

## Some rural examples of place-based education

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*There are important issues for rural communities in Australia in relation to the provision of education for their young people (HREOC, 2000). This is particularly so in an era when successful completion of education is becoming increasingly vital as the pressures of a globalised economy mean that many rural and farming businesses are struggling to prosper. The term 'place-based education' is used by educators and researchers who have a focus on the well-being and effective learning of students.*

*This paper explores what is meant by 'place-based education' and how this concept of education is being implemented in some rural schools in Australia, although usually without using this term. A review of literature about effective literacy learning will demonstrate why teaching that is place-based is important for rural students. What the implementation of place-based education might look like in rural schools is also explored.*

Place-based education, pedagogy, rural education, rural schools, rural community

### INTRODUCTION

Students completing their secondary education in rural locations are educationally disadvantaged (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), 2000) as confirmed by a range of statistics. Retention rates for the students completing their education in rural schools are lower. Students who do complete their education in rural schools are also more likely to choose less prestigious subject areas to study, and to study courses in their final year of schooling with forms of assessment that yield lower scores (Secondary School Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA), 1999). When rural students are compared directly with their metropolitan peers on average they gain scores a little lower than those of their metropolitan peers (SSABSA, 1999). Such outcomes of schooling are an important concern in an era of globalisation, which has particularly impacted on rural communities and their economic and social well-being.

Ironically, the mission of rural schooling is more complex than that of schools in metropolitan locations. As Sher and Sher point out:

Rural educators understand the necessity of preparing their students to succeed in the urban context (given that many students eventually migrate to a city). And yet, their students also must be equipped to be successful in the local rural context. There is an expectation that rural schools prepare their students to function well *biculturally*: as people who may move back and forth between city and country many times. By contrast, there is no expectation placed upon urban schools to prepare their students for anything beyond city life. (Sher and Sher, 1994, p.39)

There are additional issues for rural schools that often make delivery of the curriculum more challenging. They became evident during a period of teaching in the school I had attended myself a few years earlier, and again as I conducted doctoral research there in the late 1990s:

- disengagement of a significant proportion of students, particularly from mainstream education,
- many students accepting that it is necessary to leave their rural community if they are to have worthwhile and productive lives,
- perceptions held by many that what is more highly valued by society exists outside their rural community, and
- often it is students from less financially advantaged families and less able students who remain in their local school and community.

### PLACE-BASED EDUCATION

Paul Gruchow, a freelance writer from Minnesota, relates from his experiences of rural education:

Among my science courses I took two full years of biology, but I never learned that the beautiful meadow at the bottom of my family's pasture was a remnant virgin prairie. We did not spend, so far as I can remember, a single hour on the prairies – the landscape in which we were immersed – in two years of biological study.

I took history courses for years, but I never learned that one of the founders of my town and for decades the leading banker...was also the author of the first comprehensive treatise on Minnesota's prairie botany. I can only imagine now what it might have meant to me – a studious boy with a love of nature – to know that a great scholar of natural history had made a full and satisfying life in my town. I did not know until long after I left the place that it afforded the possibility of an intellectual life.

Nothing in my education prepared me to believe, or encouraged me to expect, that there was any reason to be interested in my own place. If I had hoped to amount to anything, I understood, I had better take the first road east out of town as fast as I could. And, like so many of my classmates, I did. (Gruchow, 1995, cited in Haas and Nachtigal, 1998, pp.1-2)

Unfortunately many schools do not utilise the resources and life of the community for the benefit of students.

Gruenwald (2003a) points out that students and their teachers are too often isolated from the places outside the classroom, leading to a limiting of the experiences and perceptions of the students, a stunting of development and a lack of connection to and appreciation of the place in which they are located. This isolation from the place outside the school walls is exacerbated in many countries by the standardised curriculum, testing, emphasis on high scores at the conclusion of schooling, and a reliance on textbooks produced to serve a wide range of students (Bryden and Boylan, 2004; Gruenwald, 2003b; Northern Queensland Priority Country Area Program and Tablelands School Support Centre, 1993). Dewey identified similar concerns in the first half of the twentieth century:

From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilise the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, he is unable to apply in daily life what he is learning at school ... So the school, being unable to utilise this everyday experience, sets painfully to work, on another tack and by a variety of means, to arouse in the child an interest in school studies. (Dewey, 1938, cited in Smith, 2002)

This is a key explanation for student disengagement.

