

Place-Based Education & the *Global* Classroom

Building global competency through local inquiry

SUBJECT / GRADE	Adaptable, K–12 • Interdisciplinary
UNIT DURATION	4–6 weeks, modular by grade band
UNIT THEME	Local identity → Global citizenship
FRAMEWORK	Place-Based Education with global competency

DRIVING QUESTION

How does where I am from shape who I am — and how I connect to the world?

Unit overview

Place-Based Education begins with the understanding that learning is most powerful when rooted in the authentic contexts students inhabit. This unit guides educators in using their students' own communities as the entry point for developing global competency — the skills, knowledge, and dispositions required to engage thoughtfully in an interconnected world.

Students will explore their own identities and localities, trace the connections between local experiences and global systems, and take informed action on real-world challenges. By moving from the immediate and familiar to the distant and complex, this unit reflects the concentric rings model of place-based learning: self → classroom → community → region → world.

Core insight from the research

The EdWeek framing of "Think Globally, Teach Locally" captures this unit's philosophy precisely: local inquiry is not a limitation, it's a scaffold. When students deeply understand their own place, they gain the conceptual tools to understand all places.

Essential questions

- Who am I, and where do I belong? (Taiye Selasi: "Where are you local?" rather than "Where are you from?")
- How does my community reflect — and connect to — larger global systems?
- What does it mean to be a global citizen who is also deeply rooted in a place?
- How can local knowledge and action create global impact?
- Whose perspectives are represented in my community's story, and whose are missing?

Learning objectives

By the end of this unit, students will be able to:

Knowledge & understanding

- Explain what Place-Based Education is and why it matters
- Define global competency and its core dimensions
- Identify connections between local community features and global systems
- Describe how identity, culture, and place intersect

Skills & dispositions

- Conduct local inquiry using observation, interview, and mapping
- Analyze issues from multiple cultural perspectives
- Connect local data and stories to global patterns
- Design and implement a community action project
- Reflect on their own positionality and identity

Standards *alignment*

This unit can be mapped to standards across multiple frameworks. Educators should adjust to grade level and state requirements.

FRAMEWORK	ALIGNMENT
Asia Society Global Competency	Investigate the world, recognize perspectives, communicate ideas, take action
C3 Social Studies	Constructing compelling questions, gathering and evaluating sources, communicating and critiquing conclusions
Common Core ELA	Reading informational text, writing arguments, speaking and listening for academic discussion, research standards
NGSS Science Practices	Asking questions, analyzing data, constructing explanations, engaging in argument from evidence (environmental units)
CASEL SEL	Self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills

Curriculum *resources*

Each resource is integrated into specific unit activities. Educators should preview all materials and adapt for their grade level and context.

RESOURCE	PURPOSE & USE
TED Talk: Taiye Selasi, "Don't Ask Me Where I'm From"	Launches identity inquiry in Week 1. Anchor for Essential Question 1.
Getting Smart: What Is PBE and Why Does It Matter?	Teacher background and student-accessible overview. Introduces the concentric rings model and PBE design principles.
EdWeek: Think Globally, Teach Locally	Concrete classroom examples from Cottonwood School. Used Week 2-3 to model local-to-global connections.
National Geographic: Exploring Multiple Perspectives	Structured activity for examining an issue from multiple cultural and geographic viewpoints. Used in Week 3.
Edutopia: Place-Based Learning Examples	Curated lesson examples K-12. Teachers select one or more aligned to their local context in Week 2.
Participate Learning: Action Against Hunger	Real-world model of the understand → connect → act sequence. Mentor text for student-designed action projects.
Video: Getting Started with PBL for Educators	Introductory video for educators new to place-based pedagogy. Recommended before unit launch.

Unit sequence

Five phases following the PBE concentric rings progression from self to world. Durations are flexible — adjust for your context.

01 Self @ Place — who am I, where am I local?

View and discuss the Taiye Selasi TED Talk. "Where am I local?" identity mapping. Home interview: talk to a family member about their sense of place. Class discussion: what makes a place feel like home?

CHECKPOINT *Identity map — three places that have shaped you*

02 Community as classroom — exploring our place

Community walk and fieldwork with observation journals. Community expert or elder as guest speaker. Edutopia PBE lesson exploration. Teacher models PBE design principles from Getting Smart.

CHECKPOINT *Community asset map, individual or small group*

03 Local meets global — making connections

EdWeek article on local-to-global units. National Geographic Multiple Perspectives activity. "My place, your place, all places" comparative inquiry. Small groups choose a local topic with a global link.

