

## **We're practical people: Schooling and identity in a Canadian coastal community**

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Canadian coastal communities have a long history of capitalist underdevelopment mediated by powerful cultural traditions and place attachment. Today, these traditions are under siege as are the productive relations that sustained them. Using the work of Bauman, Giddens, and Bourdieu, I report on a three year study investigating the way youth identity is constructed and enacted in families in a coastal community in Atlantic Canada. I argue that the spatial and cultural dynamics of social class continue to shape orientations to education, work, outmigration, and the pragmatics of "getting ahead" managing risk, and becoming an adult. To accept the content of secondary schooling and university study, children in rural communities must do the difficult, potentially alienating and often dangerous identity work of developing an "impractical" self that embraces the abstractions and esoteric knowledges that serve as capital in university preparatory courses and in higher education. For most youth "born and bred" in the coastal community, formal education is imagined and valued in instrumental terms that support students in the process of acquiring known skills that are considered practical from the point of view of adults in the local context.

### **Practicality**

All families are practical. As Pierre Bourdieu (1963) demonstrated in his early research in Algeria, the family is a kind of social technology for passing on resources from one generation to the next. Families can only give what they know how to give and as Bourdieu went on to show in his later work in France, many families in modern societies pass on resources through the mediating agency of the school (1974, 1977, 1984, 1990). In this way, families whose resources are largely grounded in knowledge could pass their privilege on to their children in a school system that mirrors the myth of a capitalist economic system and promotes the ideology that it provides equal opportunity to all.

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Traditional methods of resource transfer across generations have been gradually eroded by a number of well known forces that have shaped rural communities in the West since the 1960s. In the particular case of coastal communities in Eastern Canada, as the fishery industrialized and eventually globalized, the small boat independent producer has been persistently challenged by the corporate fishery (Davis, 1991; Apostle, McCay and Mikalson, 2002; Apostle and Barrett, 1992; Sacouman and Veltmeyer, 2005). State policy has generally supported the latter through increased regulation and buyouts, and as the number of independent fishing families has diminished, institutional schooling has come to play an increasingly important role in coastal communities. This role however, often fails to articulate well with community traditions of independence and with commonly held understandings of practicality and common sense.

At the same time, the grand social transformations described by contemporary sociologists like Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman and Manuel Castells have shown how identity has become considerably more fluid in recent years. Contemporary globalization has, in Giddens (1990, 1991) terms, created a new way of understanding the self that has become “disembedded” from particular locales and from the defining structures and sedimented processes of tradition. Bauman (1991, 2004) has made essentially the same case arguing that modern (or postmodern) individuals are now responsible for constructing a self out of a series of choices that essentially mirror and match the menu of choices available to consumers. We have, Bauman quips, become “our own problem” and we are faced with the challenge of constructing a self with few of the old boundaries represented by established metanarratives, habitus and tradition that once guided us.

The story is much the same from more critical perspectives inspired explicitly by Marxist traditions. While he is critical of what he considers to be the exclusivity of Giddens’ idea of the self as a project, Castells writes in a similar vein about the growing “power of identity” (2004) in which serves as a location for resistance to the centralization concentration of power in grand narratives and corporate concentration. In the social movements, identity politics and nationalist movements that have flowered in the last several decades in the face of multinational capitalism and as a result of the breakdown of the transnational hegemony of the Soviet Union, Castells sees new forms of identity emerging. He calls these “resistance identities” because they are formed in opposition large power structures as fragmented and multiple spaces of opposition.

Bauman particularly has focused on the importance of mobility to the development of postmodern identities. As the forces of disembedding develop with contemporary capitalism, people are mobilized and the success of their “self projects” is increasingly understood in terms of their ability to move from place to place. Bauman (1998) has argued that to be stuck in place or “glocalized” is a key feature of poverty and marginalization. The poor and the marginal are localized geographically, rendered unable to leave their places, but also localized spatially unable to access the virtual pipelines of information now available in network society. It is becoming more and more evident that to be educated is to be mobile.

In this essay I investigate findings from the first part of a three year study of the school experience and educational/mobility aspirations of a group of twenty-five youth between the ages of 13 and 16 (in 2004) who were born and raised in a coastal community in Atlantic Canada. This study is located in a community in which I have been working as a teacher or as a social researcher since 1991 and it follows an investigation conducted between 1998 and 2001 that analyzed the historical relationship between schooling and outmigration in the community (Corbett, 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2004, 2005a). The overall focus of this research is to understand educational and mobility trajectories of a group of young people in a coastal community in Eastern Canada.

Data presented here have been gathered in three ways. First of all, the research team has carried out field work in the regional secondary school since May of 2004. Secondly, a series of semi-structured interviews were held with twenty one of the twenty-five youth in November and December of 2004. Finally I report preliminary data from a survey conducted with 172 students (grades 9-11) in the regional secondary school in early November of 2005.<sup>2</sup>

### **Practical families**

In a previous paper, I identified four identity orientations in the young people with whom I have been working (2005b). The most school successful were those students who tended to be least interested in place in the sense of locating their own agency specifically in the rural community where they lives. I called these youth “space travelers.” Their interest, exploration and creativity was primarily located in spaces such as the hierarchies of high school status and culture, the mass media, the internet, and in the abstract spaces opened up by academic subject areas. They were also able to link their agency in virtual spaces to their pragmatic social networks, primarily in the school. In other words they used knowledge gathered in “space” (eg. MSN contact networks, information about music, style, youth culture, etc.) to position them as powerful actors in the physical environment of the school and its surroundings. Space travelers stand out in a rural school. They are the youth who run the school organizations and to some extent populate the sports teams, who see themselves and are seen as popular or preppy. They are also academically successful as a group and have typically developed an upwardly mobile and outwardly mobile attitude toward their “boring” home communities. Most of these youth had strong access to family-based cultural capital and in most cases, to higher than average levels of economic capital. Most of this group are girls.