Nachtigal (1982) has suggested that schools need to be concerned with what occurs within their walls, but also with the place and its community outside the walls. This requires an understanding of the social and political climate of the school's location. Education with the emphasis suggested by Dewey, Nachtigal and others is often referred to as place-based education. Place-based education has a focus on the place of the students, involving sound and frequent interaction with the surrounding landscape both human and natural through first hand experiences, and even include actions that shape that place (Gruenwald, 2003a). To quote Kincheloe and Pinar on place-based education:

Place becomes an important means of linking particularity to the social concerns of curriculum theory. A sense of place allows for an intensified focus on sensation. Such a focus provides a sense of direction and identity that might empower individuals to struggle and to endure. (Kincheloe and Pinar, 1991, p.21)

Bryden and Boylan point out that the school that links well with the surrounding community:

...seeks to engage both the parents of the students and the broader community into the educational program of the school. The relationship is regarded as a dynamic partnership with all participants working towards providing the best learning experiences for the students to ensure high levels of success both in the designated curriculum and also in becoming a valued community member who can make a contribution to society. (Bryden and Boylan, 2004, p.9).

Interaction with place and utilising local resources for teaching and learning also brings young people in contact with others in the community with similar interests, and allow students access to a wide range of expertise and experiences that are found in the residents of their local community:

‘Place-based’ education is 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 every aspect of teaching and learning. (Rural Schools and Community Trust, n.d.)

As the case studies to follow demonstrate, place-based education can also involve a focus on vocational education and training.

Often students need more than simply exposure to opportunities, for example when learning literacy skills, if they are to have the necessary motivation to continue to progress with what is demanding intellectual activity. Where opportunities are relevant to students' lives, and texts are more easily accessible as a result of content, purpose and values, the incentive to work to access the text and in the process further develop literacy skills and use a range of resources is more easily achieved. In particular, a connection with the place that is the focus of the student's life is a way to achieve this outcome. Breen et al.'s (1994) study of literacy teaching in Australian rural and urban locations highlights the similarities in pedagogy despite the differing literacy experiences and learning needs of students with the absence of recognition of place.

Where place assumes a central role in place-based education, what is taught, how it is taught, and when it is taught, are guided by environmental, social, and community related factors. In this way the curriculum serves the learner located within their community, to understand who they are, where they have come from, and what future directions might be, as well as celebrating the richness and uniqueness of their place and its cultural traditions. This focus on place within the curriculum will re-empower rural youth to value their local culture, history, and identity (Bryden and Boylan, 2004; Romero, n.d.). An example is the Russian Mission School in Alaska where students have been learning the traditional ways of hunting, butchering, preparation of skins as part of the curriculum (Gay, 2004). The village was originally a Yup'ik Eskimo settlement where

a fur-trading post opened in 1837, and 10 years later the first Russian Orthodox mission in Alaska was established and colonisation and abandonment of traditional ways of life began. As the students of this school have learnt from village elders, there has been increased school attendance and greatly improved results in academic tests. These young people have also learnt about their heritage, and gained skills that may be important for their future<sup>1</sup>.

Place-based education can redress concerns about a lack of connection of students with their local place or community. This disconnection can cause poor personal development and the desire to seek a new location – a particularly important point in locations where there is a concern that too many young people do not see a future for themselves in their local community, and instead desire to relocate to an urban centre as soon as they are able, with no plans for a return to their rural community. This is a concern for communities where there are aging rural populations and patterns of out migration, such as in rural Scotland, regional Canada and rural Australia (Gougeon, 2004; Kelly 1993; Northern Queensland Priority Country Area Program and Tablelands School Support Centre, 1993).

A well-known example of place-based education in the United State is Foxfire. The Foxfire Approach grew from a program to improve the English skills of Appalachian students to a learning process that draws on Dewey's vision of strong relationships between teachers, students, curriculum and the community (Gougeon, 2004; Starnes, 1999). A body of quality publications have resulted from this program. Kelly has written about the importance of using the literature of Newfoundland, and benefits of the exposure of the students (and indeed all residents) of that Canadian province to their literary heritage.

