Place-Based Education: The Key to Raising Active Global Citizens

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Abstract

Goals and methods of education need to be adapted to accommodate changing demands of a Globalized and constantly evolving world. The skillsets required for the 21st century labour market cannot be supplied by traditional schooling systems and curricula. Place-based learning is proffered as a suitable curriculum which will equip children with the attitudes, propensities, and mindsets necessary to negotiate their changing world.

Keywords: Place-based education, Global citizenship

Introduction

One of the key foci of education for global citizenship is to inculcate enough of a sense of collective responsibility in learners to motivate and empower them to become activists – active participants who contribute in a meaningful way to the global discussions and decision-making processes that affect their lives as well as the lives of others. Global citizens should feel empowered to "challenge authority and existing power structures — to think, argue and act — with the intent of changing the world." (Byers, 2005).

Our planet is in dire straits. There are environmental concerns which transcend national borders and can only be attended to with global collaboration (Ross, 2016). Endless conflicts, as well as fluid migration and immigration occasioned by ease of travel come with attendant refugee populations and the challenges associated with that, all happening in a tightly interconnected world. We need to face up to the complex global challenges ahead of us and we need to prepare the future generations to be able to have the tough conversations and make the difficult decisions around these critical issues. (OECD, 2018)

There is an urgent need to revamp our current schooling system, which was designed for a world caught up in the industrial revolution. The skills required in the workplace at a time when there was a need for a 'compliant workforce' of factory workers are completely different from the skills required in our current knowledge-based economy (Knight, 2016). Several researchers in the United States (Frey & Osborne, 2017), Hungary (Illéssy et al., 2021), Norway (Pajarinen et al., 2015) and other Scandinavian countries point to the reality that a substantial percentage (close to 50% in some countries) of occupations in transportation, logistics, production, sales, services, and construction are at risk of becoming irrelevant within a few decades. The ManpowerGroup, a global talent sourcing and workforce management solutions provider, points out in its 2020 Talent Shortage Report, that digital technology and the increasing automation of routine tasks mean that many previously valued skills and abilities are quite obsolete today (ManpowerGroup, 2020). Children do not need to memorize and regurgitate facts, formulae, and data when we have technology that can do that faster and better than any human. However, computers cannot substitute for humans in solving problems that do not admit to rules-based solutions (Levy, 2016) or for complex workplace communication involved in managing human emotions and motivating the workforce. Thus, occupations requiring social intelligence and technical creativity will continue to be in high demand (Frey & Osborne, 2017). So-called 'soft skills'— including effective communication

and relationship-building skills, creativity, resilience, problem solving, and independent thinking— will remain at a premium (Burning Glass Technologies, 2015). A place-based pedagogy can equip children to develop these skills (Smith, 2007).

What is Place-based Education?

The idea behind place-based education is simple. Children's learning should be grounded in local phenomena and the children's lived experiences (Smith, 2002). While not having exactly the same meaning, there are a few terms which have enough characteristics in common that they can all be brought under the larger umbrella of the term 'place-based learning' for the purpose of this paper: 'service-learning,' 'experiential education,' 'project-based curriculum,' and 'community-based education.'

The advantages of this pedagogy include:

i.   Improved teacher and student engagement. When learning is connected to children's experiences, previous knowledge, and context, long-term retention and connection to subject matter are increased. (Nichols et al., 2016).

ii.   Strengthens children's connections to their communities. By reconnecting children with, rather than separating them from the world, place-based education helps them "experience the value they hold for others and allows communities to benefit from them" (Smith, 2002: p. 594).

