Implementing Place-Based Education in the Elementary Classroom

By

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Abstract

This study examines how teachers are implementing place-based education in the elementary classroom. With the Ontario Ministry of Education’s increasing focus on place-based education, the purpose of this study is to provide the educational community with some of the knowledge and tools they need to implement place-based education successfully in their own classrooms. This study also addresses a number of challenges that teachers face while incorporating place-based education in the elementary classroom. This is a qualitative research project in which a literature review and interviews were conducted to answer the question: How is a small sample of elementary school teachers implementing place-based education in their lessons, and what is the perceived impact of these practices on students’ academic performance and environmental conscientiousness? The findings suggest that teachers are successfully implementing place-based education in a variety of subjects and that these teachers perceive their students as being more engaged and interested in learning. Implications of the findings and suggested future research are also discussed.

*Keywords:* place-based education, critical pedagogy of place, community, environment
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction to the Research Study

While living in an increasingly technology-saturated society, children are often disconnected from the places they inhabit and thus lack the opportunity to fully connect with their community (Clements, 2004; Karsten, 2005; Louv, 2008). Place-based education, as defined by David Sobel, is “the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum” (2005, p. 7). Place-based education encourages educators to incorporate places into the ways that curriculum is developed, such that students are able to “pursue the kind of social action that improves the social and ecological life of places, near and far, now and in the future” (Gruenewald 2003:7-8). Place-based education is a combination of environmental education, sustainability education, project-based learning, community-based learning, experiential learning, and service learning (Clark, 2008). Through these forms of learning students are able to develop a sense of civic engagement (Clark 2008). When students are taught about their communities, they “learn to take care of the world by understanding where they live and taking action in their own backyards and communities” (Place-based Education Evaluation Collaborative 2010:2). Place-based education focuses on creating a sense of wonder in children and teaching them about community values instead of focusing solely on academics. As the Ontario Ministry of Education states, “When students are engaged in their learning and social environment, they are better able to develop the skills and knowledge and grasp the opportunities that can help them reach their full potential, pursue lifelong learning, and contribute to a prosperous, cohesive society” (Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education, 2008, p. 12).
Purpose of the Study

With the Ontario Ministry of Education’s increasing focus on place-based education and its benefits within schools (Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow, 2009), it is crucial to support educators in incorporating these strategies in their own classrooms. As a teacher candidate, it is important that I explore topics that I am interested in, especially when they concern cutting-edge ways in which classrooms can become more hands-on and engaging for students. Despite the Ministry’s new focus on place-based education, it has yet to become a mainstream instructional practice in classrooms. While the Ministry documents have begun including environmental and place-based education strategies, many teachers may lack the skills or resources needed to implement these practices in the most effective way. It is essential that all teachers develop methods of teaching that incorporate and implement Ontario’s vision for environmental education, which is the following:

Ontario’s education system will prepare students with the knowledge, skills, perspectives, and practices they need to be environmentally responsible citizens. Students will understand our fundamental connections to each other and to the world around us through our relationship to food, water, energy, air, and land, and our interaction with all living things. The education system will provide opportunities within the classroom and the community for students to engage in actions that deepen this understanding (Shaping Our Schools, Shaping Our Future, p. 4).

By interviewing educators who successfully implement place-based education strategies in their classroom, I have learned more about the range of these practices and how they can be implemented through an integrated curriculum, as well as the range of challenges that educators face when trying to implement place-based education.
Research Question

The primary research questions guiding my research include:

➢ How is a small sample of elementary school teachers implementing place-based education in their lessons, and what is the perceived impact of these practices on students’ academic performance and environmental conscientiousness?

  o How do teachers with limited school-grounds and outdoor resources implement place-based and environmental education?

  o What community connections are these teachers making to assist in the implementation of place-based education?

Background of the Researcher

My interest in place-based education began in 2010 when I began working at Ascension Childcare in South Burlington, Vermont. Vermont is a state that, in my experience, is driven by community values and outdoor exploration. Ascension Childcare, a preschool center that has children ranging in age from 6-weeks to 5-years-old, inspired me by demonstrating how much environmental education can be given to children right from the start. There were 2-year-olds composting and recycling without being asked and 5-year-olds telling me how butterflies become butterflies. I was immediately amazed at how fascinated children are by nature and their surrounding communities. We took walks in the woods and studied tadpoles, and the children were very interested and engaged by these experiences.

Upon further research in a sociology course, I studied David Sobel’s work regarding place-based education and I became more knowledgeable about the benefits of place-based education. The integration of community and schools seemed so natural and obvious to me and I began to further research the topic. In my opinion, it is very important that children come across
these community and environmental values early in their lives so it becomes natural and habitual for them. I truly believe that with environmental and place-based education in early childhood education programs and beyond, we can make a true difference within our communities and furthermore on our planet by creating productive members of society.

