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### Feature

## The Places Teachers Build: Eight Research Findings that Build Better Schools

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## The Places Teachers Build: Eight Research Findings that Build Better Schools

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### Introduction

Place-based pedagogies help us better understand how teachers work collaboratively with other teachers and students to create the ecological and social spaces in which they live and work. Our recent study (Parsons and Beauchamp, 2011), interviewed teachers from five highly successful elementary schools in Alberta to determine what kind of leadership supports effective teaching and learning. Our study found that highly effective schools shared similar attributes and cultures. Specifically, they worked to create school spaces that leveraged curricula to negotiate and design cultural pedagogies that capitalized on the needs and opportunities found within their local schools.

The foundation of this paper is a synthesis of an Alberta Teachers Association (ATA) sponsored case study of five effective elementary schools in Alberta. As researchers, we did not choose the schools we studied: these schools were chosen as schools with *good reputations* (schools with a reputation for supporting student learning) by the Alberta Teachers' Association. We spent a year in these five schools interviewing teachers, principals, and support staff asking two questions: (A) What makes this school such a good place for teaching and learning? and (B) What does the administration do to help? Then, we analysed, theorized, and shared our data and findings. We made comprehensive notes, then organized, analysed, and synthesized our findings into five case studies – one for each school. Drafts of each case study were made available to participants to verify findings.

### Place-based Pedagogies

Although the major focus of our work was instructional leadership, we learned much about teacher professional learning that fits well into Gruenewald's (2003) and Smith's (2002) place-based pedagogies and Martusewicz and Edmundson's (2005) work on pedagogies of responsibility. Gruenewald (2003, p.3) specifically argues, "place-based pedagogies are needed so that educating citizens might have some bearing on the wellbeing of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit." Place, to Gruenewald (2003, p.3), is a critical construct that analyses "how economic and political decisions impact particular places." We found that such a place-based understanding of how teachers – as a community – create and use energy, materials, and create broader relationships, opportunities, and constraints is a fundamental educational prerequisite for understanding how teaching might be designed to maximize student learning.

Gruenewald posits that critical pedagogy and place-based education are mutually supportive traditions that allow a conscious synthesis of two discourses into a critical pedagogy of place. Gruenewald's analysis of critical pedagogy emphasizes the spatial aspects of social experience; however, we also found that teachers created a psychology of place that advanced their work and lives. In this paper, we examine how teachers demonstrate a critical social analysis built almost exclusively upon human relationships. Next, we discuss a cultural understanding of place-based education. Finally, we outline a critical pedagogy of place that defines the objectives of decolonization and inhabitation by speculating about teacher professional learning within the context of place-based pedagogy. We believe a critical consideration of place challenges teachers to bridge between the kind of professional learning we pursue and the kind of places we build, inhabit, and leave as legacies for future generations.

Our paper will examine the literature on pedagogy of place and consider how place-based pedagogies have been expressed within schools as teachers build communities through service to student learning. The twin constructs in which teachers live – service and learning – can be

understood within the context of pedagogy of place which can lead to exciting professional learning possibilities focused upon the ecology of local school sites. In many ways, the attention to teacher professional learning are built upon principles of reconciliation that offer teachers a fresh entry to engage both their own and their students' learning as they live out an initial call to teaching as a profession.

### **Pedagogy of Place**

A growing body of literature articulates the need for pedagogy embedded in the particularity of place. Educators are challenged to consider relationships between what and how they teach and the kinds of places they inhabit. Place-based pedagogies are fruitful because the "study of place ... has a significance in re-educating people in the art of living well where they are" (Orr, 1992, p. 130).

Sobel (2005) notes that place-based education can be characterized as the pedagogy of community, the reintegration of individuals into home grounds, and the restoration of essential links between people and their places. In this paper, we advocate for a critical pedagogy of place, where teachers and students are encouraged to re-inhabit their places and pursue actions that improve the social, economic, political, and ecological life of places both current and future.

Such understandings of place-based pedagogy emerge from a dialectical product of classical Enlightenment views founded upon a belief that humans are finite, embodied, time-bound, place-based creatures with the capacity to consider, compare, and construct traditions that discern and build norms for sorting out what should be preserved and what should be changed within their own cultures.

As part of our paper, we will explore the following findings – each, of which, will be explicated as part of a place-based pedagogy:

#### **Finding One: Teachers working together**

The power and value of teachers working together was obvious in our research. The actions of teacher collaboration assumed a variety of forms; however, at the foundation of these positive actions was accepting and building on the professionalization of teachers. In schools that worked well, teachers showed themselves to be capable of insight, leadership, collaboration, and trust.

