

Beyond the Classroom Walls: Place-Based and Sustainable Education

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Abstract

This article explores the shift towards place-based education, prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, advocating for innovative, flexible teaching methods. Integrating local environments and communities into education fosters active citizenship and social engagement, particularly benefiting Indigenous communities. Reflecting on personal experiences, the article emphasizes the intersectionality of sustainability and place-based education, promoting meaningful educational experiences that empower students as agents of change. It dives into the benefits, challenges, and implications of incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy, advocating for inclusive, equitable, and sustainable education practices. Through this holistic approach, schools can nurture environmentally conscious citizens deeply rooted in their cultural heritage, driving societal change towards justice, equity, and respect.

The COVID-19 pandemic accentuated the need for an overhaul of traditional education systems, showcasing a growing recognition to embrace place-based education. The pandemic prompted a shift away from the confines of physical classroom walls (Yemini et al., 2023), highlighting the need for innovative, flexible approaches to teaching and learning. The shift towards place-based education acknowledges the value of integrating communities and local environments into the learning process, ultimately strengthening experiences for students. Just as the transition to remote learning during the early months of 2020 aimed to minimize barriers to education, place-based education similarly focuses on strengthening connections to society and communities. By integrating local economic, political, cultural, natural, and social elements with instruction, place-based education drives active citizenship and social engagement among students (Uztemur & Dere, 2023). Raising awareness of sustainability education, fosters educational reform, and rethinking traditional strategies for instruction enhances a sense of accountability, especially within Indigenous communities, where it has been a longstanding practice.

Reflecting on my experiences as a white teacher in a densely Indigenous and newcomer inner-city school encouraged my exploration of the intersectionality of place-based and sustainability education. As a lover of the outdoors, and a child with an ADHD diagnosis, the classroom has always been stifling for me. By examining the relationship between sustainability and place-based education, I aim to show how they positively impact students and communities alike. Through this article, educators will gain insights into these approaches as teaching strategies. The objective is to advance both of these learning initiatives, inspiring meaningful educational experiences that empower students as agents of change.

Rationale

Embracing culturally relevant education is crucial in my role as a white female educator, particularly in an inner-city school setting. Recognizing my position within the oppressive traditional education system, I acknowledge the historical injustices that impact students, especially those identifying as Indigenous. My professional growth centres on exploring culture, racism, identity, and social justice within my school's Professional Learning Community (PLC), guided by the Mamàhtawisiwin: The Wonder We Are Born With document. Through place-based education, I aim to confront colonial legacies that marginalize Indigenous knowledge and

perspectives, celebrating Indigenous ways of knowing and the connection between students and their environment.

Reflecting on decolonization within my teaching practice, I critiqued my instructional approaches, interactions with students, and provincial curriculum, striving to decentre Western narratives and incorporate Indigenous history and voices. Reflective practices empower Indigenous students by validating their experiences and knowledge, fostering inclusive and equitable spaces. Place-based learning is not just about curriculum; it is the journey of advocating for decolonization, justice, and reform.

Literature Review

Traditional education often fails to bridge the gap between students and their environment, focusing primarily on classroom-based instruction. However, there is a growing recognition of the need for place-based education as a means to foster holistic learning experiences (Ritchie et al., 2015). This shift is particularly urgent in light of the ongoing global environmental crisis, characterized by challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation (Bascope & Reiss, 2021). To address these issues, there is a need to revise instructional approaches, while cultivating a sense of ecological responsibility and stewardship among educators and students alike.

For centuries, Indigenous communities have centred education on people, land, and culture. By recognizing and building upon these foundations, educators can create more meaningful experiences that resonate with students from diverse backgrounds. Integrating cultural perspectives into education not only honours Indigenous knowledge systems, furthering students' understanding of their relationship with the environment (Morgan, 2012). Acknowledging the significance of place-based sustainable education, educators begin to nurture environmentally aware students.

