



Education in the North

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Editorial

Space, Place and Pedagogy: Local Contexts in a Globalised World.

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Editorial

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This themed issue of the journal *Education in the North* coincides with the adoption of 'The North' as one of the University of Aberdeen's interdisciplinary research themes. Aberdeen is located within a geographical area known as the 'circumpolar North', including eastwards the Nordic and Baltic countries and westwards, Iceland, Greenland, Canada and Alaska. This region is acquiring increasing significance for the future of life on Earth, out of proportion to its relatively sparse human population. Understanding the interplay of power relations and cultural understandings within this region can have important repercussions for how we conceive of our actions within the broader context of humanity's relationship with the Earth. The North may be the ultimate camp for resource extraction and exploitation; yet it is within this North that we see the receding appendices of our ecological and cultural heritage. The North Pole is the place where the first signs of climate change were detected and where we encounter some of the remaining indigenous cultures, holding knowledge and wisdom that is fast disappearing by the on-going rate of disruption of ecosystems' services.

The concept of 'place' as construed from within the Natural Sciences is indeed a slippery one, for places are continuously changing, being themselves the product of living and non-living forces interacting and shaping locales over time. Yet place is a biophysical terrain as much as it is a cultural setting and 'zone of engagement' which includes human and non-human actors (Cook, Laidlow and Mair, 2009). The biophysical features of an environment affect the way in which our bodies are metabolically regulated, to temperature, taste and even emotional outlooks. Within a geographical location our interactions with people and spaces contributes to the making and remaking of 'place'. Hence there is creativity and there is responsibility in understanding oneself in place.

However, education as it is most commonly conceived as the process through which a person acquires knowledge and a set of competences is a context in which the notion of place is problematic; on the one hand it is acknowledged that cultural background and geographical origins play a role in the learners' engagement with any curricular materials; on the other hand, the emphasis on standardised provision and assessment overrides qualitative differences and with them, the potential for creative expression of individual and collective understandings.

From an educational point of view, a reflection on ourselves in place demands questioning of the aims and purposes of our educational curricula; it requires a sustained awareness of the ways in which we partake in social interaction; it interrogates the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion. Questions of co-existence become paramount.

This special issue contains six peer-reviewed articles and five feature articles exploring the

significance of the concept of 'place' to understand culture and behaviours in relation to the environment. Contributors range from the Northern (Iceland, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Canada) to the Southern Countries (Italy, Greece).

The first three papers offered in the peer-reviewed section centre on place-based education in school contexts. Starting from Finland, Eeva Kaisa Hyry-Beihammer and Outi Autti (University of Oulu, Finland) report on a study of schools as places narrated by students. In their paper the school moves from being a simple physical construction, a building, to embedding the social, normative and physical arena of young people's developing sense of identity and belonging. It is within the space of the school that young people negotiate access to the social world and acquire agency. Hence the authors stress the importance for teachers to be able to interrogate the school as a relational context, and become active explorers of such space.

Exploring this theme further, Heli Villanen and Eva Alerby (Lulea University of Technology, Sweden) put forward a model for looking at children's educational development as a set of activities in place. Hence the study of the geography of school learning environments is paramount to understanding the learning opportunities that are being afforded for children and to designing pedagogical interventions accordingly.

Along similar lines, Irida Tsevreni (National Technical University of Athens) and Konstantina Benteñidi (Architect, Berlin, Germany) explore the dialectical relationship between children and space with a particular focus on the empowering role of space for disabled children. Participatory design workshops with teachers and children bring forth the possibility to design space according to categories of belonging, creative expression and development. Space becomes an enabling dimension.

Moving from the context of school to the community, Allyson Macdonald and Auður Pálsdóttir (University of Iceland) deploy the study of place as a means for engendering awareness and understanding of diversity amongst people and communities. The authors report on the development of a course in the International Studies in Education Programme at the University of Iceland which supports the development of critical awareness about the role of history of social environments, and how people come to acquire beliefs systems and values. Far from being a local or regional endeavour aimed at self-preservation, the study of place can set the basis for the development of students' dispositions towards variety, multiplicity and difference.

From the study of people and communities it is thus possible to enter the complex scenery of division of labour and social expectations. With a study on women's educational opportunities in rural Iceland, Anna Guðrún Edvardsdóttir explores the potential and practical possibilities for education as a means to reconnect people with their original or acquired community. Rural is becoming increasingly associated with unpopulated; yet women's education in rural contexts appears to be a tool for women

to support their families and thus strengthening the life of local communities. The provision of University distance learning courses for people living in rural areas, however, does not always respond to women's role and needs in the community and it remains a critical feature of the study.

Finally, Ásthildur Jónsdóttir (Iceland Academy of the Arts) discusses the implications of place-based approaches through the medium of the arts to develop students' understanding of sustainability and sustainable life-styles. Art students are sensitised to the qualities of their environment and the features and changes of place in time. The paper details settings and design activities that enable students to grapple with the holistic and value-laden dimensions of sustainability such as quality of life and well-being.

