilience, cultivation of relational space for change, critical pedagogies, Education for Sustainability, compassionate systems awareness and social fields, community-engaged learning, place-based learning, youth leadership, climate justice, and middle level education.
Sustaining Relationships through Critical Place Inquiry

Alexandra Schindel,
Ryan Rish,
Kellyann Ramdath,
David Mawer,
Conor Higgins, &
Matthew Christiano
University at Buffalo, SUNY

In this essay and the accompanying StoryMaps, we utilize critical place inquiry as a method and pedagogy for grappling with concerns of sustainability. These concerns are related to relationships among human and non-human actors in place-based science education. Within a Climate Justice in Education graduate course in a teacher education program, we explored such questions as: What is worth sustaining? Who benefits from sustaining and sustainability? Who is sustaining what and for whom?

The Climate Justice in Education course was framed around this guiding question: How do we heal our relationships with people and the natural world as a response to the climate crisis? This question lies at the heart of some of the fundamental root causes of the climate crisis and the impetus for climate justice. Namely, that the climate crisis has been caused by historical and current human activities that favor the development of capital and capitalistic lifestyles in developed countries, and that the pursuit of capital and these lifestyles occurs at the expense of or through the exploitation of humans and the natural world.

Climate justice involves recognizing the deep and intertwined relationships between people and their environment and the ways in which climate change disproportionately affects the most vulnerable populations on the planet. Vulnerable populations, namely historically-marginalized communities and non-human living beings (i.e. plants, animals), have typically done little to cause the climate crisis. Thus, when we question what it means to heal relationships with others and the natural world, we directly confront the cultural and material modes of production that have caused the climate crisis and we (re)imagine just transitions towards sustainability and sustainable relationships with places, people, and the natural world.

In the climate justice course, we engaged in inquiries broadly centered on the climate crisis, anchored in specific places, and critical of the deep historical, cultural, social, and political meanings of place and land. We represent these inquiries with ArcGIS StoryMaps described below. We utilize StoryMaps because they offer an inviting presentation format that can combine multimedia, text, and interactive maps.

In what follows, we first describe critical place inquiry and our framing of ethical care-centered relationships. We then describe the StoryMaps tool, introduce each StoryMap, and share how the process helped us make sense of what is worth sustaining. The StoryMap introductions are told through the voices of the StoryMap authors.

Critical Inquiry of Place

We foregrounded the concept of place in our climate justice course.

Place and our relationships with places matter. The places we inhabit and navigate in our daily lives are inextricably linked to our life experiences and the life experiences of others who have relationships with those places. These relationships to places and histories within places index power relations among people and other species. Therefore, place can be considered a “site of conflict as various constituents struggle
over its meaning and identity and wrestle over tensions of transformation and preservation.”

The “throwntogetherness of place demands negotiation” as people with different priorities, purposes, and lived experiences come together to consider the meaning and value of a particular place. However, we acknowledge that not all constituents in the negotiation of place have equal agency and influence in regard to how a place is defined and used by the people who dwell there. For example, white settlers of Native territory where Native people have been displaced or subject to genocide have historically appropriated, redefined, renamed, and redesigned those places for their own benefit. Therefore, any negotiation of place also demands an interrogation of who we are in relationship to each other, attending to histories and power asymmetries, in addition to who we are in relationship to a particular place.

With these concerns in mind, we use the term “critical inquiry of place” to name processes and practices involved in learning about places from the critical perspective of social and environmental justice as well as Indigenous and feminist frameworks described below. This critical perspective guides inquiry into not only the power relations among humans who have complex relationships with particular places but also other species that inhabit and traverse those places, all of whom/which shape those places in material and ideological ways. This critical inquiry of place also demands that we account for our own positionality by acknowledging how our ideologies and ontologies shape our situated understanding of ourselves and others within particular places. This accounting of our positionality takes into consideration not only who we are as individuals but also who we represent historically as a member of a cultural group.

The students enrolled in the climate justice course conducted critical inquiries of place throughout the semester culminating in Story-Maps, some of which we highlight below. The students were tasked with identifying a particular place of interest to them and leading an investigation of that place through historical, ecological, sociological, and critical lenses. Their goal was to tell a story of the place from these perspectives with as much complexity as they could discover while considering their own positional-ity in relationship to the people, other species, and places they investigated.

**Relationships with the Natural World**

We draw upon Indigenous and feminist scholarship to better understand how we might heal relationships with people and the natural world.

Within the course, we engaged in re-examining our own socialization in Western, Eurocentric, and colonial spaces through Indigenous perspectives that foreground the ways in which gratitude and reciprocity must become the central framing of our interactions with the natural world. We also drew upon the perspectives of critical and politicized caring to consider our own shifts from abstract reasoning to relational reasoning.

Indigenous wisdom and land education influence us to consider our relationships with land—and likewise to consider how the people, lands, and more-than-human inhabitants of earth are constructed, positioned, neglected, and

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situated within overlapping systems of power and oppression. In the course, we read Robin Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* to reflectively explore Indigenous perspectives and relationships. *Braiding Sweetgrass* beautifully navigates across time, place, epistemology, and Kimmerer’s own roles as a mother and botanist to share how these identities and epistemologies can help heal our relationships with land.

As a class, we reflected on Indigenous perspectives towards land alongside our own historically-situated perspectives and relationships with land and, specifically, the places we inhabit. Speaking of the history of settler colonialism in the US and forced removal of Native peoples from their homelands, Kimmerer emphasizes the meaning of land:

> Children, language, lands: almost everything was stripped away, stolen when you weren’t looking because you were trying to stay alive. In the face of such loss, one thing our people could not surrender was the meaning of land. In the settler mind, land was property, real estate, capital, or natural resources. But to our people, it was everything: identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustained us. Our lands were where our responsibility to the world was enacted, sacred ground. It belonged to itself; it was a gift, not a commodity, so it could never be bought or sold.

This responsibility to the world, Kimmerer explains, can be enacted with practices of gratitude and reciprocity. She shares, “we must give back in equal measure for what we are given. Our first responsibility, the most potent offering we possess, is gratitude.” Thus, Kimmerer articulates how awakening our consciousness of ecology and our engagement with the world around us requires us to embrace our reciprocal relationship with the living world.

Our class similarly engaged with feminist perspectives to decenter abstract and distant relationships towards the natural world and its inhabitants. Feminist scholars argue we must center compassion and care as a moral ethic that

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6 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*.
influences decision-making. Russell and Bell extend this ethic to highlight the value of empathy and relational reasoning, which is particularly significant in science due to the history of privileging abstract and unattached reasoning. Ecofeminist scholars position relational attitudes with the natural world within broader calls for justice. They push us to commit not only to the development of “non-hierarchical care-based relationships with human and nonhuman others, but . . . also . . . to the interrogation of all potential drivers of injustice and inequity.”

We drew upon this work to shift from learning about the natural world to learning with/within/from the natural world to strive towards reciprocal relationships.

Next, we share the StoryMaps as examples of critical inquiries of places that have been influenced by these frameworks.

**ArcGIS StoryMaps**

ArcGIS StoryMaps is a web-based digital storytelling platform developed and maintained by Esri, an international geographic information system (GIS) software company based in Redlands, CA.

The StoryMaps platform enables the creation of visually rich, interactive web pages that integrate digital maps and GIS data to present information and tell stories. The StoryMaps interface offers a block-based editing system that allows users to add, modify, and rearrange content blocks from within a web browser. Here, users have the option of adding multimedia, text, and interactive maps to build their StoryMap, and this content can be imported from a user’s personal computer or sourced from a variety of GIS data websites.

Crucially, the StoryMaps platform affords a rich blending of these media forms—a StoryMap might guide viewers through a map that presents a hiking trail containing photo pop-ups and text descriptions of points of interest determined by the StoryMap creator. Additionally, StoryMaps’ integration with other Esri software, including the popular ArcGIS Online, allows for GIS data and maps to be seamlessly imported into one’s StoryMap. Users can perform GIS functions using data within an ArcGIS Online map, for example, before presenting this data

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10. Constance L. Russell and Anne C. Bell, “A Politicized Ethic of Care: Environmental Education from an Ecofeminist Perspective,” in *Women’s Voices in Experiential Education*, ed. Karen Warren (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 1996) 172-81. See also Jane Goodall’s words on empathy in scientific endeavors, Jane Goodall, “Being with Jane Goodall,” filmed September 2014 at NOVA’s Secret Life of Scientists and Engineers, video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Qu7Wn1mRYA&t=101s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Qu7Wn1mRYA&t=101s).


within a StoryMap. Users can share their StoryMaps using a custom URL that is generated by the platform upon publishing a finalized project to the web. Finally, the StoryMaps platform supports web accessibility by offering tools that permit users’ StoryMaps to adhere to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. By default, a StoryMap supports keyboard navigation and semantic web page structure, and users can provide multimedia content with alternative text as well as suitable text and background color contrast.14

Students enrolled in the climate justice course utilized the StoryMaps platform as a tool for conducting critical place inquiries related to the climate crisis. Specifically, the mapmaking features within the platform uniquely afforded a spatial dimension to characterize each student’s inquiry and resultant climate justice story. In the StoryMaps student examples below, interactive digital maps help convey information (and, ultimately, tell a story) that traditional media forms such as text and imagery could not otherwise communicate as effectively. Throughout these projects are rich examples of integrating critical spatial inquiries with modern GIS tools afforded by StoryMaps.

Additionally, students in the present context embraced StoryMaps’ accessibility in two ways. First, because the platform runs in an internet browser and does not require high-end computer hardware as is typical with other dedicated GIS software, students were able to work on their StoryMaps with their personal computers both in the classroom and at home. Second, we found that students quickly gained comfort with the StoryMaps platform and were not burdened with an otherwise complicated interface: after just two scaffolded learning sessions—a single tutorial activity and a guided in-class working day—students were equipped to navigate the platform’s block-based editing system and build interactive, multimedia-rich accounts of their inquiries.

What is Worth Sustaining? As Told through StoryMaps

In what follows, we share four of the StoryMaps created by the authors (who were instructors, researchers, and learners in the course). They are introduced here by the StoryMap’s authors who each reflected on how the StoryMap is representative of how they consider sustainability and, specifically, the question: What is worth sustaining? We invite readers to explore each of the StoryMaps linked below.

Conor’s StoryMap, entitled Land Use in the Allegheny National Forest, explores the intersection of competing demands upon the land, which is used for recreation, for resource extraction (e.g. timber and oil), and as home and territory for the Endangered Northern Goshawk.

Conor shared:

The Allegheny National Forest is a location where sustainability efforts are competing with historical and current demands. Lands preserved for timber were taken from Indigenous people. Endangered species compete for space with oil leases and campgrounds. Managing the conflicting demands for resources through conservation

and sustainable use practices benefits everyone. All finite resources are worth sustaining, these include the natural resources we need like timber, clean water, air, and spaces for recreation. This also extends to resources used by others, namely wildlife habitat. Cultural resources, while harder to quantify, also require sustaining. Frequently, these three categories can be sustained with the same efforts as they are deeply intertwined. Our requirements are similar to the needs of nature, and cultural knowledge is woven into these places. Future generations, diverse cultures, and complex ecosystems can only exist with deliberate sustainability efforts.