To build a place-based pedagogy, we believe teachers should move away from professional development to job-embedded and context-specific professional learning. Obviously, educational terms can be defined differently and professional development and professional learning might – to some people – mean the same thing. However, to be clear, the professional learning we are speaking about is local and teacher-led. It is not instituted on the shoulders of outside, knowledgeable experts. Professional learning occurs in many ways, but it is always borne by teachers within their own schools. Our research suggests that teacher professional learning should be expected, encouraged, and supported. It also suggests that teachers should embrace leadership opportunities. Countless conversations with teachers revealed a reoccurring theme: external PD events are costly, superficial, and seldom alter or impact teacher practice. A number of teachers praised the idea of 'share fairs' – in-house, teacher-led, timely, and supported mini-lessons around specific professional learning goals: instructional technologies, literacy activities, assessment practices, instructional strategies, and data analysis are just a few of the many peer-to-peer learning collaborations that shift knowledge from a few designated leaders to leadership by the majority of teaching staff.

As long-time teachers, we have watched the actions of our teaching colleagues grow and change. To build a place-based pedagogy, we believe one positive change is to create more social and collegial aspects of teaching. Teaching was once a lonely activity – the humans one worked with were mostly one's students. Today's teachers talk to each other more. The skill set required for successful employment in the work world – collaboration, teamwork, networking, and critical problem solving – is just as necessary in teaching. Formerly criticized as isolating, lonely, and competitive, high schools are eschewing the culture of scores and percentages for a culture of mutual interests and goals –

ensuring all students are learning and receiving the best instructional learning opportunities. The impact of this shift is positive for many reasons. In the effective schools we researched, when teachers worked together on real educational issues, their leadership grew and positive changes happened. This finding suggests the possibility and value of Action Research – teachers working together to address their own challenges and to solve their own problems. Our research also found that, when teachers worked together, they were happier, more effective, and better able to promote positive attitudes and increased student engagement.

### **Finding Two: Building relationships**

Although this might seem overstated, our research found that relationships are the key to every positive action within a school. To build a place-based pedagogy, we believe advancing relationships is necessary. These relationships are everywhere – between teachers and students; between students and students; between teachers and teachers; between teachers and principals; and between teachers and principals and parents – and all other possible combinations. When relationships were smooth, schools operated smoothly. Simply put, we all tend to accept incredible challenges and tasks if asked by someone with whom we share good relations. Yet, when asked to undertake an easy job by someone we dislike, we find any number of reasons to decline. Considering our research in the area of instructional leadership, which includes reading many leadership books and articles, we felt literature in the area of school leadership was too much about identity and too little about relationships. These place-based relationships came to life as school staff came to name themselves metaphorically as “family.”

To build a place-based pedagogy, we believe teachers should nurture relationships. Often we forget what small villages schools actually are. Schools are places to which humans carry their lives: schools become social geographies for teachers and students. Sadly, thousands of Canadian students enter neighborhood schools where only a handful of people know their names. They pass through hallways surrounded by people yet feel invisible. In geographies where high-stakes assessment activities are especially alive, as is the case in the province of Alberta, covering content to prepare for provincial achievement exams appropriates space where relationships could flourish.

Careful attention to relationships seemed a key aspect in the schools we researched. In these schools, teachers and administrators put people first – this appeared to be non-negotiable. The pay-off was seen in how the young people in the study schools treated each other. Simply acknowledging the existence of relationships is a healthy beginning, accomplished by creating place-based cultures of caring. In the schools we researched, student engagement linked directly to positive and caring relationships. Our research suggests that all young people benefit from good relationships as they engage in building communities with caring adults. Teachers also benefitted from good relationships. Teaching has the potential to bring optimal occasions for engaging in caring behaviors, and our research suggests that both teachers and students should keep asking each other – directly and indirectly – how caring might be manifested in actions.

### **Finding Three: The creation of learning spaces**

Building a school is more than physically constructing a building. “Spaces for learning” are both cultural and geographical, and our research found that social relationships were keys to how schools functioned. Similar to any culture, schools build rituals, shared language, and values. School beliefs color every aspect of the milieu. Considering how these cultures work and could work helps us build better schools. The effective schools we researched also expanded learning environments past the classroom – wisely engaging technology for learning. Such technologies, when used wisely, expanded learning opportunities for students and teachers.

To build a place-based pedagogy, we believe teachers should not forget that school life is cultural life, and work to construct “learning cultures.” Good schools build spaces that promote learning. Good governance, open communication, trust, and attentiveness to issues compel people to actively participate. A learning culture shares rights and responsibilities; builds a language of success; creates learning rituals and celebrations; and provides safety, support, and agency. Our research suggests

that these spaces of culture and geography should be constructed consciously.

