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Interlaced Strands of Change: Vernacular Pedagogies Weaving Indeterminism into Place-Based Education

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Abstract

Amid profoundly unstable and vulnerable times, conventional education systems continue to reflect the dominant ideology in modernity that has contributed to the current global polycrisis. This study explores how educators engage in vernacular pedagogical practices, locally grounded, relational and often situated outside standard curricula, that act as counterpoints to the conventional constraints using a Place-Based Education (PBE) approach. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 14 educators from the Southeast Michigan Stewardship (SEMIS) Coalition, the research investigates how educators experience job satisfaction, define their roles and navigate tensions between dominant norms and community-rooted learning. Findings suggest that educators embrace indeterminism as a source of creativity, responsiveness and growth, weaving together interlaced strands of personal, cultural and ecological meaning in their vernacular pedagogical practices. Educators carve out alternative ways of knowing and relating, positioning PBE as a cultural stance that enables responsive, locally rooted reform amid today's complex, uncertain and interconnected crises.

Keywords: agency; educator; indeterminism; place-based education; vernacular

We live in profoundly unstable and vulnerable times marked by a global polycrisis, intersecting ecological, social and epistemic crises, that stem from dominant ideology of modernity, including extractivism and control, which are often reinforced by conventional education systems that prioritise linear progress over relational and context-responsive ways of knowing (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000; Folke et al., 2021; Stein, 2020). These uncertain times demand a critical re-evaluation of ingrained assumptions in Western notions of progress and rationality (Bowers, 1991; Gilbert, 2016; Greenwood, 2014). In response, this study explores the potential of vernacular pedagogical practices in challenging systemic constraints, cultivating culturally engaged forms of learning that are relational, place-conscious and attentive to the histories and local autonomy of the communities and lands where education takes place (Tuck et al., 2014).

Bauman (2008) frames the vernacular as a communicative modality embedded in community practice, informally acquired, locally grounded and relational in nature. Bauman contrasts the vernacular with dominant modes of modernity that prioritise efficiency, standardisation and decontextualised transmission, positioning vernacular learning as a practice of cultural persistence and creative variation that sustains lived knowledge in dynamic tension with hegemonic norms. The vernacular is often marginalised or rendered invisible by dominant educational discourses,

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yet this very marginality can enable vernacular learning to remain less regulated, more autonomous and resilient towards standardisation (Imafuku, 1991; Suga, 2024). This critical dimension aligns with Ingold's (2016) observation that dominant ideology in modernity tends to operate as static networks of point-to-point connectors, unlike practices cast aside by modernity that move with momentum, wander freely and flow.

Vernacular pedagogical practices, as understood here, refer to locally grounded and relationally sustained forms of facilitating learning that often emerge outside of the standard curriculum and at the margins of standardised classroom teaching (Bauman, 2008; Illich, 1980, 1983). Rather, it points to learning that is vital, creative and deeply contextual, emerging through lived experience and mutual relationships within communities (Lantis, 1960; Shiva, 2004). Selby (2017) further portrays vernacular learning as emotionally resonant, sensory-rich and grounded in place, offering an alternative to institutionalised and instrumental educational models.

This study responds to growing calls for alternative practices that are participatory, relational and embedded in local contexts, particularly those that challenge what Dryzek and Pickering (2018) describe as systemic path dependence, that, arguably, has led to the current anthropogenic crisis. Place-Based Education (PBE) offers a framework for enacting vernacular pedagogical practices that embrace spontaneity, and situated experience (Selby, 2017). It diverges from the linearity and control, and pursuit of economic affluence that characterise dominant ideology in modernity (Ingold, 2016; Sterling, 2017) and its exercise of "disciplinary power" (Foucault, 2012, p. 153) to foster a meaningful cultural shift in how educators relate to place, students and their communities by valuing educators' grassroots creativity and place-based responsiveness. Drawing on 14 in-depth interviews, we explore how educators perceive vernacular practices to support job satisfaction, grassroots agency and culturally situated responses to the need for a meaningful shift in social and cultural engagement. In doing so, the study contributes to the cultural reframing of environmental education by emphasising the importance of lived experience and relational knowledge in uncertain times (Bonnett, 2017; Sterling, 2017).

