


EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Place, Space, and Localism in Education History

A. J. Angulo* and Jack Schneider 

School of Education, University of Massachusetts Lowell, Lowell, MA

*Corresponding author. Email: AJ_Angulo@uml.edu

All historians know they must in some way reckon with place. The raw material of historical inquiry emerges not just from particular times, but also from particular locations—places and spaces that shape the form and meaning of past events. Still, recent scholarship suggests that we have yet to fully tap the potential of place in our decisions about sources and what they mean.¹

Traditional conceptions of place have largely aligned with political boundaries—neighborhoods and towns, schools and districts, states and nations. Yet the influence of place and space is both smaller and larger than the units found on our maps.² What we are trained to see when we situate past events, and what we are accustomed to looking for, is only a part of the spatial story. The context of place in history, as we are learning, is composed of many layers.

Consider the closest level of observation—the micro-geographies of the classroom, in which physical and material artifacts can begin to yield new meaning and significance. Chairs, desks, and classroom equipment, in a careful spatial analysis, might disclose the social dynamics of power, control, and pedagogy. In such a light, the design of learning spaces can tell us much more about the world of the past than perhaps was previously understood. Of course, the fact that spaces convey explicit and implicit lessons—that there is more to probe than meets the eye—isn't necessarily a new idea. But the degree of attention placed on such details does appear to be a more recent substantive and methodological move among historians working inside and outside of education.³

¹See, for instance, Kalervo N. Gulson and Colin Symes, eds., *Spatial Theories of Education: Policy and Geography Matters* (New York: Routledge: 2007); Sue Middleton, *Henri Lefebvre and Education: Space, History, Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2014); “Henri Lefebvre on Education: Critique and Pedagogy,” *Policy Futures in Education* 15, no. 4 (May 2017), 410–26.

²For a sampling of works on the global-to-local axis, see Marcelo Caruso, “World Systems, World Society, World Polity: Theoretical Insights for a Global History of Education,” *History of Education* 37, no. 6 (Nov. 2008), 825–40; Johannes Westberg, “Combining Global and Local Narratives: A New Social History of the Expansion of Mass Education?,” *European Education* 52, no. 3 (Feb. 2020), 206–14; Marc Depaepe, *Order in Progress: Everyday Educational Practice in Primary Schools - Belgium, 1880–1970* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2000).

³Ian Grosvenor and Lisa Rosén Rasmussen explore the promise of close levels of observation in their edited volume on *Making Education: Material School Design and Educational Governance* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018).

Scholars have also long acknowledged the value of studying place at larger scales, particularly through projects that highlight the reception of ideas across nation-states. Historians of science have had a head start along these lines, probing questions like “What happened to psychoanalysis when it migrated from Vienna to Buenos Aires?” or “How did the theory of evolution change as it moved from the UK to places like France and Russia?” But historians of education have also shown us the explanatory power of such macro-geographies: exploring the Atlantic and Pacific “worlds,” reconstructing diasporas, and tracing social movements across various locations. Such a turn has produced insights about the role of texts, translators, and interpreters, as well as about the ways that social, political, and economic values color the reception of new ideas. Global histories of education have trended in similar directions, borrowing directly and indirectly from the broader historical interest in how ideas traverse boundaries of space, time, and territory.⁴

The articles in this issue examine place and space at a scale somewhere between the two poles of micro- and macro-geography. Moving beyond the political map to identify communities of thought, experience, and culture, these works engage with space and place in a manner that helps us see their subjects in new ways. What happens when ideas about one locale—Puerto Rico, in Lauren Lefty’s work—are applied to another? How do the dynamics of localism—in Gonzalo Guzmán’s Wyoming—collide with the phenomenon of migration? How do regional economic systems and structures—those of Appalachia, in Kristan McCullum’s article—shape the particularities of identity? In what ways is racial separatism—a topic examined by ShaVonte’ Mills—a local or regional project, and not a national or international one? Such questions gain their power and their pull from attention to matters of space and place.

As we emerge from the global pandemic, new spaces have taken center stage—ones that depart even more strikingly from the physical world by bringing people together in the virtual realm. Such locations present new challenges and opportunities for students and educators, as well as for historians seeking to understand the influence of simulated environments on teaching and learning. In this issue’s Policy Dialogue, Carroll Pursell and Toru Iiyoshi explore the ways technology has transformed education: reducing its dimensionality and decoupling it from local community, while simultaneously broadening its boundaries and expanding its audience.

This special issue emerged not as the result of a call for manuscripts, but as an organic response to a wealth of submissions attuned to the factors of place, space, and localism. The most immediate implication of this, for readers of the journal, is that there is more to come: the manuscripts included in this issue are just the tip

⁴Mariano Ben Plotkin, “Freud, Politics, and the Porteños: The Reception of Psychoanalysis in Buenos Aires, 1910–1943,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 77, no. 1 (Feb. 1997), 45–74; Thomas F. Glick, *The Comparative Reception of Darwinism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Josep Simon and Antonio Garcia-Belmar, “Education and Textbooks,” *Technology and Culture* 57, no. 4 (2016), 940–50; Eckhardt Fuchs and Eugenia Roldán Vera, eds., *The Transnational in the History of Education: Concepts and Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

of the iceberg. The long-term implication for the field is similar. Historians of education are framing new kinds of questions, tapping new sources, and interpreting the past with increasing sensitivity to the ways place, space, and localism shape the human experience.