To understand a culture, a people, it is necessary to examine the radical roots out of which contemporary antagonisms, oppositions and bondings come. Such historicizing, which is a crucial part of cultural recovery, provides an opportunity to examine the ruptures and fissures where history has both helped us and failed us. Beginning from and teaching to this "place," to the specific forms of oppression and oppressiveness which are the struggles of this place, it becomes possible, then, to teach toward more empowered, bonded and creative subjects whose voicings are multiple, diverse and culturally aware. This beginning may also ensure a greater security in both the chaos and complexities of our histories and the convictions of our present. Beginning from this "place" may help us muster the necessary courage to move beyond the oppressive formations of the past and the present, the legacies of colonialism and Confederation, and into the hope and possibilities of a more vital and just future. (Kelly, 1993, p.85)

Place based education, or place conscious education, enables schools and students to respond positively to the lives of the community where they are situated. The issues, concerns, and the values of the local community, can be responded to in constructive and critical ways and make contributions to further development of the local community possible. Additional resources also become available to the local school.

## METHOD

Data collected for this research has been obtained from two sources. The first case study is of an Aboriginal school, with a text produced by the school illustrating the importance and value of recognition of local cultural heritage and practices for students used as the basis for a retelling of the school's journey to place-based education. The other two case studies are based on data gained from accessing the websites of schools administered by the Department of Education and

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Ray Bernhardt for pointing out that with reduced social security these students may well need these traditional skills in the future to help ensure their families survive in the future.

Children's Services SA (DECS). Key information for these schools is contained in the School Context Statements<sup>2</sup>. The School Context Statements are used within DECS as information for the process of recruitment for teaching positions in schools, either school choice positions<sup>3</sup>, most coordinator positions, and assistant principal and school principal positions. These statements provide information about the school such as student population, including number of students in each year level cohort (and thus a crude measure of school retention), students who receive School Card assistance, students of non-English speaking background students (NESB), and Aboriginal students, which are measures of disadvantage in the school's population. This document also provides information about the curriculum of the school, school staffing, other important characteristics of the school, its location, and the educational priorities of the school.

Other documents provided on the school website were also accessed, in particular school newsletters, where these are posted. The school newsletters provide information about the nature of the connections between the school, parents and the wider community. These documents also are an opportunity to view the ways in which the school is written about by its staff, and identify what is deemed sufficiently important or interesting to be shared as written text.

Selections were made from the data located on the websites based on identification of material detailing alterations to the curriculum in response to features of the local setting and community. Where units of work that have a local focus are not featured in the curriculum as detailed on the School Context Statement, newsletters may feature examples of work that are seen as potentially interesting to parents or acknowledging noteworthy personal effort by students. However, the main items of this type located in newsletters focused on achievements in VET courses. The selected case studies to be discussed below indicate important curricular opportunities for students, a focus that influenced almost all school curriculum.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Papunya School

Papunya School serves an Aboriginal community in central Australia in the Northern Territory state school system. This case study is based on an award winning published book, which is a product of place-based education and has been produced as a resource for future place-based education in the school. The school and community developed *Papunya School Book of Country and History*<sup>4</sup> with the assistance of some people outside the community including Nadia Wheatley. There are similarities with the Foxfire project (Starnes, 1999), but with a focus on the community's history and connections with traditional Aboriginal life of the area rather than on individuals. The story, or history, begins with the Dreamtime, progressing to the arrival of white man and the history of the Christian mission station, and then to the development of the Papunya community and its school. The Papunya community is famous as the home of Albert Namatjira, and for its traditional dot painting artworks. The reader is reminded too that people from Papunya designed the mural at the entrance to Parliament House in Canberra.

From the *Papunya School Book of Country and History* the reader learns that the school at Papunya opened in 1960. At that time, in common with many schools in Aboriginal communities,

<sup>2</sup> Context Statements can be accessed at [http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/decs\\_search/pages/locs](http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/decs_search/pages/locs)

<sup>3</sup> In an era of partial devolution of decision to schools, managers of most schools are given permission to seek staff applications for approved positions which are then advertised within DECS with permanent staff able to apply for these positions.