Place-Based Education: A Pedagogical Approach

Place-based education, as defined by McDonald (2023), is an instructional approach centred on the environment, community, and culture, drawing from students' lived experiences to shape curricular content. It is an umbrella term connecting educational activities and the physical environment where educators and students interact (Yemini et al., 2023). Through hands-on, experiential learning (McInerney et al., 2011), this approach empowers students to actively engage with their surroundings, strengthening a deeper understanding of real-world issues. Emphasizing local engagement advances active citizenship, contributing significantly to the development of social skills (Uztemer & Dere, 2023). Place-based education naturally produces critical thinking and problem-solving skills by exploring and tackling local issues (McInerney et al., 2011) across subject areas. Unlike traditional classrooms where students passively receive information, in place-based education models, students actively generate and create knowledge (Yemini et al., 2023). Learning this way facilitates community engagement by building partnerships between schools and local entities to address authentic community needs. The overarching goal of place-based education is to anchor students' learning in their own experiences, enabling them to generate knowledge rather than absorb information that perpetuates oppressive systems (McDonald, 2023).

Originating within environmental education movements in the mid-to-late 20th century, place-based education incorporates Indigenous pedagogies, acknowledging the importance of traditional knowledge, ancestral lands, and intergenerational learning (Yemini et al., 2023). Aligning with progressive educational philosophies from gurus such as John Dewey (experiential learning theory) and Maria Montessori (learning in authentic contexts), place-based education stems from principles of community development, empowerment, and social justice in the pursuit of resilient, sustainable communities through educational practices (Boyd, 2019).

As an innovative pedagogical approach, place-based education challenges traditional Western education by prioritizing learning opportunities outside the conventional classroom setting (Yemini et al., 2023), highlighting the value of traditional Indigenous knowledge systems. These systems offer invaluable insight into sustainable living practices, ecological stewardship (Bascope & Reiss, 2021), and coexistence with the environment. By incorporating Indigenous perspectives into education, we not only honour and respect Indigenous cultures but also enrich our understanding of sustainable practices rooted in centuries of wisdom and experience (Arellano et al., 2019). This integration supports a more holistic approach (Uztemur & Dere, 2023) to sustainability, promoting cultural diversity, environmental awareness, and social equity within educational frameworks. Ultimately, it empowers learners to engage with sustainability issues through a lens that champions a deeper connection to Indigenous wisdom and to the land. Welcoming place-based sustainable education alongside Indigenous knowledge systems reinforces students' understanding of our interconnected world, empowering them as agents for change in their communities.

Sustainability as Environmental Education

Sustainability is rooted in the principle of meeting current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to fulfill their own, emphasizing the connection between people and the natural environment (Morgan, 2012). This foundational concept spans economic, environmental, and social dimensions (Morgan, 2012), collectively referred to as the three pillars of sustainability. In an educational context, integrating cultural connections into sustainability is vital. This integration involves recognizing the ways in which human interactions, shaped by cultural practices and beliefs, influence the health and functioning of local communities and the environment (Boyd, 2019). When educators acknowledge and understand these relationships, they are better able to create a holistic approach to sustainable education (Bascope & Reiss, 2021) that respects diverse cultural perspectives and promotes environmental stewardship.

Addressing global challenges such as climate change, resource depletion, and social inequality (Boyd, 2019), sustainability education advocates for practices that safeguard the wellbeing of both present and future generations. Morgan (2012) expressed the need for a shift towards sustainable education, ensuring students acknowledge and understand the connection between social and community dynamics, as well as the landscape and environment. Additionally, Bascope and Reiss (2021) emphasized the importance of the bond between students and local communities, stressing the critical role of conserving ecosystems, biodiversity, and natural resources for environmental wellbeing. Ultimately, sustainability education advocates for equity and justice in the fight for inclusive and resilient communities.

Discussion

The intersectionality of sustainability, place-based education, and Indigenous knowledge systems is crucial for educational reform. Incorporating Indigenous perspectives is vital for maintaining diverse knowledge systems and in shaping a sustainable future.

