**Title:** Transforming Social Studies: A Case Study of Place-Based Education at a Rural High School in North Carolina

**Abstract:** Research has shown that students have negative attitudes toward social studies. One reason is that they struggle to find the relevance to their lives. By using the local community as a text and context for teaching and learning, place-based education promotes active and authentic engagement with real-world concerns, concepts, and challenges. I am proposing to conduct a year-long qualitative case study that involves at least one teacher at Graham High School who will be using a place-based approach in her social studies courses. Participants will also include approximately 60 high school students. Data will be generated from interviews, observations, and documents (e.g., lesson plans, student work). Although there are examples of place-based social studies curriculum in journals and books, there are no studies that examine the effects on student learning and engagement, citizenship competencies, and Positive Youth Development.

**Personal Statement:**

When I entered high school, I was encouraged to apply to the Lindsey Meyer Teen Institute for Leadership. At the time, I was unsure what this five-day conference would look like or what I would learn. Now, after attending for three summers in a row, I appreciate how it has helped shape who I am as a person today. It is where I first experienced what it is like to interact with a diverse group of students. My neighborhood and school in New Jersey were both quite homogenous; so, when I was introduced to students of color from all over the state, I experienced a bit of culture shock. Although it was not easy, I eventually learned how to be an ally, how to lead alongside others, and how to be comfortable in my own skin. Being a participant at the Institute helped me realize my leadership potential by empowering me to enact positive change in my community. When I read *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson before my first semester at Elon, I was fully convinced that my life would be devoted to fighting injustice.

I arrived at Elon unsure of how to hone my passion, however. As a Leadership Fellow, I was automatically placed into Ethical Practice, which enhanced my awareness of my own privilege and complicated my understanding of the world even more. This first occurred when I was introduced to a book entitled *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*. The author, Monique Morris, taught me how black girls are constantly at a disadvantage in school, and she explained the school-to-prison pipeline. Reading this book continually reminded me that the United States is not perfect; if my skin was just a shade darker, I could be caught in that pipeline, too. For 18 years I had been oblivious to such rampant injustice in schools, and this weighed heavily on me. It sparked many questions: Why does the school-to-prison pipeline exist? What role do teachers play in it? How might students who already feel hopeless be restored? At the time, I was thinking of majoring in political science and maybe attending law school, but the book prompted me to consider the field of education. I could envision myself being the kind of teacher who disrupts the pipeline and makes a difference in the lives of students who might otherwise struggle to succeed because the system is set up against them.

My zeal for educational justice was redoubled when I took Education and Society, which is where I met my research mentor. Although my field placement was at Elon Elementary, I noticed how students of color experienced school differently. The following semester, in Educational Psychology, I spent time at Harvey Newlin Elementary, which is a Title I school populated with students who live in poverty. Many of them supposedly had severe learning disabilities, but I was not sure if that was due to something neurological or something more social and political. It is hard to learn when you have experienced trauma and do not receive the support and resources you need. One student in particular captured my attention. He was labeled as having ADHD, and he was expected to sit still inside a classroom all day; not doing so would lead to disciplinary action. In my view, he was constantly set up for failure. This made me think about my own sister who had a great deal of difficulty in school because of ADHD. She rarely received appropriate accommodations and thus struggled consistently. I began asking myself questions once again: Why is teaching in a classroom so structured and rigid? How can students who learn differently than others be set up for success rather than failure?

My experiences at Elon have altered my career trajectory. Dr. Carignan helped rekindle my love for history. I have tutored students at Cummings High School for Elon Academy and mentored Girl Scouts through Panhellenic philanthropy. Currently, I am the director of the Intersect Conference for Diversity, Leadership, and Social Justice. Through these experiences I have become a culturally aware citizen who not only has a new perspective on what students need to succeed, but also the desire to take action on it. The past several months have convinced me even further that I am on the right path. In preparation for applying for the Lumen Prize, I have been reading about teachers who take their students outside the classroom and into their communities. As a future high school social studies teacher, I see myself doing the same. Educational approaches like place-based education and garden-based learning have resonated with me on multiple levels, and I am eager to work on a research project that will give me hands-on experience developing curriculum, partnering with experts, and documenting student learning, all of which will shape the teacher I will become. The Lumen Prize will help me extend my intellectual journey that began in high school and eventually make a difference in the lives of my future students.