The foundations of this pedagogy can be found in Deweyan philosophy. In his 1899 essay 'The school and Society', John Dewey described the industrial-age school as "only a place to learn lessons having an abstract and remote reference to some possible living to be done in the future." (Dewey, 1899, p. 13). In a keynote address at the 2016 Global Education Conference hosted by the Global Education Conference Network, Nate McClennen, Vice President for Education and Innovation at the Teton Science schools, Jackson, Wyoming, echoes this notion when he points out that a major flaw of the traditional school system is that it requires children to wait for years throughout their formal education before they are placed into contexts where they can have true agency and make a difference in their world. The two basic tenets of place-based education attempt to correct this deficit:

i.   Children's learning is rooted in their unique local environment, both physical and socio-economic/cultural. The local community is an integral part of the children's learning, with children's work focused primarily on community needs and interests, and community members serving as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning. (RSCT, 2004).

ii.   Children are given opportunities from very early on to identify and solve real-world problems. (Smith, 2002)

At first glance, it may seem antithetical to attempt to raise globally aware universal citizens by focusing their education primarily on their local environments and circumstances. It could be argued that this approach would create learners with a homogenized or even

xenophobic world view. However, as shall be seen in this paper, the evidence shows that this may not necessarily be the case.

Place-based learning is based on a local–to–global context. Projects or investigations can involve cultural studies in which children undertake to compile information about their local communities, or nature studies in which children investigate natural local phenomena (Smith, 2002). They often involve children identifying local problems or issues and designing solutions to these. Children start out focused on their local environments – in the early years, pre-school, and early grade school years, they are focused on understanding themselves and their local environment (school, home, neighbourhood). For instance, Smith (2002) tells of how elementary school students in North Portland designed a plan to restore their school playground and a nearby park which had fallen into a state of disrepair. The unique advantage of place-based education at this stage is that focusing on self, school, classroom, and neighbourhood problems and attempting to solve them serves as a "great proving ground" for doing projects and making changes within *their* sphere of influence (Ross, 2016).

As children mature, their outlook is broadened – by third grade to fifth grades they are expanding their lens to look at issues affecting their country and their region, and by middle school they may have developed the ability to collect, analyze and synthesize information using a global lens (VIF, 2014). Killoran (2016) narrates how a 'service group' in a small international school in Bangkok, Thailand, got involved with local farmers in their coffee-growing district. While on a field trip, the students interviewed the local farmers, learnt about their challenges, and set out to help them. The students negotiated a fair compensation contract with coffee farmers, buying their coffee beans at a fair price about 30% higher than the prevalent market price. They then processed the beans and distributed the coffee. The proceeds from these sales were reinvested in their 'business' – buying and processing more coffee, as well as in community development projects – the children built a water tank for the village, they supported the farmers by buying coffee roasting and drying equipment, etc. Seeing the direct impact of their choices and actions– in the improved living circumstances of the coffee farmers – is likely to have significant impact on their feelings of agency and strengthen their belief in their capacity to change their world for the better (Smith, 2007).

The appeal of place-based learning to me as an educator keenly interested in raising global citizens is two-fold. Firstly, place - based learning ignites a passion in children for their ecosystems – both cultural and physical. To be able to respond to issues on a global scale, you first have to *care*. Our increasingly insular and sedentary modern lifestyle is creating a disconnection between young people and the natural world (Smith & Sobel, 2010). Place-based education creates citizens who care. While it is acknowledged that love of place does not automatically translate to actions to protect one's place (Chang, 2017), it is quite plausible to argue that citizens who care may be more willing to dedicate the time and make the efforts required for environmental and social stewardship (Smith, 2007: p. 192). This can be so especially if educators consciously explore interactions between the global and the local while cultivating a deep connection with the local (Chang, 2017). Secondly, because the children are doing their learning in a local context, they are empowered to act. They are not encumbered by the feelings of helplessness many of us experience when faced with the wide array of global issues. Children see the problems in their localities and act on them. They observe the immediate impact of their actions on their ecology. Over an entire childhood of noticing problems, planning solutions, and acting to solve them, children are likely to develop a self-identification of themselves as problem solvers – as assets to the community and as functional individuals who can take on challenges (Ross, 2016). Smith & Sobel (2010) tell of a high school project began in the early 1990s. Students attempted to solve a simple problem – the

declining population of trout in their local streams. A decade later, the solution the students came up with has become a thriving agricultural business in their community. The students who participated in this project saw how their ideas resulted in real improvements for their local community, thus learning that they *can* change the world.

