The importance of place in environmental education

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Abstract

As many in the field of environmental education would appreciate, "to know anything about the world is to know its places" (Gruenewald, 2006, p. 4). David Sobel (1996) suggests that, in teaching about environmental education, using local places to teach about environmental concepts, such as ecosystems or a catchment area, provides students with a context for what they are learning. Cameron (2008, p. 303) further argues that "by implication, education, environmental sustainability and intercultural dialogue should not just take place into account, but they should be deeply grounded in place". As well as providing an opportunity for environmental education to become more participative, and encourage intercultural dialogue and community action, education that is grounded in places encourages students to look critically at their places, both natural and constructed, and consider the interconnections that occur within and through these places. Further, allowing students to investigate the influence of social, political and economical decisions on natural places incorporates the socially-critical and political action goals of environmental education. This paper aims to give an overview of place-conscious education and its place in environmental education, in particular suggesting that environmental education has a central role to play in promoting a place ethic.

Overview of environmental education

To become educated as humans means that we must learn how to engage with others to consider questions of how to live on this planet, how to live just and sustainable lives without destroying the immensely diverse systems that makes life possible (Martusewicz & Edmundson, 2005, p. 71).

The international discourse of environmental education is, comparatively speaking, a young field within a wider educational discipline. However, in only several decades it is a discourse that has evolved from a discipline ‘on the outskirts’, into a field that is all-encompassing and increasingly gaining mainstream momentum. The 1970s saw an increase in social concern about the environment which led to calls for education to be part of the solution. Through a series of conferences and workshops (Stockholm 1972, Belgrade 1975, Tbilisi 1977, Rio de Janeiro 1992, Johannesburg 2002) and the establishment of international environmental programs (United Nations Environment Program 1972, International Environmental Education Program 1975) and reports (Brundtland Report 1987; Agenda 21 1992; UNESCO 2002) the development of environmental education has been promoted as “one of the most critical elements of an all-out attack on the world’s environmental crisis” (UNESCO-UNEP, 1976, p. 2).

Despite growing public interest in environmental issues, there are many concerns and critiques of the environmental education field that need to be addressed. Issues such as the institutionalisation of environmental education, the domination of marginalising colonial and western discourses in environmental education, the silencing of many sectors of the global society, particularly those in developing nations and the emphasis on a western rationalist, ‘scientistic’ and instrumentalist view of education are just some of the criticisms of the field (Fien, 1993; Gough, 1997; Greenall Gough, 1993a, 1993b; Gruenewald, 2003a, 2004, 2008; Stevenson, 1987, 2007). However, education grounded in the local places that children...
belong to and know is one way of addressing some of these concerns and critiques. Place-based, or place-conscious, education with a focus on one’s own place in relation to other places provides a significant opportunity for environmental education to meet criticisms of marginalisation and enable educators to represent non-western and diverse views of education, science and knowing, environment, and place. Fostering strong connection and attachment to local places, as well as understanding the interrelation between one place and another, is an instrumental element to transforming environmental education into an integrating context across the curriculum and the community. Furthermore, by using learning experiences that are grounded in place, students are given contextualised opportunities to explore the ecological, social and political dimensions of environmental education.

Within education, the importance of recognising the role of people as place makers suggests that schools could take a “more active role … in the study, care and creation of places” (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 627). Moreover, in environmental education, by taking a more active role in the ‘study, care and creation’ of places, students and teachers can begin to reflect on how “places, and our ideas about them, became what they are”, as well as allowing students to take a part in the process of shaping what their places will become (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 627).

The following section highlights the importance of place, and place-conscious education, to the future of effective and meaningful environmental education. Following this is a brief example of two primary schools that are using their school grounds as places of environmental learning

**Place-conscious (environmental) education**

*To know anything about the world is to know its places* (Gruenewald, 2006, p. 4).