**Project Description**

**Focus:** As a future social studies teacher, I want students to be excited about learning. Unfortunately, most find the subject boring (Milo, 2015). There is an increasing number of scholars who argue that social studies education needs to undergo a transformation. According to Milo (2017), a majority of students dislike it because they fail to see the relevance to their lives. Strauss’ (2017) critique is that students absorb trivia straight out of a textbook and expected to regurgitate it days later on a test. Schmidt (2007) claimed the problem is that teachers have taken the *social* out of social studies: “lessons are long on force-fed factoids and short on human interest” (p. 3). White (2016) used the word “reimagine” to describe what is needed in the field, and Ross (2017) suggested that social studies needs to be reconfigured so that learning becomes “synonymous with an inquiry into the problems faced by real people in their everyday life” (p. 18). Supreme Court Justice Sotomayor expressed this sentiment to students and educators in Seattle: "Let's give kids the opportunity to change their own lives" (Fowler, 2018).

Place-based education is a framework that has the potential to transform social studies (Kissling, 2016). Sobel (2004) defined place-based education as “the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point” (p. 7) for teaching. According to Smith (2016), the purpose is to “engender among students a sense of affiliation with their home communities and regions, develop problem-solving skills and the ability to collaborate with others, cultivate a sense of responsibility for the natural environment and the people it supports, and instill a recognition of their own capacity to be positive change-makers and leaders.” The learning design firm Getting Smart (n.d.) define place-based education as “anytime, anywhere learning that leverages the power of place, and not just the power of technology, to personalize learning.” The goals are to increase student and teacher engagement, boost academic outcomes, and impact communities.

Place-based education is not a new concept. All over the world, teachers have initiated programs that allow students to get outside the classroom (e.g., Kissling & Barton, 2013; Resor, 2010; Stevenson, 2007; Smith, 2002). Gruenewald, Koppelman, and Elam (2007) examined the Olympia, Washington, school district, which received a three-year Teaching American History grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Their place-based project improved historical content knowledge for U.S. history teachers as well as increased student achievement. In the mid-1990s, Francisco Guajardo put place-based education into action at Edcouch-Elsa High School. His students conducted interviews with local residents and explored issues affecting their town (Smith, 2014). In a study by Volk and Cheak (2003), Hawaiian students worked together to select, investigate, and act on local environmental issues, which improved their critical thinking skills; reading, writing, and oral communication skills; familiarity with technology; self-confidence; and citizenship confidence. In sum, place-based education allows teachers and students the opportunity to get outside of the school where they can be active learners; it “focuses both on developing depth of knowledge stemming from experience with relevant contexts, and fostering the ability and desire to participate as informed citizens in the stewardship of places near and far, now and in the future” (Gruenewald, Koppelman, & Elman, 2007, p. 235).

Since place-based education involves getting students outside, it is also a means to connect with nature. According to Louv (2005), “the bond is breaking between the young and the natural world” (p. 3).Schools contribute to this problem as most students are required to be enclosed in classrooms with limited options for movement. Smith (2014) argues that our society is “preventing many children from establishing the relationships with nature that may undegrid both emotional health and environmental preservation” (p. 213). Place-based education affords students the chance to reconnect with nature and provides new learning environments that stimulate their minds. Research studies indicate that being outside helps restore mental energy, improve concentration, and sharpen thinking and creativity (e.g., Atchley, Strayer & Atchley, 2012; Berman, Jonides, & Kaplan, 2008; Kaplan,1995; Taylor & Kuo, 2009; Tennessen & Cimprich, 1995). Gruenewald (2003) considers place-based education the “cousin of environmental education” (p. 7).

Ideally, schools function as “political agents” where the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good is being achieved (Carlsson & Jensen, 2006). In this spirit, Gruenewald (2003) advocates for what he calls a *critical pedagogy of place*, which aims to “identify, recover and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environment (reinhabitation), and identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization)” (p. 9). This anti-oppressive approach to place-based education encourages teachers and students to pursue forms of activism that improve the social and ecological life of their community, which promotes both transformative and sustainability conceptions of citizenship. According to Banks (2017), transformative citizenship focuses on the ability to take action, which “enables marginalized and structurally excluded groups to become recognized and participatory citizens who are fully integrated” (p. 367). Relatedly, sustainability citizenship encompasses action on behalf of the environment (Dobson, 2011; Schusler & Kransy, 2010). Both of these conceptions of citizenship necessitate authentic participation in community issues. Place-based education, therefore, fits well within the boundaries of social studies education, which “aims to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (NCSS, n.d.).