CHECKPOINT *Perspective-taking journal — one issue from three viewpoints*

04 Understand → connect → act

Study the South Graham Elementary hunger action model. Identify a local challenge with global dimensions. Research phase: gather evidence, stories, data. Draft an action project proposal.

CHECKPOINT *Action project proposal in pitch format*

05 Taking action @ sharing learning

Implement action project (food drive, awareness campaign, etc.). Create a public-facing product — exhibit, podcast, presentation. Reflect on what changed and what comes next. Celebrate and share with a community audience.

CHECKPOINT *Final reflection and showcase product (see rubric)*

Lesson one

"Where are you *local*?" Identity @ place

L.01

DURATION **1–2 class periods** PHASE **01** GRADES **4–12 adaptable** RESOURCE **Taiye Selasi TED Talk**

Materials

- TED Talk video access
- Identity map graphic organizer
- Colored markers and art supplies
- Reflection journal

Sequence

- 01 HOOK** 10 min — Show a 2-minute clip from the TED Talk. Ask: "Has anyone ever asked you where you're from? How did that feel?"
- 02 EXPLORE** 20 min — Watch the full TED Talk. Students annotate: what does Selasi mean by "local"? What are her three questions?
- 03 APPLY** 25 min — Students create an identity map with three concentric circles: (1) places I've lived, (2) rituals and routines that define me, (3) relationships that shaped me.
- 04 SHARE** 15 min — Pair-share maps. Whole class: what patterns do you notice? What surprises you?
- 05 REFLECT** 10 min — Journal prompt: "I am local to ___ because ___. This matters to my learning because ___."

Differentiation

- Lower grades: drawing-based identity map; teacher scribes; focus on one place
- ELL support: provide sentence frames; allow home language in the map
- Extension: research where the family is local across generations; create a family place-history timeline

Lesson *two*

Community as *classroom* — asset mapping

L.02

DURATION **2–3 class periods**

PHASE **02**

GRADES **3–12**

RESOURCES **Getting Smart PBE Guide, Edutopia**

Sequence

- 01 PREPARE** 20 min — Review PBE design principles from the Getting Smart guide. Discuss: community as classroom. Brainstorm: what counts as a learning resource?
- 02 FIELDWORK** 45–60 min — Community walk or schoolyard exploration. Students document: what do you notice? What questions arise? What assets exist here?
- 03 SYNTHESIZE** 30 min — Small groups create community asset maps identifying people, places, and practices that could connect to curriculum.
- 04 CONNECT** 20 min — Browse Edutopia PBE examples. Where do you see your community represented? What's missing?
- 05 PLAN** 15 min — Each student drafts one question about their community they want to investigate further.

Guiding questions for the walk

- What resources exist here that schools rarely use?
- What problems do you notice, and who is affected?
- Who are the experts in this community — formal and informal?
- What connects this place to somewhere far away?

Lesson *three*

Multiple *perspectives* — local issues, global lenses

L.03

DURATION **2 class periods**

PHASE **03**

GRADES **5–12**

RESOURCES **Nat Geo Tool, EdWeek**

Sample global–local pairs

- Water quality (local watershed ↔ global water rights)
- Food systems (school lunch ↔ global hunger)
- Immigration (local newcomer community ↔ global migration)
- Environment (local park ↔ climate change)

Sequence

- 01 ANCHOR** 15 min — Read EdWeek article examples. Identify how educators zoom in and out between local and global.
- 02 INVESTIGATE** 30 min — Small groups use the National Geographic Multiple Perspectives tool on a locally-chosen issue. Document at least three distinct viewpoints.
- 03 PRESENT** 25 min — Each group presents using: what's happening locally → what's the parallel globally → what's universal?
- 04 CRITICAL LENS** 20 min — Discussion: whose voice is missing? How do different positionalities shape understanding?
- 05 REFLECT** 10 min — What did you learn that surprised you? What do you still want to know?

Action project *framework*

Inspired by the South Graham Elementary model, students follow a three-stage sequence to move from understanding to meaningful community action.

STAGE 01

Understand

- Research the issue using multiple sources
- Hear from people directly affected
- Build vocabulary and conceptual knowledge
- Ask: why does this happen, who is impacted?