Place-conscious education is education that is “grounded in the resources, issues, and values of the local community and focuses on using the local community as an integrating context for learning at all levels” (Powers, 2004, p. 17). A committed proponent and developer of place-based education programmes in the USA, the Rural School and Community Trust define place-based learning as:

learning that is rooted in what is local – the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art of a particular place. The community provides the context for learning, student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in teaching and learning. Place-based educators have discovered that this local focus has the power to engage students academically, pairing real world relevance with intellectual rigour, while promoting genuine citizenship and preparing people to respect and live well in any community they choose (Rural School and Community Trust, 2003)

The purpose for becoming conscious of places in education is to “extend our notions of pedagogy and accountability outward, toward places”, making learning more relevant to “the lived experiences of students and teachers … so that places matter to educators, students and citizens in tangible ways” (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 620). Although place-based education is often used interchangeably with a number of terms – community-based learning, rural education, project-based learning, service-learning, sustainability education – it encompasses a broad hope by educators to:
‘tear down’ school walls so that the community becomes integral to all facets of student learning – that is, that the school is open and inviting to the community and the community welcomes student learning occurring in many dimensions (Powers, 2004, p. 18).

Place-conscious education is used to refer to the “philosophical orientation that embraces place as a construct fundamental to the purpose, process and structure of schooling” (Gruenewald, 2005, p. 263). Experience in place shapes our culture and identity, and our experiences of place, particularly socially constructed spaces (i.e. schools, highways, suburban streets), are in turn mediated by our culture. As Gruenewald (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 625) contends, “we live our lives in places and our relationship to them colours who we are”. These socially constructed spaces are often perceived as a “natural part of our social landscape” that we take for granted, failing to see how they are cultural products. In doing this:

we accept their existence as non-controversial or inevitable, like the falling of rain or the fact of the sunrise … when we accept the existence of (social/cultural) places as unproblematic… we also become complicit in the political processes, however problematic, that stewarded these places into being and that continue to legitimize them” (Gruenewald, 2003b, pp. 626-627).

Although often used interchangeably with place-based education, the latter in fact being more commonly used, place-consciousness is preferred here over the term place-based education, as place-based education has connotations of being about the locality, whilst place-consciousness suggests both consciousness of one’s immediate place as well as “an awareness of other places beyond one’s own local environment” (Gruenewald, 2005, p. 263) which fosters an understanding of the interrelatedness between places. An example of place-conscious curriculum that provokes an awareness of the interrelatedness between places (see also Gruenewald, 2005) would be a study of the flora and fauna within a local nature reserve that targets both the indigenous plants and wildlife as well as an investigation into the various plants and wildlife that have come from other places, the reasons they have come to be in that place, and the impact they have on that place, such as the introduction of Laughing Kookaburras to Western Australia and Tasmania, or European songbirds to Australia more generally.

As Powers (2004, p. 18) argues, education that is conscious of and uses place(s) allows students to “see the relevance of what they are learning and therefore become more engaged in the learning process”. Additionally, evaluations of place-based education programs have shown “strong promise for improving student learning and community engagement … students who are engaged in real-world learning are more likely to succeed than are those who learn equivalent material from more abstract textbooks” (Powers, 2004, p. 18).

Within education, the importance of recognising the role of people as place-makers suggests that schools could take a “more active role … in the study, care and creation of places” (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 627). Moreover, through taking a more active role in the “study, care and creation” of places, students and teachers can begin to reflect on how “places, and our ideas about them, became what they are” as well as allowing students to take a part in the process of shaping what their places will become (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 627).

Environmental education promoting a place-ethic

Within environmental education, place-conscious education focuses on both the social and ecological environments wherein learning occurs. David Sobel (1996) suggests that in
teaching about environmental education concepts, using local places, such as ecosystems or the watershed, provides students with a context for what they are learning. On the other hand, learning about the ecosystems of a rainforest for students living in semi-arid plains, for example, does not provide students with a reference point nor allow the local place to become the ‘classroom’.