To build a place-based pedagogy, we also believe teachers should use technology wisely. How schools embrace the Internet and other computer technologies is a measure of both philosophy and possibility. It matters where computers are in the school and how often children use them. But, it takes an examined working philosophy to engage possibilities to expand classrooms. Do our schools look down or out? Are their vistas small or big? Our ability to overcome physical geographies seems almost endless – if we think to do it wisely. In the case of technology, possibilities are more real because students have already embraced them socially, if not educationally. The effective schools we researched used technology to aid and track student learning and to help students and teachers engage the world. In our research, when schools worked well, technology was a curriculum tool, not a curriculum topic.

#### **Finding Four: Involving Parents**

When schools worked well, every group or person with a vested interest in the school was included in the school's communication. And, who would be more interested in school activities than parents? Parents care deeply about children – particularly, their own children. Engaging parents in schools includes sharing the school's philosophies and actions. Sometimes, because parents understand schools in a particular way, they resist change. In this research and in our other work, we have found this resistance especially true in grading. Parents, having been "schooled in" a traditional grading system and because they want to know how their child is doing in reference to other children, resist changes they should support – for example, moving to criterion-based reporting from more traditional "How is Johnny doing compared to Janie?" reporting. Successful schools saw such resistance as an opportunity to engage parents in meaningful conversations about how schools were changing for the better – emphasizing learning processes over rote memorization of facts, for example.

To build a place-based pedagogy, we believe teachers should involve parents in their work. The quality of contact and relationship between schools and parents helps determine successful student engagement – regardless of student age. When students naturally and joyfully engage their parents in school activities – what they have done in school – parents in the schools we researched became more interested, engaged, and accepting of a school's philosophy.

#### **Finding Five: Practicing shared leadership**

In the schools we researched, good leadership underpinned the school's success and student learning. Our research highlighted the unique and key role of principals. To say that a school principal made all the difference is not much of an understatement. Our research suggests that perhaps good principals' best work was sharing leadership with teachers – in our minds, exactly how teachers need to live if they are to corporately construct place-based pedagogies.

To build a place-based pedagogy, we believe teachers should focus on instructional leadership. Our research highlighted the bridge between student learning and teacher focus. That is, teachers' focus in effective schools was "all about the kids." Teachers in these schools also possessed a leadership ethic – which differed from a leadership title. Teachers who saw themselves as classroom and school leaders were critical thinkers and problem-solvers. They viewed challenges as natural, possibilities for their own growth, and ways to improve learning. They saw themselves as agents, empowered to address and improve their practice: they were engaged in leading learning. When schools worked well, leadership was about learning – not management. Obviously, schools must be managed; but learning is their key function. Believing oneself capable of leading one's practice – regardless of years of service or experience – is prevalent in schools that esteemed and practiced instructional leadership.

To build a place-based pedagogy, we believe teachers should engage in leadership teams. Schools are busy places, dominated by innovations in technology, changes to curricula, new research findings about instructional practices, and diverse student populations. To ask any person to become expert in all areas at all times is unrealistic. Instead, the effective schools we researched invested time in

creating leadership teams – positioning staff members in specific focus areas such as technology, assessment, mathematics and reading literacy, and community relationships. Members of specific teams worked to become site-based experts – taking responsibility and accountability for how their school addressed its energies and resources in these areas and communicating with the rest of the staff. Omni-competence was absent. Instead, leadership was teamwork and effective schools shared the leadership load.

## Summary

Our research findings were theorized from our work in five highly effective elementary schools in Alberta. Our findings suggest that these schools engaged in a pedagogy that honored *place* as an organizing construct. Within these places we have come to call schools, teachers focused on actively considering relationships and community building that organized and constructed the mythology and ethos of the teaching places they had come to inhabit. We found that these communities constructed place-based pedagogies as they lived in ways that mirrored Orr's understanding of place that educated people in 'the art of living well where they are' (1992). Our study found that place-based education could be characterized into a pedagogy that stressed community-building, reintegrating students and teachers into schools that actually served as *homes* and, within these *homes*, enacted and engaged in *family living*.

In this paper, we advocated that the effective schools we studied were places that actively grew pedagogies of place that encouraged teachers and students to learn; and, this learning was centered upon a habitation of place that worked to improve the social, economic, political, and ecological life of all who lived there. Our findings suggest that considering seriously place-based pedagogies as active constructs for schools encouraged several actions. These actions included: (1) encouraging teachers to work together; (2) prizing the work of relationship building; (3) working to actively create learning spaces; (4) actively involving all stakeholders – especially parents; and (5) sharing school leadership. These were the activities of people who inhabited and shaped these places we have come to call schools.

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