The Correlation Between Sustainability and Place-Based Education

My prior understanding of sustainable practices stems from research about land-based pedagogy. Rooted in Indigenous teachings, this pedagogy encompasses all elements of the environment: earth, air, water, and minerals (McDonald, 2023). Distinguishing between land and place-based pedagogy, Spillett (2021) highlighted the importance of learning from and on the land. She advocated the reclamation with the land and water, safeguarding spaces that may be unfamiliar. As an educator, incorporating sustainability and place-based education into my practice offers a holistic framework that aligns ecological literacy with a sense of responsibility

towards environmental preservation. By integrating these principles, students gain the knowledge and skills required to address environmental challenges, taking charge as active stewards of their environment.

Experiential learning remains at the forefront of both place-based and sustainability education. Through opportunities such as outdoor education and exploration, students directly engage with their surroundings, connecting more deeply to the land (Arellano et al., 2019) and attaining a greater appreciation for sustainable practices. Following the completion of a canoe trip, a participant in Johnson and Ehsan Ali's (2020) paddling excursion shared that these experiences educate students' hearts and minds, indicating the profound impact on outdoor experiential learning. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for change in my teaching practice. Redirecting physical education and health classes outdoors, I prioritized the land not only to respect Indigenous knowledge but also to maximize outdoor learning benefits. Students engaged in tangible, sustainable learning practices, while actively contributing to their community's wellbeing.

Cultural connections play a crucial role in sustainability and place-based education, recognizing that environmental issues affect low-income neighbourhoods and people of colour (Morgan, 2012). When incorporating Indigenous perspectives and traditional knowledge, educators can strengthen students' understanding of sustainable living, generating a sense of respect for the land and its resources. Through place-based education, alternative ways of knowing stress environmental integrity, social equity, and cultural vitality, thus contributing to a sustainable society (Morgan, 2012). As a teaching strategy, this approach to education nurtures the sense of place while enabling educators to empower students to advocate for change. Through community-based thinking and action, students explore environmental issues within broader social, economic, and political systems (Arellano et al., 2019), thereby furthering their understanding of the root cause of environmental and social injustices.

Place-based education, centred on sustainability, remains a lifelong learning approach that encourages environmental citizenship, empowering students with the knowledge, skills, and values to engage meaningfully in sustainable development efforts (Bascope & Reiss, 2021) and build more resilient and equitable communities.

Place-Based Education and Sustainability: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Sustainability and place-based education are two concepts with immense potential in education, particularly when viewed through the lens of culturally relevant and responsive education. Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy (CRRP) acknowledges the diverse backgrounds, identities, and lived experiences of students, emphasizing the importance of grounding education in local context and culture (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). It centres around three aspects: (1) fostering the intellectual development of students through instruction that is both relevant and engaging; (2) prioritizing students' Indigenous culture as an avenue for learning, while creating space for others' cultural backgrounds; and (3) connecting curricular knowledge and skills to address real-world issues related to social justice (Chhin et al., 2022).

A key benefit of CRRP is the enhanced relevance and engagement for students. Implementing a shift in pedagogy encourages students to make direct connections between their own lives and the world around them (McDonald, 2023), leading to increased motivation and participation in their learning. In the context of sustainability and place-based education, CRRP stems from the gaps between the increasing cultural diversity in schools (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). Additionally, cultural relevance integrates Indigenous perspectives, traditional knowledge, and cultural practices into curriculum and instruction. By honouring and valuing Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural heritage, educators preserve and respect diverse ways of knowing while enriching students' learning experiences.

Cultural relevance promotes equity, inclusivity, and social justice by unveiling the voices and experiences of marginalized communities. Ragoonaden and Mueller (2017) highlighted the

tenuous relationship between culturally diverse students and schools that accentuate traditional Eurocentric educational methods. In addressing systemic barriers and power dynamics, educators and policymakers must prioritize cultural sensitivity and the integration of Indigenous perspectives into curriculum and instruction, navigating these critical considerations with care. Colonial discourse often neglects to acknowledge the foundational significance of Indigenous people or the harm inflicted upon them by government policies and uninformed educators (Tupper, 2014). With intentional efforts and collaborative partnerships between educational institutions (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011), Indigenous communities, and local organizations, culturally relevant and responsive place-based education has the potential to amplify students' voices when advocating for equitable access to resources and opportunities.