Kelly’s StoryMap, Pelham Bay Park: A Place of Refuge, Resilience, Resistance in The Climate Crisis Threat to BlackJoy & Communities of Color, shares the story of Blackjoy and community resilience in the Bronx and highlights the risk that the climate crisis poses to the Bronx and Pelham Bay Park.

Kelly reflected:

The popular yet least favored of New York City’s five boroughs—the Bronx—is the place that I call home. The Bronx is home for over 1.4 million people, yet it typically receives the least attention from city planners outside of revenue-drawing attractions like: The Bronx Zoo, The Botanical Gardens, and Yankee Stadium. Coverage of the area in the media is generally associated with negativity, including crime, death, chaos, and other problems. For residents, however, the Bronx represents a rich reality where the negative news are actually issues that stem from resource neglect and a lack of investments in the communities, housing, and schools. Our community is filled with diverse people, history, and opportunities that are often ignored and overlooked, or that are “solved” by leaving the area for a better chance of survival. In recent years Climate Change has added yet another layer of challenges to the community and to Pelham Bay Park with extreme flooding and weather. The StoryMap takes you on a journey to a place important in NYC history and located in the Bronx. The largest park in NYC, filled with playgrounds, hiking trails, fishing areas, picnic and BBQ areas, beach access among other things. Pelham Bay Park is loved and enjoyed by the Bronx community; it is worth sustaining as having value in and of itself; and it is worth sustaining because it is one of the places where residents can seek refuge in the midst of chaos.

Matt’s StoryMap, Devil’s Hole State Park and the Green Paradox, dives into the rich history of Devil’s Hole, NY, located just north of Niagara Falls.

After creating this StoryMap, Matt reflected:

We can no longer afford to forget the histories of both humans and more-than-humans that have been affected by our presence. The steady expansion of industry, commercialism, and population all too often steps on the toes of those unfortunate enough to be in the pathway of industry. What is seen as progress for the new, outweighs the future of the old. Devil’s Hole State Park, NY, and the surrounding areas are filled with natural, historical, and cultural beauty, both new and old. The meaningfulness and importance of this region manifests itself historically and in the present through its use by various peoples and beings. We can view Devil’s Hole as a reminder of Indigenous practices as an important portage route, as a place of conflict and bloodshed for early American settlers, and as a place of freedom for those escaping slavery by travelling across the Niagara River to Canada. The region also represents the home of over one thousand of the Tuscarora Nation and as a reminder of their dislocation and disruption. Finally, the region stands as homes for a plethora of wildlife and a delicate ecosystem under threat by a growing industry and population. And while
the long-term benefit and advantages that the industrialization of this area has had on developing our society cannot be understated, we must always remember where it came from and what was sacrificed. Sustaining our relationship to these histories will inform us on how to rebuild our relationship to nature and our relationships with humanity itself.

Alexa and Ryan’s StoryMap, *(Re)Mapping Sustainable Ramp Foraging at Hunter’s Creek*, reflects on the many relationships within a particular park named Hunter’s Creek that each of us frequents. The StoryMap introduces viewers to the various recreational uses and users of the park, including through a podcast interview of two of the mountain biking trail developers.

Alexa and Ryan shared:

Through critically examining Hunter’s Creek, we examined our own positionalities and perspectives about trail use and about foraging a wild leek, also known as a ramp. Prior to engaging in this critical inquiry, we appreciated the work that went into trail maintenance and enjoyed developing relationships with the land. However, we did not deeply consider how our own interactions might impact the trails or the ramp community. Nor did we fully understand what it might take to inhabit Hunter’s Creek sustainably with others. Although we believed that the relationships between recreators and the land and between ourselves and ramps were worth sustaining, we did not fully understand how to sustain these relationships until we engaged in the work ourselves to critically examining the many layered meanings, stories (past and present), and ways of being for humans and more-than-humans within Hunter’s Creek. This experience identified for us that our lack of deep knowledge about places and their inhabitants can reveal gaps between our intentions and sustainable actions.

**Conclusion**

Throughout and beyond the Climate Justice in Education course, we drew upon social and environmental justice foundations and Indigenous and feminist ethics to decenter and interrogate our own social positions and explore how our identities implicate and complicate past and present relationships to and within places. While this process has a focused direction moving us closer to sustainability and justice, we will not be arriving any time soon to where this work is no longer sorely needed. Therefore, our hope in sharing this essay and the StoryMaps is to outline processes, practices, and products that can be taken up in the context of teaching and learning toward the aim of sustaining particular places and repairing ecological relationships through shifts and ruptures in our cultural modes of production, living, and being.

Examining the climate crisis allows us to shed light on the deeply problematic means of production as well as exploitation of humans (including through chattel slavery) and the natural world. The climate crisis is also caused by cultural means through our problematic relationships with consuming products. However, the climate crisis is beginning to force humans to recognize that neither these exploitative relationships nor our consumerist lifestyles are sustainable. What is sustainable and what will lead to greater sustainability are reciprocal relationships between humans and between humans and the natural world. These relationships are
intertwined and are worth sustaining. Investigating the various stories that are written into the lives and land of places we inhabit allows us to deepen our perspectives on what is worth sustaining. Thus, how we sustain places (and save us from ourselves), we argue, is by deepening our knowledge about the world around us—knowledge rooted in critical Indigenous and feminist perspectives towards care, reciprocity, gratitude, and valuing all life and knowledge rooted in the complex, dynamic stories of places.

Alexandra Schindel is an Associate Professor of Science Education at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. Her research centers on justice and equity in science teaching and learning.

Ryan M. Rish is an Associate Professor of New Literacies at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. His research focuses on the literacy practices of adolescents and adults within and across institutions, social spaces, and geographic places.

Dave Mawer is a PhD Candidate in Curriculum, Instruction, and Science of Learning at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. His research interests include transdisciplinary media arts education and creative computing.

Kellyann Ramdath is a second year PhD student in Curriculum, Instruction, and Science of Learning at the University at Buffalo. Her research interests include justice and equity in science education broadly and the re-envisioning of science experiences in hyper-diverse communities.

Matt Christiano is a graduate student studying physics and adolescent physics education at the University at Buffalo, SUNY.
Co-Living Imagination in Early Childhood: Toward Education for Sustainable Development along Children’s Ways of Life

Issei Yamamoto
Shiga University

The problem of sustainability has been caused by humankind. Although it has been repeatedly reported that human activities have an irreversible impact on the global environment, humans have been unable to stop them. Facing the pressing issues of global warming, ecological change, economic disparity, and the disappearance of local cultures, we have recently begun to educate children to achieve sustainability. Particularly since the beginning of the twenty-first century, much debate has arisen over education for sustainable development (ESD), its theoretical foundations, and how it should be practiced. The critical viewpoints vary, such as shifting education from competition to coexistence, realizing both individual well-being and planetary well-being, starting ESD from early childhood, and protecting the rights of children to express their opinions and participate in society. ESD requires understanding sustainability challenges and their complex interlinkages, cultivating empathy and compassion for other people and the planet, and taking practical action for sustainable transformations in the personal, societal, and political spheres.

I do not disagree with the opinion that education from early childhood plays an important role in achieving a sustainable society. However, I wonder how children feel about their antecedents having brought the planet to the brink of sustainability. Will their well-being be inhibited by being given a large amount of deplorable information and preparing for an uncertain future?

In this paper, I focus on the animistic imagination of young children, or “co-living imagination,” to envision ESD starting with the well-being of young children. Their panpsychic and intimate relationship with all things—even with materials—and its exploration of their well-being teaches an alternative way of ESD. It is a shift from an education based on the thought of manipulating, which has been the premise of modern society, to one based on the thought of being with things—ways of knowing along with children’s lives.

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1 This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI (Grant Number JP20K13951). Some parts of this manuscript have already been presented at the 11th International Conference of the Korean Society for Early Childhood Education, but significant additions have been made. I would like to thank Steven Fesmire, Kenta Kubo, Sachie Suizu, Sousuke Yokoyama, and Chika Yamamoto for their helpful comments on the paper. I also appreciate Kazuho Sugimoto and the other members of Uji Fukushien for their cooperation. Itsuki Murota introduced me to Uji Fukushien and gave me great support for this research.


From the perspective of co-living imagination, ESD can be regarded as the expansion of this intimate relationship from familiar others to life at a distance—a movement to expand the circle of well-being. At the end of this paper, I describe, as a case study, the practice of indigo dyeing at a preschool facility in Japan. The children’s co-living imagination, which is demonstrated through indigo dyeing, helps them perceive the reality of life and expand their well-being, including other people and other lives. It can be concluded that education through co-living imagination forms a responsible relationship with life, creating a story of interspecies intimacy and a basis for scientific imagination of the multispecies ecosystem.

From Manipulating Objects to Being with Things

The history of civilization has been characterized by the development of technology that manipulates nature and other living things.

Take, for example, the ideals of Francis Bacon, who argued that the purpose of scientific research is to torture and conquer nature and that science has developed technologies to do so. However, while science and technology have made life more convenient, they have also developed to the point of having serious global impacts, and 200 years after the Industrial Revolution, the global environment has been driven to the brink of death.

Conversely, humans, like nature, have also been subject to development. As Giorgio Agamben suggests, with the term “anthropological machine,” man has formed human culture by drawing a line between human and nonhuman, between speaking man and non-speaking animal. As the “anthropological machine” has operated by “excluding as not (yet) human an already human being form itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human,” so the man-ape, the enfant sauvage, the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner have been regarded as immature and backward. Education has developed as a pedagogical technique (a technique of manipulation) to elevate immature subjects to human beings, as evidenced by the naive story of “the enfant sauvage,” educating wild children raised by animals to become human. This history continues today with the development of technologies to manipulate life, expanding the possibilities of biopolitics to design, produce, and manage “better” human beings.

To achieve sustainability, we must listen to the voices of beings once regarded as immature and voiceless. Nature, animals, and children have been subject to manipulation and intervention in the development of civilization. In order to change this situation, we must create a society in which their own life and diversity is respected. Attempts at decolonization, de-anthropocentrism, and new materialism in pedagogy can be evaluated as a reflection on the fundamental epistemology that has created an unsustainable society and a change in the direction of educational practice.

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9 Agamben, 37.
As a trend of such reflection on modern epistemology, the reevaluation of animism is underway in anthropology and other fields. In general, animism has been dismissed as a primitive and unscientific epistemology, or as a type of religion upheld by uncivilized peoples. Moreover, animism has been seen as a confused and erroneous way of looking at things, just as Jean Piaget saw it as an immature mode of cognition to be overcome by development. Contemporary anthropology, however, has dismissed these assessments as one-sided views based on Western epistemology and has come to regard animism as a way of perceiving the world that should be “taken seriously.” In other words, animism is being re-evaluated as neither a cultural mode that characterizes uncivilizedness nor a mode of thought that characterizes immature mental development but as an alternative thought to the dominance of Western epistemology.