Literature review

Conventional education systems

Ideology is propagated through social systems, especially education (Alexander, 2005; Bowers, 1997). Conventional education systems then perpetuate dominant ideology in modernity and institutional structures that have contributed to the global polycrisis, a convergence of ecological, social and epistemic crises, by reinforcing logics of control, extraction and linear progress (Au, 2011; O'Regan, 2023; Stein, 2020; Sterling, 2017). Conventional systems envision students as commodities and teachers as workers, following a rigid factory production line approach (Au, 2011), where standardised tests can be seen as an "exercise of power" (Foucault, 2012, p. 192) that can reinforce the path dependency of the system (Jackson, 2021). This resembles what Freire termed "banking education" (Freire & Macedo, 2018, p. 55), a system of knowledge deposition into students, who receive, store and regurgitate information, that largely discourages critical thinking. However, it is exactly this critical capacity to question established institutions, practices, policies and ideas that is necessary to address current challenges in increasingly uncertain times (Dryzek & Pickering, 2018).

Vernacular pedagogical practices and contextual learning

This study adopts the concept of vernacular pedagogical practices as a critical framework to examine how PBE approaches can contribute towards meaningful shifts in social and cultural engagement. Drawing on Lantis's (1960) foundational work, the concept of vernacular is

understood here as “culture-as-it-is-lived” (p. 203), an assemblage of informal, local and relational expressions of knowledge, values and behaviours rooted in everyday life. Lantis distinguishes vernacular culture from formal and institutionalised systems, highlighting its adaptive, lived character. This view envisions pedagogy not as the delivery of codified knowledge, but as facilitating relational, embodied and locally situated learning.

This framing resonates with Shiva’s (2004) notion of “living knowledge” (p.17), which emphasises experiential, ecosystem-embedded and community-generated ways of knowing. Shiva critiques the homogenisation and commodification of knowledge under dominant ideology in modernity, instead advocating for the preservation and reactivation of pluralistic, vernacular epistemologies. Aligning with these perspectives, this study approaches vernacular pedagogical practices not as peripheral but as crucial sites of cultural vitality and resistance to the standardisation of education.

By situating the vernacular as a cultural practice, an underexplored concept in the realm of environmental education, this study builds on Selby’s (2017) articulation of vernacular learning as a place-based, slow and emotionally rooted approach that cultivates intimacy with the natural world through embodied, multisensory experiences. While Selby highlights the affective and sensory dimensions of local learning, Kondo and Baars (2025) expand this view by framing vernacular as informal, everyday practices that sometimes embrace amateurism and extend beyond professionalised educational roles. Drawing on these perspectives, this study aims to reconceptualise environmental education through a cultural lens, arguing that today’s systemic crises are not only institutional but deeply cultural. Accordingly, the grassroots agency and creativity of educators documented in this study are understood as expressions of vernacular vitality, context-sensitive, practice-based forms of teaching and learning that resist decontextualised, control-oriented educational norms.

Place-based education (PBE) as a pedagogy embracing shifts in engagement

PBE is designed to take students outside the classroom, to bring education into neighbourhoods, and to provide learners opportunities for first-hand experiential learning (Sobel, 2004). PBE can encourage meaningful shifts in behaviour, social interaction and local engagement. These place-responsive practices often result in tangible changes, such as new community projects, collaborative relationships, or reconfigured classroom dynamics, that reflect a deeper integration of education with everyday life (Pisters, Vihinen & Figueiredo 2019). Rather than treating knowledge as abstract or decontextualised, PBE encourages learners to engage critically with the complexities of their everyday surroundings (Lowenstein, Grewal, Erkaeva, Nielsen & Voelker 2018). Through participation in local inquiries, students explore how political, economic and ecological systems intersect in place-specific ways (Pisters, Vihinen & Figueiredo 2020).

