ORIGINAL PAPER

Person and Place: Connecting Teen Development and Place-Based Writing

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Abstract: One challenge of teaching writing in the middle school classroom is maintaining student engagement and interest. To combat this, previous research has suggested using developmentally responsive teaching practices that meet various needs within young adolescent development. Place-based writing can fulfill this role and be used as a developmentally responsive practice. In this article, I examine the ways in which place-based writing requires self-reflective practices from each student, provides freedom for choice and agency in writing, and creates opportunities to involve the local community and/or environment and I view these fundamental characteristics of the practice through a developmental lens, specifically focusing on the social-emotional, cognitive and psychological, and physical developmental needs of young adolescents. Through doing so, I outline how place-based writing can be used to directly support many different facets of development and discuss how it can be applied to the classroom setting.

As I worked with middle school students as part of my bachelor's degree, I faced many instances where my students just did not want to write. They would complain about the prompts, they would write just enough to satisfy the rubric, or they would simply just not write at all. I tried the tricks my professors recommended: I leveled with them about why writing is important and how it will help them in life; I offered them choices between multiple predetermined prompts; I even tried a version of a writing workshop—but I couldn't get my students excited about writing. It wasn't until after my student teaching experience that I really started to look into place-based writing (PBW) as an option for middle school students. It'd been talked about in some of my classes before, but I hadn't ever seen a strong connection between it and middle school writing. However, I've since found that there are direct overlaps between young adolescent needs, specifically in middle school, and the core characteristics of PBW. Through these overlaps, I see great potential for it as a practice that can excite students and support their developmental needs. However, before we can explore these overlaps, we need to come to a shared understanding of three key things: what is the concept of "place"? What is PBW? What are the core characteristics of young adolescent development? I will address each of these in the following sections.

What is "place"?

We must first understand what "place" is when talking about PBW. If you were to ask someone to define the word "place," they'd

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likely tell you that it's just a physical location–but can place be more than that? Can it be a memory? An emotion? Can it even be something as abstract as a concept or thought? As Rob and Amanda Montgomery (2021) put it, "the concept of place is quite slippery" (p. 10). In their book, *A Place To Write*, Montgomery and Montgomery (2021) lean on a definition presented by J. A. Agnew (1987): for something to be considered a "place," it must have three qualities: location, locale, and a sense of place. Location means that a place needs to have a physical, geographical location; locale references the features that determine why this place is unique (the Montgomerys use the example of a city having specific neighborhoods); and a sense of place can be understood as a "sense of identity," which is informed by what individual features are important to each specific person—what makes this place meaningful to people (Montgomery and Montgomery, 2021).

Other authors have also approached the question of what "place" is, such as Eric Donovan (2016), who described the concept of place as a narrative or "a story that involved interactions, characters, conflicts, and the rise and flow of humanity" (p. 23). In doing so, he views "place" as something fluid that "extends beyond just the location of where people live" (p. 23), and he reframes the concept to focus mainly on the impact a place has on individuals rather than its physical location or unique characteristics. Joni Adamson (2001) also defines place, calling it "space humanized" (p. 70), focusing on the sensory feelings and personal experiences that individuals associate with locations; similar to Donovan's, Adamson's definition places more emphasis on personal impact.

David Sobel (2004) thinks of place mainly through the lens of local culture and tradition and how these grow the community. Others offer more abstract definitions, such as Jenevieve Goss' (2024) inclusion of the exploration of memories as a way of exploring place.

None of these definitions are wrong, but rather they emphasize how "slippery" the concept is. In short, there's not a solid definition of what "place" is. While Agnew provides a good overarching definition of what a space needs to be considered a "place," other definitions ask which aspect to emphasize. However, limiting the concept of place to a physical location eliminates creative uses of the word. Could place relate to memory, as mentioned above? Could place extend to someone's place in a social hierarchy or to their place in a specific time period? Ultimately, defining place IS slippery, as the concept is nebulous and personal to each individual. These definitions other scholars have presented offer an extremely useful set of guidelines in approaching the idea of "place," but I implore you to keep an open mind about other ways the concept could be defined as you continue to read.

What is Place-Based Writing?