Tim Ingold argues that the first principle of anthropology is “taking others seriously” and that sharing the animistic world provides a clue to the question of how to live in a world where sustainability is threatened. Ingold explains this by citing the ethnography of Irving Hallowell’s survey of northern Ojibwa ontology. In this profound conversation, Hallowell asks William Berens, the Ojibwa chief, “Are all the stones we see about us here alive?”, because the word for “stone” in Ojibwa grammar appeared to be of a class normally applied to animate rather than an inanimate entity. Berens thought long and hard before answering, “No! But some are.”

Ingold respects Berens’ words as offering a way of looking at the world coming into being.

They lead us to question much that we otherwise take for granted. What is it about our own approach to reality that makes the idea of moving, speaking stones so obviously fantastical? After all, stones do wander, descending scree-strewn slopes under their own weight, or carried by water, ice or ocean waves. And they do make sounds when struck, against each other or by other things. It is as though each stone had a distinctive voice, as humans do. If by speech we mean the way we humans have of making our presence audibly felt, then might not the same be said of stones in their resounding? In this sense, they too could speak.

Western culture has the custom of objectifying things as nouns and attribute properties such as “animate or inanimate.” In contrast, in the Ojibwa’s ontology, life is not a property of objects but a certain condition of being. While it is obvious that stones do not routinely move on their own in their natural environment, to the Ojibwa, they appear to move and speak by themselves under certain circumstances, including ceremonial scenes. In this sense, it is more appropriate to say that “the animate stone is not so much a living thing as a being alive,” which indicates a view of the ever-forming world.

Gaining a perspective on the world being alive means that one learns to see the world by active verbs rather than by static nouns. For example, Ingold quotes another instance of a report of Richard Nelson’s account of the Koyukon of Alaska, in which they call “‘streaking like a flash of fire through the undergrowth’ not a fox, and ‘perching in the lower branches of

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18 Ingold, Anthropology, 19.
19 Ingold, Anthropology, 22.
spruce trees,’ not an owl.”

For the Koyukon people, animals are not objects taken as nouns but movements expressed by verbs. Ingold calls this movement a life of lines that can tangle with others, and this entanglement can be described as “the meshwork of lines.”

For example, a tree may be recognized as an object that has a name and fixed meaning. However, the boundary of the tree is ambiguous, and one can tear the bark and find tiny creatures buried beneath it. Microorganisms live in its roots, and water and air circulate within the tree and around the earth. In other words, seeing a tree as a fixed object is a limited perspective, and there exist other perspectives seeing the world as the entanglements of lines generating things and meanings.

Thus, Ingold argues that anthropology is “a generous, open-ended, comparative, yet critical inquiry into the conditions and potentials of human life in the one world we all inhabit,” and that it overlaps with education, in resonance with John Dewey’s philosophy, in that it encounters a world in change and is driven by communication.

This is an attempt to shift the way of modern society, which has been oriented from “of-ness,” a thought of objectification and manipulation, to “with-ness,” a thought of correspondence to others.

Where “of-ness” makes the other to which one attends into its object, and tick it off, “with-ness” saves the other from objectification by bringing it alongside as a companion or accomplice. It turns othering into togethering. To start with the principle of habit, rather than that of volition, is to acknowledge that awareness is always awareness with before it is ever awareness of.

Reflections on the epistemologies that have shaped unsustainable societies are moving away from manipulating life toward being with life. Anthropology teaches that learning from an animistic worldview allows having a different perspective on the living environment.

Co-Living Imagination and ESD

If anthropology and education are learning from and “taking others seriously,” then ESD must also begin with being with children, not in the direction of manipulative pedagogy.

When ESD practices are attempted, is the animistic world of young children taken into account? Is the model that “leads” to the realization of sustainability a vestige of the structure by which only adults know what a sustainable society is, and children should be educated in that direction? Is there no alternative view of life on which ESD should rely?


22 Tim Ingold, Lines: A Brief History (London, UK: Routledge, 2007), 84.


24 Ingold, Anthropology and/as Education, 58–59.

25 Ingold, Anthropology and/as Education, 26.

To answer these questions, it is necessary to focus on the imagination of young children living in animistic worlds. By focusing on young children’s imagination with other life, we can find clues related to ESD, which includes aesthetic and scientific inquiry. The following is about a boy whom the author met during fieldwork in a preschool education program. In this case, the boy, like Berens, feels that the stone is “alive” and uses his imagination to envision the future.

December 8, 2015

A little boy, approximately 4 years old, planted seedlings in a flower bed with the help of his teacher. After he planted them, he looked satisfied. Soon after, he began digging the ground a few meters away with a trowel. I, as an observer, watched quietly to not disturb him. After a while, he put a leaf in the hole and covered it with soil. He looked at me and said excitedly, “I planted a leaf!” I responded, “Right, you did it! I hope a weed will grow from the leaf.” Shortly after, he dug holes and placed a stone in one of the holes. I remarked, “That’s good. You planted a stone.” He replied happily, spreading his hands, “You know, the sprout comes out from here and bears a lot of stones!” I was impressed by his words and imagined a big stone tree. I replied, “It’s true! It may produce a lot of stones.”

At this time, was my response, “It’s true,” appropriate? This boy’s imagination seems immature from the perspective of cognitive development. Scientifically, a stone cannot sprout and produce fruit. Should I teach him that the stone would not sprout? From a scientific perspective, this boy’s imagination requires correcting; however, from an affective standpoint, his experience contains an awareness of life and is filled with joy when living things grow. Namely, this experience seems aesthetic, and he is full of imagination, perceiving what is before him and considering what could be in the future. At this time, he seems to live with the stone, feeling the movement and dynamics of growing life.

Let me give you another example. The following happened when I was flying a kite with my three-year-old daughter:

December 20, 2020

It was a nice day with moderate wind, so my daughter and I decided to play with a kite at the park. My daughter seemed to be amused by the kite, which seemed to float on its own when the wind blew, and enjoyed flying it repeatedly with me while running around on the large grassy area. After a while, we started to put the kite away because we were getting tired, and the wind had decreased. As I was winding the string, I suddenly felt the wind pick up again. At that moment, she seriously mumbled, “The kite wants to fly,” and hurriedly put the string back on and attempted to put the kite into the wind by herself.

This episode expresses the girl’s fascination with the kite and her loneliness at the loss of the wind. Furthermore, when the wind blows again, the girl is eager to take the string in her hand again and tries to fulfill the kite’s wish. At this time, she deeply corresponds with the kite and appears to care for its life with empathy and responsibility.

Although these two examples are not scenes of my own educational instruction, they provide clues to learn from children’s way of life and develop ESD in a way that is in line with their well-being. First, these examples highlight the relationship between the child’s aesthetic experience and caring in an animistic world. In both cases,
the children encountered the living stone or kite with the joy of interaction and fulfilled vitality. The boy who buries the stone expresses joy with his whole body as he imagines the life of the stone growing, sprouting, and bearing fruit. The girl who hears the kite’s voice in the lively wind—what Tim Ingold calls “the dance of animacy”\textsuperscript{27}—takes responsibility for flying him again. These are aesthetic experiences in which children get resonantly involved with the living and growing world. John Dewey describes this transaction with the world as follows:

Experience in the degree in which it \textit{is} experience is heightened vitality. Instead of signifying being shut up within one’s own private feelings and sensations, it signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events. Instead of signifying surrender to caprice and disorder, it affords our sole demonstration of a stability that is not stagnation but is rhythmic and developing. Because experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in germ. Even in its rudimentary forms, it contains the promise of that delightful perception which is esthetic experience.\textsuperscript{28}

Through aesthetic experiences, one learns the art of perceiving the world. Especially in the life of young children, encountering a \textit{living} stone or kite is an interpenetrating experience that promises joy and invites responsible communication. The stone and the kite feel, speak, and live as I do, then call for caring. This imagination should be conceptualized as “co-living imagination,” which causes a sense of living and intimate responsibility toward other living beings. This point suggests the importance of taking children’s imagination seriously. It is a source of joy for them, and they grow through communication with the living world.

Second, this “co-living imagination,” in addition to providing relational well-being, is a source of relational learning about what sustains life. Dewey describes the imagination at work in aesthetic experience as follows:

Esthetic experience is imaginative. This fact, in connection with a false idea of the nature of imagination, has obscured the larger fact that all conscious experience has of necessity some degree of imaginative quality. For while the roots of every experience are found in the interaction of a live creature with its environment, that experience becomes conscious, a matter of perception, only when meanings enter it that are derived from prior experience. Imagination is the only gateway through which these meanings can find their way into a present interaction; or rather, as we have just seen, the conscious adjustment of the new and the old is imagination.\textsuperscript{29}

According to Dewey, prior experiences influence present experience through imagination, which applies not only to aesthetic experience but also to the conscious experience of everyday life and the learning process. The aesthetic experience of being alive forms a “co-living imagination” that constructs subsequent experiences.

This is not, as Ingold points out, an imagination that makes us perceive the stable things by of-ness but the process of things by with-ness.


\textsuperscript{29} Dewey, \textit{Art as Experience}, 281.
As Ingold suggests, the of-ness worldview perceives the world as a set of objects and its relationship, separated from the self, as a network of mutually independent points and straight lines that connect them. Ecosystems and the web of life, as learned in schools, are also based on this perspective. The with-ness worldview, however, perceives the world as a tangle of lines in a process of generation and change. Stones, kites, and humans all change in the intertwining lines of life, generating the meaning of each encounter—a “meshwork” worldview by which we correspond with each other. In other words, the “co-living imagination” is the only gateway to learning about the ecological relationship in the current of the lifeworld where the self participates.

The child who imagines the future of a living stone, sprouting and fruiting like seeds, perceives the world as growing together. It is an imagination that will be corrected scientifically or biologically in later learning. However, what is important is not to wither the roots of the withness imagination by later learning but to make participating in the world compatible with scientifically exploring the world.

Co-Livingness and Responsibility

ESD must combine children’s joy of living with learning about the ecological relationships that sustain life.

The concept of “ecological imagination,” developed by Steven Fesmire from Dewey’s ideas, provides clues for promoting such learning. He interprets Dewey’s concept of imagination as follows: “All active intellectual life, poetic or theoretical, is imaginative” to the degree that it “supplements and deepens observation” by affording “clear insight into the remote, the absent, the obscure.” In Fesmire’s view, empathetic projection and creatively tapping a situation’s possibilities are two recursive themes in Dewey’s writing and are issues of imagination. He writes that “imagination in Dewey’s central sense is the capacity to concretely perceive what is before us in light of what could be.”

Imagination expands the possibility of awareness of things, their backgrounds, and the various aspects of ecological relations. Ecological imagination works in daily life and renders humans more sensitive to aspects of the relational network around them. For example, one

31 Steven Fesmire, NEED PAGE.
33 Fesmire, John Dewey and Moral Imagination, 65.
rarely notices that the two-dollar hamburger and coffee are made available through deforestation for the sake of ranches and low-paid labor of coffee farmers in developing countries. The meaning of commonplace things is grasped and amplified by imagination, which crystallizes the possibilities of the present condition for thinking and acting. As a result, ecological imagination promotes ecological thinking and moral deliberation to make pro-environmental decisions for sustainability.