There was however another group who also tended to be successful in school, albeit not as successful as the space travelers. This group I called “investors.” Investors come from families who have established work within the rural community. They have succeeded through hard work and generally occupy the middle range of the economic hierarchy. They are from fishing families and families that specialize in the traditional trades, or they are the children of small business people. They tend to speak an accented

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<sup>2</sup> For copies of the interview schedule and the November 2005 questionnaire, please contact Mike Corbett, School of Education, Acadia University, ([michael.corbett@acadiu.ca](mailto:michael.corbett@acadiu.ca)).

local dialect and their parents very often have limited formal education. They are deeply embedded in local culture and tend to hunt and fish and have facility in a number of traditional outdoor skills (wood cutting, building structures, and mechanics) and have a strong knowledge of rural places (eg. the woods, shoreline, local bodies of water). Most of all, they see themselves as hard-nosed, hard-working, practical people who have used their acumen to succeed in their work ventures. They have no time for frills and no interest in entertaining academic abstractions. Everything must have its purpose, a clear goal that leads to building something for oneself or for one's family. For the practical/investor family, education is a means to an end and if it is to have value it must come in the form of training for a valued pragmatic activity. Beyond elementary school where basic literacy and mathematical skills are supposed to be mastered, the purpose of schooling ought to be a preparation for functional adult roles, and specifically, those roles which are known and valued within the families. Most among this group are boys. Better that a boy is good with machines and good with his hands than overly bookish once he reaches a certain age.<sup>3</sup> This paper focuses on these practical investors.

Terry's family struck me as interesting because they do seem to be orienting the boy to look at things in a highly pragmatic way. In many respects this family is a model of what schools claim to want from parents because both parents are actually heavily involved in their children's course selection and general orientation to school. Terry's mother particularly talks regularly with both of her children and with her children's teachers. She is actively involved and engaged on a nightly basis with the boys' homework. She encourages her children to excel and specifically, to think about school as a set of opportunities to be exploited. She has, in short, appropriated the discourse of school and state about the importance of school and the importance of parental involvement in a child's schooling through high school and beyond. This family is not the traditional and typical working class family, disengaged and alienated from the school (Willis, 1977; Weis, 1990). Both parents are high school graduates and both show considerable respect for teachers and for the school system. They want their children to succeed and be respectful in school and they see the deportment of their children as a reflection of their own orderly and careful lives.

But how do these parents understand school and how do they orient their children toward schooling? The nature of their engagement is shot through with a concern about the practical utility of the education the children receive. What will it "get them?" What will they be able to do in the way of employment as a result of their formal education? What courses are the most useful to the children given where they want to go in their lives? These kinds of questions lead quite naturally into early discussions about the child's

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<sup>3</sup> The other two groups I identified in this paper were "dreamers" who aspired to move in space but lacked the capital to carry out their wishes. They also had highly unrealistic and even fanciful career aspirations. The final group were the "stuck" who lacked the capital to transcend place to any extent. The dreamers had better access to both social and virtual spaces than do the stuck. Dreamers tended to be female and the stuck tended to be male. This is consistent with the experience of previous generations I have studied in my previous work cited above. Women were more mobile than men and they acquired more formal educational credentials. However, their mobility trajectories tended to be of shorter range than men. Women needed schooling to survive and to leave their rural villages, but they made their lives, for the most part in the local community within 50 km of their home places (Corbett, 2001, 2005a).

orientation toward the relationship between schooling and future work and even about career trajectories. Unlike Willis' lads or Weis' postindustrial urban youth, the discourse of the significance of schooling has penetrated the older working class traditions that for generations have provided apprenticeship style pathways into work (Rose, 2004). The notion that education is "necessary" has, in these careful working class families, come to take on a particular shape.

The stay-in-school discourse has indeed penetrated these families as it has virtually all families these days, but the way the message is received and acted upon leads to consequences that are not always significantly different than those that played out decades earlier. But, the question that arises is this: education is necessary for what? Then as now, education must be practical and it must be fit into identifiable horizons of opportunity, skill and work. While in the 1970s, 80s and 90s the notion that education is necessary was contested at best and dismissed out of hand at worst. Fishing families did through this period either prosper in the fishery or leave the area. The result was a sense that formal education was useful if you wanted to leave (Corbett, 2004), but of little use if one was willing and able to stay. This has changed. Since the late 1990s, few youth imagine themselves staying in the community (See figure1). Still, the lives these investors imaging for themselves are constructed from the cloth of known skills and occupations. Secondary education is then a preparation for the development of those skills.

Nor is Terry himself a resistant "lad" or what Kenway and Kraak (2002, 2004) call a "bad boy." Neither is he looking for "success without school" (Smyth and Hattam, 2004) although there are plenty of role models around him who have achieved it. Terry has responded positively to the persistent and pervasive discourse around him that frames life as a risky business full of danger. He too wants the 'practical' courses, the ones that will help him realize his aspiration of doing what he describes as "hand-machine" work of some kind. He imagines himself in some form of mechanical trade and his trajectory will run through high school and on into community college. In high school, he fears that he will have to take courses that are not particularly well connected to his work intentions and he speaks of courses like social studies and English as being outside the frame of what he thinks he will need to succeed in his work life. His parents generally support this view although they are committed to the idea that the boy must do what is expected of him in order to get over the hurdle of a secondary education and into postsecondary where he will get his "ticket." They must be practical and strategic. Now more than ever, there is little time for irrelevant educational "frills."