Speaking with children who participated in these place-based projects, Smith (2002) noted that many of the children felt empowered to address other problem areas. Many of them displayed more awareness of their obligations to their ecosystem and were more willing to act – to speak up when they see people littering their neighbourhood park, for instance, or to ask friends to be more careful of walking around cultivated areas: "Their comments suggest that they had become more cognizant of their status as inhabitants of a particular place and more aware of the obligations that that entails" (Smith, 2002. p. 590). Hopefully, as adults, they will feel that same sense of agency and act to tackle the big issues the world faces. In one study (Takano et al., 2009), researchers followed up on students who experienced a place-based education in Alaska. Five years after the introduction of place-based education in this tiny rural high school, this school remained the only school out of 11 in the school district to achieve the State standards-based assessments parameters. More importantly, some of the students (now graduates) interviewed by the researchers demonstrated high degrees of environmental consciousness and seemed ready to address environmental issues which the adults around them were uninterested in.

Are There Drawbacks to this Pedagogy?

One of the criticisms of this pedagogy is that focusing on real-world projects and development of 'soft skills' can come at the expense of competence in core academic subjects and knowledge of subject matter. Ross (2016) points out that these projects are not carried out in a vacuum, they are executed within the context of academic subjects.

Place-based education is inherently multi-disciplinary (Ontong & Le Grange, 2014). Children develop skills at collaborating when they collaborate about something – the process of collaboration can often build subject-matter knowledge and competencies. For instance, in a grade school referred to by Smith (2002), grade school students set out to save a stand of trees on their campus from runoff water pooling at the base of the trees. They constructed a small wetland and redirected the water there. Completing such a project would have involved learning areas ranging from mathematics, to geography, basic concepts in physics and design and construction, to name just a few. Other activities during which children develop 21st century skills via place-based learning include hiking to a local mountain to study different biomes and developing a walking tour for the local historical society (Jennings et al., 2005). Students have designed, planted, and raised school gardens of local plants which they sell in the neighbourhood, educating neighbours about the merits of using local plants in home gardens (Smith, 2002). The potential for building core subject matter competency in children as they get involved in these activities is almost limitless

While there are only a few studies designed to measure the academic performance of children engaged in place-based learning, one such study was reported in Wisconsin (Lewicki, 2000). Fourteen high school students in rural Wisconsin were given a standardized test at the beginning of the school year in September, and wrote another test in June, after an entire school year of place-based learning. The students scored significantly higher in all test subjects – with their composite score jumping three grade levels. One of the reasons proffered by the author for such remarkable improvement is that the 'places' where learning took place – museums, forests, riverbanks, hospitals – came to serve as "anchors" of the students' learning.

The experience of learning itself thus came to serve as a "mnemonic device", facilitating easy recall (Lewicki, 2000: p. 8). In their 1998 report for the State Education and Environment Roundtable (SEER), a coalition of education agencies from 12 States in the U.S (Lieberman Hoody, 1998), analyzed evidence gathered from 40 schools showing that children in place-based programs consistently performed better in standardized tests, schools had fewer behavioral issues, and learners were more enthusiastic and interested in their studies. Thus, while the focus of place-based education is not necessarily better test performance, we can safely say that children's academic performance is not likely to be negatively impacted by such programs.

Conclusion

The current standards-based school systems have emphasized the need to teach children "what they should know and be able to do to compete in the global marketplace" (Jennings et al, 2005: p. 49), and set out to do so by prescribing classroom routines and expected outcomes. These prescribed standards, routines and tests provide a sense of 'accountability' for policy makers and educators alike. It is certainly easier as an educator to seek the re-assurance provided by following a fixed, measurable, standards-based curriculum.

However, in a rapidly changing world where hard skills are constantly being rendered obsolete by new technology, education can no longer be aimed simply at preparing children for the workplace. Rather, we should be aiming at equipping children with skills, attitudes, and values that they will need to successfully negotiate an increasingly complex world. (OECD, 2018). These skills cannot be learnt on the pages of a book or while listening to a lecture. A good way to develop these skills is through experiential learning – actual, hands-on experience. As discussed in this paper, place-based education can confer advantages in developing these 21st century skills on children. Educators therefore need to be willing to put in the extra work needed to inquire, investigate, question, analyze, design, construct and discover knowledge alongside the children.

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