

# Place-Based Learning and the Importance of Partnerships Within Schools and Communities to Foster Engagement in Education

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## Abstract

*Place-Based Learning* (PBL) is an experiential-based pedagogy differing from the conventional text and classroom-based education. PBL uses school-wide initiatives and local communities as a primary resource for teaching and learning, and is something that can be incorporated into teaching and learning pedagogies to create positive outcomes. These initiatives are diverse, and aim to integrate learning and communities through inquiry, which in turn leads to increased student engagement, higher qualities of work and the opportunity for students to gain eye-opening experiences into the importance of the wider world. The root of PBL is enhancing learning experiences through direct engagement and inquiry into place, community and culture. These experiences can contribute to shaping ākonga into confident, connected and actively involved lifelong learners (Ministry of Education, 2007). This literature review examines the role of PBL as a platform for inclusive and community-based education, and demonstrates how PBL can be implemented in schooling contexts and the wider community to gain positive outcomes for students.

**Keywords:** *Place-based learning, partnership, community, engagement, multiculturalism, identity, collaboration, education, service learning*



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## Introduction

In the last few decades, education has been transformed by changing ideologies of the role of schools and the purpose of education. A significant contributor to this is the different priorities schools have for student learning, and the different structures and strategies in place that may enhance or hinder education. Research suggests that successful learning can occur in a variety of different places that go beyond the conventional classroom environments we may be used to, thus prompting the puzzle of why the classroom is the dominant location for education. For many years, educational theorists have identified that teaching and learning is not just the case of teachers standing at the front of a classroom lecturing students on important information, with the expectation being that students absorb this knowledge. Although early education systems would argue that teachers are the more knowledgeable other (Le, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978), current education systems reflect values of ako, community and reciprocal learning that coincide with 21<sup>st</sup>-century teaching and learning pedagogies that are important for the development of ākonga. Place-based education attempts to break down the four walls of the traditional classroom by allowing students to spend time outside on a regular basis, alongside building relationships with people and places in their community (Gruenewald, 2008). Using activities and experiences

that differ from classroom norms could be a way to help students engage further in curriculum context, learn real-life applications of issues related to their subject, and overall enhance motivation and engagement in student learning (Vennix et al., 2017). Therefore, finding connections to place are important valuable experiences for today's young people to help shape their identities, along with helping them to become actively involved lifelong learners (Bartholomaeus, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2007).

## Why Place-Based Learning?

There are several reasons why teachers and schooling environments should engage with effective place-based learning (PBL) pedagogies, with the primary goal being to increase student engagement, motivate and boost academic outcomes, positively impact communities and promote an in-depth understanding of the wider-world. PBL pedagogies or initiatives that are similar can be traced back to Dewey (1963) who expressed concern over the growing disconnect between students' school experiences and their everyday lives outside of the classroom. Dewey sought to create an educational approach that would contextualise learning for students and make it more applicable to them in the real world (Smith & Sobel, 2010). Therefore, the initial idea of PBL and the differentiation it has from civic learning or service learning is the explicit focus it has on both human

and natural environments alongside its concern for equity, social justice and environmental issues (Smith, 2017). The idea of classroom learning that incorporates interests to enable students to find a purpose for learning is something that PBL coincides with (Bartholomaeus, 2013; Smith, 2002).

Sharkey et al. (2016) reinforces the idea that PBL increases student engagement, motivation, and family-school involvement. With an increase in testing throughout schools and curriculums that devalue local knowledge and emphasise deficit perspectives, PBL could be a way forward for education (Comber, 2016). This idea is explored through a study of four different schools where PBL is implemented. Upon conclusion of the study, the teachers involved indicated that PBL projects implemented increased student engagement and motivation, fostered or enhanced existing student-teacher relationships and school-family engagement. It also helped to increase student and teacher awareness or appreciation for local knowledge and its value as a curriculum resource. This reinforces the positive nature PBL can have for students, whanau, and communities. Essentially, further research indicates that PBL can enhance student learning through giving students both voice and choice in determining what, how and where they learn, thus tailoring learning to individual strengths and needs (Hanover Research, 2014). With the evidence provided by these sources, it is clear that PBL can promote positive outcomes for a range of parties involved. Therefore, incorporating PBL pedagogies into schooling environments and normalising them within national curriculums could provide substantial benefits for students, teachers, whanau and communities.

Currently, 21<sup>st</sup>-century teaching and learning environments are encountering major educational reforms, particularly with the development of modern learning environments that stray far from conventional learning (Starkey et al., 2009). PBL as a pedagogy can help contribute to these changes in education by providing students opportunities to learn with a critical community and place lens on. Overall, PBL can easily be incorporated into educational settings to provide and promote success among students. PBL can help create ties between community, place and people, which is crucial for the development of ākonga.

## Place-Based Learning Within the Schooling Environment

One of the challenges associated with PBL is the potential lack of community resources available. For schooling environments that are limited to local resources, the use of the school itself to incorporate PBL is achievable as PBL can be implemented diversely. Implementing and maintaining school community gardens is one way that place-based pedagogies can be encouraged in a schooling environment where local resources may be out of reach. Gardens can be used as a valuable tool in schools to teach the curriculum, improve student behaviour and self-confidence, instil a sense of responsibility in students, and strengthen connections

between schools and the community (Ratcliffe, 2017). From a pedagogical perspective, garden-based education falls directly under the sphere of PBL, and is something that can be easily implemented and used on a cross-curricular level. Community gardens draw on PBL principles, attempting to connect students to place and make curriculum relevant outside of the classroom (Ratcliffe, 2017). Although the garden is located within the school, the knowledge learned from this space can be used and applied in many different strands of life. Students can learn and utilise a range of skills within a school garden space, therefore, showing the benefit of PBL initiatives that are exclusive only to the school. It is important to acknowledge that PBL within a schooling context is not limited to just school gardens.