In a move away from the predominantly science-based and behaviour-changing emphasis of much environmental education, Sobel (1996) argues that simply teaching children about environmental problems and issues will not make these children grow up to be adults who have environmentally responsible behaviours. In fact, by emphasising environmental problems we may well be doing the opposite and are “cutting [children] off from their roots” (Sobel, 1996, p. 1). By focussing on global problems rather than local places, Sobel (1996, p. 2) asks “what really happens when we lay the weight of the world’s environmental problems on eight and nine year olds already haunted with too many concerns and not enough real contact with nature?”. This is further supported by Arenas (1999, p. 2), who argues that without a pedagogy of place “children cannot comprehend, even less feel a sense of commitment towards, issues and problems in distant places until they have a well-grounded knowledge of their own place”. Sobel (1996, p. 10) maintains that “what is important is that children have an opportunity to bond with the natural world, to learn to love it and feel comfortable in it, before being asked to heal its wounds”. If (environmental) educators develop a sense of place in children that fosters attachment and bonding with the natural world, and is grounded in the resources and context of the community, then these children will not only develop a sense of the place that they are in, they will also (hopefully) develop care and concern for other places as well. There are several studies into ‘significant life experiences’ (SLE) that show experiences in nature, along with the encouragement and sharing of knowledge with a mentor, as having significant impacts on that child’s future environmental ethic, attitude and behaviour (Chawla, 1998; Huby & Bradshaw, 2006).

John Cameron (2003, p. 99) promotes ‘place responsiveness’ as holding a “creative tension between deep experience and critical awareness” in an ethic of place, claiming that education has a central role to play in promoting this place ethic. Suggesting that a place-responsive society “is one whose institutions and customs nurture and support a rich, deep connection with place and places”, he argues that mainstream Australian society does not at present do this (Cameron, 2003, p. 13; see also Plumwood 1999). In discussing an ethical place education, Cameron (2003) considers the importance of depth of experience in place, combined with critical awareness in developing place-responsiveness. He also highlights the significance of engaging indigenous knowledge and coming into a relationship with the “fact of prior Aboriginal inhabitation and intimate knowledge of every part of the country” (Cameron, 2003, p. 106). Cameron (2008, p. 303) argues that “by implication, education, environmental sustainability and intercultural dialogue should not just take place into account, but they should be deeply grounded in place”. The importance of being deeply grounded in place should also apply to the field of environmental education. A critical awareness of place allows students to investigate the influence of social, political and economical decisions on natural places, incorporating Stevenson’s (2007, p. 139) “socially critical and political action goals of environmental education”.

Similarly, a ‘critical pedagogy of place’ is the amalgamation of place-conscious education and critical pedagogy (Gruenewald, 2003a). Where place-conscious education emphasises educating within a local and ecological context, critical pedagogy emphasises identifying and challenging oppressions of race, class, and gender (to this, proponents of eco-justice and
socio-ecological justice would also add oppressions occurring in nature; see also Bowers, 1995; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004; Gruenewald, 2003a; Jucker, 2004). Merging place-conscious education and socially-critical education, a critical pedagogy of place “focuses attention on analysing how economic and political decisions impact particular places” (Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 3). In a critical pedagogy of place, David Gruenewald (2003a) contends that students need to be educated to the decolonisation and reinhabitation of places. ‘Decolonisation’ involves an understanding of the patterns of domination and discrimination that have benefited some while exploiting others. It looks at how places, both human-centred and more-than-human, have been “diminished or thwarted” by such domination and discrimination (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. 346). ‘Reinhabitation’, on the other hand, involves the “restoration of relationships to other people and the land characterised by affiliation and responsibility” (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. 347; see also Gruenewald, 2003a).

Whilst place-conscious education is becoming a growing educational movement, Gruenewald (2003b, p. 621) warns that within the current educational discourse, “where place-conscious traditions continue, they will be under constant pressure to prove their worth by conventional measures in national, state, and local systems of education that remain disengaged from and unaccountable to the connections between people, education, and places”. Smith (2007, p. 190) suggests that place-based education, “although rooted in environmental education”, differs from conventional environmental education “by the attention its practitioners direct toward both social and natural environments” by grounding “at least part of student learning in the local”.