Overview

In Chapter 1, I have outlined the topic and purpose of the study, provided a background of the researcher, and presented the research questions and sub-questions. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on place-based education as a whole, as well as in Ontario specifically. Chapter 3 examines the methodology used in this study and outlines information about the participants and data collection. Chapter 4 explains the data collected, while Chapter 5 examines the data and how it relates to the research questions along with the implications for the educational community. Lastly, references and a list of appendices are provided.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Place-Based Education and Critical Pedagogy of Place

*Place-based education* is an increasingly popular educational reform that focuses on expanding classrooms beyond the walls of a school and into the surrounding community such that “the school is open and inviting in the community and the community welcomes student learning occurring in many dimensions” (Powers, 2004, p. 18). David Sobel, a founder of place-based education, defines it as “the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum” (2005, p. 7). Gregory Smith (2002) explains that place-based education’s goal is to “ground learning in local phenomenon and students’ lived experience” (p. 586) instead of focusing on material that students have no connection to. When students are taught about their community, they “learn to take care of the world by understanding where they live and taking action in their own backyards and communities” (Place-based Education Evaluation Collaborative, 2010, p. 2). Place-based education encourages educators to consider place in the way that their curriculum is delivered, such that students can “pursue the kind of social action that improves the social and ecological life of places, near and far, now and in the future” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 7-8). Place-based education is a combination of environmental education, sustainability education, project-based learning, community-based learning, experiential learning, and service learning (Clark, 2008). Commitment to community results in a sense of self-competence and stewardship and the skills and experiences students have through place-based education often have a life-long effect.
Smith (2002) points out that because place-based education is focused on a particular place, it does not look the same when implemented in various locations, however he lists five themes that are consistently found in place-based education. The first is cultural studies, in which he suggests that once students learn about the local, teachers can then direct them to the regional, national, or international. The second theme is nature studies, which is the incorporation of the natural world into curriculum. Smith says “teachers who incorporate the study of the natural world into their curriculum reap the rich benefits of simply getting students outside the classroom and taking advantage of their curiosity” (p. 589). Real-world problem solving, the third theme, is allowing the students to identify and solve problems that they are interested in. For example, the students may notice an area of the playground that needs attention and they will then work in tandem with their teacher to solve that problem. This element of place-based education allows students’ learning to be inquiry-based and student-driven. With teachers positioned more as co-learners than instructors, “place-based education changes the power relationship between teachers and students” (Smith, 2002, p. 31). The fourth theme is internships and entrepreneurial opportunities, which illustrates how connecting students with community members can have benefits that extend beyond the classroom. For example, after doing a school project with a community business, the student may feel especially invested in that company and continue doing work with them outside of school or throughout the summer break. The fifth and final theme Smith posits is induction into community processes, which suggests that students are given the opportunity to see how a community works and how they can be positively involved in making a community run. As Smith points out, “We do not teach children how to pitch and catch and run by asking them to read books or watch video tapes. We might draw on these media for one purpose or another, but the real learning comes from actual
involvement in the game” (p. 591-592), so why do so many educators expect children to learn real life skills in this manner?

Place-based education and critical pedagogy are combined to form the critical pedagogy of place. Critical pedagogy encourages students to think critically about their situation and ask questions about the material they are presented (Freire, 1970/2007). Freire compares the traditional form of education to a banking model, which suggests that teachers ‘deposit’ information into students. The banking model of education “treats students as objects of assistance,” whereas, “problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers” (p. 83). The intersection of place-based education and critical pedagogy is the theory of critical pedagogy of place, which is quite similar to place-based education. David Gruenewald states that critical pedagogy often ignores the fact that education is rooted in the places we live and therefore “a critical pedagogy of place challenges all educators to reflect on the relationship between the education they pursue and the kind of places we inhabit and leave behind for future generations” (2003, p. 3). Critical pedagogy of place encourages teachers and students to think critically about the places we occupy. As Paulo Freire outlines in The Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970/2007, p. 107):

People, as beings ‘in a situation,’ find themselves rooted in temporal-spatial conditions which mark them and which they also mark. They will tend to reflect on their own ‘situationality’ to the extent that they are challenged by it to act upon it. Human beings are because they are in a situation. And they will be more the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it.
Freire emphasizes the importance of our surroundings in the education process and suggests the need for educational reforms to include a focus on place within the curriculum delivered daily. As John Dewey (1915, p. 52) points out,

> From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in school comes from the inability to utilize 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. That is the isolation of the school – it’s the isolation from life.

As teachers, we need to seek to make learning meaningful for students, and place-based education is a revolutionary way that we can do so.

A main component of place-based education is the complementary relationship between the classroom and the community. For example, in Lincoln, Montana, K-12 students worked together with local and government agencies to create a children’s forest; older students worked with GPS technology to map a one-mile trail and even helped build the trail, while younger students were in charge of marking landmarks along the trail (Clark, 2012). By tailoring the curriculum to meet the surrounding conditions of a school, children are offered enhanced opportunities for learning experiences that have relevance to their daily lives. There are many opportunities for hands-on learning and place-based education when the proper partnerships are sought out within the community, and these experiences can have a positive influence on all parties involved.