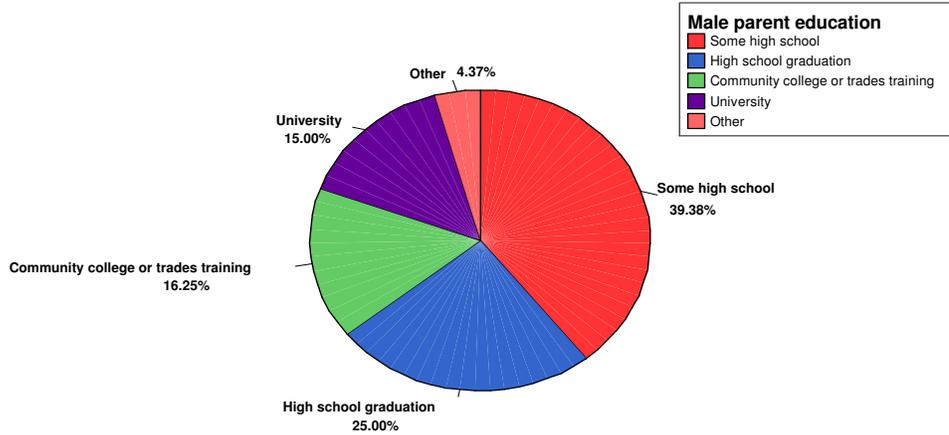
It is ironic that this focus on practicality will lead him into nonacademic courses that will limit the range of his options to practical things. Unlike the spectacular rebels in Willis and other resistance theorists, this lad tolerates those parts of schooling that seem irrelevant to him. He understands that he "needs his grade 12 to do anything." Yet, this posture is reminiscent of Bourdieu. The most practical families, through their own instrumental construction of what education is good for steer their children away from the high status academic subjects and thus, a shot at middle class occupations. The abstract and academically focused courses like advanced mathematics, advanced science courses,

second languages, academic English and social studies courses are endured despite their dubiously relevant content. One “gets through” these courses but invests no real enthusiasm in them because they do not connect with the important business of getting a living. Academic courses are a test of endurance and of the ability to put one’s nose to the grindstone and tackle things which are unpleasant but necessary. The content is held at arm’s length and the boy’s engagement with it is tentative, lacking serious commitment. Shakespeare and linear algebra are important because they are tested and because test scores have consequences, not because they have any inherent value. Getting good grades, or grades good enough to move on to community college is the goal and deep understanding of the content and the ideas it contains is effectively beside the point because it is fundamentally impractical. To take this material seriously would be to leave the straight and narrow path that leads from home to school to employment in a world that is known. To aspire in a more academic and abstract direction would be considered impractical and indeed a cause for concern.

There is nothing of “making a virtue of necessity” in this orientation, although this could be described as a family operating in a known market, the transforming market of the working class in a rural village. This family positions itself and its children to take advantage of what Mike Rose (2004) calls working intelligence, or ways of thinking and acting in the world that are framed in the performance of manual tasks. These children grew up in working class surroundings where successful adults were not only skilled tool users, but also wise and careful entrepreneurs and strong, supportive and careful parents whose agency as parents fit into a community and religious structure that defined what counted as the good and proper life. In rural communities, these people are considered to be both “salt of the earth” because of their practicality and because their lives represent a foundation for a sustainable community.

These are the families that support small rural schools, that drive children to events, that show up at the bake sales, and that regularly support school, church and community events. And they are eminently practical and no-nonsense. They expect school to deliver for their children if the children deliver for the school. This is their contract and it is a contract that is not dissimilar from other community-based contracts. For instance, if a fisherman works hard, uses skill and persistence, takes appropriate precautions, keeps an orderly boat and careful records, then through the application of careful pragmatics, he should be successful. Years of experience on the water have proven this approach to be sound despite the fact that fluctuating (and in many fisheries, declining) fish stocks, corporatization, commodification and government regulation have all conspired to introduce new risks into the business. It is in fact, these very risks that have led many practical families to look to the school as a resource that can place their children in position in the broader world of pragmatic working class opportunity. The application of the orderly pragmatics of entrepreneurial engagement are at risk and the risk can be minimized by formal educational credentials that connect youth to changing local job markets (eg. in the trades, call centers, and emerging technologies).

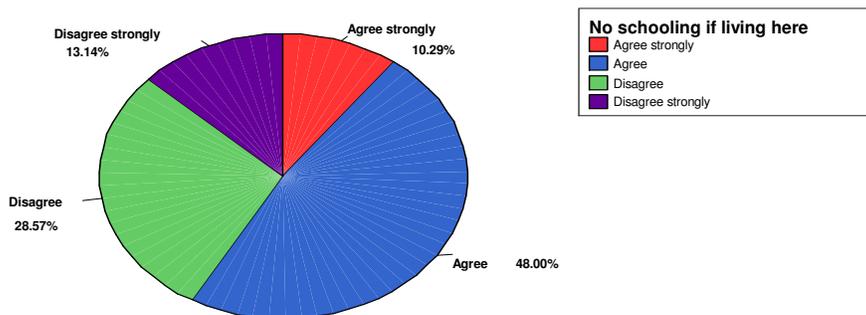
**Figure 1**  
*Highest level of formal education achieved by male parent, Schooling and Community Survey, November 2005.*



Given that nearly 40% of male parents in his peer group have not graduated high school (See Figure 1) the process of getting a boy through high school and on to post secondary education of any kind is a kind of family “trailblazing” (Jones, 1999). My data show that some 64% of male parents and in this population have not experienced postsecondary education. These men received their education in the informal apprenticeship alternative education that has been the predominant institution of higher learning in the locale for generations (Corbett, 2001). Indeed, all of this supports the historically well supported idea that higher education is not particularly important if a person wishes to remain “around here” (See Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Responses to the statement: “You don’t need very much schooling if you want to live around here” Schooling and Community Survey, November 2005.*



Like the middle class, these people now put considerable resources into positioning their children well in school. They enroll their children in sports, they buy the children books, they ensure that their children have fashionable clothes, they interact regularly and in a positive way with their children's teachers, they might even hire tutors to help the child through more obscure courses and topics and write essays or do quadratic equations. These are all strategies of risk management and they represent an active shepherding of children through "the system," out of the high risk environment of the community where formal educational credentials are both relatively uncommon and impossible to acquire. The practical parent helps a child learn to leave to the extent that it is necessary to move on to community college in order to learn practical skills and to acquire credentials or "tickets" to do things like mechanical work.

The practical family however, is not actively involved in supporting children to leave home in the sense of moving into intellectual spaces that are not connected to the kind of life that is known by the parents. This lad's choice of mechanics as a future profession positions him in a known space, the young man working with tools on familiar machines used regularly in the local environment. The discourse of the mechanic, of the garage, of the internal combustion engine may be enhanced or appended by the introduction of computer diagnostics, but it remains a fundamentally masculine discourse in the community, one of maintenance and repair of machines. Thus, it is practical. They boy's parents can see where he is going and what he will do when he gets there. They can even imagine him returning home to fit into the community as a skilled and understood participant in the world that produced him.