Co-living imagination in early childhood can be considered a primary form of ecological imagination. In early childhood, children often heighten their vitality when they live an aesthetic experience, which dissolves the boundary between self and environment. In this experience, they participate in the world and discover various meanings in commonplace things. After absorbing the sounds of wind for a moment, they may ask teachers, “Where did the wind come from?” After gazing at the beautiful red flower, they may ask, “Why are the seeds green and the flowers red?” or hypothesize, “Maybe because they are embarrassed to be seen?” This sense of wonder shows not only an intimate relationship with commonplace things but also the beginning of scientific inquiry. In this ecological inquiry, the self is entangled in the relationship between living and dynamic environments. Considering Ingold’s argument, when children work their co-living imagination, they participate in the meshwork of life. Instead of being objectified and detached from the world, they experience a relational, responsible world.

Fesmire also indicates that experiencing things in a relational way brings responsibility. He insists that ecological imagination generates this relational and transactional experience of things, and the lack of it means the loss of responsibility.

The terms “bee, bird, or tree” signify not only an object one can point to at a simple location, but also “an organized integration of complex relationships, activities, and events which incorporate a whole transactional field.” Because human choices and policies are themselves part of this transactional field, we tend toward irresponsibility whenever imagination fails to shuttle back and forth between things and those relationships relevant to intelligently mediating the situation at hand.35

Sensitivity and responsiveness to the environment are developed through imaginative encounters. At the aesthetic level, where the self and the environment transact deeply, children correspond with the world. This experience affords their sense of wonder and allows them to explore their surroundings aesthetically and scientifically. As Fesmire insists, dramatic rehearsal in imagination is “a capacity for crystallizing possibilities for thinking and acting and transforming them into directive hypotheses.” 36 This kind of inquiry, rooted in intimacy with things, can be said to be the quest to discover the meaning of the environment based on the reality of life.

From this standpoint, experience with co-living imagination is reconsidered as an

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experience of a sense of vitality, togetherness of being, and intimate and responsible relationships rather than an immature viewpoint. This animistic reality forms a strong responsibility for other lives and further insight into the coming and going of life. Paul Gauguin once asked, “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?” To paraphrase this expression, co-living imagination in early childhood arouses the concern of “Where Do You Come From? What Are You? Where Are You Going?”

Children live with various companions, even stone or kite, and ask about their home, wants, and friends. They expand co-living imaginations along the meshwork of lines that connect the present with the past, future, far, and strange. Based on these intimate and future-oriented relationships with the living world, they develop moral deliberation and scientific verification relating to the living environment as our affair. When the animistic imagination of young children is combined with ESD, it can be envisioned as a movement to expand their relational well-being, including other people and other lives rooted in the feelings of intimacy and caring.

Practicing Co-Living Imagination in ESD in Early Childhood

I have presented the perspective of co-living imagination by using the concepts of Ingold and Fesmire, which opens the possibility of applying the animistic experiences of early childhood to ESD.

Finally, I shall describe and consider a Japanese preschool practice to examine the aesthetic and scientific learning of young children leading sustainability in their daily lives. The following are excerpts from pedagogical documentation and a research paper on indigo dyeing activities at Uji Fukushien in Kyoto. The parts with co-living imagination are underlined.

Permission to publish the document and photography was obtained from the president of the facility. Uji Fukushien, established in 1978, operates five nursery schools. The goal of Uji Fukushien is for all children to grow into people who care for life and understand each other’s perspectives. Indigo dyeing activity began in 2014. The children, who had been playing with dyeing plants and trees daily, wanted to bring out the blue color, and the teacher introduced the culture of indigo dyeing to them. The seeds used at Uji Fukushien were obtained from the Yura River indigo, which had been cultivated for 600 years but had declined and disappeared in 1926. However, in 1983, the local community began to

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revive the Yura River indigo by using the “Kojoko” variety of indigo produced in Tokushima. Uji Fukushien also uses the Yura River indigo, which is carefully cultivated in the local community.

Sowing and Caring for Tiny Lives

The series of activities begin with sowing and watering indigo seeds in the school garden. In this process of growing, children show co-living imagination and care for life.

One month had passed since the seeds were sown, and the sprouted indigo plants had gradually grown. The children looked at the indigo and said, “They are getting bigger,” and then noticed that the sprouts were growing densely: “It’s so small, I feel sorry for them.” From that, we had a class discussion and decided to plant indigo in a field where we made the second garden . . . The last thing to do was water the plants. The children expressed the water being absorbed into the soil as “they are gulping! Goku Goku” and talked to the plants, saying, “keep growing!”

In this activity, children corresponded with sprouts and felt intimacy day by day. When the crowded sprouts seemed too small and pitiful, the children shared ideas and found a solution to transplant them into a second field. At this point, the teacher assisted in organizing a dialogue along with the young children’s co-living imagination. They seemed to experience the reality of life by becoming plants that drink water and by talking to them with sympathetic care. This can be considered an aesthetic experience filled with joy and hope.

Relational Imagination along the Meshwork of Indigo Life

The children nicknamed the indigo and raised it as if it were their own friend. In the process, they experienced indigo in relation to various lives and imagined the meshwork of life.

The following happened during the indigo activity for the older children or the lily group. When they went to harvest the indigo they had grown, they noticed that the leaves were full of holes.

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38 The phrase is onomatopoeic. Japan has a rich onomatopoeic culture, as exemplified by the literature of Kenji Miyazawa. As Satoji Yano points out, onomatopoeia is “the music/word between landscape and human,” connecting humans to the wider world of life. See Satoji Yano, Education from the Perspective of Gift and Exchange with Seeski and Kenji as Models of a Pure-Gift Giver (贈与と交歓の教育学) (Tokyo, Japan: University of Tokyo Press, 2008).

39 Miyuki Tanaka, “Towards the Width and Depth of Experience in Continuous Activity: Analysis of ‘One Year Indigo Dyeing Activity’ by Older Children” (継続的な活動において広がりと深まりが生まれていくために:年長児による「藍染の一年間の取り組み」の分析), master’s thesis at Osaka University of Comprehensive Children Education (2017), 16.
“Was it because it was too hot?” “Was there not enough water?” “Maybe they were eaten by bugs?” As they were reaping the leaves, they found black lumps on the indigo leaves. “That’s poop!” Another boy who loves insects said, “This is caterpillar poop!” “No, I found a mantis! It might be a mantis!” Finally, the mantis and caterpillars were caught. The captured caterpillars were raised to determine what they might become. The caterpillars we caught were white, brown, and black. Some children wondered, “Why are the caterpillars different colors?” “Do they change color when they grow up?” “Maybe they have different fathers and mothers?” Other children wondered, “Why did they turn black when they ate Ailin?” The indigo leaves are green, and when dyed with indigo, they are light blue or blue; meanwhile, these caterpillars ate indigo, but they were different from any other color, puzzling the children.

After returning to the school, we drew pictures of the caterpillars and considered how to raise them. The children wanted to raise caterpillars, but they did not want them to eat the indigo we used for dyeing. The children contemplated and decided to use the indigo stalks in plastic bottles in which a teacher was experimenting with water root cultivation by the side of the room. A child said, “If I do this, I can make food!” Some children challenged the water root cultivation. Other children did not want to give the indigo stalks to the caterpillars, so they conducted experiments to determine if the caterpillars would eat different leaves. At first, the children treated the caterpillars that ate the indigo as criminals, but now, the caterpillars have become important members of the class, even obtaining nicknames.

The holes and the droppings on the leaves seemed to stimulate the children’s co-living imagination, which expanded through multispecies, human-indigo-caterpillar-mantis relationships. The children followed the lines of each life, hypothesizing about who defecated, why the caterpillars were of different colors, and whether the food they ate affected their color. The children’s imagination demonstrates respect for the lives of both caterpillars and indigo and led them to a problem-solving attempt to hydroponically grow caterpillar food. The teacher documented the children’s questions and hypotheses and envisioned the next phase of care, supporting the children’s quest to coexist with the caterpillars and indigo.

Scientific Imagination in Fermentation and Dyeing

In the process of preparing for indigo dyeing, the children deepened their empathic relationship with indigo and developed their scientific imagination about them.

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40 Ailin is the nickname of indigo.
41 Childcare record, August 29, 2021.
Sukumo (栄) is made by mixing dried indigo leaves and water and fermenting them, which is the preliminary stage of indigo dyeing. To make sukumo, we needed to remove chlorine from the water. Children said, “What's chlorine?” “I can’t see it.” A teacher gave an illustrated explanation, and the children learned about the role of chlorine and how to remove it. They also enjoyed the fact that the dried indigo leaves have a different texture and smell from fresh leaves. They said, “It smells like tea” “It smells like old leaves” “It’s so crispy!” “They were in the sun, so they must have sweated” “Maybe they had been dried because it was too hot. I think they are thirsty.” Based on their own experiences, they were able to predict the phenomenon of the indigo leaves becoming dry.

In the process of determining the ratio of water to indigo leaves, the children became familiar with numbers such as weight and volume. They also wondered why the bulk of the leaves decreased when the dried leaves and water were placed in a barrel and stirred. A teacher used tape to show the bulk of the leaves before stirring, and when the children stirred the leaves, the bulk was indeed reduced. The children then compared the dry leaves to the watered leaves and found that “the wet leaves were soggy and smaller!” In the future, we will be stirring daily and discovering the science of fermentation.  

The explanation of the chalky process made the children realize that the fermentation of indigo is supported by other microorganisms that are not visible to the eye. Through the drying and fermentation of the leaves, the children learned about numbers and quantities, experiencing an elementary scientific experiment. It is noteworthy that the intimate relationship established through the naming and care of the indigo juxtaposes aesthetics and science; the scientific experiment becomes an exploration directed toward symbiosis rather than a mere manipulation of the object.

Cultural and Artistic Expression Based on Co-Living Imagination

The history of living with indigo heightened the children’s cultural activity. The following case of artistic activity, just before graduation, shows that their learning through indigo dyeing was joyful and meaningful enough to be a source of creative expression.

January is when we decide the contents of the annual “Children’s Heart Festival (Dramatic Play Presentation)” held in February. Every year, teachers consult with the children, reflect on the year’s activities, and decide what the children will present. During a meeting, the children were asked, “Soon, we will have a ‘Children’s Heart Festival.’ I would like to do something that you enjoyed this year as a member of the Yuri class.” Many children raised their hands, saying, “Yes! Yes! Yes!” and answered, “indigo dyeing was fun,” “raising indigo baby,” “sukumo was stinky,” and so on. After discussing various opinions, they unanimously decided to perform a play about indigo dyeing that year.