PBW is an evolution of the pedagogy of place-based education, first coined by Laurie Lane-Zucker and John Elder, which itself is an evolution of environmental education (Sobel, 2004). In the early 1990s, Zucker and Elder (2020) determined place-based education to be a "pedagogy of community, the reintegration of the individual into her home ground and the restoration of the essential links between a person and her place" (para. 28). However, it wasn't first put into print until 2004 when Sobel defined it as "the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts" (p. 11). As place-based education has evolved, it has produced the more specific practice of PBW,

and this evolution is evident in the main idea behind PBW: writing inspired by a place significant to the writer, especially as related to the writer's community. This idea leaves much room for interpretation, making it very flexible for classroom application. I've added some interpretations below.

In their book, *A Place to Write*, Montgomery and Montgomery (2021) state that PBW should be personal, agentive, engaging, audience-oriented, and built in a way that can promote change. It is personal, as each student will discuss a place significant to them; agentive, since students each have control over their topic and writing style; engaging, because choice and control over a project breeds engagement; audience oriented by providing new audiences outside of the classroom, such as community members; and built in a way to promote change, since students will often write about something they care about within the community.

Elliot Jacobs (2011) thinks that PBW needs "a balance between narrative and landscape [in which the] setting and story share a spotlight" (p. 50), a dialogue between the writer and the setting, especially when highlighting the writer's relationship with themself; to allow students to choose what they will write about from personal experiences and places that are meaningful to them; and a writing environment that considers any place a student chooses as meaningful and worth writing about.

Donovan (2016) describes PBW as a way for students to find connections within their community and as a way to "better understand themselves while authentically expressing that understanding through writing" (p. 23). In doing so, he details PBW as a way to create active and purposeful learning through multimodal approaches with the goal of allowing students to clearly express their own stories within the context of their community.

Additionally, other scholars offer different ideas of central characteristics to define PBW. These include finding connections between nature and language (Lundahl et al., 2024), implementing technology into writing (Novak, 2024), the focus on community connections through research and interviews (Delgado-Chernick, 2024), and writing as a petition within the community (Hudson & Hudson, 2024).

Though all of these authors have different views on PBW and which characteristics to consider crucial, there are many points of overlap. Most of these authors agree that PBW needs:

1. To be focused on the writer and their personal experiences
2. To be about a meaningful, significant place within that writer's life
3. To allow choice and agency in the writing prompt and process
4. To connect the writer with their environment and/or community

Moving forward in this paper, I will use these four agreed-upon characteristics as the working definition of what PBW requires.

What Are Major Characteristics Of Young Adolescent Development?

To get to the heart of this article, we must first discuss another topic: adolescent development. Adolescents are going through one of the most developmentally rich times in their lives and require much support from the people around them to do this (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022). Though these adolescents are going through many changes, their development can be grouped into three distinct categories: social-emotional development, cognitive and psychological development, and physical development.

Below, I've added a brief description of each of these.

Social-Emotional Development

Much happens during the stages of social-emotional development. Friends turn on each other, peer groups shatter and reform, bullying, and anxiety become more regular—the list goes on. Social-emotional development is responsible for anything related to social circles, peer power dynamics, peer pressure, and interpersonal feelings (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Developing adolescents are often susceptible to this peer pressure and bad decisions, as they want to be seen as individuals, but they also crave a sense of belonging among their peers, which leads to an increased willingness to take risks (Scholastic Parents Staff, 2021).

Social-emotional development is also responsible for the growing "awareness of social identities including race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, or immigrant status" (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022, para. 28), which leads to "a deeper and more nuanced awareness and understanding of social injustices such as racism, sexism, and homophobia" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 61). Together, these aspects serve to promote empathy and as a foundation for moral development.

Cognitive and Psychological Development

The psyche of an adolescent is a mess of figuring things out and learning who they are as an individual. This often presents itself through experimentation with their identity and developing strong egocentrism. This egocentrism has two aspects to it. These are the imaginary audience: the idea that everything they do and everything about them is extremely important to those around them, and the personal fable: the belief that

they are the only ones who experience their emotions (Scholastic Parents Staff, 2021). These students are beginning to understand that everyone has unique perspectives and thoughts, which may clash with their own.