As a physical education teacher, health and wellness are at the forefront of my practice, recognizing the value of CRRP in this domain. While this approach has traditionally been explored in other educational areas, its integration into physical health education is recent. Halas (2006) discussed how Ladson-Billings' (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy has been adapted for physical and health education, aiming to affirm students' cultural identities within the curriculum and advocate for social justice. Culturally responsive physical education focuses on leveraging students' backgrounds to create optimal learning environments (Gay, 2000) that emphasize meaningful activities that celebrate cultural identities and boost engagement, leading to improved student achievement. During the spring of 2020, our physical education team launched a gardening club to teach curricular content while adhering to COVID-19 distancing rules, providing hands-on learning experiences about nutrition, food systems, and environmental stewardship. This pedagogical approach in health education is crucial for ensuring that curriculum resonates with students' diverse backgrounds, supporting inclusive and effective learning outcomes. By offering a range of physical activities and health education initiatives, schools empower students to make informed healthy choices, cultivating lifelong habits that benefit their overall wellbeing and contribute to community success.

Strengths and Challenges of Place-Based and Sustainable Education in Schools

Place-based and sustainability education offer valuable opportunities for students, educators, and communities, but they also present significant challenges. Within my experience, one advantage of these approaches is their ability to inspire relevance in learning. Place-based and sustainability education enhance student engagement and motivation by connecting curriculum to students' lives, interests, and local environments (Uztemur & Dere, 2023), raising a sense of ownership through meaningful activities (Boyd, 2019). These approaches instill a sense of responsibility and care for the environment through hands-on experiences and community involvement (Boyd, 2019). Additionally, they contribute to student learning by integrating academic content with practical skills, critical thinking (Uztemur & Dere, 2023), and social-emotional development while strengthening community connections and relationships among students, educators, and community members.

While the benefits of these approaches are promising, they pose several challenges that educators must overcome. One major challenge is land acknowledgement (Greenwood, 2019) within curriculum alignment. Integrating place-based approaches with current curricula and assessments can be difficult within traditional educational systems.

Other significant challenges include the lack of resources: professional development among educators (Uztemur & Dere, 2023), access to outdoor spaces, community partnerships, and adequate funding. Additionally, contemporary educational systems that are shaped by traditional hierarchies perpetuate a myriad of inequalities (McInerney et al., 2011). Efforts to decolonize the curriculum and ensure equitable access to learning opportunities for all students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, are imperative to address these issues. Despite these challenges, educators and policymakers must address historical trauma,

overcome biases and assumptions, and prioritize cultural relevance in order to mitigate the obstacles and maximize the benefits of place-based and sustainability education.

Conclusion

Embracing sustainability through culturally relevant place-based education has the potential to enrich experiences for students while affecting large-scale societal change. By centring on Indigenous perspectives and values, schools will nurture a generation of environmentally conscious citizens who are deeply rooted in their cultural heritage and committed to social justice. Greenwood (2019) asserted that educators must engage in self-reflection regarding their own lived experiences, rather than solely focusing on refining teaching methods. For educators, especially white teachers, adopting this approach is essential both pedagogically and morally. By acknowledging Indigenous knowledge systems, participating in dialogue, and building collaborative relationships, educators create inclusive learning environments that empower students as agents of change in their local and global communities. In doing so, the principles of sustainability and place-based education uphold justice, equity, and respect, influencing policy decisions for a more equitable and sustainable future.

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About the Author

Jordana Etkin, a tenth year PE teacher in Winnipeg's inner-city, holds an M.Ed. in special education (2020) and is pursuing an M.Ed. in curriculum and pedagogy (due 2025). Fond of time with family and friends, reading, listening to live music, and exploring Manitoba's trails, she treasures summers at her family cabin enjoying the great outdoors.