In addition to the community benefits that accompany place-based education, there are also a number of academic and social benefits for students. For example, a study of 40 schools that adopted the social, cultural, and natural features of local environments as the context for learning reported that students acted more independently and responsibility, displayed pride in
and ownership of their accomplishments, exhibited more discipline and self-control, and academically outperformed their traditionally instructed peers (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998). Lieberman and Hoody also found that students exposed to place-based education were better able to work in groups, had stronger communication skills and creativity, acted with greater civility towards others, and were more enthusiastic about learning. The Beebe School in Malden, Massachusetts, has been using place-based curriculum since 1999 and between the years 2002 and 2006, the students at the Beebe School have outperformed their peers on standardized state tests in math and science (Place-based Education Evaluation Collaborative, 2010). In a study of 15 United Kingdom schools over three years, it was found that the most successful schools had sustainability as a central element of curriculum as well as events and activities planned within and outside the classroom (Gayford, 2009; OFSTED, 2009). However, it is not just the students that benefit from place-based education, but quite often the educators themselves experience a number of benefits.

The benefits that educators experience due to place-based education often include increased enthusiasm and commitment to teaching, more opportunities to explore new subject matter, and frequent opportunities to use innovative teaching in the classroom (Lieberman and Hoody, 1998). Through place-based education and “by promoting a pedagogy for student engagement in community life, place-based educators embrace aims beyond preparing students for market competition” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 7). Passionate and enthusiastic teachers are the answer to educational reform and through use of non-traditional models of education it is possible for both students and teachers to be excited about learning.

In discussing the benefits of place-based education, it is important to note that it should not serve as the only way of learning, but instead be used to complement learning in other areas. As
a group of education researchers point out, “although the ‘local’ may be an appropriate point of entry into a study of regional, national and global issues, we contend that students can also learn much about themselves and their world by studying other cultures, places and times” (McInerney, Smyth & Down, 2011). While place-based education has a number of positive elements to offer, as educators it is essential to use place-based curriculum in a careful and critical manner. As McInerney and colleagues mention, a critical approach to place-based education “encourages young people to connect local issues to global environmental, financial and social concerns, such as climate change, water scarcity, poverty and trade” (p. 11). Place-based education has numerous benefits to offer as outlined above, however we must not ignore the advantages that come along with exploring topics that occur outside of our own communities as well.

We also must acknowledge that place-based education is not always easy to implement. Smith (2002, p. 10) points out that,

Educators who wish to move in this direction will face a number of challenges, many of which are deeply rooted in the practices, structures, and philosophical premises commonly encountered in American schools. Teachers must become the creators of curriculum rather than the dispensers of curriculum developed by others. They must become able to make the link between the unpredictable activities that can happen beyond the classroom and student performance standards set by the district or state. Educators and community members must set aside the assumption that what now passes for legitimate learning, the kind necessary to score well on standardized tests, happens only in classrooms. For place-based education to work, teachers will have to relax their reliance on academic disciplines as the primary framework for making curricular
decisions, and parents will need to accept more ambiguous measures of student learning that are tied to the completion of projects that integrate rather than separate school subjects.

Despite the challenges educators will face when trying to implement place-based education, because of the benefits it brings for students, educators, and the community, we must work through these challenges to provide the best educational experience possible for our students.

**Nature-Deficit Disorder**

Place-based education is thought of as being implemented in small, rural communities, however the challenges of place-based education in urban areas are more complex. Most place-based education initiatives to date have been in rural settings (Russell-Ciardi, 2006) because as McInerney and colleagues point out, “it is easy to feel a strong sense of attachment to an aesthetically pleasing landscape—a pristine stream, a beautiful valley or a leafy-green suburb—much less so to a squalid, unsafe, environmentally degraded place or one that is fractured by social, economic and racial divides” (2011, p. 10). Many children, especially in urban areas, suffer from what Richard Louv (2008) calls *nature-deficit disorder*. Nature-deficit disorder is not a medical diagnosis, but instead a term that refers to the fact that people, especially children, are spending significantly less time outdoors; “Nature deficit disorder describes the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses” (Louv, 2008, p. 36). Additionally, Louv suggests that this leads to numerous negative outcomes for children and adults, such as obesity, anxiety, attention-deficit disorder, and depression. Researchers at Indiana University found that neighborhoods with higher greenness, regardless of neighborhood density, were associated with slower increases in children’s body mass over a two-year period (Bell, Wilson, & Liu, 2008). As
Louv points out, “this underscores the need for urban design to provide a greener, healthier environment, even in the most densely populated neighborhoods. Surely such a design can also improve children’s readiness to learn—and their sense of wonder” (2009/2010, p. 25).

There are a number of reasons for the decline of time spent in nature, including decreased green space and the increased prevalence of technology. Most children today spend the majority of their playtime inside; these children often choose to spend their time on the computer, watching television, or playing video games (Clements, 2004; Karsten, 2005). Karsten also uses the term “backseat generation” to describe how children are transported around in vehicles to and from school and to their various activities. For some children, their journey to and from an organized activity may be the most they connect with the outside world in a given day. It has been suggested that this decrease in the time spent outside has been accompanied with increased adult supervision and a decrease in the agency children feel (Karsten, 2005). Parental fears are cited as a large cause of nature-deficit disorder; Louv proposes that the media has scared children out of nature and led to the “stranger danger” felt in today’s society. However,

The physical exercise and emotional stretching that children enjoy in unorganized play is more varied and less time-bound than is found in organized sports. Playtime—especially unstructured, imaginative, exploratory play—is increasingly recognized as an essential component of wholesome child development (Louv, 2008, p. 48).