Cognitively, this time in someone's life is when they develop a sense of independence and the ability to think critically and abstractly. This looks like the ability to "develop and test hypotheses, analyze and synthesize data, grapple with complex concepts, and think reflectively," as well as determining and arguing a position, thinking through ideologies, challenging positions of authority, and considering the future (including the development of personal goals) (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022, para. 15).

Similarly to social-emotional development, cognitive development also promotes moral growth. They start to move away from simply accepting the judgments of adults and start to develop their own moral and ethical positions. This may lead to questionable or even harmful behaviors, but ultimately this is the beginning of each adolescent determining what's important to them and what their beliefs are (Caskey & Anfara, 2007).

Physical Development

Physical development largely references the bodily changes adolescents experience. Students need opportunities to safely learn about these changes and different aspects of healthy living. This doesn't exactly match the curriculum of an ELA classroom, but physical activity is an extremely important aspect of supporting physical development (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022). Additionally, adolescents have a heightened awareness of how they are changing and may talk negatively or harmfully about the physical qualities of themselves or others (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). These aspects of physical

development can be incorporated in education outside of the health classroom, and both are applicable to the practice of PBW.

How Do Place-Based Writing and Young Adolescent Development Connect?

In the following section, I will describe how the characteristics of PBW and the characteristics of young adolescent development overlap and how utilizing PBW in the classroom can be beneficial for middle school students. To do this, I will highlight one of the characteristics from the earlier definition of PBW, and I will then explain how it can be connected to one or more attributes of developmental needs.

Focus on the Writer and Their Personal Experiences

As adolescents develop, they're figuring out their morals, their ideological positions, the existence and impact of social issues, and various parts of their identity. PBW can help them in this journey by asking them to think about who they are and what is most important to them. For example, a student may recognize that they care about social fairness if they realize an important moment in their life was standing up to a bully on the playground—a realization of asking themselves why they consider the playground a personally important place. This or any other recognition of an important place will be unique to each student, as it's unique to their individual identity and experiences.

Additionally, PBW, by its nature, requires writers to dive into their own identities and determine what's important to them. To accomplish this, writers have to grapple with how their environments and experiences have shaped them in life and continue to do so; they must understand that

their identities and priorities haven't been formed in a vacuum but are related, at least in part, to the community and culture they've grown up in. To take it further, by inspiring writing through somewhere important to the writer, the writer is also learning how to apply classroom concepts to real-world situations. An example of this comes from Amanda Montgomery (2024), who combined Google Street View and the Marietta History Project for her students to learn about Marietta Square, a place familiar to them. In the project, students learned about groups important to historic Marietta and the significance of the square, and they had to develop a narrative of daily life from the perspective of someone of the time period. Though students were familiar with the square, they didn't know the rich history behind it, to which this project exposed them, furthering their understanding of the community that shaped them while also showing how concepts, such as research and writing, can have real-life applications.

Write About a Meaningful, Significant Place in the Writer's Life

In a similar manner to the first characteristic, by asking students to write about a significant place in their lives, PBW is asking them to practice self-reflection and to be able to recognize what is significant to them as individuals. This directly targets aspects of their social-emotional, cognitive, and psychological development.

Social-emotional learning asks students to understand how interactions with others can affect how they view a place— they have to ask themselves questions about *why* a place is significant to them. Was there an important moment between them and their friends in this location? Is it a place that their friend group frequents? Is it a place they go to seclude themselves when being around people becomes too much?

Because a place is a story involving "interactions, characters, conflicts, and the rise and flow of humanity" (Donovan, 2016, p.23), its significance cannot exist without a connection to personal interactions with others. In other words, each student must understand how their interactions with others affect them to understand why a place is meaningful.

Regarding cognitive and psychological development, asking students to determine a meaningful place also requires them to understand part of their individual identities. Someone who is a social butterfly is more likely to choose a place of significance that focuses on something with their peer groups, such as a place where a party happens or where their friends regularly meet up, while someone more introverted may choose a place where they are typically alone. These examples are broad aspects of identity, but PBW would encourage students to dig deeper into themselves to determine what is truly important to them based on who they are and what they prioritize in life. Having students write about a place of significance may build into their strong sense of egocentrism as well, but this could be mitigated by sharing these locations and writings, ultimately promoting the idea that everyone has unique experiences, perspectives, and thoughts.