The next question was what kind of content they wanted to include in the scenes that comprised the play. They decided on “watering the indigo, catching insects, protecting the indigo from typhoons,” “making sukumo,” “stirring the indigo liquid,” and “indigo dyeing.” They were able to learn numerous words and phrases through the experience, such as “sukumo,” “indigo construction,” “indigo flower (bubbles produced during fermentation),” “stirring,” and

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43 Childcare record, September 13, 2021.
“fermentation” . . . When they had to perform the lines they wanted to say in front of everyone, they appeared confident: “I have made an indigo flower,” “never be defeated by the storm,” and “I will drink lots of water and become big.” They were less likely to hesitate or forget because the lines were not decided by others but by the children based on their own experiences.44

The children learned and expressed the culture of indigo dyeing through a series of activities in which they dyed their own clothes with the indigo they had grown themselves. As the plays created by the children indicate, this is not given knowledge but creative learning that has been enhanced into a form of cultural expression through their own enjoyment of living with indigo. They learn and celebrate the fact that our necessities of life are made sustainable through interactions with various living things.

Making Sustainable Society from Co-Living Imagination

Uji Fukushien practices ESD through indigo dyeing, naturally combining the modern lives of children with traditional Japanese culture.45

As Dewey and Fesmire indicate, the aesthetic and scientific aspects of imagination are reciprocal and aim to find an ecologically responsible way of life. By naming, growing, and dyeing clothes with indigo, children have varying emotions when encountering it; their lives and the indigo’s lives correspond deeply. They imagine the intertwined lives of the indigo in the multispecies meshwork of insects, soil, and fungi. Sometimes, it is a narrative imagination about the living indigo, called “Airin,” and at other times, it is an exploratory imagination about fermentation and dyeing. Through the layering of these imaginings, the meaning of commonplace things in the present becomes layered and deepens, and things are perceived with a relational reality. Learning with such a reality forms an attitude to think deeply about coexistence with other life as one’s own.

The children’s co-living imagination is supported by the teachers’ environmental composition and dialogue with them. The life of indigo, lived in convergence with the local culture over hundreds of years, is incorporated into the children’s living environment. Teachers “take children’s imagination seriously” and weave a story of living with indigo (“Airin”), sometimes exploring it scientifically. Teachers realize children’s well-being as the well-being of living with indigo. When the children become older, they will recall that dyeing clothes with indigo, which they have lived with, is a cultural aspect rooted in the lives of the local people, accumulated over hundreds of years, and they will imagine, learn, and act so as to protect indigo. This is not sustainability that is merely taught as knowledge—it is sustainability that is deeply connected to one’s own life.

Learning through experience and imagination has lifelong importance.46,47 Co-living imagination affords the axis of ESD practice for early childhood and later learning. It extends the child’s own well-being to other life—in other words, well-being is relational in the meshwork of life. As children respond to various lines of life, they imagine their companions’ past, future, distant, and apart; their perception and awareness of the living environment deepens. Their knowledge and skills become wisdom for coexistence by being rooted in co-living imagination.

44 Tanaka, 54.
A sustainable society develops from living with young children.

Isei Yamamoto is an Associate Professor at Shiga University. After beginning his career as a preschool teacher, he received his PhD from Kyoto University. His research interest is to link theory and practice of early childhood education from an educational anthropological approach. He is the author of Ecological Approach to Early Childhood Education: Encountering the World Through Affordance Theory (Kyushu University Press, 2019).
Building a Community of Educators of Color as Rebellion: Struggles toward a Rightful Presence in a Historically White Institution

Cecilia Guzman
University of San Francisco

Manuela G. Cruz Sebastian, Tina Cheuk, & Amanda Frye
California Polytechnic State University

It’s important, therefore, to know who the real enemy is, and to know the function, the very serious function of racism, which is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining over and over again, your reason for being . . . There will always be one more thing.

Toni Morrison¹

In this structured conversation, you will hear from two young Chicanx women, both first generation college students, working collectively to change the social order and how society functions, for themselves and their students.

The Educators of Color Club was established at Cal Poly, the Whitest public university in the state of California, during the 2020-21 academic year, by Cecilia Guzman, a Liberal Studies major and aspiring teacher. Building community was a way of coping with the “twindemics” of the time—the COVID-19 pandemic and the backlash against protests for racial equity in the face of police brutality and white supremacy.

Word spread quickly and membership swelled as the student-led network of care addressed students’ needs for a community and a space of their own. The club gave students a way of transforming their own educational experiences in real time and engaging in collective action for change even as the fractious national public discourse, local racial unrest and protests in the streets amplified anti-immigrant rhetoric on campus and in the San Luis Obispo area. The Educators of Color Club united students across multiple levels of professional development, from those early in their undergraduate preparation to newly credentialed teachers preparing to lead their own classrooms.

As an advocate for educators of Color on our campus, Dr. Cheuk had the pleasure of working with and learning from Cecilia and her successor as EOC President, Manuela G. Cruz Sebastian, as their faculty advisor and mentor as they began their journey as future educators and student activists. After Dr. Frye joined the Cal Poly faculty in the summer of 2020 and became faculty co-advisor of the Educators of Color Club, she worked with Dr. Cheuk to find research and institutional support for the club and for a program of research focused on the needs of aspiring teachers of Color as they progress through the teacher educator pipeline from undergraduates, through credentialing and masters’ programs, and into the early years of their careers as established educators.

As researchers and practitioners, Drs Cheuk and Frye build on existing research showing that strengthening teacher networks,² creating critical affinity groups,³ and engaging in critical


Manuela G. Cruz Sebastian

Liberal Studies, and then joined the teacher credential program with a joint Masters of Arts in Curriculum and Instruction through Cal Poly’s Teaching for Inclusivity and Equity Residency program. This fall, I will be a transitional kindergarten teacher at Robert Bruce Elementary, in Santa Maria.

Tina: I had a chance to meet some of your family members at the recent awards celebration for you in the service and activism work you led with Educators of Color as club president. Would you like to share a bit about your family and the role they’ve played in your educational journey?

Manuela: My family has been amazing and supportive through my educational journey. It took me a long time to find my path. Being from a low-income family and a single parent, it was challenging to return to school and feel like this is what I had to do full time, especially when my parents were struggling as farm workers. Every day, they were working in the fields picking fruits and vegetables. I felt like my job really was dependent on our family’s survival, so it was hard for me to go back to school full time.

When my siblings were a little bit younger, it was hard to leave them to focus on myself in school. So that’s partly why I was in community college for a long time—I was taking one class at a time or two classes at most. My family has been in full support of me and they have done everything that they can to get to where I am today. For my other family members, including my son, it’s been hard for them to know what and how to support. They are there to encourage and just be there as my support system as I went back and did my education.

Tina: Cecilia, I want to give you time to recognize the people who have been there for you and supported your educational journey.

Cecilia: My older sister paved the way for me in terms of thinking about higher education. We were both in Upward Bound when we were in high school. She’s six years older than I am and left for UCLA when I was barely entering middle school, so I was able to see her grow up and understand what it meant for her to go to college. And for me to be able to see that my sister Diana was going to college, I knew that I just had to go. Not going wasn’t an option for me.

Once I finally got into college, it was no surprise—being at a predominantly White university was very difficult when you are a first-generation college student. I wanted to make the most out of college, because I knew I deserved to be there, but that imposter syndrome was making me feel like I don’t belong there.

Thankfully, I met Dr. Berber-Jiménez, the department chair for the Liberal Studies Program. She encouraged me to consider a pathway into education. I didn’t know education was my path when I started my college career. I knew that I liked math and I wanted to be a math major. She was the first person that I had met at Cal Poly who saw me for more than a student, but a person.

It helped that we were both women of Color and she made me feel like I belonged on this campus. She provided me with the support that I felt like I hadn’t been receiving from anybody else. She became my biggest support system. Then, with my work with TRIO, advisors there talked with me about pursuing a master’s degree

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9 Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) provides opportunities for success in college available to low-income and first-generation students, and/or students with disabilities.
and what that looks like. Two other faculty members, Dr. José Navarro and Dr. Oscar Navarro, encouraged me to start the Educators of Color club.

Tina: What motivated you to start the Educators of Color club at Cal Poly?

Cecilia: In my second year in college, I was transferring from Math to Anthropology, then finally to Liberal Studies. I looked around to see who wanted to go into education and become teachers.

All throughout my freshman year, I felt like I didn’t belong in my own major—I felt isolated. I knew that California was racially diverse. Yet, my peers in the Liberal Studies Program were predominantly White.

I wanted to create a space to feel like I belonged. It wasn’t until I remember seeing Brown people at a picnic hosted by Liberal Studies. I immediately went to them and started a conversation, excited to find people who looked like me and were in my major.

Manuela: I definitely remember Cecilia at the picnic, and I was so grateful for Cecilia for being there. Like her, going into the Liberal Studies Program, I wanted to be the teacher that reflected my own lived experiences. With all of the other students in the program I felt out of place. When Cecilia came to me and Francisca, another Latina student in the major, I felt so welcomed by her.

At this SCTA\textsuperscript{10} meeting, I felt almost as if they [the White students] were the ones in charge, and I had no opinion. I did not feel comfortable or welcomed but I had to be there because it was part of my class. I was there to get information and that was it. It wasn’t a welcoming environment. When Cecilia mentioned making the club

\textsuperscript{10} SCTA [Student California Teachers Association] is a professional organization for college students in California who are pursuing careers in education.
centered on the lives of educators of Color, it was definitely the most amazing thing, if we could make it happen.

Cecilia had that vision to put into practice how to make it into a reality. The chance encounter at the picnic with Cecilia changed my path. My goal was to come in and leave. Do my education. I didn’t have any friends when I transferred here from the community college, and I wasn’t at Cal Poly to “make friends” because, at first, I didn’t feel comfortable either. Meeting Cecilia changed my path, it made me see and realize that I belong here in higher education.

Tina: Cecilia, tell me about your goals and your vision for this club. Especially in the early days, what experiences motivated you?

Cecilia: When Mandela was talking about the SCTA meeting, I remember going there and thinking, “Okay, since I know I wanted to do education and pursue this as a career, I’m going to attend these meetings. I wanted to be dedicated and do this right and become an officer of this student club. I got involved because I believe that having a community outside of the classroom is important. I went to those meetings. At one of the meetings, I went with Manuela and Francisca. and I remember feeling at my gut level—I felt like I just did not belong. Even though we were all the same major and wanted to be educators, I thought we would all be on the same page. I know it wasn’t their intention to make us feel very out of place. It was this feeling that didn’t feel right.

Yet, I still wanted to be part of this club because I wanted to be involved. But then I remember hearing that once I had applied to be in a leadership position within SCTA, my peers started saying something to the effect that I was “racist towards White people” and wouldn’t qualify to be an officer within SCTA. I immediately thought that’s impossible. I remember sharing this with one of my faculty mentors. You can only imagine how this made me feel. These are the same women who are in my major who wanted to be educators yet were so quick to judge me in terms of how much I advocated for myself and how much I wanted to advocate for the students who they were going to be teaching! I remember sitting down and thought, “How am I going to be in a club that isn’t welcoming and isn’t open to different opinions to different identities?” At the same time, I was also trying to make sure that my voice was being heard in this major because Liberal Studies was a predominantly White women major; whereas the students that they are going to be teaching will be very diverse.