We argue in this paper that PBE exemplifies a form of meaningful social and cultural engagement that enables students to move beyond conventional education, which often leaves individuals “disembedded” (Giddens, 1991, p. 16) from specific times and spaces. PBE can facilitate “reinhabitation” (Greenwood, 2013, p. 93) through physical engagement and experiences in a particular place through vernacular practices, place-responsive teaching grounded in community knowledge, lived experiences and mutual relationships (Gruenewald, 2003; Pisters et al., 2019, Pisters et al., 2020). These practices, often overlooked by education systems focused on economic efficiency and control, allow students and educators alike to reimagine the cultural foundations of education. By emphasising relationality to place and inquiry-based creativity that addresses local issues, the PBE approach can help uncover and challenge the dominant discourses and ideologies that shape our systems (Martusewicz, Edmundson & Lupinacci 2014).

Place-based educators as change agents

To foster meaningful shifts in social and cultural engagement, the role of educators as change agents is crucial when integrating PBE into educational systems (Everth, 2022; Powers, 2004). Educators as change agents can model and embody transformative learning as a process of self-development, characterised by a cycle of dilemma, critical self-reflection, action and personal growth (Mezirow, 1990; Sharma et al., 2023). They serve as role models, demonstrating a positive example of personal development for students (Fullan, 1993). By introducing unconventional pedagogical approaches, such as PBE, educators can also signal to students that knowledge and the world around them are not fixed, encouraging them to reflect on and question dominant assumptions (McInerney, Smyth & Down 2011). While previous studies have highlighted the challenges and controversies of implementing PBE within traditional school systems, often placing teachers in a vulnerable position (Smith, 2007; Yemini, Engel & Ben Simon 2023), many educators continue to design creative curricula and materials that reflect their agency and commitment to change (Powers, 2004; Smith, 2002).

Previous PBE research and shifting perspectives

PBE research and practice largely aim to foster a profound attachment to local communities, often based on student experiences with actively engaged local individuals (Greenwood, 2013; Smith & Sobel, 2014; Yemini et al., 2023). The theory of place attachment asserts that individuals are more likely to behave responsibly toward their immediate environment when they possess a sense of rootedness (Kudryavtsev et al., 2012).

Greenwood (2013) and Pisters et al. (2020) investigated PBE through the lenses of critical pedagogy and transformative learning theory, illustrating how a locally grounded approach in PBE can help students and educators critically examine “disembedded” (Giddens, 1991, p. 16) dominant narratives of modernity, such as economic growth and individualism, and begin to reimagine more relational, place-conscious ways of living that resist path dependency. While this line of inquiry has broadened our understanding of how PBE can support meaningful shifts in social and cultural engagement, the specific ways in which educators experience and navigate such shifts remain underexplored. This paper argues that such shifts in perspective require not only pedagogical changes but also cultural ones, particularly through the incorporation of vernacular pedagogical practices.

Research objective

The objective of this study is to explore how vernacular pedagogical practices within PBE can challenge dominant cultural and institutional norms. By viewing educators as agents of cultural and educational change, this study illustrates how PBE supports grassroots and contextually grounded practices. In doing so, it responds to the limitations of conventional education in addressing the complex and interwoven political, economic and social crisis of our time, arguing that PBE offers meaningful pathways toward pedagogical shifts rooted in lived experience, local knowledge and relational engagement.

Context

The Southeast Michigan Stewardship (SEMIS) Coalition, based at Eastern Michigan University (EMU), provides an example of how K-12 school teachers can implement PBE in collaboration with local educators (Martusewicz et al., 2014). In a region exemplified by Detroit, which has experienced numerous efforts in community-led revitalisation (Boggs & Kurashige, 2012; Lowenstein et al., 2018), the SEMIS Coalition promotes educational practices that connect students to local ecological and social challenges through collaborative, inquiry-driven projects.