Not only is this form of unorganized play an essential component of wholesome child development, but studies comparing children who played on flat playgrounds to those who played among nature found that the children who played in natural areas tested better for motor fitness, including balance and agility (Louv, 2008).
Nature-deficit disorder is an issue that has roots other than just the school setting, however Louv provides a list of things that educators can do to help reduce nature-deficit disorder in our students:

- **Become a natural teacher**: As a first step, principals, school board members, administrators, and teachers should better inform themselves about the cognitive and other health benefits of experience with nature.

- **Network with other natural teachers**: There are many challenges related to taking students outdoors, such as curriculum and standards integration, discipline issues, materials management, and safety. However, by networking, teachers [both within and outside the United States] can share ideas for getting students outdoors, support one another, and know they are not alone in their efforts.

- **Teach other teachers**: Many educators, especially new teachers, feel inadequately trained to give their students an outdoor experience. We need additional support for existing teacher-training programs.

- **Green the schoolyards**

- **Create nature preschools**: Ensure that children begin their school years knowing the physical world firsthand. Encourage nature-based public, charter, or independent K–12 schools that place community and nature experience—not only environmental education—at the center of the curriculum.

- **Establish an eco club**

- **Bring nature to the classroom**
• Create nature-based community classrooms: Beyond the classroom and school grounds, schools, businesses, and outdoor organizations can work together to introduce students to nature centers and parks and sponsor or promote overnight camping trips.

(Louv, 2009/2010, p. 25-26)

These are just some small steps we can take to expose our students to nature. As Louv (2008) acknowledges, “An environment-based education movement—at all levels of education—will help students realize that school isn't supposed to be a polite form of incarceration, but a portal to the wider world” (p. 226).

Environmental and Place-Based Education in Ontario

The formal push for environmental education in Ontario began in June 2007 when the Ministry of Education published “Shaping Our School, Shaping Our Future,” a document outlining the environmental education vision in Ontario’s K-12 system. The document outlines that “environmental education seeks to promote an appreciation and understanding of, and concern for, the environment, and to foster informed, engaged, and responsible citizenship” (p. 6) and that environmental education should be adopted as a “basic” part of education in the twenty-first century. As the document points out, “schools have a vital role to play in preparing our young people to take their place as informed, engaged, and empowered citizens who will be pivotal in shaping the future of our communities, our province, our country, and our global environment” (Ontario Ministry of Education, Shaping Our Schools, Shaping Our Future, p. 1).

One of the essential pieces of environmental education is its power to enhance student engagement—“when students are engaged in their learning and social environment, they are better able to develop the skills and knowledge and grasp the opportunities that can help them reach their full potential, pursue lifelong learning, and contribute to a prosperous, cohesive
society” (Ontario Ministry of Education, *Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education*, 2008, p. 12). The Ministry of Education followed up with a revised policy framework for environmental education in Ontario titled “Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow” (2009). The framework outlines a number of goals that are categorized into three themes: *teaching and learning, student engagement and community connections, and environmental leadership*. It is also important to note that the document makes it clear that these goals are a shared responsibility between learners, teachers, leaders and community members. Due to its relevance to place-based education, I will look primarily at the theme of *student engagement and community connections*. The goal for student engagement and community connections is to “Increase student engagement by fostering active participation in environmental projects and building links between schools and communities” (Ontario Ministry of Education, *Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow*, p. 14). There are two strategies to reach this goal: “Build student capacity to take action on environmental issues” and “Provide leadership support to enhance student engagement and community involvement” (p. 15-16). Some of the actions stated to reach these goals include the school doing the following:

- Work with parents, the school council, community groups, and other education stakeholders to promote environmental awareness and foster appropriate environmentally responsible practices;

- Enrich and complement students’ learning by organizing out-of-classroom experiences and activities (such as the naturalization of the school yard), as appropriate;

- Encourage students to consider ways of completing their community service requirements that involve addressing environmental issues in their communities, in a manner consistent with school board policy.
This list of actions for schools outlines the way place-based education has been implemented as a requirement by The Ministry of Education. This form of education enables students to connect with their communities in a meaningful way and become active and productive citizens from a young age.

In 2014 the Ontario Ministry of Education introduced a new document, *Foundations for a Healthy School*, which outlines five areas that contribute to a healthy school and the well-being of students. One of these areas is ‘Home, School and Community Partnerships’ and the document states that this will “engage parents, extended family, school staff, child care, and family support programs, and community groups in a mutually beneficial way to support, enhance, and promote opportunities for learning and well-being” (p. 4). This area includes “engagement and coordination of services, expertise and resources that are available within the school and local community” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). This document offers a number of sample strategies of how this looks at the school, in the classroom, and for students. Some of these include inviting community partners into the classroom and students participating in a variety of programs offered in partnership with community partners during and/or outside school hours. Within the classroom, the document outlines the importance of creating engaging learning experiences based on student feedback and that promote collaboration, innovation, and creativity. Although this document does not present the category as place-based education, it directly relates to place-based education’s focus on the importance of engaging with the local community.