Allow Choice and Agency in the Writing Prompt and Process

Young adolescents' cognitive and psychological development leads to an ever-growing need for autonomy and individuality in their lives. When students are given a very structured assignment, these needs are ignored, and students are less engaged and produce less authentic work. Much of Montgomery and Montgomery's (2021) work focuses on PBW in relation to

creating authentic work, defining authentic work as work created through "choosing topics, purposes, audiences, and forms that are relevant and meaningful" to the writer (p. 5), but they also determine that the very nature of a classroom setting will always prevent work from being truly 100% authentic. However, agency through choices about the writing and presentation of a project can help approach authentic work through the autonomy and individuality personal agency allows students to express (p. 6). Though you, as a teacher, require students to create work for your class, you can give them the choice of how to format their writing and, of course, the choice of which place of significance to write about. This aspect of PBW still allows for some structure in the format of a project, but it requires the students to think about what format would best relay the story they're creating about their significant place. This extra freedom for students not only addresses the need for autonomy and individuality but also requires students to think critically about how they present their work.

Connect the Writer with Their Environment and/or Community

A big part of PBW is the matter of getting students out of the classroom, into their community or environment and writing to an audience beyond the teacher and their immediate peers. In this, there's a lot of potential to have students make connections with local community members, such as various government agencies, neighborhood people, or anyone else who could be helpful in their writing. Perhaps they need to interview people to establish a history of their chosen place. Maybe they need to talk with a specialist, such as a scientist or an engineer, in order to better understand the mechanical aspects of their chosen place,

like a swamp, a specific building, or a garden. This is an area in which teachers can help promote necessary aspects of physical development. As I mentioned before, physical development is about educating the students, preventing negative talk about themselves and others, and having them move around regularly. For students to accomplish a connection with their environment or with their community, they must move around town and interact with people who are different from themselves; in doing so, they will witness people of all types, which could act as a positive representation.

A PBW assignment that invites students to explore their community will find affirmation of many types of positive representation, such as in race, ethnicity, gender, physical body shape, etc., as they are given the opportunity to explore differences and commonalities between themselves and the community members in ways typical classroom education may not allow for. Through community interactions, students will be able to identify with people they meet while also exploring different perspectives, addressing the social-emotional needs of developing a sense of belonging and learning to empathize with others.

Implementation of Place-Based Writing

As stated at the beginning, there are many interpretations of PBW, which means there are many ways to apply it to the classroom. As discussed previously, Amanda Montgomery's application was a journey through history to better understand the local community, but there are many other examples. Others have taken the approach of connecting with nature and the environment by having students compare aspects of their personal identity with objects and phenomena in the natural landscape

(Lundahl et al., 2024) or by asking students to inquire about how a geographical location connects to nature and culture through human needs, including creativity, survival, and spirituality (Hudson & Hudson, 2024). An example from Goss (2024) is the less physical approach to the concept of place, asking students to explore parts of their past, focusing on a single topic, such as food, music, or nature, which she found to inspire art and writing relating not just to their experiences within these topics but also to who they are as people. The Montgomerys (2021) discuss an example from Rob's childhood in which a teacher led the class around the school in silence as they recorded what they noticed, which they then used as inspiration for creative writing. I was involved in a similar use of PBW, in which we took a field trip to a nearby river and wrote creative pieces based on our observations and sensory experiences.

Ultimately, the ways to apply PBW are virtually endless. Application of PBW can range from a field trip to a park or downtown to exploring virtual tours on a website to a walk around the school to even just recalling important memories—it's incredibly flexible, depending mostly on the classroom environment, school limitations, needs of the students, and desired outcomes of the lesson. It can be used simply for creative inspiration or for learning bigger material. Regardless of how it's implemented, the practice will connect students to their community and/or environment, allow for personal agency over their writing, and ask them to think about themselves while still having positive developmental benefits across the range of young adolescent needs through interaction with community members, physical activity, critical thinking, self-reflection, and exposure to other people's experiences.

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