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Educating for Sustainable Communities

The Value of Place-Based Learning in Pre-Service Teacher Education Programs

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As tertiary educators we are concerned with and committed to improving the educational outcomes of pre-service teachers and ultimately of the students they will teach. For many of us this concern and commitment drives one beyond the boundaries of traditional teaching spaces and into wider local and global communities. Place-Based Learning (PBL) becomes the pedagogy adopted to enable pre-service teachers to meet identified community needs and to facilitate reflection on those experiences in such a way as to gain deeper understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of their discipline and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bingle & Hatch, 1996). Thirty years ago the principles of environmental education (EE) were set forth in the Tbilissi Declaration (UNESCO-UNEP, 1978) and included fundamental elements of sustainable development which highlighted the need to consider social aspects of the environment, including the connectedness between communities and people: that is, social sustainability. Place-Based learning experiences can be an effective means of providing this connection and in doing so strengthen the educational nexus between universities, pre-service teachers, schools and communities. The connections forged through PBL enable pre-service teachers and the students they work with to feel a part of their communities, and to engage with the members of that community in meaningful and productive ways. However, PBL experiences not only acknowledge and value local communities they also seek to renew them (Gruenewald, 2003). Gruenewald & Smith (2008: xvi) state that the renewal of communities requires ‘a community based effort to reconnect the process of education, enculturation, and human development to the well-being of community life’. They argue further that Place-Based education introduces children and youth to the skills and dispositions needed to generate and sustain communities (Gruenewald & Smith (2008).

This paper aims to reflect on the value of Place-Based learning in pre-service teacher education programs by identifying a number of PBL projects implemented in the Bachelor of Education Primary/Middle and Design and Technology Education undergraduate programs. Through considering one project in detail, ‘Something in the week’, this paper draws on feedback from pre-service teachers, students, parents and teachers to explore the potential of Place-Based learning in pre-service teacher education programs to renew and reconnect communities, that is, to educate for sustainable communities.

Keywords: Teacher education, place-based education, social sustainability

Introduction

Communities are the places in which we live, work and play. They are the places in which we develop a sense of belonging and connectedness with the members who live there. They are as Sauve (1996) argues the shared living milieu. Place-Based learning (PBL) experiences provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to become part of this living milieu, with the aim of understanding, critiquing and contributing to it in collaboration with others. Whilst it is acknowledged that PBL continues to evolve in its forms (McInerney, Smith & Down, 2011) for the purposes of this paper PBL is concerned with connecting communities of students, in-service teachers, parents, pre-service teachers and community support groups to improve learning opportunities for students.

It is argued here that the connections forged through PBL projects enable pre-service teachers and the students they work with to feel a part of their communities, and to engage with the members of that community in meaningful and productive ways. However, PBL experiences should not only acknowledge and value local communities but they should also seek to renew them (Gruenewald, 2003).

Gruenewald & Smith (2008: xvi) state that the renewal of communities requires ‘a community – based effort to reconnect the process of education, enculturation, and human development to the well-being of community life’. They state further that Place-Based or place conscious education introduces children and youth to the skills and dispositions needed to generate and sustain communities (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). These skills and dispositions include the ability to critically reflect, to work effectively both autonomously and collaboratively, to problem solve, to learn from each other, and to be open to new ideas (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). Jones (2010: 109) states more specifically that PBL ‘forges new social bonds, builds understanding of difference to develop new relationships and understandings’. The capacity building nature of PBL is central to an education which strives to sustain communities and society by producing independent, capable and critical thinkers.

PBL should also provide opportunities for students, parents and pre-service past history and experiences within communities to be valued and built upon, and in doing so provide context and relevance to learning. Learning through, with and in communities can also ‘challenge the authenticity of mandated curriculum’ (McInerney, et.al, 2011:6) and can facilitate a reconnection to learning for those students who have become alienated from schooling. This view also recognises that all communities have assets (Mc Knight 1995, cited in Prosser, Lucas & Reid, (ed) 2010), or funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005 cited in Prosser, et al, (ed) 2010) that can be drawn upon to shape and support the learning of its community members and through this process the community itself is strengthened. Furthermore PBL provides opportunities to recognise, value and celebrate the distinctive elements of local culture including the practices of the people in the community. Smith states that:

One of its primary strengths is that it (PBL) can adapt to the unique characteristics of particular places, and in this way can overcome the disjuncture between school and children’s lives.