I am proposing to conduct a qualitative case study (Merriam, 2009) that involves at least one social studies teacher at Graham High School, which serves mostly low-income and racially diverse students. Ashleigh Denny has been teaching for over 15 years, and she has already agreed to participate. One purpose of the study, then, will be to ascertain the opportunities and challenges faced by teachers who use a place-based approach in secondary social studies. Another purpose of the study will be to analyze the effects of place-based education on student engagement and learning, citizenship competencies, and positive youth development (PYD). Dam, Geijsel, Remuraman, and Ledoux (2011) developed and tested interview questions to measure young people’s citizenship competencies, and Lerner et al. (2005) constructed a 77-item survey that has been used to measure the six components of PYD: competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, and contributions (Lerner, 2017). Neither of these measures have been used in research on place-based education, making this study an original contribution to the literature.

My research questions are as follows:

* What are the effects of place-based education for low-income and racially diverse students in a rural high school?
  + In what ways does place-based education affect engagement, motivation, learning, understanding of citizenship, and positive youth development?
* What does place-based education in high school social studies courses look like in practice? How does it compare to traditional approaches?
  + In what ways do students interact with others in their community?
  + What knowledge and skills do students acquire and practice?
* What are teacher perceptions of place-based education in social studies?

**Scholarly Process:** According to Merriam (2009), a case study is “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (p. xiii). Case studies also have distinctive attributes: they focus on a particular situation or event; they yield thick, rich description; and they illuminate a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Data sources for this qualitative case study will include interviews, observations, and documents.

The research site is Graham High School, a Title I school in Graham, NC. Only 14.5% of the students entering 9th grade are academically proficient, and 70.8% of the students are economically disadvantaged. In 2016-2017, the graduation rate was 79%. Over 75% of the students identify as Black or Hispanic. At least one teacher, Ms. Denny, will be using a place-based approach in her social studies courses, most likely AP Human Geography and Civics and Economics based on our conversation in December. She teaches approximately 60 students per semester in those courses, and all of her students will be invited to participate.

The study will begin this summer and last throughout the 2018-2019 academic year. My research mentor and I will collaborate with Ms. Denny and any other teachers who join the study on curriculum development in July and August. The teachers will be invited to join me at the Inquiry Design Model (IDM) Institute in Raleigh, NC. This is a two-day professional development workshop for social studies teachers who want to create lessons and units using the IDM and C3 Framework developed by the National Council for Social Studies. IDM has four dimensions: develop questions and plan investigations; apply disciplinary concepts and tools; gather, evaluate, and use evidence; and communicate conclusions and take informed action (Herczog, 2013). Together, we will be able to generate a curriculum map and units of study that incorporate the principles of place-based education for use during the fall and spring semesters, which is when data collection will occur.

The teachers in the study will be interviewed at the beginning, middle, and end of each semester. Questions will cover educational philosophy, reflections on strengths and areas for improvement, and perceptions of place-based education. Once the school year begins, I will recruit students to participate in the study. For those willing to join, I will interview them individually or in focus groups depending on their preferences. I will ask questions about their schooling experiences, particularly in social studies; their conceptions of citizenship (using the protocol developed by Dam et al., 2011); and their knowledge of local political, social, economic, and environmental issues. I will also give them the 77-question PYD survey. Another data point will be observations in the classroom. I will observe approximately 4-5 hours per week during the fall and spring semesters. I will write field notes during each lesson and write memos afterward. Finally, I will collect documents to analyze, like lesson plans and student work. At the end of each semester, I will interview the participating students again, asking questions related to what they learned, their perceptions of place-based education, and their conception of citizenship; they will also take the PYD survey again. All interviews throughout the study will be audio-recorded and transcribed.

Proposed Products: I plan on presenting my findings at several state and national conferences, including the National Council for Social Studies conference, the American Educational Research Association annual meeting, the Place-Based Education conference,  and the North Carolina State Social Studies conference. In addition, I will also prepare at least one manuscript for submission to *Theory & Research in Social Studies Education*, the flagship journal in social studies education published by the National Council for Social Studies.

**Feasibility Statement:** In many ways, this research project has already begun. I will be participating in SURE starting in May, which is when I will work with my mentor to receive IRB approval, continue my literature review, and collaborate with Ms. Denny on curriculum development. Ms. Denny has enthusiastically agreed to participate, and she is hoping to recruit other teachers at Graham High School to join her. This would add more data and complexity to the study, but it also may assist the teachers in curriculum development if they worked together. Because Graham High School is on a semester calendar, I will be able to collect two cycles of data: one in the fall and one in the spring. This will help me manage data collection no matter how many teachers end up participating in the study.