Due to the increasing focus on environmental and place-based education in Ontario, it is crucial to examine how teachers are implementing these strategies with their students. In doing
so, educators across Ontario can adopt these strategies with the hopes of improving the quality of education for all students in both rural and urban areas.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Procedure

This research study examining place-based education strategies in the elementary classroom was conducted qualitatively. Relevant literature was reviewed before data collection in order to better understand place-based education within the educational community. The literature reviewed was then summarized and categorized into the following three categories:

1. Place-Based Education & Critical Pedagogy of Place
2. Nature Deficit Disorder
3. Environmental and Place-Based Education in Ontario

Following an extensive literature review, informal semi-structured face-to-face interviews with two teachers were completed. The interviews were 30-50 minutes and took place at the convenience of the participants in terms of both time and location. The interview questions (see Appendix B) were open-ended in nature allowing participants to elaborate on their own experience and allowing the researcher to ask probing questions when necessary. An example of an interview question asked is ‘Could you give an example of how you typically include place-based educational practices into your classroom?’ The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed and coded for reoccurring themes. These reoccurring themes were then consolidated into the following categories and subcategories:

- How Teachers Define & Implement Place-Based Education
  - Defining place-based education
  - Implementing place-based education
    - Place-based education in Ontario
Challenges of Place-Based Education

- Internal challenges of place-based education
- External challenges of place-based education

Benefits of Place-Based Education

- Community connections
- Perceived impact on student learning

The interview transcripts were read and coded multiple times in order to ensure the authenticity of the themes outlined. A cross-case analysis was also completed due to the participants’ similar responses. The findings and their implications will be further discussed in Chapters Four (Findings) and Five (Discussion).

Participants

The teachers interviewed were chosen through purposeful sampling and met the following criteria: willingness to participate, primary teacher for at least three years, and have place-based education at the core of their philosophy of education and classroom practice. Each participant has been given a pseudonym and all identifying factors have been kept private to ensure anonymity.

The following participants participated in this study through the completion of an interview between 30-50 minutes:

1. Diana: Diana, a current associate professor, was a primary teacher for six years before starting her master’s degree. Following her master’s degree, she was in a teaching role at an Ontario university while completing her PhD. She continues to hold a teaching role at
a post-secondary level and teaches through and about place-based education to future educators.

2. Kellie: Kellie is a first grade teacher at a public alternative school that has social justice, environmentalism, and community activism as its core values. She has a bachelor’s degree in linguistics, a master’s degree, and this is her fifth year teaching. Although she has been teaching for five years, she is in her first year of teaching at this alternative school.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

Following the Ethical Review Procedures of the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, participants were given a consent form (see Appendix A) prior to participation in the interview. Each participant was required to read and sign the consent form before the interview and was given a copy for their personal records. The purpose of the study had been previously discussed with both teachers in order to clarify any outstanding questions about the topic. All interviews were recorded using a recording device in their entirety prior to transcription. Participants were ensured anonymity through the use of pseudonyms and changing the names of any projects they were/are involved in. Prior to the interview, participants were reminded that their participation in the research project was voluntary and that they were welcome to opt-out of certain questions, or the entire research study, without penalty of any kind. Participants were also offered the opportunity to see completed transcripts of the interview and were encouraged to have the researcher omit any data that may not have represented what they meant to express. They were also told they could request a copy of the project following the study’s completion.
Chapter 4: Findings

How Teachers Define and Implement Place-Based Education

Defining place-based education.

Both participants defined place-based education similarly to one another as well as the existing literature on place-based education. For example, Diana said, “it’s learning in place” and described that “place is an overlapping of different environments,” such as the social environment, the political environment, and the history of the place you are in. Diana also emphasized citizenship in her description of place-based education and the importance of students having direct connections to their communities. Diana also mentioned that place-based education is a term that incorporates many different “hot topics” such as environmental education. Kellie defined place-based education as “curricular learning that happens in relation to the children’s immediate community.” Kellie gave an example of taking on a social action project for an issue that’s relevant to one’s particular community and stressed the importance of interaction with people and places in the community. In doing so, Kellie expressed that you can help students use an understanding of their local community to help them understand the broader world.

Implementing place-based education.

Both participants described the ease and importance of implementing place-based education in their classrooms. As Diana explains, “any [curriculum] expectation tells you what to teach, but the context and how you teach it is totally up to you.” Kellie brought up that because she teaches young children, it just makes the most sense to focus on place-based education because “that’s the experience that they have and that’s what they know.” She provided an
example of how her grade 1 students’ experience in their community was used to give them a broader understanding of the world:

This Fall we were studying monarch butterflies and we studied that in the context of monarch butterflies in Ontario to help us better understand monarch butterflies in Mexico and migration. We hatched and reared them here and released them, but we also collected milk weed pods from a local park so we could replant them in our school garden. So, we’re looking at a broader problem but looking at how we can solve it in a very place-based way. We know that monarch populations are decreasing so in our own school garden, we planted a monarch way station.