(Smith, 2002:593)

The aim of each of the PBL projects described in this paper has been to acknowledge and draw on the strengths of the local community with a view to overcoming this disjuncture. Each of the projects has been established in the Northern suburbs of Adelaide, an area known for its high unemployment rate (37% for 17-22 year olds) and low year twelve retention rates (26 %) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). The disjuncture between school and many of the students’ lives in the Northern Suburbs of Adelaide is wide; the PBL projects outlined here aim to contribute to narrowing that gap.

An Overview of Place-Based Learning Experiences in the Primary/Middle school pre-service teacher education program.

The Primary/ Middle school teacher education program offered through the University of South Australia aims to prepare educators who are concerned with learners’ wellbeing; committed to social justice, to futures thinking and social sustainability. Cultural, environmental and community studies, including ‘real-world’ problem solving and entrepreneurial opportunities are all contexts used throughout the program to provide authentic learning experiences. It is recognised that

learning in, through and with the community (Place-Based learning) encourages an interconnected, mutually supportive environment for learning.

More specifically pre-service teachers completing Design and Technology education courses within in the Primary/Middle program have the opportunity to:

- Develop their capabilities to critique the technological and designed worlds around them,
- Question those worlds in new ways and construct new meanings,
- Challenge the status quo of acceptance of the built and created world, and
- Detect and deconstruct dominant power structures which create inequalities.

(SACSA, 2001:36)

As part of their study in Design and Technology education pre-service students have the opportunity to engage in the following PBL experiences;

- Developing sensory teaching aids to support the learning of students with learning and physical disability.
- Working collaboratively with schools and communities to establish school/community gardens, and establishing whole School *Healthy Eating-Healthy Living projects*.
- Engaging with community libraries and early childhood centres to produce a range of textile/tactile toys to support parents in telling stories to young children.
- Developing and delivering Robotics Peer Mentoring Programs to regional and remote secondary schools.
- Mentoring students in schools who have been identified as being at risk of disengaging from learning, *Something in the Week project*

The capacity building nature of each project PBL has also enabled schools, the community and the university to develop long term, sustainable and ongoing partnerships. For instance the Sensory teaching aid project has continued over a seven year period, and the textile technology project for four years.

Through considering one project in detail, *Something in the week*, the following section of this paper draws on feedback from pre-service teachers, students, parents and teachers to investigate in greater detail the potential of place-based learning in pre-service teacher education programs to not only provide authentic learning experiences but to renew and reconnect communities.

A Case study of a Place-Based Project

Something in the Week project

This project initially developed through contact with the northern Adelaide Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), Whole School Change Coordinator. The Coordinator sought UniSA's involvement in a proposal for an intervention program to be developed for primary school students at risk of disengaging from learning and school. The proposal was accepted by the University, School of Education. A successful DECS funding application enabled the *Something in the Week* (SITW) project to be developed and implemented over a two year period. The purpose of the SITW project was to:

- encourage and improve targeted primary school students attendance,
- provide an opportunity for relationship building between students, their class teachers through release time to accompany students when attending the university site
- create a positive friendship network outside of the school through meeting students from other sites

- reconnect parents to the school community through being involved in aspects of the project, and to
- develop an awareness of the family support services that operated within the school and local community that may be able to offer ongoing support
- create links between community organisations and schools that may increase each others capacity to meet the needs of at risk students.

The naming of the project emphasised the need to engage students in *something* that would encourage their attendance at school and in doing so improve their levels of confidence and self esteem. The project was offered over two consecutive years to pre-service teachers as part of the Design and Technology negotiated study course in their final year of study. The project involved 27 pre-service teachers and 42 year 4 and 5 school students. The project was implemented across a cluster of six Northern Adelaide primary school sites. The primary school students involved had been identified by their teachers as presenting withdrawn, avoidant types of behaviours. They were the students that teachers were concerned about because, *'they slipped into the background of classroom life and showed signs of having low levels of learning wellbeing'* (in-service teacher participant). These were students who were identified by their teachers as demonstrating low levels of wellbeing for a variety of reasons which included, high sick room attendance, lack of a stable friendship group, or being a victim of bullying or trauma. As a result teachers viewed these students as being at risk of disengaging from learning and school.

The project was structured to enable the school students to attend the university site each week for one day over a ten week period. During this time school students engaged in a range of Design and Technology activities. The activities were planned collaboratively with the school students and were based on their interests. The learning activities included, food (making pizzas and cakes) and textile technology (puppets) robotics, lego-technics and making short movies using clay animation. These activities were then taught by the pre-service teachers who worked with the same small group of students each week, thus enabling relationships to be developed. A rotation of classroom teachers and members of the school leadership teams transported the students to and from the University. School based staff also engaged in the activities with school students. Transporting school students to the university also provided teaching staff, with an opportunity to engage in small group conversation with students. The University visits were complemented by the pre-service teacher visits to the schools. During the school site visits school students, with the support of their pre-service teacher mentors, taught the content of the university sessions to their peers in the classroom, sometimes to a small group and at times to the whole class. The purpose of providing the opportunity to teach an activity to their peers was to develop and promote self confidence. In three school sites students also shared their projects at the school assembly. University students were also involved preparing and participating in these whole school presentations.