Taken altogether the six articles provide empirical accounts of academic research 'in place', aimed at supporting and developing awareness of people's individual and collective actions in relation to context and the environment. It is a type of education that enhances reflexivity within the complexity of one's relationships with the Earth and other people.

While the articles in the first section of the journal provide the detail of specific studies and interventions, the feature articles in this issue offered respectively by Elena Camino (Interdisciplinary Research Institute in Sustainability, Italy), Sean Blenkinsop (Simon Fraser University, Canada), Jim Parson and Larry Beauchamp (University of Alberta, Canada), Alan Paterson (University of Aberdeen, Scotland), and Timo Jokela (University of Lapland, Finland) are suggestive, holistic reflections encompassing all and more of the themes explored in the first part of the themed issue. All six authors who have contributed the feature articles have a long standing career as academics and practitioners in formal and informal educational settings. The variety of disciplines and backgrounds which characterise them speaks loud about the multiplicity of dimensions that characterise 'place education' or 'education in place' and the need to re-connect several modes and levels of knowing, from the cognitive to the emotional, from the individual to the collective level. A common theme across all the articles is the idea of the Planet as place and most importantly as 'home'.

So we can begin from the plea made by Elena Camino for an education that openly addresses the limitations and dangers of a powerful and yet singular way of knowing; the marriage of techno-science with the world of finance in the current neoliberal world is rooted in a particular way of conceiving the relationship between human beings and Nature; the power of technology to transform ecosystems is also the same power which is squandering food webs and communities, fuelled by an apparent social consensus and underscored by mounting inequalities. More specifically, and quoting Camino *"conventional approaches to science teaching are still emphasizing the idea of science as a special way of knowing – free from values and directed towards the 'progress' of humanity. Moreover, by fragmenting information in different disciplines, space and time scales, (...) teachers fail to help students to build a personal, critical, reflexive view of ecosystems' services and the role and position of humans within the natural world"*. Another science and another type of science education are

possible. Camino argues for an approach based on diversity and dialogue amongst different cultures, languages and experiences of the world; such dialogue however is not a simple exercise of citizenship. It is dialogue based on the discernment of common values and the maintenance of common, fundamental needs which are sustained by the Planet in which we live and depend upon, in common.

Sean Blenkinsop reiterates the need to frame educational practice according to a process of re-valuing of the relationships between human communities and nature. Nature is more than the 'backgrounding' of the human world and which "*simply drops out of sight and out of mind*". Blenkinsop's paper engages with a study of a School newly opened in 2011 in Maple Ridge, Canada, which was founded on the principles and values of: Place and community; Nature, ecology and sustainability; Inquiry and possibility; Interdependence and flourishing; and Imagination and integration. Following the progress of the school during its first few years, and some of the challenges faced, Blenkinsop offers a vision of the way in which schools begin to develop a more environmentally integrated and place-based approach to learning and teaching.

If the word 'Environment' has tended to be understood as an entity set apart from humanity, the word 'ecology' was introduced to reminds us that within the project we understand ecosystems to be exemplars of sustainable communities. "*They are places that have much to teach us as we move towards a more ecological worldview*".

From a synthesis of data they collected as part of an Alberta Teachers Association sponsored study, Parsons and Beauchamp, found that the place-based understanding of teachers, as a community, is a fundamental educational prerequisite for understanding how teaching might be designed to maximize student learning. Building on the idea of the 'home' indicated by Blenkinsop with the word 'ecology, Parsons and Beauchamp maintain that place-based education can be characterized as a pedagogy that stresses community-building and reintegrates students and teachers into schools that actually serve as homes and, within these homes, they enact and are engaged in family living.

Finally, in their respective articles, Alan Paterson (artist and teacher educator, Aberdeen University) and Timo Jokela (Professor of Art Education, University of Lapland, Finland) talk to us about place-formation as part of aesthetic interaction with materials. Alan Paterson describes educational experiences in workshop contexts with beginning teachers. Quoting Paterson: "*When the emphasis is on experimentation with materials, both cultural and personal bias can be counterbalanced with open exchanges and developments in practice. Real participation and real dialogue should capture the essence of these approaches and processes*". The richness of opportunity to freely explore and experiment can increase the vitality and connectedness of the participants thus instigating the sense of creativity, community that are at the basis of sustainable living 'in place'. Along similar lines, Timo Jokela is an active artist who often uses natural materials, wood, snow, ice, or the local cultural heritage as a starting point for his works. His article is a personal narrative where he explores his own

experiences as an artist as a product of a Western artistic education and a native of a northern village. In his own words he tries to place himself “*midway between the two, where I look in two directions at the same time from a single point. I try to examine the North - my own phenomenal world of experience - as an intertextual narrative; it is a narrative in which Western art and science are interwoven with the stories, meanings and truths of the local people.*” Through this narrative we get a very real sense of the importance place has in shaping his art, but not only the place itself but very often the journey to that place, the wandering.

Their wide-ranging accounts speak to teachers, students, scholars of many disciplines and most importantly they speak to us – the readers – as wanderers in the landscape in which we belong.

Reference

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