I wanted to make a club that didn’t just talk about how to get fingerprint Live Scan, but rather how we could provide financial support to students who the cost would be a barrier. I wanted to create a book library and exchange for students who couldn’t afford to buy or rent books every quarter. I wanted a space to talk about different opportunities that were outside of classroom teaching that were about education, because I didn’t want to be a teacher. I wanted to do more community-based outreach so that we weren’t so insular and isolated from students and their families.

I knew that I needed that support system and there wasn’t one. So I needed to create it with others. Creating this space and the club not only provided us that safe community, but also, it saved me from being pushed out from this major that I knew I was passionate about. I hope the community is a legacy that carries on, not just for me, but because I want other future educators of Color to have that support system.

Tina: Talk to me a little bit about your organizing and community-building efforts. What drew you and your colleagues into this space to work in solidarity and focus on your strengths?

Manuela: Part of it was just being able to have that space where we feel comfortable.
There was not this safe space for students of Color here. I didn’t feel welcomed at Cal Poly, especially as an undergrad. This club was about having that space where we were able to understand what other students of Color were coming from.

We started the first meeting wanting to do everything that was mentioned earlier by Cecilia. We talked about building an exchange library, raising funds to help pay for so many of the fees associated with being a teacher. That first winter, Cecilia and I led our winter fund-raising event. The donations went towards our club buying and distributing toys, books, and pajamas for over 100 children of farmworkers in Santa Maria. It was at this event we realized the potential we had as educators of Color—working to serve in the communities that we grew up, and schooled at, and would return and become teachers and leaders.

I know our efforts don’t address the root causes of income, food, and housing insecurities that so many of our young students and their families face, but as students in higher education, we were able to have that voice and make those connections with each other and with our local communities was an important step for us. To see us work together, students of Color all in one room. It wasn’t just me, or just Cecilia, it was all of us working together to make this happen for our community.

With the pandemic that started in the spring, we got a lot of students of Color craving connection with those who shared lived experiences like them—and to have a safe space to talk about what our community needed. Especially with George Floyd’s murder and Black Lives Matter, we were able to talk about how we felt—in classes where most of the students are White, and process what it has been like to navigate those conversations and silences, and those unspoken feelings that our White colleagues might have felt or projected about us, Black and Brown people.

Cecilia: Partly, our solidarity emerged as we were bonding through trauma, navigating our daily lives in a PWI (Predominantly White Institution).

I’ve had a lot of people ask me whether I regret going to Cal Poly. Or do I wish that I had gone to a Hispanic Serving Institution? No. I don't regret it. If it wasn’t for being in this space where I was forced to reevaluate my identity and my purpose, I wouldn’t be where I am today. Creating this club and this community has been foundational to my identity. The holiday toy drive put us on the map. I wanted to show others that education is beyond what happens in the classroom, and much of the work is about making connections and giving back to the community. The fact that students like us—have not only survived but thrived for ourselves and have extended that to the communities we care about.

Tina: What parting messages do you have for aspiring educators of Color?

Cecilia: I want to know that for educators of Color who are here, they can make it through and thrive. The resources exist and there are faculty and staff who will see and embrace your full humanity. When I talk about my experience and I think about how much Cal Poly has changed me and forced me to evaluate how much my identity means to me, my experiences have shaped my values, which is to “always send the elevator back down.” I learned to advocate for myself, make my voice heard. I want my peers to be empowered to create the communities that don’t exist.

It’s on us. It’s a lot of pressure for us first-generation college students who also come from low-income families. We’re not only going through school trying to figure out who we are as young adults, but at the same time, coming face to face with how lacking our university is in
recognizing our existence. It’s like they force us to figure it out on our own on purpose. It’s about surrounding yourself with people who share the same aspirations as you.

Manuela: You belong here. You worked hard. It is challenging to tell that to ourselves because we all have that imposter syndrome, where we feel like we’re not smart enough, we don’t belong, we’re not able, we can’t do this . . . Yes, you can. You made it all the way here. If the community isn’t present, build it. Find your people and create that support system. For us, that has made all the difference.

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What you heard were cumulative sets of hopes, experiences, and feelings, forged in White institutional spaces of higher education and emerging by design from two Latina student activists-educators. Throughout, these young leaders powerfully articulate themes of belonging and exclusion, the necessity of community, the centrality of their identities as women of Color of immigrant origin, and the importance of creating and maintaining sources of emotional support and encouragement.

Interestingly, at no point during our conversation did Cecilia or Manuela refer to themselves as “activists.” Rather, they described how they recognized each other as “strangers to the institution [who] find in that estrangement a bond.” Together, they shared their realizations that none of the on-campus spaces for teacher education were made for them, and neither, ultimately, was the campus itself. Both Cecilia and Manuela fought to educate their own—to resist the layered toll that racism in teacher education has filtered into their lives, and work in solidarity to create new ways of being with one another.

For these students, their activism came in the form of self-protection and collective affirmation. They made space for one another when none was present for them. Creating the club, planning activities and outreach events, and creating systems for sharing encouragement, support, and practical strategies for navigating the Cal Poly campus as well as the gatekeeping processes around teacher credentialing and professional advancement wasn’t fueled by a desire to pad their resumes, but by their clear commitments to themselves and their communities. Cecilia and Manuela, like their peers and colleagues in the Club, are working for not just the survival but the thriving of the children they plan to serve and for the incoming generations of educators of Color who will walk in their footsteps.

Community in this form isn’t simply a form of resistance but is one of rebellion. What has been worth sustaining for them is that of audacious hope.

Driven by their passion, optimism, and resistance, these young leaders are transforming higher education so that it can better center their

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15 García Peña, *Community as Rebellion*.
creative energies and dreams in ways that were unimaginable by past generations.

*Cecilia Guzman is a Master of Arts candidate in Higher Education and Student Affairs at the University of San Francisco. Cecilia was the founder and former student president of Educators of Color club at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. She graduated with a degree in Liberal Studies with a concentration in Comparative Ethnic Studies.*

*Manuela G. Cruz Sebastian is a Master of Arts candidate in Curriculum and Instruction at the California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly) in San Luis Obispo. Manuela was the former student president of Educators of Color club. She recently completed her multiple subject teaching certificate with bilingual authorization as part of Teaching For Inclusivity and Equity Residency (TIER) at Cal Poly. She is currently a Spanish bilingual transitional-kindergarten teacher at Bruce Elementary School in Santa Maria, California.*

*Tina Cheuk is an assistant professor in Elementary Science Education and a faculty co-advisor for the Educators of Color student club at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo.*

*Amanda Frye is an assistant professor in Liberal Studies and a faculty co-advisor for Educators of Color student club at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo.*
Let’s Have a Conversation about Cultural Capital

Anindya Kundu & Conor M. O’Brien
Florida International University

First introduced by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s, cultural capital refers to nonfinancial resources that allow a person to obtain status or social mobility, by signaling whether they belong in certain circles.1 In other words, it’s not just our money that matters, but our outward displays too, which can include language, behavior, and the clothing we wear. As educators, we may sometimes refer to cultural capital as the soft skills we hope our students gain so they can excel in college and future careers. This includes the practice of going to professor’s office hours or knowing how to appropriately construct emails. In our schools, students express, learn, and acquire new forms of cultural capital as they socialize with one another and adults, learning what it means to be a functioning human and citizen in a modern world.

The idea of cultural capital works by being exclusionary—helping us to understand the signals of who fits in and who does not—given our expectations of certain spaces and the people who should inhabit them. In our rapidly changing and diversifying world, a basic problem that arises related to cultural capital is how the concept relates to “underrepresented” students, or those from minoritized backgrounds and low-income homes.

Race and Cultural Capital in Education

Our expectations of what these students and our understanding of their inherent cultural gifts is colored by our perceptions of capital and belonging. As these students are less represented in coveted higher education spaces and in the professionalized workforce, they often find themselves attempting to defy negative stereotypes about their culture while simultaneously pursuing the so-called “American Dream.”

For example, at our undergraduate institutions—the University of Chicago and University of California, Los Angeles—we noticed that our Black college classmates were often questioned on campus by university police personnel and asked to show student identification, an experience that was rarely, if ever, shared by our White peers.

Within the field of education, several scholars have taken up these questions around race and cultural capital. Cartwright critiques our common conceptualization of cultural capital, arguing that it is inherently racialized and thus effectively delegitimizes the cultural norms of many.2 The racialized nature of cultural capital is evident in recent movements to delegitimize and vilify Critical Race Theory for the fear that it threatens Whiteness and the status quo of acceptable and comfortable curriculum. In urban education discourse, Tara Yosso poses the important question, whose culture has capital, explaining that the many existing skills, competencies, and behaviors of diverse students are characterized as atypical and thus in need of reform to conform to the mainstream.3

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We build off on these scholars’ works to ask: If a student does not feel that their culture or identity is respected or valued in school, how could they be expected to excel? Why would they strive to demonstrate their worth if they do not feel like they belong?

Students of Color sometimes experience what we could consider to be an unsustainable double standard to which their actions and accomplishments are measured. On the one hand, there is the trap of trying to succeed in a society marred by White supremacy. On the other hand, there is then a trap where we expect that young people of Color need to not only succeed but to do so “authentically,” and without “selling out.” This fails to consider the various expressions that cultural capital can take on and disregards the different manifestations through which giftedness can present itself.

Whether intentionally or not, we ultimately end up placing our own unfair judgements and preconceived notions upon students. As a result, some students are often critiqued by their peers for turning their backs on their communities as they work to bridge their existing cultural assets with forms more often rewarded.

Our thesis is that this kind of labeling comes from a commonplace, narrow view of students’ cultures and cultural assets, both of which are dynamic and dynamically expressed. In a world where students of Color from lower-income homes already can feel less valued and less welcome, we can alleviate the burdens they experience by ourselves striving to consider and uplift the multiple, varied forms of giftedness we may encounter.

If we begin to reframe our stagnant notions of what and who success looks like, attempting to recognize brilliance in the many unique forms it might be presented, we can work toward helping more students fit in as well as achieve in a way that showcases their special talents and the various forms they may take.

Judging J-Stud

Anindya Kundu’s (2020) *The Power of Student Agency* includes many narratives of student success and individual agency overcoming structural barriers.4

One such story is that of “J-Stud.” J-Stud is from Jamaica Queens, where he was born and raised by his single mother and grandmother. Like many of his peers from the same low-income NYC neighborhood, he became disinterested with (and disenfranchised from) school. He sat in the back and kept his head down in all his classes, writing away in a tattered notebook.

One day, his high school English teacher took an interest in what he was scribbling. Curiously, she asked if she could see the contents of his journal. Flipping through the pages, the teacher became astonished at J-Stud’s passion and talent for writing rap lyrics. The teacher then offered J-Stud, a student with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), the rare opportunity to record his lyrics at a friend’s studio in exchange for him displaying more effort in her class. This seemingly trivial exchange between a shy student and a passionate educator ultimately led to a series of events, opportunities, and mentors where J-Stud realized he was interested in the accounting side of the music business. J-Stud, through the help of others, embarked on a new path to pursue his associate’s and then bachelor’s degrees in Finance. Over time, he climbed the ranks of a large investment bank where he is currently employed as a high-ranking Director.