Kellie provided another example from a grade 4/5 classroom in which they were studying animal habitats and they chose to focus on backyard birds rather than studying bird habitats all around the world. She pointed out that this unit could have been focused on comparing penguins and flamingos, but her students had no experience with either animal, so it just did not make sense.

Both participants felt that spending time outside was a very simple and effective way to implement place-based education. Diana recommends “going outside whenever possible. It’s so easy to do and there’s your out of school learning—you just go out the door!” Diana also said in reference to communities that may not be as well located for nature-walks or things of that nature, “the natural world is all around us and it’s more than just that, it’s really expanding what our understanding of place is and how we define place.” Kellie talked about a nature courtyard at her school in which they have a school garden that grows vegetables and non-food plants. She also explains that their school grounds have many trees and grassy areas, so a lot of the learning that occurs outside happens in places right on the school grounds.
While both participants agreed that some subjects lend themselves better to place-based education than others (such as science and social studies), they both expressed that it is possible to incorporate into all curriculum areas. Kellie differed in the fact that she explicitly mentioned that it’s important to not exclusively expose students to their community. She used literature as an example and said that she does not aim to only read stories about Toronto, but instead tries to provide students with a diverse exposure to literature.

Kellie also described a number of practices that are unique to her alternative, community-based school. For example, to help build community, they have a community-circle on the school lawn each morning where families and children can interact and see each other before they start the day. This community circle also provides community members the opportunity to make relevant announcements, such as an upcoming show or event.

*Place-based education in Ontario.*

Both teachers mentioned Ontario-specific curriculum expectations that lend themselves to place-based education. For example, Diana stated that some expectations are explicit within the curriculum documents, but that others implicitly suggest place-based education. She explained that, “any expectation tells you *what* to teach, but the context and *how* you teach it is totally up to you.” Kellie explained that, “most of the science and social studies curriculum is specifically about the local community and the importance of context, like urban versus rural and cultural pieces.” She also mentioned that there are other expectations that imply students will be in nature—therefore, she explained that you would “do that in your own space and then they [the students] are gaining knowledge of their own surroundings.”
Challenges of Place-Based Education

**Internal challenges of place-based education.**

Internal challenges of place-based education refer to challenges imposed within the school, school grounds, or by the staff/administration. The participants varied in their view of internal challenges of place-based education. Diana expressed that many teachers and administrators often find it easier to carry on with how they have always done things, rather than trying something new like place-based education. She said she has experienced administrators that have not fully bought into place-based education and want to see learning happening in the classroom exclusively. Diana also said, “It’s too bad it’s always the alternative schools or art schools that can do these things or it’s like one or two teachers that are motivated in the school to get things going—but that’s hard to maintain because teachers are busy and don’t always stay in the same place.”

Kellie, on the other hand, expressed no challenges from administrators (likely due to her position at an alternative, community-based school). Instead, Kellie mentioned the accommodations and modifications that some of her students have and wonders how she can take them outside. She explained in reference to her students’ writing needs, “I don’t have a word wall outside and I have some really resistant writers, so how do I encourage them to write in a space that doesn’t necessarily support them in that way?”

**External challenges of place-based education.**

External challenges of place-based education refer to challenges imposed by the community that surrounds the school or by community members themselves. Both participants expressed a number of external challenges faced while implementing place-based education, however none of their challenges were the same. Diana expressed that there are more risks when
you go out of the classroom—“You have more control when you’re in the classroom so when you take your kids outside you’re opening up the curriculum to different possibilities which is a wonderful thing, but it can also be a scary thing because you don’t know where it’s going to go.”

Diana also expressed concern over the absence of a set structure in place-based education. Diana also has experienced parent backlash—for example, she had one parent demand she keep her students in school and learning instead of having so many field trips. In reference to urban settings, Diana acknowledged that there are challenges, but that we need to recognize that place does not need to be a pristine wilderness area. Diana also mentioned that she wishes she could situate all of her courses in place, but because of her position teaching undergraduate students, she often finds it hard to do. She also expressed a desire to learn more about “community resources, places to go, and people within the community.”

Kellie had little to say about the external challenges of place-based education, but the ones she did mention were weather, student behavior, and “a couple of cranky neighbors here and there.” She also noted the challenge of implementing students’ ideas for projects—for example, her students have often come up with a great idea for a project, but it is too late in the year to implement it or book a trip to a certain location. That being said, she says she would be interested in more options for short-term and spontaneous projects that can be booked on a week’s notice based on what your students are learning at that moment.