So the strong engagement of this family ironically and quite unintentionally supports a deep level of disengagement with the high status academic content that might take the child away from his roots and lead him into "impractical" discourse spaces that subsequently lead to more abstract forms of engagement in universities and subsequently in the professions in management and even in what is commonly understood to be higher echelon technical work. As Bourdieu showed in *Distinction* (1984), it is the very impracticality of the engagements and the freedom from necessity that marks out the taste and orientation of the relatively privileged classes. It is the engagement with abstractions that have no obvious practical content that serves as the gold standard of intelligence and achievement in contemporary schools and assigns the children of practical families to the second tier even when they play the game in a very disciplined and hard-working fashion. It is, as Bourdieu suggests, the very pragmatism of these families that positions them and defines their children as educational second class citizens despite all of the pious rhetoric of those who promote equity and inclusion as hallmarks of contemporary education. On the contrary, social class is alive and well in contemporary Canadian schools and its agency is subtle and deep.

As a child of the practical family, this young man presents himself as a person who likes to work with his hands. He also likes to be outdoors and he knows how to work. His most abiding interests are rooted in a knowledge and experience of place. He is proud of his contributions to the family business and his ability to make money. He is also a person who knows where he is going and he makes his moves in school accordingly. He gives

no trouble, he listens in class and he tries to avoid distractions like girls and partying. He has a clear plan for buying his first car and he has a plan for saving to achieve this goal. His parents are saving for his education and encourage him to do so. They negotiate about whether the boy's savings will go toward a vehicle or into his education. I expect they will reach some compromise on this matter as the practical, sensible and careful people they are, they will be careful not to alienate the boy and cause him to lose his focus and his orientation. Like all parents they understand adolescence as a potentially volatile and dangerous space in a life and they remain actively engaged in their children's lives. To do anything else would be far too risky. And ironically, part of the risk is that the boy will develop an impractical identity construction that might involve taking the academic side of school too seriously.

### *Risk and fear*

When they talk about their families and how their families think about their life trajectories, most of the children addressed risk and fear. In some accounts the world is constructed as a place of considerable danger both for children, and for adults. The level of risk is typically considered to be higher the further a person moves from the home place. For this reason, a number of parents want to keep their children as close to home as possible for as long as possible. Since higher education involves leaving the community, this causes considerable ambivalence about higher education.

The high school itself can also be defined as a high risk environment. Drugs and alcohol are the most often reported source of risk, but risks associated with early sexual activity, computer access and the "mixing" of individuals from other communities and ethnic groups are also identified as problematic or at least potentially problematic. As young people sort out and come to understand the social geography of the high school, they come to learn about risk spaces where smoking, drug and alcohol use, sexual activity and other forms of adult-like behavior predominate. Interestingly, immaturity appears to be something of a hedge against high risk behaviours which are typically things in which \ adults commonly engage. In some of the smoking spaces for instance, a young person needs to establish credentials in order to gain admission and these credentials are partly acquired through experimentation with adult-like behaviour and by ignoring what Lesko (2001) calls the "moratorium" that marks off adolescence from adulthood, effectively defining the adolescent in terms of what they are unable or forbidden from doing.

School itself is generally considered by parents to be a safe place for children, but for the children themselves, this is not always the case. The corridors are places where young people can be vulnerable to more or less overt bullying, sexual advances, name calling and a general sorting out of cliques and allegiances. The same is true of other public spaces like the cafeteria which is under much better surveillance and in spaces around the school which generally are not well watched. Young people like Terry are excluded from the spaces resistant adolescents carve out and protect against both institutionally affiliated adults and those "nerdy" youth who cannot be trusted and whose "uncool" company is not wanted anyhow.

The way that most youth manage risk and fear in school is to develop trust networks or cliques. Groups serve as protection against other groups. They provide identity positions for young people to try on and to exhibit particular constructions of the self through activity and dress. Groups create the illusion that one chooses and invents a self which is authentic and which reflects inner orientations as opposed to reflecting structural positioning. Cliques essentially mirror existing social divisions in the community. Most of the “preppy” or “popular” youth whose identities are most intimately connected to institutional education, and other virtual spaces are the children of professionals, small and medium sized business owners or highly successful (“rich”) independent resource industry entrepreneurs. Most of the resistant youth whose identities are least connected to institutional education are the children of service workers, fisheries support workers like deckhands and fish plant workers, factory operatives, or seasonally employed labourers. Each of these groups constructs social space in school through a matrix of inclusions and exclusions, of in-group loyalty and ritual practices and boundary maintenance. The ritual practices of inclusion often involve communal engagement in adult-like and high-risk behaviours, sports, the heroics of gaming culture and in the consumption of popular culture. The ritual practices of exclusion involve everything from gossip and character assassination, to physical violence, to subtle snubs in the school hallways, to simply knowing your place, where you are allowed to go, and what you are allowed to say. The informal spaces of adolescent culture are policed at least as rigorously as the formal spaces of the classroom and other “watched” institutional school spaces.

### **Knowing where you are: Seeing social space**

#### *Negotiating places and spaces in school*

A second key part of learning to be a practical person is coming to develop an analysis of variants of youth culture that are risky, frivolous or designed for those youth whose capital can be played out into university. Not all young people have the same degree of insight into the nature and structure of social space. In fact, a keen awareness of social space as a manipulable entity is both a developmental matter and a differentially distributed set of skills and resources. These skills represent a valuable form of capital that takes the form of knowing how the discourses and embodied practices associated with particular social groups in and out of school. The most socially challenged children either fail to see the significance of social space or are unwilling to talk about it because they see themselves as victims of the way it is organized. These young people will often have social position ascribed to them externally by powerful social actors (preps, athletes) as “geeks” or “losers” and so their own sense will often be that social space is something that is imposed on others by those who have the power to control relations between youth. So it should be no surprise that these youth are not particularly interested in talking about “groups” of individuals who “hang out” together. For some it is this pragmatism and careful demeanour that marks them off as outsiders in youth controlled resistant spaces.