A focus on place in environmental education, particularly pedagogies that engage in critical as well as ecological and social inquiry about the environment, is one such way to address the criticisms of environmental education noted above. Place pedagogy which merges experience with the critical awareness of a place and its history, is an important way of engaging learners with non-western discourses through a focus on indigenous place knowledge and alternative ways of knowing and being in place (Cameron, 2003; Gruenewald, 2003b; Hay, 2002; Payne, 2006).

The use of school grounds for place-making provides valuable opportunities for schools and teachers to situate environmental learning in place, making use of resources readily available and easily accessible. However, in a criticism of some uses of environmental learning spaces in school grounds, Malone and Tranter (2003) point out that all too often these spaces are heavily regulated, with student interaction within them only allowed during structured classroom activities, being designated out-of-bounds at all other times. The importance of unstructured environmental play in fostering care and concern for places is well documented (see, for example, Louv, 2008; Malone & Tranter, 2003; Sobel, 1996).

Far from being a push for curriculum reform in education and environmental education, place-conscious education is a means in which to develop and address issues of “human responsiveness and adaptability to the local and global dilemmas that now demand our attention, intelligence and energy” (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. 345). Much in the field of environmental education allows for the possibility and potential of education that is grounded in place. A focus on local places can work as an integrating context for environmental education to become imbedded across the school curriculum. Community and environmental focuses in school curriculum can provide scope for teachers to engage with local places on a deeper level, allowing for critical discussion of the interrelatedness of places, humans and the
more-than human world. Similarly, a place-conscious curriculum enables values education, cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and community participation to be integrated throughout the curriculum. As Cameron (2008, p. 303) argues “by implication, education, environmental sustainability and intercultural dialogue should not just take place into account, but they should be deeply grounded in place”. Likewise, as well as providing an opportunity for environmental education to become more participative as a result, an ethical place education encourages intercultural dialogue and community action, some of the key goals of environmental education (see UNESCO-UNEP, 1978).

The following section outlines two examples of environmental education grounded in place, in particular the use of school grounds as an integrating context for environmental education, community and regeneration.

**School grounds as an integrating context for environmental education grounded in place**

Originally a degraded and disused stock reserve next to the local school, ‘Gindaany Springs Public School’ is now a part-time Environmental Education Centre (EEC) and public reserve in South-East Australia. Through the co-creating of place by the school and community, Willaroo EEC and nature reserve is an example of a “revitalizing of the commons” (Bowers, 2005). With a population of around 150, Gindaany Springs has become a place of biodiversity, regeneration and environmental education, fostering both ecological and rural-regional sustainability (see Green & Reid, 2004).

The experiences of students in Willaroo EEC has been used by the school to “tear down the school walls [fences]” (Powers, 2004, p. 17), giving students contextualised opportunities for environmental learning. In turn, this place is also used as a centre for environmental learning for visiting schools, with up to 3000 students visiting the centre each year. With an emphasis on ‘getting their hands dirty’, the curriculum and pedagogy at Gindaany Springs Public School emphasise the priority of place-based environmental education. As Daniel, the Principal at Gindaany Springs Public School, states:

> we’ve got this unwritten rule here that the kids have got another subject they do that’s not really in the [Board of Studies] curriculum... I feel [environmental education] has just got to be a part of their everyday life that they’re doing.

The students at Gindaany Springs Public School, whilst also being taught set outcomes from the NSW Board of Studies syllabus’, partake in weekly gardening classes (image 1), and use Willaroo as a classroom resource for integrated learning experiences in Math, English, HSIE, Science, Creative Arts, and Personal Development, Health and Physical Education learning areas. Additionally, within the schoolgrounds, students have unstructured and informal access to outdoors areas, such as the bird garden, orchard and vegetable garden, and an extensive treed area where they spend much recess and lunch time, in the cooler months, building cubbies.