**Benefits of Place-Based Education**

**Community connections.**

Both participants had many community-based experiences to talk about and all were painted in a positive light. Diana talked about how interested community members were to see her and her students in the community and to ask them about what they were doing—she
explained, “…they love to see students outside learning and people that live in the community like to see the kids out doing things together. I think it opens up what happens in schools to the public…if anything, it makes the school look good to rest of the community.” Kellie talked about her class’s regular walking trips to the library, community centre, or surrounding parks. She also mentioned a partnership with a nearby nursing home, where students go to sing choir songs.

Diana and Kellie mentioned the involvement of parents in place-based education. Diana talked about parents coming along on trips and really enjoying the experience because they are learning more about their community too; additionally, as community members they can contribute by talking about their experiences. Kellie mentioned using the parent expertise in the school community—for example, she mentioned that parents come in to help deliver curriculum in areas such as dance. She said this is great because “the children are seeing their own community members being active in their education.” Kellie also mentioned that their alternative school is the third floor of a bigger school, so they also make connections with children from the other school to create class partnerships. In conclusion, Diana said, in reference to community connections, “place-based education is great because all understandings of place are recognized and validated…there’s not one way of knowing things, so [place-based education] fits. It fits for everything.”

**Perceived impact on student learning.**

Both participants expressed seeing a positive impact of place-based education. Both educators said they have seen students more engaged and interested in what they are doing. Diana said students are so interested in what they have done through place-based education that they often go home and tell their parents about it and then take their parents to those places. Kellie also talked about the way in which the community benefits from placed-based education,
especially in the long run: “the more connected my students feel to the community, the more they’re going to want to take ownership for the community in the future and ensure that the community is a place they want to live and stay.”
Chapter 5: Discussion

Implications and Connections to the Literature

Both participants in this interview-based study had an understanding of place-based education that was directly in line with how it is defined in the literature. Smith (2002) defined place-based education as the process of “ground[ing] learning in local phenomenon and students’ lived experiences” (p. 586) and both participants echoed this sentiment by emphasizing the importance of ‘place’ and the ‘local community.’ Clark (2008) explained place-based education as a combination of many movements, such as project-based learning, community-based learning, and experiential learning—Diana also mentioned the fact that place-based education is not an exclusive term and incorporates many of the movements happening in schools. This suggests that there are educators implementing place-based education that may not even know they are doing so, pointing to a need for a more focused movement. By this, I mean that although I wholeheartedly believe in place-based education, I think we have a tendency to throw so many terms around that it makes it difficult for educators to keep them straight. Additionally, there are new terms all the time that claim to be “the next best thing in education,” so how do we work through these terms and make place-based education an enduring term and a philosophy that catches on.

Smith (2002) explains that because place-based education is focused in many different places, it does not always look the same. Diana and Kellie were great examples of this. Diana spent much of her time teaching in British Columbia with a national park just a walk away from her school, while Kellie is currently teaching in downtown Toronto. Despite these two places looking drastically different, both teachers exemplify the implementation of place-based
education. Each teacher also illustrated at least one of the five themes Smith (2002) sees in place-based education. For example, Diana’s national park experience illustrates ‘nature studies,’ while Kellie’s butterfly project with her students illustrates ‘real-world problem solving.’

Lieberman and Hoody (1998) discussed a number of the positive impacts that place-based education has for students and educators. Diana and Kellie both talked about higher engagement from their students. It was also evident from talking to both of these teachers, that as Lieberman and Hoody point out, teachers implementing place-based education display a higher enthusiasm and commitment to teaching. They spoke of place-based education like it was a natural and assumed part of their teaching—it was evident that it truly is at the core of their teaching philosophy.

While both teachers embraced place-based education whole-heartedly, they agreed that place-based education is not something they always do. McInerney, Smyth and Down (2011) mention the importance of exposing students not just to local issues, but to regional, national, and global issues as well. Kellie explicitly mentioned making sure that her students are not only exposed to their community, especially in terms of literature. She explained that a diverse exposure to literature is quite important because there is so much you can learn from reading books about other places. This supports the findings in the literature saying that although place-based education is beneficial to students, it should not be the only method for delivering curriculum.

Smith (2002) mentions that a number of the challenges educators will face when implementing place-based education are deeply rooted in schools and that teachers must be able to handle the “unpredictable activities.” Diana expressed having a similar experience of the unpredictability that place-based education can hold when she said, “You have more control in
the classroom so when you take kids outside you’re opening up curriculum to different possibilities, which is a wonderful thing, but it can also be a scary thing because you don’t know where it’s going to go.” Smith also mentions that educators and community members must redefine what learning looks like and put aside the assumption that it only occurs in the classroom. Diana mentioned having a parent who told her to stop taking so many field trips and to keep her students at school—this illustrates one of the problems Smith says educators will encounter. Kellie, who mentioned having fewer challenges when implementing place-based education, teaches in a community that supports this kind of learning. It seems as though teachers in unique, alternative settings experience less backlash when implementing place-based education, so we need to establish the best practice for implementing place-based education in traditional, public school settings.