When a young person comes from a small elementary school, the transition to life in high school is very often problematic at a number of levels. The academic and social challenges of making the change to a larger school where one is more anonymous and further from family is difficult. For most students grade 7 is a year of learning about where you are and how to negotiate the social spaces of a secondary school. For the most part, grade 7 students are well contained by the institutional processes; they change classes in a more or less orderly fashion and they try to please their teachers. They are making new friends and beginning to sort out where they fit in the matrix of the “big school.” In the informal space of peer culture, these children are introduced to the relatively autonomous groupings that exist in the secondary school, and they begin to make the transition to forms of agency that take them out from under adult surveillance. They can walk to the store at particular free times. They find unsupervised spaces in the school which can be risky and dangerous or alluring. They can observe illicit or partly illicit behaviour such as smoking, drug use and necking. They begin to imagine themselves in one of another of these groups.

As a result of this initiation and apprenticeship, children gravitate into cliques, or in some cases, fail to do so. The children who do not develop connections to groups seem to have a relatively underdeveloped sense of social space. This may be because they are excluded from the places and spaces of informal group life where they would learn these subtle dynamics, and it may be because they come into the world of the secondary school with little inclination for making alliances and “fitting in.” Either way, the youth social scene of the school is outside the frame of what they claim to know about. When asked about groups or cliques or “who hangs out with whom,” the most socially marginal young people express genuine puzzlement. Others are able to speak about their “home group” or the people they “hang out” with, but they have very little sense of any other groupings of young people.

Through the second and third year of secondary schooling youth learn to mingle and to sort themselves into the groups I described above. Most successfully find a clique, but inevitably, some do not. These children are “different” in some way that allows them to make few connections with others in the space of school. They either do not see potential alliances and groups, or they are unable to penetrate them. If they are conscious of this, by grade 8, they may have given up on even trying to fit in and have retreated into isolation. In some cases, this isolation is imagined as a virtue (“I’m not interested in any of those immature social games”), in some cases it is not. A few students on the margins become academic stars. These individuals tend to have cultural and educational capital and whose difference is often connected to parents whose own cultural capital is not connected to the habitus in the rural community. They tend to have strong connections to communities of interest and affinity beyond the local, often, at least in part in cyberspace. They are travelers in space.

In fact, in grades 8 and 9, young people on the margins are either unwilling or unable to speak confidently and credibly about social space. It is as though they are unaware of the way that groups operate in school and out, because they themselves have no intimate

knowledge of such processes. They are outside the whole thing and when they see groups they appear only as threats or taunts to them. Their difference and their alienation is accentuated and created in the clubby world of the school and so to admit that social space exists would be to admit that one inhabits its nether regions. Better to say that I have my friends and we have nothing to do with those people or all of that stuff. Better to construct the whole school-based social enterprise as a fiction peopled by false characters who play bizarre and impenetrable games. For these youth, the social space exists as a fiction, a fiction that serves the interests of those who create it.

Of course, as W. I. Thomas said so many years ago, fictions that are considered to be real, become real in their consequences. Youth who inhabit the social margins live in fear. They can be taunted and even physically assaulted by the guardians of the school social order, in many cases on a regular and systematic basis. Those on the inside of these mysterious groups have the power of numbers, but they also have the power of institutional support and the ability to hide the seamier side of their own peer power because they are seen by institutional authorities as the “good kids” who run the clubs, who do well academically and who play up to teachers and school administrators in ways that resound. They are middle class kids who are thought to be basically decent. The reality is that they are often tyrants and enforcers of a particular kind of decorum in schools that make life uncertain and even dangerous for those they define as “losers.”

#### *The definition and policing of social space in school*

Opposite pragmatic youth are those youth who define and police peer spaces in school. These youth tend to have a highly developed sense of social space. Their identities are relatively clear and robust because they carry weight and legitimacy within the official social circles of the institution of school as well as in the informally constructed hierarchies of student life. These are the popular youth, who participate actively in school sports and maintain at least the appearance of engagement in the institutional processes of schooling. They also tend to organize co-curricular and para-scholastic activities such as serving on committees and organizing dances, proms and other social activities that extend their social networks outside the classroom. Such activities are obviously supported by teachers and taken as markers of “leadership” and commitment on the part of students who engage in them.

The exclusive nature of these activities and the cadre of youth who engage in them is seldom considered by school personnel. That these youth manage and regulate social space within the school is seldom understood to be problematic and as the reason why so many alienated youth will have little or nothing to do with school activities largely unseen and unacknowledged by institutional players who incidentally tend to see themselves in these “active” and “engaged” school leaders who are “motivated” to achieve and to make the school a “better place.”

The relationship between schooling and “growing up” is both problematic and contested by differently placed youth. The preppy, popular youth maintain the façade that they

accept and even embrace the institutionally approved version of adolescence. This vision of adolescence draws clear lines between adult and youth behaviour and the popular youth manage impressions in such a way that they present a self that remains clearly on the appropriate side of the line. Since these youth draw considerable social prestige from this presentation of the self and since they are socially positioned to access higher education, typically at the university level, they must take the institutional expectations of school seriously and “play the game.” Those among them who possess the most academic or educational capital are in competition for scholarships and other recognition that the school can bestow on them and so their commitment to maintaining an identity that is considered studious, hard-working, and committed is essential.