Rooted in a theoretical framing of Ecojustice Education, both the SEMIS Coalition and EMU emphasise the importance of cultivating civic responsibility, critical awareness of socio-ecological systems and engagement with local knowledge. This includes confronting legacies of industrial decline and systemic inequality, while fostering participatory learning environments that prioritise equity, sustainability and community empowerment (Lowenstein et al., 2010, Lowenstein et al., 2018; Martusewicz et al., 2014).

The SEMIS Coalition includes members from local schools as well as community partner organisations. It supports educators through personal coaching, consulting and PBE teaching materials. The coalition also organises field trips, professional development seminars and workshops held several times a year. Additionally, it hosts an annual community forum featuring student-led presentations and intergenerational conversations. What characterises the SEMIS Coalition is its support for creative curricular development, based on educator autonomy. Rather than relying solely on standardised textbook content, educators are empowered to act as community workers, developing relationships and building educational experiences that respond to local contexts. This contrasts with conventional formal education models, which often restrict creative inputs by enforcing the use of standardised materials. Despite the existing constraints imposed by standard curricula, the SEMIS Coalition members offer students hands-on, inquiry-based, contextually embedded and community-supported learning experiences, which are “in and with a place or community, (. . .) about a place or community, and yield benefits for a place or community” (Lowenstein et al., 2018, p. 39). The SEMIS Coalition projects reflect a shared commitment to integrating local aspects with PBE to enhance inquiry-based learning and community engagement.

Methodology

Participants

This study was conducted in the United States, where research involving human participants is typically subject to ethical reviews by an Institutional Review Board (IRB) under the Common Rule (45 CFR 46). However, according to 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2), research involving interviews, surveys, or educational tests may be exempt from IRB reviews if the information collected does not identify participants or place them at risk. This study met these criteria, as it did not involve vulnerable populations, medical or clinical data, or interventions that could cause harm.

The Management Office for Research Regulations at Kyoto University confirmed that an ethical review was not required under Japanese regulations, Ethical Guidelines for Medical and Biological Research Involving Human Subjects and did not require a review by the IRB. Additionally, to ensure ethical integrity and participant rights, we followed standard research ethics in both the U.S. and Japan. Written informed consent was voluntarily obtained, and participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, confidentiality measures and their right to withdraw at any time. Interviews were conducted in a private setting, audio-recorded with consent and anonymised for analysis.

A total of 14 interviews were conducted between January and April 2020. Participants included schoolteachers ($N = 7$), with representatives from high school ($N = 3$), middle school ($N = 2$) and elementary school ($N = 2$). Additionally, community educators dispatched from local non-formal educational organisations ($N = 3$) and organisation staff ($N = 4$) were interviewed. Recognising the integral role of PBE in engaging with local communities beyond formal education settings, the study extended its scope beyond schoolteachers to include community educators and organisation staff due to their active role in shaping the development of student learning environments. Recruitment of participants was undertaken at a professional development session offered by the SEMIS Coalition on January 31, 2020. Interested respondents volunteered to participate in this study. Participants were assigned anonymised alphabetical codes (A-N).

Design

To explore educators' experiences with PBE, we conducted semi-structured interviews designed as a flexible but thematically structured format organised around six core areas: (1) teaching background and involvement with PBE; (2) specific experiences and examples of PBE practices; (3) perceived benefits and challenges; (4) perceptions of student learning through PBE; (5) community support; and (6) motivation and engagement (Table 1, available in supplemental materials). These themes were developed based on key concerns in the literature regarding teachers' experiences with implementing unconventional inquiry-based pedagogical approaches, such as PBE or Problem-Based Learning (McInerney et al., 2011; Nariman & Chrispeels, 2016; Powers, 2004).

Analytic strategy

To identify themes emerging from interviewees' reflections on their pedagogical practices, perceived benefits and challenges, as well as broader experience with PBE, we employed an inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2021). Interview transcripts were imported into NVivo 14 and manually coded. A summary of the coded reference counts for each theme is provided in Table 2, available in the supplementary materials. This coding approach was both inductive and recursive, involving continuous comparisons within and between transcripts, encompassing both explicit and implicit meanings. Overall, the analysis aimed to capture distinctions and commonalities interpreted from the interviews that illuminate the broader pedagogical and cultural dimensions of PBE.