The community and the school have worked together to (co)create Willaroo. The students have been given valuable access to the expertise of community members, and in turn have taken part in the planning, propagating, planting, digging and maintenance of Willaroo. School principal, Daniel, has been an integral part in accessing funding and recognition for the centre. In turn, Willaroo has become an educational resource base, providing community environment groups with a place for members to showcase the vegetation that should be
planted locally to increase biodiversity as well as space for a seed-bank of indigenous plant species fast disappearing from surrounding bush remnants. Furthermore, the educative potential of Willaroo as a place for environmental learning is seen through its use by community and regional groups for functions, professional development days, and as a training centre.

Image 1: Gardening Class at Gindaany PS  
Image 2: Mountain-Top PS bin receptacle

In another example, Mountain-Top Primary School, located in North Eastern Victoria, has used its school grounds as an integrating context for environmental education. The school community has utilised a number of environmental education programs such as Learnscapes, Waste Wise and Special Forever, with a strong emphasis on visual arts in the school grounds. Through these programs, each class takes care of a place within the school grounds. These places include herb gardens, a mandala vegetable garden, an indigenous sculpture garden, and a chook yard, with classes working in their place in the school grounds at least once, often twice, a week. Using the school grounds in this way works to create a sense of place in students, encouraging them to take ownership and care, and to generate respect for their part of the grounds.

Similarly, the use of student artworks in the school grounds builds on the aesthetic dimension of place, creating bright colourful places in otherwise dark and unsightly places, such as the bin receptacle (image 2) and the bus shelter. Furthermore, these artworks feature native Australian birds, such as Cockatoos, Kookaburras, Swan’s, Galahs, Willy-Wagtails and even a Wedge Tailed Eagle (complete with half-eaten prey), and so also work as an educative tool for the wider school and community through providing images of, and pride in, the native birds commonly occurring in and around the Mountain-Top area.

Both of these examples show how school grounds and local areas can act, not only as a resource for learning, but as an integrating context for environmental education to become embedded in the curriculum. As Power’s (2004) definition of place-based education shows, these schools have become both a resource for the local community, as well as use the local community as a resource. With an emphasis on environmental education as a priority curriculum area in these schools, the teachers and students are engaging with local places and developing a sense of care and concern for these places. Furthermore, as well as the formal learning experiences occurring in their places, these schools encourage free and imaginary outside play amongst their students, with students from both schools keenly spending lunch and recess time building cubbies and creating elaborate fantasy worlds and games.
Conclusion: grounding environmental education in place

Place matters in environmental education. Grounding educational experiences in places not only provides a context for student’s environmental learning, it offers opportunities for students to investigate the influence of social, political and economical decisions on natural places and also incorporate the socially-critical and political action goals of environmental education. Education that is conscious of place allows for engagement with an alternative/indigenous ecological gaze. Similarly, conceiving of place using an ecological gaze encourages a social and ecological justice perspective. The study and care of one’s own place, while also considering the interrelatedness between one’s place and another, fosters care and concern for other places. Furthermore a focus on place allows students to develop a care and concern for the place(s) they interact with, including positive actions they can take in regenerating that place. By providing opportunities for environmental education to become more participative, and to encourage intercultural dialogue and community action, education that is explicitly grounded in places encourages students to look critically at their places, both natural and constructed, and to consider the interconnections that occur within and through these places. The place of ‘place’, with its opportunity for cross-curricular integration, active participation and community interaction, should, therefore, be integral to effective environmental education.

References


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Further information about these conferences, reports and documents can be found online.

ii All names of people and places have been changed for confidentiality. However, all efforts have been made to retain the name-identity of the place, within the confines of confidentiality, through its pseudonym.

Gindaany means “Sugar glider” in the Wiradjuri language, the language group of the traditional Indigenous Australian owners of the land. Sugar gliders are small gliding possums that were previously common in the area. The community at ‘Gindaany Springs’ have been involved in an effort to conserve habitats for Sugar Gliders at the Willaroo EEC.

Willaaroo means “Bush-Stone Curlew” in the local Wiradjuri Language, a ground-dwelling native bird that was previously common to the area but is now endangered.