This group must be seen as working as hard and as diligently at academic tasks as their teacher and their middle class parents do at their professional jobs. They have little opportunity to “slack off” or to be seen frequenting the wrong places and engaged in the wrong activities with the wrong people. This is not to say that this group is uninvolved in the very sorts of adult like behaviour as the resistant group: they are. The difference is that the middle class “preppy” group or working class youth who aspire to academic success in school, and subsequently in higher education, are required to hide their partying, drug use, foul language, sexual activity, violence, abusiveness and exclusivity from the view of most adults, particularly those adults who are institutional gate keepers like teachers and school personnel. The preps understand the importance of school as a ritual performance in which they need to present a particular kind of self, one that is defined as committed to middle class values, at least somewhat academically serious, orderly, helpful and possessing of leadership qualities, positive, polite and respectful of adults (Bettis and Adams, 2003). They know it is an act, but they also know they must play their part while in school. This is in part why the preps are seen as “two-faced” or “phoney” people who are living inauthentic lives and who cannot be trusted. Their ultimate commitments are to themselves and preserving face in the institution of school in a way that will allow them to steer successfully through the institution while hiding significant aspects of their personalities, their agency and their feelings.

Their commitment to maintaining social space and the divisions between themselves and other groups of “losers” is not just a “mean” or a nasty caprice, it is the foundation of their own success within the institutional system of schooling and higher education. While the psychological inclinations and predispositions of both the prep and the loser are called into question when a disaster like Columbine occurs, or when racial tensions flare up in Nova Scotia schools like Digby or Cole Harbour, it seems more reasonable to understand how social class distinctions and cultural capital combine with institutional structures and processes to set youth up for the kinds of identity positions they assume both in and out of school.

### *Resistance identities*

Other youth who fit somewhere in between and whose identity positions are developed in active resistance to the official institutional practices of the school. Unlike the alienated groups or the loners, resistant groups are not placed in social space by external forces in

the quite the same way. Resistant groups like the smokers, the druggies and the bad actors actively challenge the official definitions of adolescence as a space of moratorium by engaging in adult-like behaviors like smoking, drinking, drug use, and sexual activity. In this way they actively assume identities that are forbidden to them in the context of their official social roles as students and youth. This group too is externally defined by media and institutional discourses of youth demonization and by threats and pressures levied by teachers and the school administration, and indeed by the middle class establishment in the community.

They are, however, typically proud to assume an identity that boasts autonomy and a commitment to the forbidden fruits of adult pleasures. Outside the institutional community of adults, the precocious youth, particularly the precocious young man has been a valuable commodity as labor in the fishery. Traditions of work apprenticeship in the fishery beginning in early teen years and even before typically slid seamlessly into early adult like behaviors and alienation from school and other institutional agents whose work it is to regulate youth behavior (clergy, social workers, authoritarian parents, police, etc.). On the other hand, parallel traditions of exploitation of the labor of young men in the fishery laud the ability to work hard and to party hard. So the identity of the school resistant young man is actually valued and celebrated in the working class culture of the community and the fishery. This continues to be the case whether or not there is work and an economic base to support/exploit such identity constructions. Boys will be boys and even outside the availability of fisheries work, the school resistant young man is said to be following a natural inclination to be physically active and opposed to “tolerating” the feminine space of the school (teachers are mostly women).

The principal danger posed by this group is that they actively attempt (often successfully) to bring into school adult discourse, autonomy, accoutrements and practices effectively challenging the adolescent moratorium enforced by those officially in control of the institutional space of school. This group challenges for control of the space and is always on the edge of leaving school in search of both spaces they can control to a greater degree and where they can practice adult recreational practices out of sight of institutional and family surveillance. From the perspective of their parents and from that of their “practical” peers, these young people both waste time and court danger, not the least of which is scuttling even a mediocre school career, the prerequisite to post secondary study.

The struggle for control of space between adolescents and adults around school property is a story that has been played out since the establishment of the regional high school in the 1950s. Obviously, since the 1950s, the most effective means of achieving this is through the automobile. In 1954 Digby Neck was connected to “town” (Digby) by a paved road and one of Nova Scotia’s first rural high schools was opened in 1955. By the mid 1960s the fishery was generating larger family incomes and most families had vehicles. A decade later it was not uncommon for young men and some women of high school age to have regular access to family and even independently owned vehicles. High male dropout rates that continue into the present decade meant that there has always been a group of young men with money in their pockets hanging around school working

in an industry that features sporadic work dependent on quotas, seasons, fish landings and the weather. In or out of school, young men who have access to vehicles and periodic windfalls of cash from the fishery have acted as sirens to those youth who exist in social space between institutional compliance and resistance. This seduction out of school and into the party life has been a significant challenge for teachers and parents who try to keep their sons and daughters in school through to graduation. While the fisheries based economic infrastructure that supported this resistance has eroded considerably, the traditions and social patterns that have been established appear to be harder to break.

### **Practical suggestion #1: Literacy as space travel**

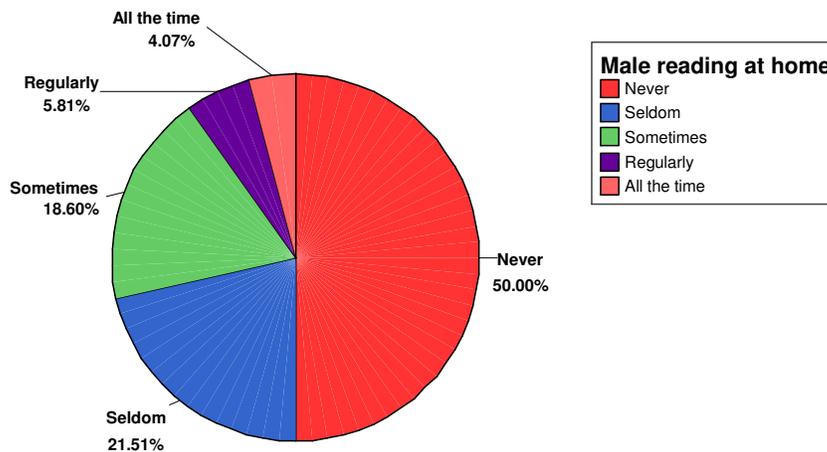
There are at least two kinds of problem here. The first is that a large group of rural youth is disengaged for high status academic subject matter for what they define as “practical” reasons. The second is that school has favored and served middle class space travelers over place dwellers. An obvious policy implication of this research might be to suggest a vocational or technical curriculum for the children of practical families. I think there is a good deal of merit to this idea. The problem with this of course is that the idea of pragmatic course offerings is easily translated into the streaming of youth into technical training at an early age. Even if this is done in an intellectually rich Deweyan fashion, it remains problematic because like the agricultural education movement of the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Jones, 1979), this is fundamentally an education designed for promoting industrial and technological ideas of social progress (Egan, 2002, Popkewitz, Franklin and Pereyar, 2001; Bowers, 2003) as well as reproducing class structure and the habitus of families themselves. However, if these young people already seem to have a pretty good idea whether or not they will be staying around or leaving by mid adolescence, then this seems to make some sense. The trouble is that it takes away the possibility of other life trajectories and other literacies that could take a young person far away from familiar local environments, or which could cause these youth to reflect more deeply on social, economic, political, and ecological conditions in these local environments.