Surprisingly, some might admonish J-Stud’s upward mobility by accusing him of “selling out” by working for the same capitalist system that

has arguably kept communities of Color under-resourced. For example, once, when lecturing at New York University, one of Kundu’s undergraduate students questioned why this story—where J-Stud works at a financial institution likely associated with displacing low-income people of Color—epitomizes successful agency. This critique came from a self-proclaimed progressive student who was working on the Hillary Clinton campaign, highlighting that unfair judgments can come from anyone, even those with equitable intentions. It seems that some students, J-Stud in this case, cannot catch a break in the current system—whether directly experiencing barriers or skepticism around their accomplishments because of how we narrowly perceive success and identity.

Would this NYU student hold J-Stud equally accountable for his success if he were a White male who grew up in SoHo or the West Village and attended a prestigious NYC private school? The NYU student’s critique of J-Stud is ultimately harmful, and in a sense, is much like the commonly and controversially referenced scenario of children being chastised by their peers for either “sounding White” or not being “Black enough”. While we are more likely to recognize that this premise is absurd, we may not realize that equally damaging can be our perception of who should live and work in certain spaces.

Breaking down the exclusivity of certain high-status spaces—even including the investment banking profession—is a necessary but potentially uphill battle.

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value. Thus, for members of marginalized communities, achieving Bourdieu’s type of cultural capital can be a double-edged sword, creating an existential crisis where some may feel the pressure to sacrifice their own cultural norms and identities to achieve mainstream success, or chance sacrificing the latter to achieve social acceptance by conforming to the demands of “authenticity.” For many, achieving Boudreau’s cultural capital may seem necessary in the pursuit of upward mobility and advocating for others. In other words, individuals may strive to leverage their hard-earned entry in dominant spaces to mobilize important changes in policy and practice from within.

Problematically, our networks with the highest status and privilege—those in our higher education and workforce sectors—remain arenas where people like J-Stud are underrepresented and thus feel less degrees of freedom to express themselves naturally. There are real costs to these constraints. For example, walking the tightrope of meeting other’s expectations even leads to higher stress levels and lower life expectancy. These dilemmas are particularly problematic for young people entering adulthood, where one’s life choices carry immense weight and consequences for the ability to obtain financial stability and security in relationships.

Understanding why “keeping it real” versus “selling out” is a hypocritical dichotomy requires a more thorough interrogation of deficit perspectives and their prevalence in explaining educational outcomes. Deficit perspectives assess students per their perceived weaknesses and shortcomings rather than focusing on strengths.

This fails to acknowledge multifaceted forms of giftedness is causing us to “mistake difference—particularly difference from ourselves—for deficit”.

Yet, problematically, influential education and social sciences research continues to implicitly and explicitly indicate that underrepresented youth are often more drawn to “keep it real” and express apathy or resentment toward activities like schoolwork than to improve their circumstances. What much of these dialogues fail to realize or consider is that students can in fact be true to themselves and strive toward academic and professional greatness.

In fact, this is the kind of achievement we should wish for all our students, where they succeed and do so by showcasing their individually unique talents and gifts. Ideally, we can work toward creating an education system that embraces and fosters this kind of distinct, student agency.

Finding and Supporting More J-Studs

What is the true value of cultural capital if achieving it means losing oneself in the process?

Likewise, why does achieving cultural capital come at the cost of authenticity in the eyes of some? The self can be viewed as both malleable and in direct relationship to the concrete community and situation that one finds oneself in at

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10 John Dewey likewise questioned “to what avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to gain the ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul.” John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (1938), https://archive.org/stream/ExperienceAndEducation_JohnDewey/dewey-edu-experience_djvu.txt. The soul in this context refers to one’s relative appreciation of things deemed worthwhile, and the desire to apply what has been learned.
any moment. Ultimately, only a student herself can tell us what it means for her to succeed authentically. Our measuring of student success by premeditated assumptions and judgements of who belongs where is exclusionary.

As all young people embark on the journey of finding their selves, we as educators and youth advocates should support them with open minds and open hearts. This means nurturing each student’s personhood and encouraging fulfillment as well as achievement, as they seek self-improvement. That is how adolescents will be able to contribute back proudly and uniquely to society. Educators can support growth by acknowledging the importance of uplifting various forms of giftedness. We need our students to continue developing their identities as they enter spaces that may be unfamiliar to them.

Reflecting on the tragic death of Tamir Rice, it seems that children of Color, particularly young Black boys, are not granted the ease of childhood that other are in our nation. From youth they are feared as pariahs by courts and store owners alike, the mere sight of “unredeemable hoodies” invoking the clutching of purses. After the death of Trayvon Martin, Geraldo Rivera said that the killer, George Zimmerman, was as much to blame as the hoodie Martin wore that night.

Educators have a special capacity and ability to change these deeply ingrained social narratives as young people come of age in schools. Through working to embody the broadest sense of inclusivity in our classrooms, we can directly shape our community toward obtaining a better and more equitable future for all. This begins with us reframing discussions on success and achievement to be more inclusive of people of all backgrounds and profiles. We do this by acknowledging and celebrating varied forms of giftedness, from being good at accounting to being able to write rap lyrics.

J-Stud is doing powerful work reconstructing what it means to be a New York investment banker. Still living in lower-income area of Jamaica, Queens where he once was a boy, J-Stud wants other kids in the neighborhood to see him as he dresses sharp on his way to his banking job in the city, so they too can see another, unique representation of what success could look like for them. He also serves on boards within his company that looks to diversify their talent pool by opening doors to opportunity that are traditionally closed for underrepresented people.

J-Stud does not have to do these things to be accepted by anyone. His ability to transcend limitations of poverty should be praised regardless of his background. Still, it is a great testament that he does. We should allow ourselves to find and support more J-Studs by acknowledging that interest in one thing can often lead to another. In this way, we invite students into spaces where they have traditionally been excluded and make them their own.

One way to start is to create the conditions for our students to express themselves in their own way and thereby allow them to challenge our monolithic ideas of what and who success looks like in both academic and professional settings.

Anindya Kundu is a sociologist and Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at Florida International University. Kundu’s scholarship heavily involves the concepts of “agency” and “grit,” investigating the social supports that are necessary for students to unlock their potential. Kundu’s work is dedicated to highlighting how youth overcome various challenges and countering deficit perspectives. Additionally, Kundu’s work also address themes of urban education, cultural competence in academic settings,

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mental health in higher education, race & inequality, and social justice.

Conor O’Brien is an educator in the Miami Dade County Public School district and graduate student in Florida International University’s Executive Master’s in Public Administration Program. O’Brien has worked in the fields of education and youth development in Miami for over five years. O’Brien’s academic and research interests include urban education, sociology, race, culture, African American studies, and Latin American studies.
Sustaining Hope: A Reflective Review of Sarah M. Stitzlein’s Learning How to Hope: Reviving Democracy Through Our Schools and Civil Society

Erin C. Scussel
Georgia State University

How, at a time like this, can we possibly sustain hope?

We are almost three years into a pandemic that has resulted in millions of deaths globally. Here in the United States, law enforcement has sustained a reputation for aggressively pursuing, shooting, and killing Black and Brown bodies.

In 2020, we experienced a tense election cycle in which the outgoing president refused to accept the outcome. In his refusal, he also attempted to persuade lawmakers to do everything in their power to “find votes” and alter the outcome. As a result, we feared for the future of our democracy. On Jan 6, 2021, far-right extremists attacked and invaded our capital during the counting of electoral votes—complete with firearms, makeshift weapons, tactical gear, and a guy with face paint and a fuzzy horned helmet.

Globally, there are ongoing armed conflicts, mounting challenges from climate change, and supply-chain issues impeding global imports and exports. On January 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a violent invasion into Ukraine that has, thus far, resulted in thousands of civilian deaths and millions of refugees fleeing their homes. Experts fear that Putin’s agenda could be the catalyst that begins a larger armed world conflict.

In the United States, mass shootings and gun related deaths are accelerating. In May 2022, two particularly deadly attacks took place. The first was in Buffalo, New York, where the 18-year-old gunman racially targeted a small-town supermarket and murdered ten Black Americans. Ten days later another 18-year-old walked into an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, and murdered 19 children and two educators. This, all while we are witnessing a state-by-state pursuit to pass education policies to ban books and censor classroom conversations about topics like human rights, social justice, racism, and LGBTQIA+ issues.

And so, with all of this, I must ask: how, at a time like this, can we possibly NOT sustain hope?

At a time when the entire globe is collectively experiencing a number of exceptionally tumultuous events that ultimately put the very core of our values to the test, one might be skeptical of the value of a book about hope. The concept of hope can sound like white noise among the 24-hour news cycle that flashes negativity, propaganda, and infotainment on our screens. But, Sarah M. Stitzlein’s book, Learning How to Hope: Reviving Democracy Through Our Schools and Civil Society, written and published just before the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election cycle, may have been a serendipitous foreshadowing of a philosophy educators did not yet know they needed.

“Pragmatic hope,” during this particularly chaotic time in our country, could be the means to revive and revitalize American democracy. And I believe Stitzlein is right to contend that educators are uniquely positioned to engage with students to do what it takes to sustain hope.

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1 For more information on gun violence in the United States, and up to date statistics, see the Gun Violence Archive at https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/.
Hope—Why, What, How?

During challenging times, we may find ourselves feeling hopeless.

Hopelessness might leave us wondering if there are reasons to have hope, what we should even hope for, and how to hope when we only feel despair. Stitzlein answers these questions by examining the present social and political context to address our current state of affairs. We come to learn “not only reasons for why we can hope and particular content of what we ought to hope for but also, more importantly, an enriched understanding of how we hope together.”

Stitzlein argues that hope should be valued as an endeavor that could result in a more equitable future to sustain our democracy. She claims that hope is waning and there is a critical need to “resuscitate hope within America by offering a notion of hope that is grounded in real struggles.” Her goal is to justify how we can sustain hope during difficult times and the role hope plays in our democracy.

Stitzlein calls on schools and civil society to action, to “nurture hope as a set of habits that disposes citizens toward possibility and motivates citizens to act to improve their lives and, often, those of others.” While her project is grounded in the current struggles of society, her aim is to develop habits of hope to revive our democracy. Building on the framework of American pragmatism, specifically using John Dewey’s work, Stitzlein guides the reader through a realistic approach to teaching and learning how to sustain hope.

Her approach to pragmatic hope considers “real conditions—recognizing their constraints, complexities, and possibilities.” Pragmatism substantiates that knowledge of the world, and our agency to act in the world, are symbiotic. According to Dewey, pragmatism is a method of knowing in which:

Its essential feature is to maintain the continuity of knowing with an activity which purposely modifies the environment. It holds that knowledge in its strict sense of something possessed consists of our intellectual resources—of all the habits that render our action intelligent. Only that which has been organized into our disposition so as to enable us to adapt the environment to our needs and to adapt our aims and desires to the situation in which we live is really knowledge.

The reciprocal relationship of hope and pragmatism is built on the elements of inquiry, growth, truth, meliorism, and habits. These elements are key to sustaining hope. The challenge, however, is taking that first step to get past discouragement and hopelessness.