In parallel with the school student focussed activities, parenting support sessions for parents of the students involved were provided by the Good Beginnings Australia -Turn Around Program (TAP). The aim of the sessions was to create links between the target students, their families and community-based organisations that were able to offer on-going support to families.

The approach to the SITW project was highly collaborative. Interagency support involving the Department of Education (DECS), University of South Australia (UniSA), family support agencies, Good Beginnings and The Smith Family, ensured the project success and viability through connecting with the local community. All parties developed the implementation plan, monitored the progress of the project and undertook the evaluation.

Research Methods

A mixed methodology was adopted for evaluating the outcomes of this project. Semi structured interviews, observations and journal entries reflected a qualitative approach, while testing and

questionnaires formed the quantitative component. In keeping with the aims of the project data was collected in ways that would enable participants, that is pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, school students and community members, to share the outcomes of their involvement in the SITW project. Approval to conduct this research was obtained from DECS and the University of South Australia ethics committee.

Data Collection

Evaluation of the project was ongoing throughout and at the conclusion of the two year period. The evaluation was based on data collected and collated through:

- Pre and post testing of school student's involvement using *Ainley & Bourke's Quality of School Life Scales*.
- Collation of UniSA student responses to evaluation questions – questionnaire conducted at the completion of their involvement.
- Report from the Turn Around Program about family involvement in meetings held and groups available.
- Anecdotal feedback from partners (including teachers, principals and parents at each project meeting).

Methods of Data Analysis

The following section of the paper provides an overview of the methods of data analysis and commences with a statistical analysis of the *Quality of School Life Scales* (QSL) scores, followed by the responses to the pre-service teacher questionnaires and feedback from partners. Issues of parent confidentiality restrict the results of the Turn-Around report from being published in this paper. However 15 of the 18 families contacted participated in the project in some way in the first year and 10 of those families continued in their participation in the project in the second year.

Quality of School Life Scales (QSL)

The *Quality of School Life Scales* were used to identify the students who would participate in the project. Pre and post testing was calculated from a set of sub-tests based on:

- General satisfaction at school
- Teacher-student relations
- Social integration
- Opportunity
- Achievement
- Adventure
- Negative effect

For both the pre and post test identified school students worked individually through the scales with a school support officer. The test results from each school site were collected and collated off site by a social worker. The outcomes of the test were provided to the principal of each school site. Scores from the pre test were used to identify students who could possibly benefit from involvement in the project. The post test was implemented once the project had concluded. Once again a social worker statistically analysed the data for targeted students. The analysis revealed that the overall QSL post test scores were higher than on the pre-test, $t(17) = 2.7$, $p = .014$. This is depicted in figure 1. At the outset, the QSL mean was 93.3, and after intervention the score was 110.2. This was seen as a strong (statistically significant) positive effect in the overall QSL for the target group. Data from the QSL indicated that the *Something in the Week* project had been successful in:

- improving the levels of general satisfaction at school,

- significantly increasing the levels of social integration, and
- increasing the belief that schooling could positively influence their future.