So what do I want to recommend? Some balance of pragmatic skills training probably makes sense. Yet, this training should not preclude intellectually stimulating engagements with literature and with ideas. In Canada we have moved a long way down the road of an academic system for all and we continue to have high expectations for academic performance from all children. But it is also clear that this kind of approach does not work particularly well for a considerable number of rural and urban youth. Should we retreat from the idea that all young people ought to be given maximum opportunity to have a standard, yet high quality intellectual experience in school for as long as possible before so-called “pragmatics” (i.e. the power of the habitus) stream them into predictable lives?

So the problem is: how can the academic curriculum be made to appear as relevant? In language learning, I think we have some very good evidence both from the research and practice base in language arts teaching and from the work of scholars in what has been

called the new literacy studies (Street, 2003). There is always a literacy crisis upon us. I will not cite the latest statistics, but the upshot is that an alarmingly large percentage of the adult population in most of the OECD nations is alleged to be unable to handle routine literacy tasks with fluency. The response to this presumed crisis is typically framed in terms of more accountability schemes in the public schools and a return to traditional skills-based literacy instruction. The literacy crisis has been caused, apparently, by a failure of our methods. There are a number of ways of thinking about this, but in my research one aspect of the problem is emerging with considerable clarity and that is that the majority of rural men do not seem to read books.

**Figure 3**  
*Book reading at home by men and boys*  
*Schooling and Community Survey, November 2005.*



In fact Figure 3 shows that fewer than 10% of students surveyed identified book reading as something men and boys do for pleasure on a regular basis (i.e. regularly or all the time). Fully half never read books. So what is the literacy crisis here? All of these parents are considered to be able to read, but very few of the men in the community read books. It is not a lack of skills, but rather a lack of engagement that is in play here. How can we bring young people (and particularly young men) to books? What kinds of teaching skills do teachers need to help young people find their way to literature that makes them want to read? How can we address the literacy crisis (which is a crisis of will more than a crisis of skill) I am identifying here? It seems to me that by returning to literacy instruction that is rooted in a skills approach rather than in the pleasure of stories we will continue to see print literacy and particularly the practice of book reading relegated to the margins by practical young people who will read only what they have to when they have to.

## **Practical suggestion #2: Place-based education**

A second suggestion I would like to make is that despite its problems and limitations, the idea of place-based education that has been promoted by mainly by rural but also by some urban educators (Theobald, 1997, 2005; Gruenwald, 2002, 2003; Shelton, 2005; Wotherspoon, 1998; Haas and Nachtigal, 1998) over the past decade or more is one that deserves careful consideration.

Over the last several decades most western educational jurisdictions have witnessed a powerful policy and curricular transformation. Increasingly, educational performance has come to be constructed and evaluated in terms of generic standards measured by instruments of mass assessment. In pragmatic terms in Canada this means that educational outcomes are predefined at the provincial level, harmonized nationally and then articulated with recognized international standardized tests like the Organization for International Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Project for International Student Assessment (PISA). Since the mid 1990s, educational outcomes have come to be framed in terms of performance on standardized tests, the results of which are routinely published in the regional and national media.

What has occurred in educational discourse mirrors the shifts represented by economic globalization and we have witnessed a move away from what might be called local control of education. Educational "products" (i.e. educational outcomes) are consequently evaluated in terms of the standards and requirements of larger and larger geographies. This is generally understood as improvement, higher standards and expectations and generally as educational progress. The story goes something like this: there was a time when a young person needed only to be educated to live within a local world, but these days globalization has changed all of that and children everywhere need to be educated for participation in the global economy and in a networked knowledge society. This generic, standardized vision of education and the idea that learning can and should be quantified, measured and compared like any other commodity has passed into public educational discourse over the past 20 years relatively unproblematically despite the fact it seems to contradict much of what we have come to know about how people learn.

The difficulty with the policy shift toward standardization and quantitative measurement is that there is a well established body of evidence gathered over the last century that has consistently shown that young people learn from experience and that this experience occurs in real physical places. Learning then is contextual and it occurs in the cultural settings in which people live. Children who live on farms come to learn about farming not because they are "gifted" in that way, but rather because they are immersed in the culture of farming. Young people who grow up in literate homes with large numbers of books and parents who read a lot come to learn about the value and pleasures of literacy not necessarily because they are "bright", but because they live in a social space where this activity is just something one does. It is all very well for us to dream about globalization and network society, but the fundamental educational reality is that children learn their most powerful lessons in the actual communities they inhabit.

This connection between learning and living has been understood for more than a century when the American educational theorist John Dewey challenged the idea that learning is detached from context and is best accomplished through the rote memorization of material that is considered to be essential. Dewey was one of the first people to actually look at children and how they went about learning the things they came to know and more importantly why schooled learning was such a boring and irrelevant activity for most children in the traditional classroom of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. So Dewey's ideas challenged the notion of the generic, standardized educational outcome and challenged educators to move away from standardized tests of what was considered core knowledge. Instead, educators were challenged to see teaching and learning as an engagement with children in place. Learning is a different process for different children and the interests, inclinations, family background, traditions and social location of each child obviously forms the foundation of the child's experience. Dewey urged teachers to begin with experience or where the child is, rather than with a core set of content to be drilled into the head of the child.