Results: interview portrayals

The results are organised into two sections: 1. Themes of Educators' Reflections on Their Practices, and 2. Community Layers. Section 1 draws from educators' specific experiences with PBE, seen through their experiences of job satisfaction, their definitions of roles and their navigation of tensions between dominant norms and community-rooted learning, primarily informed by their perceived benefits and challenges in implementing PBE (Nariman & Chrispeels, 2016). Section 2 deepens the analysis by interpreting these experiences through the lens of the vernacular, examining how educators reimagine 'community' to encompass local and personal spheres beyond professional roles. This perspective draws on the concept of vernacular practice as culturally embedded, informal, everyday practices that may operate outside professionalised educational structures (Kondo & Baars, 2025). The findings reflect recurring patterns relevant to our inquiry into educator agency and culturally rooted practices. Rather than pursuing thematic saturation, we aim to highlight the depth and complexity of lived everyday engagements with PBE.

Themes of educators' reflections on their practices

Seeking an alternative pedagogy to traditional education

Interviewees stressed seeking an alternative pedagogy to conventional education, such as inquiry-based learning. They value authentic learning experiences outside the classroom as contributing to the enjoyment of learning among students. These experiences are not commonly found in traditional education systems, and educators' interests reflect their active engagement with something novel and different.

I teach AP environmental science. It's rigor, the speed of the content, so having to do assessments every two weeks. So, one thing I noticed that we were very based in the book, and very interest based and hypotheticals but not kind of about real tangible things. I want to

bring that to them instead of just talking about what if that were kind of in the book (F: High school teacher)

I was a student that did not have PBE, but I would always want it and I never knew what it would look like. (...) So when I went to college and we could do more stuff that's kind of place-based. That's when I was like, "School is cool, learning is cool." (H: Community educator)

Authentic learning experiences: exposing students to real-world environments

Interviewees also expressed their desire to expose students to real-world environments, which allows for a novel, uncertain and somewhat unpredictable nature of learning for both educators and students. The quotes below highlight the interviewees' belief that exposing students to real-world environments can foster authentic learning experiences, including interactions with people, observation of animals, and the initiation and implementation of community projects. According to interview responses, this approach provides students with rare opportunities to venture beyond the confines of the traditional classroom setting.

In downtown Detroit, there are no grocery stores around in that area (...), we created garden (..) we harvest vegetables and send them home with the students. (...) The kids started wanting to eat vegetables more as a result of that project. They wrote a proposal to the district to change the lunch menu at the school (...) They're in college now. And some of them, they head to plant-based diets. (...) It was impactful because it did make them think about their health. (D: Middle school teacher)

Those are the ones that when they come back as adults, I want them to walk their kids over there and say, "Hey, I helped put that fence in," "I put that tree in." "Hey, I painted that sign." (...) It's the excitement about the work as well. I really do I think that they were excited about the work because they knew this wasn't something that they were building for an hour or for a day with their friends. They were making something for their community. And that meant something. (G: Elementary school teacher)

Inquiry dynamics: understanding the unpredictable process of inquiry-based approaches

Interviewees embrace the challenging process of facilitating inquiry-based student learning, viewing it as a source of creativity and fulfilment. Openness to experience and personal growth are crucial parts of extraversion. Educators' job satisfaction showcases their pleasurable and meaningful experiences and positive emotions.