STAGE 02

Connect

- Map the local-to-global links
- Invite community partners
- Explore parallel examples from other places
- Develop empathy through storytelling

STAGE 03

Act

- Design and implement a project
- Create a real product for a real audience
- Reflect on impact and next steps
- Share learning with the community

Sample action project ideas by grade band

GRADE BAND	LOCAL ISSUE	GLOBAL CONNECTION
K-2	Classroom garden, school food waste	Food security and SDG 2: Zero Hunger
3-5	Local food drive (South Graham model)	Global hunger statistics, community resilience
6-8	Watershed pollution or park access	Global water rights, urban green space equity
6-8	Local newcomer oral history	Global migration patterns, belonging and identity
9-12	Local business supply chain mapping	Fair trade, colonialism, global economic systems
9-12	Community health data analysis	Global health disparities, social determinants

Assessment

Assessment in PBE is ongoing, authentic, and multi-modal. The portfolio of evidence below captures student learning across the unit.

Formative assessments

- Identity map (Week 1) — graphic representation of self, place, and local identity
- Observation journal — running documentation of community fieldwork and questions
- Perspective-taking journal (Week 3) — same issue from at least three viewpoints
- Exit tickets and Socratic seminar contributions
- Small-group inquiry presentations

Summative: action project + reflection

DIMENSION	EXCEEDS (4)	MEETS (3)	APPROACHING (2)
Local-global connection	Articulates multiple, nuanced links with evidence	Explains connection with supporting evidence	Identifies connection but lacks depth
Multiple perspectives	3+ perspectives including marginalized voices; genuine empathy and critical lens	2-3 perspectives addressed thoughtfully	Identifies perspectives but surface-level
Action & impact	Project creates measurable community impact; reflects on systemic change	Project implemented; some documented impact	Project planned; partial implementation
Reflection & voice	Deep, honest reflection on growth, identity, continued questions	Thoughtful reflection connecting learning to self	Some reflection; surface level

Differentiation & equity

Place-Based Education is inherently equitable when implemented with intentionality — it centers students' own knowledge as valid and important.

Universal design

- Offer multiple modalities for expression: writing, drawing, speaking, digital
- Provide sentence frames and vocabulary supports
- Allow home language in identity and reflection activities
- Use flexible grouping: individual, pair, small group, class
- Build in choice: students select inquiry topic and project form

Equity considerations

- Honor all communities as having assets; avoid deficit framing
- Be sensitive to students who have experienced displacement or trauma
- Include community members in co-designing fieldwork and projects
- Ensure the local-to-global lens includes Global South perspectives
- Acknowledge whose stories have been historically excluded

Teacher guidance

Before you begin

- Watch the Getting Started for Educators video — orient to PBE pedagogy
- Read the Getting Smart overview — understand the six design principles
- Reflect on your own place: where are you local? How does that shape your teaching?
- Browse Edutopia examples — find one or two that resonate with your context

Three entry points

ENTRY POINT	WHAT YOU DO	GOOD FOR
Lesson-level	Replace one existing lesson with a place-based version of the same standard (e.g., study local water instead of an abstract water cycle example)	Teachers new to PBE; low-risk start
Unit-level	Implement this full unit as written or adapted — one multi-week investigation	Teachers ready to commit a marking period to PBE
School-level	Partner with other teachers and community organizations; use the Getting Smart framework as your design guide	Leaders and teams building a PBE school culture

Key terms

Place-Based Education	An approach to learning that leverages geography, community, and local culture as the foundation for authentic, interdisciplinary, student-centered learning.
Global competency	The skills, knowledge, and dispositions to investigate the world, recognize perspectives, communicate ideas, and take action on global challenges.
Concentric rings model	The PBE framework in which understanding expands outward from self → classroom → community → region → nation → world.
Community as classroom	Using local places, people, and resources as active learning environments beyond school walls.
Local-to-global lens	A pedagogical approach where local inquiry serves as the scaffold for understanding global patterns, connections, and challenges.
Asset mapping	A community-based tool for identifying existing strengths, resources, and expertise — countering deficit-based thinking.
Understand → connect → act	The three-stage sequence that structures meaningful action projects: build knowledge, connect to real-world context, act with purpose.
Positionality	Awareness of how one's identity, background, and place shape one's perspective and interpretation of the world.



Instead of asking students to wait twenty years to really understand the why behind school, students should spend twenty years as integral and participatory members of learning communities. Imagine a world with Place-Based Education for every child — connecting learning locally, regionally, and ultimately, globally.

— NATE MCCLENNEN, TETON SCIENCE SCHOOLS

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