This was a revolutionary and highly controversial way of looking at learning and despite its powerful face validity, the older traditions of teaching and testing bodies of academic content that are generally not intimately linked to community or the context in which the child lives. The revival of the standardized test internationally indicates the power of traditional educational ideas. Place-based education is, a contemporary articulation of the ideas that Dewey popularized, but with a couple of interesting twists.

The first twist is sociological. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century educational sociologists have confirmed again and again a powerful link between school success and a child's social and economic position. It is difficult to present this research simply in a short piece, but the key problem is that because learning is embedded in the context of the learner, schools have been largely unsuccessful at penetrating the very powerful educational influence of families and neighborhoods (in other words the real places where children live). Of course, families and neighborhoods are divided in modern societies along social class, racial, gender and ethnic lines. These social divisions can be in practical terms in the very different sets of life conditions in which different children grow and learn. Obviously, the lifeworld of the child of double income middle class professional children living in a suburb will be very different from the lifeworld of the child living in poverty in an urban or rural ghetto. What this means is that school attempts to take children who have very different life learning experiences and give them the same education. This is deeply problematic and the consistent findings of differential in school performance of different races, ethnic groups, social classes and genders presents us with a picture of a schooling that is fundamentally unequal.

The second twist is an ecological one. The basic concept behind place based education is the idea that an education ought to help children and youth both understand and enhance the wellbeing of the actual ecological places they inhabit. Traditional curriculum has tended to view learning in terms of the mastery of abstract content, or deep structural knowledge that is applicable in a variety of different settings and which in some

incarnations has become timeless by transcending the particularities of its period and its place. Place based educators argue that by removing school knowledge from the particularity of the locations in which it is applied, education tends albeit unintentionally to encourage a separation of knowledge from place. This makes educational institutions particularly detached places that not only fail to respond to their communities, but which actually define themselves and the work they do in terms of this separation. Educational institutions then become places where “pure” essential knowledge is pursued. Educational historians have shown how the more esoteric and abstract a subject area becomes, the higher its status and the more prestigious its position in what Ivor Goodson calls the “hierarchy of curriculum.” This manifests itself whenever money is short and programs are on the chopping block and music, art, technology education, and other practical hands-on subjects are typically the first to go or to be challenged because they are considered to be the least important. Nobody would suggest dropping advanced mathematics or senior level physics and chemistry courses from the high school curriculum, even though the subject matter of these courses is only used to any extent by a small minority of university-bound.

The nub of the problem is that by ignoring place and promoting abstractions, young people’s considerable intellectual energies are focused on a set of puzzles that have no grounding in the lives they know. This is particularly true in rural areas. A deeper criticism is that our abstract focus that ignores place also causes us to remain impotent in the face of the most important human story of the present moment, the ecological crisis. Place-based educators argue that if we do not reconnect schools to protecting and sustaining local ecologies, we will continue to witness environmental degradation, rural depopulation and the likely collapse of foundational life systems that rely on functioning rural ecologies.

In the traditional standardized idea of schooling and curriculum, place is unimportant and even irrelevant to the educational process which is fundamentally about depositing basic knowledge into the heads of people. I have even gone so far as to argue that historically, the mission of formal education has been one of severing people’s attachments to place, enhancing their attachment to virtual spaces and networks, and concentrating them physically in urban agglomerations. The more one knows about one’s rural home, the more “rustic” or backward one is considered to be. The more one speaks in a localized vernacular, the more one is considered to be uneducated and even “stuck.” What develops is a language barrier between educators and other professional cohorts on one hand and the working people in rural communities on the other. One consequence of this for rural communities is that formal education has too often been divorced from community problems and issues that are often questions of survival. It is well known how in rural communities, formal education has tended to support best that group of youth who know and care least about their home places and who are most geographically mobile. In other words, as I have found in my own work, educationally successful young people “learn to leave.” Place-based education is not though and attempt to keep people in place and prevent them from being mobile; at its best I think it is an education that focuses curriculum on community and locale and helps students build bridges to the broader world. The operational principle is that by studying local economies, local

cultures, local ecosystems, and local politics, that children can learn both the deep structural principles and concepts that are represented in academic disciplines while at the same time learning to value and protect their home places. Place-based education then does not write the locale out of the educational process as do standardized, pre-defined mass-testable outcome-based schemes that are currently popular.

Place-based education attempts to return a greater measure of importance to the experience of the learner and the place in which that person learns. Some variants of place-based education contain within them strong political and environmental critiques of the impact of globalization and advanced capitalism on the natural and sociocultural environment. Other forms of place-based education are more politically conservative and represent the longstanding local traditions and heritage of people who have lived on a piece of land for a long time and who care deeply about threats to those traditions and to the land itself. So place-based education can be, it seems to me, a way of thinking about education that allows us to bridge social and political gaps, given that valuing the sustenance and protection of natural places is a commonly held value in most communities. By educating children about local ecology for instance, we help promote the idea that we are stewards on the land and responsible for protecting natural systems for future generations.

Place-based education has been developed for the most part by rural educators and thinkers probably because maintaining sustainability of communities transformed by industrialization has been such focus of concern in rural areas. We tend to associate place with countryside and a core myth of industrialization and post-industrialization is that “peripheral” rural places and rural people are victimized by the interests and power located in urban “core” areas. There is a certain truth to this position, and yet as the global ecological crisis has deepened, urban people have begun to look to rural places as desirable, clean living spaces.

Paul Theobald (1997) actually goes so far as to argue that the good rural school ought to be a template for urban education. Why indeed can we not make urban and suburban schools more place-based, locally focused and designed to foster community and stewardship rather competition and individual consumption. So rather than making rural schools and rural children more internationally competitive so that an elite cadre of high achievers can be creamed off and be deployed in urban centres, leaving the educationally unsuccessful to remain “stuck” in place, why can we not develop a vision of schooling and education generally that helps communities confront and resolve the issues they currently face. This is vision of educational institutions that serve as intellectual work spaces for engagement with immediate community problems which these days can only be solved by considering the connections between the global and the local. I think this may be one way to make school more engaging and integrated for both space travelers and for practical people.

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