I like doing the planning aspects of it because I think PBE allows you to be more creative. So definitely say that I'm more motivated when we do the Place-Based projects than I am when I'm just teaching like a lesson on factory or whatever. (E: High school teacher)

I think it is hard, but it is also very fulfilling at the same time. (...) coming up with different games like climate change games (...) is difficult. And you have to do you have to give a lot of time, outside of the time that you're in the office, you have to always just be thinking about how this can relate, always watching news, always watching things that will be like in a teenager's mind that you'll be able to relate to. (...) But it's super fulfilling. And I do not think that is in vain. (H: Community educator)

Logistical challenges: recognising and addressing conflicts with other aspects in schools

Interviewees express the complexities and problem-solving aspects of implementing PBE. The quotes shed light on the logistical challenges faced by teachers, showcasing their proactive

strategies to overcome these challenges. It prompts educators to explore creative solutions, think differently, and embrace the uncertainties associated with the pedagogical approach of PBE.

Sometimes there are challenges because we are removing the students from something that they're usually doing every day from the usual structure. (...) How can we have some sense of structure but also have fun is, so far, that's been beyond the challenge that I've had. (I: Community educator)

I like to problem solve those with teachers. And a lot of teachers just say, "I cannot do that." I have these other things happening. And I say maybe you cannot do it that way. But how could we do it if we thought about it differently. Which is a challenge to think about PBE from different angles, knowing that maybe five of those pathways are going to be blocked, but maybe the sixth one will work. So it's a lot of energy. (K: Organisation staff)

Informal nature of vernacular: reaching beyond school-based structures

Interviewees who actively engage in networks like the SEMIS Coalition, beyond their formal school affiliations, demonstrate how vernacular pedagogical practices thrive in informal, often marginalised spaces of the formal education system. These connections reflect a form of relational, community-rooted learning that resists institutional isolation and supports the weaving of diverse pedagogical strands.

In a building (of the school) where I feel like they're not so many, I have some co-collaborators here, but mostly alone just in their own little struggle. And it's hard to get a bigger picture left. SEMIS has provided that for me meeting other teachers who are pushing. (B: Middle school teacher)

If you've ever been to a SEMIS meeting, it's just good people wanting to be involved in good projects, that are good for communities. It's just uplifting the work that we do, It's just good for the soul. It's just good for your mind. it's enjoyable, (...) I enjoy the people. (G: Elementary school teacher)

Diversity Integration: Incorporating External Educators with Diverse Backgrounds

Interviewees strive to embrace colleagues with diverse backgrounds, enjoying the stimuli generated by the synergy of different dynamics. The refreshing impacts of this diversity are regarded as novel experiences in educational practices. Quotes illustrate the impact of community educators and the SEMIS Coalition staff on infusing new dynamics, fostering active engagement and introducing new perspectives to the learning environment.

They (community educators) told me about SEMIS. (...) It's been great to have them come into the school and they have brought a huge amount of dynamism and engagement with the kids. The students relate very well to the two volunteers that have come into my room. (B: Middle school teacher)

SEMIS provides that's been really beneficial that I've used quite a bit is like the one-on-one coaching from the like leadership team (...) So in particular, I've met with L (organisation staff) a couple years in a row and I have a project idea. (...) she helped me kind of go through the standards and the units and find where I could connect math content to a place-based experience for students. So, I've done a lot of planning and one on one coaching with them, (...) That's really cool. (E: High school teacher)

Community layers

We identified four layers of community that interviewees find themselves in: 2-1. Educational System, 2-2. School and Local Community, 2-3. Classroom Relationships, 2-4. Beyond Work (Family, Former Teacher, Friend, etc.). This categorisation suggests that the school itself (as part of the educational system) is situated in and integrated with the local community. Classroom relationships refer to a setting that is focused on teacher-student interaction and development, while the fourth layer encompasses 'private life' beyond work. These layers are not mutually exclusive or absolute, but function as tools to organise information and identify common threads from our interpretations of the interviews.

Educational System

Within the education system, interviewees find satisfaction in broadening perspectives within the traditional educational framework, especially when challenging its limitations in dealing with students labelled as 'low achievers'. PBE emerges as a means of shifting the school system's focus to empower students from diverse backgrounds.