<sup>4</sup> This book was winner of the 2002 CBC Awards Book of the Year: Eve Pownall Award for Information Books. It was also winner of the single primary title category and named joint overall winner of the Australian Awards for Excellence in Educational Publishing 2002.

there was a poor link between the people of the community and its school. The changing of students out of their camp clothes into school uniform at the beginning of the school day was both a physical action, but was also symbolic of the disconnection between the lives of students in school and their lives outside of school hours, to which they returned in their camp clothes after school. To quote from the book, “Teachers did not recognise the learning the children brought from the community. They did not value learning about the community”. Parents grew so concerned they withdrew their children from the school in 1992 and it was forced to close.

Negotiations with the education authorities followed and the school reopened in 1994, but with a number of requirements of the Aboriginal parents taken into consideration. The school’s new ways of working are represented in the school’s vision painting. The fact this statement is in the form of a traditional Aboriginal painting rather than words says much about the recognition of Aboriginal cultural life in the school. A look at the painting and the explanation of the vision tells us much about the role of the local Indigenous culture that now exists in the school and how this is achieved:

This is our painting telling the story of how we want our school to run and how we want our children to learn.

The top left-hand corner shows the Anangu<sup>5</sup> learning Tjulkura language ... The bottom right-hand corner shows how we are going to control our own school with Anangu people in charge of our children so they will be able to come to school and learn properly, and learn both ways<sup>6</sup> education.

...we will make decisions about how and what we want the children to learn. Tjulkura will sit outside and behind Anangu to assist and work with Anangu teachers... (Papunya School, 2001).

The commentary on the pictorial mission statements states that without the Aboriginal people remaining in charge of the education of the children they will not learn properly and be equipped for their future lives.

A focus of the school’s education program is the culture of the local Indigenous population and students learning so they can participate fully in their community or in mainstream Australian society. The vision statement clearly indicates the pivotal role of culture, and the symbolism of the position of Caucasian teachers in the school as advisers and educators. The changes to the curriculum have a focus on cultural survival and participation in school of the students who were previously being colonised by mainstream Australian culture with the insignificant valuing of the Indigenous culture present in the school.

### **Cowell Area School<sup>7</sup> - Aquaculture**

Cowell is a small rural community located on the eastern coast of Eyre Peninsula in South Australia. The school has approximately 200 students from Reception to Year 12. Originally much of the economic activity of the district was focused on agriculture, principally grain and livestock production. The aquaculture industry is more recent and increasingly important to the local economy. In 1991, a group of local oyster growers approached the school requesting that an aquaculture course be set up in the school. In response to that request the first aquaculture course commenced the following year, and the school appointed a farm manager in 1999 to run the

<sup>5</sup> Tjulkura are the non-Aboriginal teachers. Anangu are the traditional Indigenous inhabitants of the land.

<sup>6</sup> That is, children will learn both the language and culture of their traditional lives, and the language and culture of the mainstream Australian society, in order that they are able to move between and participate successfully in both.

<sup>7</sup> Website: <http://www.cowell.sa.edu.au>

school's aquaculture lease and land based fish tanks. Since 2000 there has been a full-time teaching position at the school for the aquaculture course (Cowell Area School Context Statement, 2004).

This project grew out of a request by local producers who were seeking to ensure there was continued development in the community of the knowledge and skills required for the aquaculture industry and a supply of future employees. Thus there is an emphasis on economic priorities with this example of place-based education. A VET course equipping people to work in the aquaculture industry has become an important part of the curriculum, and Years 11 and 12 students are now able to choose to study a certificate in aquaculture in place of the standard senior secondary school curriculum. As a small community a considerable distance from large centres there are other advantages too in having students undertaking this training. With both adult members of the workforce and school students all wishing to take some VET modules it is possible to provide some in the community, meaning it is not always necessary to leave the town for these courses. The school has also developed its own aquaculture lease for oyster production and fish tanks for farming other fish species that students work with the farm manager.

This quotation from the School Context Statement explains the school focus on science:

Cowell Area School is highly aware and responsive to the certainty that a sound and enlightened science program throughout the entire school will be of enormous benefit to the students' educational outcomes in terms of career options and their ability to function in a modern technological world. (Cowell Area School Context Statement)

This science focus indicates that the desire to ensure a reliable workforce for a local industry has developed into recognition of the importance of applied scientific work to the whole community and the benefits of engaging students through this focus.