Graham High School is located near downtown Graham. This proximity may help the teachers and students access community resources. In addition, the campus is large and filled with green space, which teachers are able to access for teaching outside.

I am currently enrolled in HST 301 Research Methods this spring, which has helped me understand the research process. In order to improve my knowledge of research in the field of social studies, I plan on attending the National Council for Social Studies conference November 2018. I will also be attending the IDM Institute in Raleigh in July 2018, and I will invite the teachers in the study to join me as well. This two-day professional development workshop focuses on curriculum development. This will deepen my understanding of unit and lesson planning in social studies. Finally, in November 2018, I will attend the Place-Based Education conference in Ypsilanti, MI. This three-day conference is sponsored by the Southeast Michigan Stewardship Coalition at Eastern Michigan University and is designed to inspire and support a community of educators around the power of place-based learning. These experiences combined will prepare me to fully understand the content, concepts, and research methods that undergird my project.

**Budget**

Audio recorder and microphone: $100

Transcription: $500

Resources for teachers who participate

* Books: $300
* Gifts for guest speakers: $300
* Transportation for field trips: $1,500
* Miscellaneous funds for teachers (e.g., registration and travel if they want to co-present at conferences): $1,500
* **Total: $3,600**

National Council for Social Studies Conference (2018): Chicago, IL

* Registration: $100
* Travel: $300
* Lodging: $600
* **Total: $1,000**

Place-Based Education Conference (2018): Ypsilanti, MI

* Registration: $100
* Travel: $300
* Lodging: $300
* **Total: $700**

North Carolina Council for Social Studies Conference (2019): Greensboro, NC

* Registration: $100
* Travel: $100
* Lodging: None
* **Total: $200**

National Council for Social Studies Conference (2019): Austin, TX

* Registration: $100
* Travel: $300
* Lodging: $600
* **Total: $1,000**

Place-Based Education Conference (2019): Ypsilanti, MI

* Registration: $100
* Travel: $300
* Lodging: $300
* **Total: $700**

North Carolina Council for Social Studies Conference (2020): Greensboro, NC

* Registration: $200
* Travel: $100
* Lodging: None
* **Total: $300**

American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting (2020): San Francisco, CA

* Registration: $200
* Travel: $400
* Lodging: $600
* **Total: $1,200**

**Tuition: $10,700**

**Total: $20,000**

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**Timeline**

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| **Experiences** | **Products** |
| **Summer 2018** |  |
| Summer Undergraduate Research Experience (SURE)  Attend the Inquiry Design Model Institute in Raleigh, NC  Interview participating teachers | IRB approval  Transcribed interviews  Place-based curriculum map and units of study |
| **Fall 2018** |  |
| Attend the National Council for Social Studies conference in Chicago, IL  Attend the Place-Based Education conference in Ypsilanti, MI  Data collection (e.g., interviews, observations, documents)  LUM 498: Thesis Research | Transcribed interviews, field notes, memos, documents |
| **Winter 2019** |  |
| Data collection (e.g., interviews, observations, documents)  LUM 498: Thesis Research | Transcribed interviews, field notes, memos, documents |
| **Spring 2019** |  |
| Attend the North Carolina Council for Social Studies conference in Greensboro, NC  Data collection (e.g., interviews, observations, documents)  Write proposal for National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) conference  LUM 498: Thesis Research | Transcribed interviews, field notes, memos, documents  NCSS conference proposal |
| **Summer 2019** |  |
| SURE  Analyze data  Write proposal for AERA annual meeting  Write proposal for the Place-Based Education conference  LUM 498: Thesis Research | Preliminary findings  AERA annual meeting proposal  Place-Based Education conference proposal |
| **Fall 2019** |  |
| Attend the National Council for Social Studies conference in Austin, TX  Attend the Place-Based Education conference in Ypsilanti, MI  Analyze data  Draft manuscript for *Theory & Research in Social Education*  Write SURF Proposal  LUM 498: Thesis Research | Draft of manuscript  SURF proposal  NCSS conference presentation  Place-Based Education conference presentation |
| **Winter 2020** |  |
| Finalize manuscript and submit for review | Manuscript to be submitted for publication |
| **Spring 2020** |  |
| Student Teaching  Attend the North Carolina Council for Social Studies conference in Greensboro, North Carolina  Attend the AERA annual meeting in San Francisco, CA  Present research at SURF Day at Elon  Present research at Leadership Fellows Common Good Project Presentation | AERA presentation  SURF presentation  Common Good Project presentation  NCCSS presentation |