I think traditional education in the United States often focuses on the testing and the grades and the high performance and then it often takes students who are acting out poor learners (. . .) So I think the benefit of PBE is that it allows you to take like those students who maybe aren't really successful in a traditional education model and give them tools to succeed. (J: Community educator)

The kids that I taught (at a nature center), were nontraditional learners. They were threatened by the way that school is. They didn't really learn traditional ways. They had a lot of trouble. They were kids who had trouble with drugs or had trouble with the law or had trouble just being in school because they were bored, or they didn't learn that way. So, I think I was also motivated by trying to find a different way to do school for them. (K: Organisation staff)

School and local community

At the local community level, interviewees express how their work motivation and job satisfaction extend beyond contributing to students' academic performance in school and include ways to positively impact their communities, as a consequence of engaging in PBE activities.

Whereas with our kids now through this (PBE) protocol, they're led through these steps to really understand that, "what do you want for your community?" (. . .) So it really just is, this protocol that helps to change for me and help me change my mindset and for them. (. . .) Well, if I don't like how something is going, then, there are things that I can do to change it for the greater good. To me, it's like more more than education, building a community. (G: Elementary school teacher)

We had a group of students present at the PBE conference this year. And they were just able to connect with people who, who are working with or in PBE (social issue focus) but not in the environment. (. . .) So, I think it's not just students. It's all been to adults. It's also to other members of the community, not just their direct social circles. (J: Community educator)

Classroom relationships

Interviewees perceive that they play a pivotal role in influencing and fostering the self-development of students. Their job satisfaction is often linked to instances where students demonstrate initiative in activities or generate their own ideas. Observing students take ownership of their own work and witnessing their self-development, so-called light-bulb moments, students'

influence on the community, and students' emotional excitement when they learn something new, are all tied to interviewees' job satisfaction.

One of our students, she was really shy (. . .) I would like encourage her to speak up and now this year, (. . .). Now she's grabbing the mic to talk to people about those like, oh I'm gonna cry. Oh my god. It's so happy. (. . .) And now she's like, standing up in front. She's trying to talk about climate changes stuff to everybody in the school. (H: Community educator)

Seeing students experiencing learning in real-world environments also resonates with the educators' positive self-view. It highlights the reciprocal relationship between authentic learning experiences offered to students and the positive self-view experienced by interviewees.

I think it has made me more hopeful. So, it's given me a more positive and hopeful outlook like a personally. I know like, for a long time, I was very, very cynical about everything all of the impending climate change, and I was just very cynical about it and very disheartened about it. I think young people being interested in it, and wanting to learn more about it, and then actually doing it has given me a lot of hope and a lot of it's really changed. Maybe a more positive person. (J: Community educator)

Beyond work (Family, Former Teacher, Friend, etc.)

Interviewees recognise the strong link between their perspectives on personal life and their PBE practices, reflected in the following quotes:

I had the privilege of having a lot of PBE in the 90s. And it made a huge difference for me. (. . .) I got a chance to in fifth grade, we went to Chicago, in sixth grade, we did a tour around Michigan. (. . .) It made it helped for me into a very non-traditional teacher. And so, I think that has made a lot of difference in me being successful as a teacher. (C: Elementary school teacher)

My mom's side of the family has always been kind of more environmentally minded. my uncle actually, as his life hiked across the country, numerous hikes. (. . .) And having him as an uncle to kind of get us to care about, what is so great about the wild and about nature and about the environment. (E: High school teacher)

These narratives highlight the personal connections that interviewees have with ecological and cultural values and social justice, inherent in PBE, and underscore how these aspects of their own lives influence and align with their dedication to PBE practices. Most interviewees maintain consistency across their self-identified values and a strong sense of belonging as part of a reliable community of educators. Instances, such as seeking a different perspective on education through involvement in PBE and reaching out to trustworthy educators' networks, exemplify these connections, as mentioned in the quote below:

When I was a little kid I was very sensitive to everything, (. . .) When I did the social foundations and Ecojustice education master's program, I was like, I found my people. (. . .) I love doing education with teachers. That's really empowering. That's not a given in this world to be able to go to work and be aligned with your own values and principles. (L: Organisation staff)

These narratives underscore the alignment between interviewees' values and their commitment to PBE practices, illustrating a strong sense of belonging within a reliable community of educators.