### **Gladstone High School<sup>8</sup> - Viticulture**

The third case study is of the secondary school located in Gladstone a town in the Mid North of South Australia located three hours north of Adelaide by road. This community is also one hour's travel north of the Clare Valley, a premium wine-growing district. The main industry of this area is agriculture, primarily grain and livestock production. Gladstone High School has approximately 180 students in Years 8 to 12. The school is recognised for the excellence of its agricultural program, environmental monitoring and action, and vocational education (GHS Context Statement, 2004). As a small secondary school it is a member of the Mid North Secondary Education Co-operative (MNSEC), a cluster of six cooperating schools that share responsibility for delivery of senior secondary curriculum with a mix of face-to-face teaching and distance delivery utilising technology as a means of maximising learning outcomes for students in the area.

The Gladstone area is influenced by seasonal fluctuations and the ways the globalised economy impact on the community. The economic prosperity of the population of the district is uncertain and requires flexibility in management of enterprises and personal lifestyle decisions. The school's farm manager suggested in 1999 that students could receive training at the school to equip them to engage in seasonal work in the vineyards of the Clare Valley as a means of supplementing their income from local enterprises, or to join the trend to establish small pockets of vines where soil and climatic conditions are appropriate. The suggestion that the school establish a vineyard was quickly taken up and established in 2000 on one of the school's sports ovals. The school's first small vintage was in 2003 and a report of this vintage can be accessed on the school website<sup>9</sup>. From this report it can be seen that the whole student body was involved in

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<sup>8</sup> Website: <http://www.gladstonehs.sa.edu.au>

<sup>9</sup>

the enterprise, with all students helping with the planting of the vines, tending them, and in 2003 in the picking of the first vintage. Rather than send the grapes elsewhere for processing it was decided to undertake the whole wine making process at the school with advice from a winemaker based at the southern end of the Clare Valley and student involvement. This decision was unique for a school in South Australia, as previously schools with vineyards have had the winemaking completed by a commercial winery.

Much of the development of the vineyard and purchasing of winemaking materials and facilities was achieved through grants and donations from various bodies, including businesses associated with industries in the district. The students' learning about viticulture and wine-making has been supported by many different groups of people, and the vision of what this project might achieve for students is evidently shared by a range of different people. Making this series of learning activities available to students has also meant students have been able to experience a variety of different roles from practical work among vines, to organisation of people working, applied science in winemaking, and researching and seeking solutions to problems as the wines developed.

### CONCLUSION

That two of the examples discussed above are focused on the VET curriculum indicates that some rural schools are striving to meet the specific educational needs of their students. These examples are also illustrative of schools responding to the economic needs of their community, and receptive to suggestions or requests that arise from the local community. The inclusion of aspects of this place-based focus through the whole school is also significant. It is of concern however, that these examples are related to economic aspects of the school's community rather than other elements of place-based education such as culture and heritage. DECS schools in South Australia may be including other examples of place-based education, but their omission from the context statement suggests that inclusion is ad hoc and not highly valued in schools.

The example of place-based education told by the Papunya School community illustrates how important recognition of the culture of the local community can be, and the different positioning of teachers that may be necessary for place-based education to occur. It is alarming that this Papunya School had to close before it became possible for place-based education with a focus on the local culture to be introduced. The production of the book is an excellent outcome of place-based education, and a record of the changes at that school.

While I began with the point that rural students are educationally disadvantaged, place-based education can both enable students to gain higher academic achievements and learn to live well and better appreciate the place where they live. These are each desirable outcomes of formal education. I conclude with a quotation from the report of the Arkleton Seminar held in October 2004.

Place-based education focuses on holistic development, connects students to the community, creates a meaningful learning context, accommodates differential learning, develops social competencies, builds a sense of identity, increases the learners' sense of responsibility to the community, reproduces local knowledge, and empowers individuals in the community to change, evolve and be effective. (Gougeon, 2004, 14-15)

Such learning is important for all students.

While I began with the point that rural students are educationally disadvantaged, place-based education can both enable students to achieve better academic achievements and learn to live well



and appreciate the place where they live. These are desirable outcomes of participation in formal education.

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