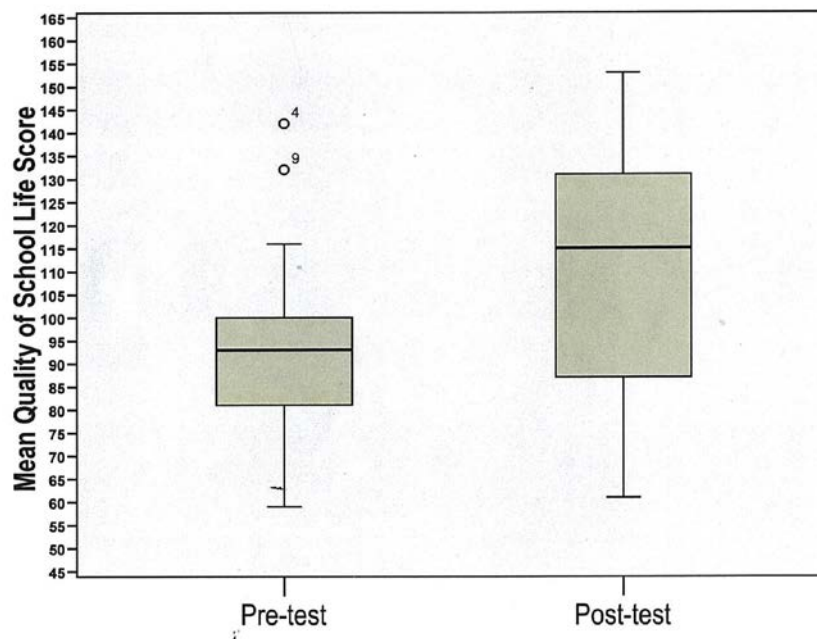


Figure 1: Quality of School, Life scores on pre- and post-test

Pre-service teacher questionnaire

To facilitate the longitudinal collection of data pre-service teachers maintained a journal which documented their observations throughout the project. At the conclusion of the project a questionnaire was distributed. The questionnaire posed questions that focussed on levels of school student engagement, changes to student behaviour, opportunities for relationship building and opportunities for understanding social inclusion. Pre –service teachers were encouraged to reflect on their journal entries to respond. Responses were made on a voluntary basis with 20 out of 27 pre-service teachers responding. Collated responses indicated that pre-service teachers felt the SITW project had been most successful in:

- improving school student relationships with peers, teachers and pre-service teachers,
- increasing the level of student engagement eg staying on task, and
- increasing social inclusion eg talking to others in the class, helping each other with activities.

Written responses from pre-service teacher’s journal entries included the following;

The level of student engagement and general interest improved each week. As the weeks progressed there was a vast improvement in students’ interaction with each other, even helping each other. An increase in the level of confidence to try new tasks was also evident. (PST 3)

The attitudes of the students did change towards us and to each other over the time of the project. Towards the end of the project they were not so guarded, and as their familiarity and confidence grew in us and the environment, the students’ attitudes changed. (PST 12)

Anecdotal feedback from partners (including teachers, principals and parents)

The following data was collated, with the permission of participants, from feedback minuted at monthly review meetings. Participants at these meetings included a school leadership team member from each school site, a representative from the university, DECS and a pre-service teacher.

School principals in 2 of the 6 sites reported a significant reduction of behaviour incidences involving students in the project. All schools reported that students were very proud of what they produced and were willing to share their ideas with others in the class. All adult participants who travelled with students indicated that the opportunity to talk with students was a definite positive in enabling the development of relationships. Teachers who travelled with students reported that students approached them more readily in the classroom to ask for help.

Educating for Sustainable Communities Identifying the benefits

Place-Based learning projects and the experiences they provide can contribute to the development of socially and educationally sustainable communities; that is, they can work with members of the community to identify and meet long term community needs in ways that are sustainable. The benefits from the projects identified in this paper included;

- Parents were engaged in purpose developed activities (facilitated through the Good Beginnings Australia -Turn Around Program) that supported, increased and improved parenting skills.
- Primary school students, who were identified as at risk of disengaging from learning, increased their attendance rates and demonstrated an improvement in their self esteem.
- Classroom teachers were exposed to current teaching and learning content and pedagogy in Design and Technology education.
- School and community members were exposed to UniSA pre-service teachers who by their presence provided role models of success in accessing and participating in university. A large percentage (60%) of the pre-service teachers involved in the project had lived in and had attended schools in the Northern suburbs.
- Pre-service teachers increased their understanding of diversity and their ability to plan and teach for diversity.
- Cross school communication facilitated an increased opportunity to develop a more coordinated response to the learning needs of students.
- This was the first time that school students had visited a university. It was hoped that the visits may have presented students with a post school option that may have not been previously considered.

Conclusions

This paper argues that through adopting a Place-Based pedagogy pre-service teachers in collaboration with schools and community services can be active participants in reconnecting and renewing communities. Place-Based learning experiences have been viewed in this paper as an effective means of providing 'connection' and in doing so are seen as strengthening the educational nexus between universities, pre-service teachers, schools and communities. Through the introduced projects, participants have come to recognise the capacity of PBL to re-engage those students who had been identified as disengaging from learning and school. As stated by one school principal,

This project was a great example of schools, non government agencies, parents and pre-service teachers working together successfully to extend the learning opportunities of young people and

help them to re-engage with school. This is a benefit not only to the students but to the wider community. (Principal 1)

Evidence from the projects introduced in this paper would suggest that PBL provided more than an opportunity to re-engage students with learning in that it also provided the opportunity for all participants to understand, critique and contribute to the living milieu that is community (Sauve, 1996).

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