With respect to space and time, I have chosen to focus on the aspects of meliorism and habits as they are unique factors that are central to sustaining hope.

Meliorism and Habits

Meliorism is the belief that human action can effectively improve our conditions. Habits are the engine for realizing this belief.

However, it is not hard to understand why people are hesitant to believe that we can make the world a better place if they believe that meliorism means that there is a complete solution to unfair and oppressive conditions. Stitzlein addresses this concern by reminding the reader that hope for progress does not mean the struggle is over, nor does it mean the actions we take are

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3 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 2-3.
4 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 3.
5 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 7.
7 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 25-37.
meant to bring all struggles to an end. Rather, “hope provides us a direction and a rationale to guide our actions and is grounded in the belief that progress is possible.”

In Dewey’s terms, we should not seek solutions but, instead, seek ends-in-view, or, intermediate outcomes we desire based on the consequences of our experiences. Hope that accounts for ends-in-view requires us to become critically transitive about our world and our experiences. Stitzlein reminds us that “pragmatism emphasizes facing difficult conditions and responding with inquiry to understand them, ingenuity to experiment with improving them, and vision to craft a better future.” Acting upon pragmatic hope does not mean we ignore our challenges and hardships, it means we define what we hope for in direct relationship to our everyday challenges and hardships.

Stitzlein makes the case that “hope, as a set of habits and their enactment, is most essentially a disposition toward possibility and change for the betterment of oneself and, typically, others.” We develop habits of hope through practice, and practicing hope becomes more meaningful when we work towards common ends-in-view with our neighbors. Stitzlein observes that, “when cultivating pragmatist habits of hope is integrated across civil life and schooling, we can slowly make such an important transition and can sustain that effort through larger democratic habits.”

Our collective actions build a sense of trust. It shows that we care about our community and we want better circumstances for all people, not just ourselves:

Dewey recognized that action could be inhibited by stagnant and entrenched practices of individuals and culture in a democracy. Certainly, we have witnessed that problem in the cynicism and despair currently growing in America. As a result, Dewey turned to education, arguing that new and more flexible ways of life can be cultivated to fulfill the call to action for improving the world.

The foundation of American education is centered around the effort to develop citizens that will expand and preserve democracy. Still, citizens must act, and act often, to sustain our democracy. Stitzlein argues that sustaining hope and reviving democracy in America is an all-hands-on-deck approach. Within our school system, citizenship education is already taking place, which, according to Stitzlein, provides an existing platform to seamlessly integrate lessons on pragmatic hope.

**Finding Hope ImPossible**

Some might consider Stitzlein’s approach to hope impractical. Some might question how realistic it is to hope for progress when past experiences make it seem like there is no such thing as a “better” future.

But other thinkers would concur with Stitzlein. For example, Paulo Freire finds hope while entrenched within a struggle, not at the end of a struggle. Further, Henry Giroux proclaims that hope “is a subversive force, an active presence in opening a space for imagining the impossible, evoking not only different stories but also different futures.”

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8 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 34.
9 Critical transitivity, according to Freire, is the concept in which an individual has not only become conscious of societal problems but acts to transform society. Paulo Freire, Education for Critical Consciousness (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).
10 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 23.
11 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 42.
12 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 50.
13 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 36.
I posed a question at the beginning of this essay: How, at a time like this, can we possibly NOT sustain hope? It would be hard to deny that life in the early 2020’s has not been without its unique challenges. We might ask, between the pandemic, the intensification of climate change, political and cultural warfare, the economy, and the rise of fascism: How is hope possible? How is it possible to sustain hope at a time like (gestures wildly) THIS?

It is not easy, but I believe it is possible.

As the fall 2022 semester has begun, and there is life buzzing on my campus for the first time in two years, I feel there is potential to find hope. The students who have made it through the trials of the last two years could be the driving force behind the vision of sustaining hope.

I am in a position where I am a PhD student, but I also teach undergrads. I have experienced, as both a teacher and student, how unfamiliar it is to feel hopeful. As a student it was challenging to find hope to conduct research, complete assignments, and submit manuscripts amidst the constant despair. Regardless, I kept moving forward, and took steps towards my ends-in-view as a novice scholar. Each action I have taken, amidst the struggles, whether or not the outcome was “successful,” was an action taken because I really do still have hope (even if it is hard to find).

And as an educator, I know that my students are looking to me for guidance, and I can choose to guide with hope—or not. I teach two different undergraduate courses that address critical and societal issues in education. Week after week, I present issue after issue—problem after problem—to my students. And week after week we deliberate.

The purpose is to guide them through effective deliberation within a community of learners who are actively engaged in collaborative problem analysis with intelligent action as the ends-in-view. Stitzlein explains that deliberations about problems should be oriented around the question, “What should we do?” She emphasizes the need to engage as a community to hope together.

This type of collective action requires trust, and in the classroom, we build trust by “engaging in mutually supportive activities together, supporting the agency of others, and making ourselves vulnerable through recognition of our own need for support.” Through the use of deliberation, I encourage students to move the conversation forward through constructive responses to the issues and their classmates. The ends-in-view of this process is intentional. The student is tasked with making a judgement, not a conclusion, about the problem. Their judgements should be action oriented, meaning they are focused on the what should we do aspect of the issue.

It is not easy to spend each week discussing both the existing and looming problems that threaten our public schools. It often feels like there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Even though I wouldn’t say my students express unbridled hopeFULness, one thing I rarely hear or witness is hopeLESSness; which tells me hope is there, even if dormant, ready to be nudged.

But who is going to give that nudge?

Educators, who have direct and regular contact with their students, have the opportunity to cultivate a community of civic-minded learners engaged in pragmatic hope together. I recognize, however, there are restrictive barriers on educators’ agency, especially in the K-12 public school sector. Educators arguably experience constraints on resources and time. They are directed by the standards and evaluated by their students’ test scores. Their agency to abandon the standards is contingent upon the outcomes and consequences of student performance measures. (Perhaps these too are problems with which we could ask, “What should we do?”)

16 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 136.

17 Stitzlein, Learning How to Hope, 131.
With respect to existing challenges, educators are positioned to engage directly with students and inculcate habits of hope in their classrooms. The problems that students face in the world around them do not just go away or pause when the school day begins. James Baldwin believes that you cannot talk about schools without talking about communities—and that the problems we see in our communities will replicate within our schools. Stitzlein would agree that schools are a distinct space to intentionally contend with these problems. When teaching and learning is directed through meliorism and habits of hope, the problems become the guide—rather than battle. Students could practice positioning themselves as intelligent actors with some skin in the game. An emphasis on sustaining pragmatic hope in schools could help students become critically transitive participants in civil society who are focused on justice and social progress.

18 See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=piGSpnSog5E.
Education and Sustainability: The Nigerian Context

Ikeoluwapo B. Baruwa
Queen’s University

Indeed, anything can be sustained—from Yosemite to fascism—and it’s about time that we get clear, as educators, about what is to be sustained, and where, and how.¹

The educational system of Nigeria, specifically that of higher education, is peculiar. I have considerable experience within the Nigerian academy, and I have witnessed what is often taken as the status quo. This paper regards what is being overlooked within the Nigerian polity. I argue that the status quo remains a stumbling block in the sustainability of the Nigerian educational system and the development of the nation.

Many studies have identified various challenges hindering the Nigerian education system. Some of the challenges include corruption, mismanagement, and misappropriation of funds by the government; inadequate facilities; inadequate staffing of competent or merited personnel; lack of funds, grants, and scholarships; and many others.²

In recognition of these problems, I begin by examining the significance of education to humanity, and how it shapes our insights. I argue that education is best understood as a practice of sustainability. Accordingly, it is necessary to explicitly deconstruct its current place and function in Nigerian society.

Without a doubt, education is a means of protecting, fostering, and passing down a people's culture from one generation to the next. It enables people to acquire the knowledge, values, and abilities necessary to take part in decisions that affect them, both locally and globally. Every individual should get the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values essential to sculpt a meaningful future through education that is conceived as a practice of sustainable development. In short, education as a practice of sustainability means satisfying current demands without jeopardizing the capacity of future generations to meet their own.³

Is the Nigerian Education System Worth Sustaining?

The Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations include both education and development. Sustainable development was described as "development that satisfies the need for the present without compromising the ability of future generations to satisfy their own requirements" by the World Commission on Environment and Development, also known as the Bruntland Commission.⁴

The Sustainable Development Goals were introduced in 2015 as a new development agenda by the international community through the United Nations in cooperation with the

leaders of the 193 member countries following the expiration of the Millennium Development Goals implementation timeline.\(^5\) 17 goals make up this agenda, often known as Agenda 2030. Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Agenda focuses on providing all people with access to quality education and promoting opportunities for lifelong learning. One of the nations that ratified and endorsed the Agenda for implementation in September 2015 was Nigeria, which started implementation right away.

Sustainability can be a misused or taken-for-granted concept which is sometimes equated with environmental education (which necessarily focuses on social, environmental, and economic areas).\(^6\) By way of contrast, in this paper, when I speak of sustainability, I mean a transformative paradigm which puts into consideration the sustenance and enrichment of humankind.

The Nigerian education system is faced with a myriad of problems, and this ultimately makes it impossible to transition into a sustainability paradigm. For example, the Nigerian universities have been on an incessant strike which has led to closure of universities since February 2022. While the government’s negligent policies may be to blame for the strike, the university system is not exempted from blame.

As a graduate student, I have come to realise other shortcomings, particularly as they related to mentoring. As relational as it could be, there is hardly a true mentorship within the Nigerian institutions—it puts many graduate students on the search for “who is the supervisor.” Beyond titles and professionalism, hardly will you find a professor hiring and paying a research or teaching assistant in the Nigerian universities. I am fortunate to be mentored by one of the exceptions.

Finally, there are problems of planning and leadership. Witness the recent crises at the Obafemi Awolowo University and University of Ibadan, where regional politics almost led to the election of vice-chancellors with no emphasis on the competence and leadership skills possessed by the supposed leaders.

In the words of Akarue, sustainability must ultimately become a global network, hence knowledge production, collaboration, and distribution are important, especially in revitalizing contexts like that of the Nigerian academy.\(^7\)

### Building the Bridges

I am thankful to have an engagement with an international peer who assisted me and offered her time that I may cross a bridge. She looked beyond race, color, and language, and offered her humanness for the sustainability of all people.

In building the bridges, we must look beyond self and engage with others. Sustainability has no restrictions of regions or continents; it extends and offers the possibilities of building bridges to make the world desirable.

This article is not meant to belittle the efforts of Nigerian intellectuals and universities, but rather advocates a repositioned academy where students and professors work together for the betterment of all.\(^8\) In response to the arguments of some people who are of the view that many university graduates are not well equipped to aid their respective societies,\(^9\) the position of this paper is crystal clear: any education received

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\(^6\) Akarue, “Sustainable Education.”

\(^7\) Akarue, “Sustainable Education.”


must be such that brings about special quality of agreeableness in the present and that exerts positive influences on the later experiences of being. In cases where this position is not possible, then, there is no sustainability. For sustainability to therefore emerge, the activities must be transformative, critical, reflective, progressive, and relational.