Discussion

Vernacular practices and relational learning

Many of the reflections shared by educators revealed a clear departure from institutionalised educational models and a shift toward practices that are lived, embodied and grounded in multiple local communities they engage with, both within and beyond their so-called formal professional roles and informal interpersonal domains. Their PBE practices go beyond the constraints of preparing for school subjects and standardised tests, taking place outside conventional textbooks and curricula. Educators described satisfaction derived from facilitating student experiences that navigate between the expectations of standardised objectivism and the possibilities of building relationships, engaging contextually and allowing learning to emerge through participation. Educators' motivation to care deeply for their students and improve learning in ways that are meaningful and personally fulfilling emerges as a recurring thread woven throughout their narratives. This sense of care drives their professional experimentation and contributes to a deeper job satisfaction rooted in pedagogical purpose.

These accounts resonate with the idea of the vernacular as an informal, localised, relational, communicative and cultural modality that is sustained through memory, repetition and variation, not formal instruction (Bauman, 2008; Illich, 1983; Selby, 2017). At times, these practices incorporate elements of interpersonal everyday life as expressions of "living knowledge" (Shiva, 2004, p. 17) or "culture-as-it-is-lived" (Lantis, 1960, p. 203). Educators in this study express joy when learning unfolds through the dynamics of community-based interaction, creative improvisation, and the lived context of place. These findings suggest that what brings educators fulfilment is not only student outcomes but the very conditions in which learning becomes embedded in everyday life.

Embracing indeterminism

As Ingold (2016) suggests, when practices embrace non-deterministic, sometimes wandering, movements and growth, a place could become knots tied from "multiple and interlaced strands" (Ingold, 2016, p. 77), in contrast to the static nodes of connection that characterise modern understandings of place. Vernacular pedagogical practices, deeply embedded in local contexts and lived relationships, mirror knots that are dynamic, fluid and woven through connection. Such indeterminism is a space for creativity and responsiveness. Educators, then, embody the vital "process of growth and development, or of self-renewal" (Ingold, 2016, p. 78), moving along the lines of life to create place as woven, interlaced strands. In doing so, they participate in a powerful form of resistance to decontextualisation (Greenwood, 2013), disrupting the one-directional, goal-oriented logic of conventional education in a methodologically critical way, particularly through a place-based approach in this case. The grassroots agency and creativity of these educators are not only markers of their satisfaction but also indicators of their capacity to navigate shifting societal and cultural engagements through vernacular vitality, an active expression of liberation from control-oriented norms in mainstream education.

Conclusion

Through interviews with educators engaged in PBE, we discussed a form of fulfilment not rooted in predetermined outcomes, but in the vitality of engagement, relational and context-sensitive learning. These educators engage in practices that extend beyond standardised curricula and embrace indeterminism. The educators in this study embrace their pedagogical journey without a fixed destination, engaging in practices that are student- and place-responsive. Their grassroots agency and creativity demonstrate how PBE enables educators to resist dominant educational

logics, those grounded in efficiency, standardisation and control, and instead cultivate meaningful, situated pathways for shifts in education. In doing so, they act as agents of culture who not only facilitate learning but also model alternative ways of being, knowing and relating.

Vernacular pedagogical practices, rooted in everyday life and embracing indeterminism, enable educators to create space for students to engage with the world as co-learners, enabling education to become not a linear process of delivery, but an unfolding dynamic, grounded in care, attentiveness and relational engagement (Martusewicz et al., 2014; Tooth & Renshaw, 2009). In this light, PBE is not merely a pedagogical tool but a philosophical and cultural stance, one that outlines new pedagogical pathways to drive meaningful educational reform rooted in lived experience and local knowledge. It opens up possibilities for reshaping education in ways that are responsive to the indeterminacy and complexity of today's interconnected polycrisis, resilient to system-level constraints and alive to the complexity of the worlds we inhabit.

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