Despite the fact that most place-based initiatives have been in rural settings (Russell-Ciardi, 2006), this study shows that place-based initiatives are happening all over the place, even in the urban setting of Toronto. Kellie’s narrative shows that even students in the most urban of settings do not need to suffer what Richard Louv (2008) coined as “nature-deficit disorder.” Both teachers expressed strongly believing that place-based education can happen anywhere. It truly depends on the place that you are in; place-based education is never going to look the same at different schools, because each school exists in a unique community, or place.

In terms of place-based education in Ontario, both participants mentioned some ways that Ministry documents mandate place-based education. They spoke almost exclusively of the curriculum documents and failed to mention any other ministry documents. These findings suggest that teachers know about some curriculum expectations relating to place-based education, but that some of the other Ministry documents such as Acting Today, Shaping
Tomorrow and Foundations for a Healthy School are not well known, even to those who have place-based education at the core of their teaching philosophy.

**Limitations and Further Study**

Despite this study’s contribution to the academic community, there are a number of limitations that should be mentioned. A major limitation of the project is the small sample of participants. Because only two teachers were interviewed, the findings have low generalizability to other populations. Additionally, only one of the teachers interviewed has teaching experience in primary schools in Ontario, therefore certain findings may not be able to be generalized to all Ontario teachers. Furthermore, one of the teachers interviewed teaches at an alternative school that is accepting of place-based education, whereas her experience may have been different if she taught in a mainstream, non-alternative public school. With more time to conduct the study, more teachers could have been interviewed regarding their place-based education practices. The teachers interviewed were also similar in their viewpoint, such that they all had place-based education as a core element in their philosophy of teaching.

While there are a number of limitations to the qualitative research conducted, there are also numerous strengths. By conducting teacher interviews, it gives educators the opportunity to validate their teaching experience and the meaning they make from it. Teachers are also given the opportunity to give voice to their experience and share real-world examples of place-based education in practice, giving the educational community hands-on, practical examples (connecting to the Ontario curriculum) that they can use also. The interview format also allows for the researcher to ask further questions to clarify when necessary.

Further study needs to be conducted on place-based education in the elementary classroom. More teachers need to be interviewed about their experiences implementing place-
based education. Further, teachers who do not implement place-based education need to be interviewed about their attitudes regarding place-based practices. The latter could give insight into why more teachers are not implementing place-based education regularly. More research should also be conducted on what place-based education looks like in urban settings—more Toronto teachers should be interviewed or a comparative study should be done interviewing teachers in various urban settings. Furthermore, students should be interviewed to get a first hand sense of place-based education’s effects on students, as opposed to hearing about the effects from the teachers. For example, students should be interviewed to assess their attitudes towards place-based practices and perhaps see what suggestions they have to make learning even more meaningful for them. Community members that have partnerships with classes or schools implementing place-based education could also be interviewed to see how they are experiencing and benefitting (or not) from place-based education. Research should also aim to alleviate some of the challenges associated with place-based education. After extensive interviews of various stakeholders are conducted, a larger web-based survey could be conducted to assess spatial patterns and allow results to be more generalizable.

**Conclusion**

My research provides a rare and meaningful narrative of two teachers implementing place-based education. This has given me further insight into what place-based education looks like in the field and inspires me to keep it at the core of my teaching philosophy. I look forward to moving forward as an educator and teaching through place-based education and inspiring students to engage with and care for the place they are in, no matter what that place looks like. I firmly believe that almost all students will respond to place-based education because it allows them to interact with something that is familiar to them. It eliminates the separation of school
and society and brings them together in a way that will benefit communities now and in the future.

*Tell me and I forget, Teach me and I remember, Involve me and I learn.*

–*Benjamin Franklin*
References


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ________________

Dear ________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying place-based education in the elementary classroom for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

My data collection consists of about a 45-minute interview that will be tape-recorded. The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign below if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Rachel Hall

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Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Rachel Hall and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ____________________________

Name (printed): _______________________

Date: ____________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Background Information:

1. What is your educational background?
   a. Where did you attend university?
   b. Do you have any training in place-based or environmental education?
2. How long have you been teaching?
3. How long have you been at this school?
4. Have you taught at other schools?
5. Have you always taught the same grade?

Teacher Practices:

1. What is your understanding of place-based education?
2. Could you give an example of how you typically include place-based educational practices into your classroom?
   a. Do you always incorporate place-based education?
   b. If so, how do you do this?
3. Could you give an example of a lesson informed by place-based education?
4. Do your students know what place-based education is?
PLACE-BASED EDUCATION IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

5. Have you noticed a difference in how your students respond when taught through place-based education?

6. Do you know of any Ontario curriculum expectations that relate to place-based education?
   a. If so, do you follow these expectations specifically?

7. What connections have you made with the surrounding community?

8. How (if at all) do you use the school grounds in your implementation of place-based education?

Benefits & Challenges of Place-Based Education:

1. What are some challenges you face when trying to implement place-based education?

2. Do you find the administration to be supportive in your efforts?

3. What about the parents?

4. Do you find the community at large benefits from your use of place-based education?

5. Have you ever experienced backlash from the community when trying to implement place-based strategies?

Next Steps:

1. What would you still like to learn about place-based education to better implement it?

2. Any further comments or questions?