## Place-Based Learning and Community Partnerships

PBL experiences outside of the school environment can be used to support students in making connections between the curriculum content taught in the classroom and practical experiences. Depending on geographic location and local resources, some schools will have more opportunities to use the communities around them than others. Research shows that students learning through PBL enact different, and more complex, roles than in a traditional classroom (Malm et al., 2012). The literature about community partnerships entails positive outcomes such as increased relationships and partnerships with local communities, further engagement with curriculum content and an overall more in-depth appreciation for learning. Sloan (2013) and Cutter-Mackenzie (2009) explore the idea that PBL is just as effective within the schooling environment itself, however Efird (2015), Gross et al. (2015) and Malm et al. (2012) discuss the importance PBL has with out-of-school community partnerships.

The importance of place and community-based education by taking students to a museum for experiential learning is explored by Efird (2015). The students taking part in this project were initially needed as volunteers around a specific environmental topic that related to their curriculum, however, as the study concluded students became fully immersed in the task and involvement quickly expanded to include interpretation of the museum's permanent exhibits on local history and culture along with interaction with community members. Efird (2015) concluded that this type of unconventional, hands-on teaching and learning can be transformative for children who have found it difficult to excel in the typical classroom and textbook-based learning context. The positive outcomes associated with this community involvement included increased knowledge, improved self-confidence and a newfound interest in citizenship. Outcomes also showed increased grades for students who were immersed in the museum task, in comparison to those who did not partake and were learning via textbooks. PBL initiatives do not have to be extreme or costly. They can cater for and meet the individual needs of both students and a schooling context by using what is provided in the community around them.

Gross et al. (2015) explores how school-community partnerships can impact student success and post-school outcomes as well as positively influence and benefit the community in return. Research revealed the diverse and reciprocal nature of successful school-community partnerships. Schools benefited from the increased resources, support and relationships resulting from the development of these partnerships. One staff member articulated their value by stating that community partnerships are a natural part of the school community, and that the school relies on them to ensure they have the best education for their students. While the school and its constituents benefitted from all partners' contributions to the school, each community partner also benefitted from its interactions. These included benefits to their business or programme, personal satisfaction, enhanced knowledge of best practices and personal growth.

Malm et al. (2012) portray similar ideologies to Efirid (2015) and Gross et al. (2015) through discussing the importance community and place-based education can have in providing students with exposure to the richness and complication of the world outside of academia. This study chronicles the development of a partnership between staff, students and members of a neighbouring community by getting students to facilitate and implement a community arts festival. Reciprocity is an important factor in community partnerships and PBL, which Gilchrist (2009) refers to as a power of a well-connected community. This idea concludes that the power of people working together can accomplish, learn and educate far more than people acting independently. The success of having a school work together with a local community to run an arts festival not only had positive outcomes for the students involved, but positively impacted local community members and families who were able to attend the event. This idea of a well-connected community reiterates the importance of using local resources in education. Place and community-based education models are evident worldwide, however, there is limited research about the negative implications that these pedagogies can have.

## **Identity Development and Multiculturalism**

Ideologies associated with a sense of belonging are embedded into the basis of place and community (Bartholomaeus, 2013). The idea of place is embodied in physical locations, symbolic meanings and emotional attachments individuals may have about a given setting. Places can become a central factor for identity as people draw on social processes, values and symbols to describe themselves (Sampson & Goodrich, 2009). From a social constructionist perspective, making sense of place is crucial in understanding how individuals socially construct and form bonds and attachments to the physical environments they live in. As explored by Sampson and Goodrich (2009), the role of community in attachment to place, belonging and identity is central.

These ideas of place directly coincide with how PBL can contribute to shaping the identities of young people.

The community provides a mechanism by which individuals can culturally produce identity and belonging. Identity draws on a collective set of values, behaviours and actions that are embedded in shared community practices (Sampson & Goodrich, 2009), closely associated with ideas Sloan (2013), Donovan (2016) and Hjørne et al. (2012) express about the importance PBL has on shaping identities. Classroom spaces are diverse and can be a place where different cultures have the potential to share lived experiences and gain insight from each other's "spatial, geographical, and contextual dimensions of existence" (Gruenewald, 2008, p. 310). Classrooms are environments where students come together as a community to understand the different forms of knowledge they are being exposed to. Place-based pedagogies can assist cultural diversity and multiculturalism within schooling environments by engaging local environments.

Sloan (2013) demonstrates the importance PBL can have on shaping identities and contributing to multiculturalism within a schooling environment. Sloan supports PBL in the school itself with the use and implementation of community gardens. Mackenzie (2009) conducted a study on garden spaces, and the purpose of learning about multiculturalism and identity. This study concluded that students developed a further understanding of their own identities, alongside establishing an awareness of the interconnected nature between students and the local environment by taking part in implementing and caring for a community garden.

Donovan (2016) suggests that a PBL curriculum is integral in the changing modern world we live in. Donovan (2016) explores a curriculum catered particularly to writing standards and how PBL can help students explore their identities through writing that is informed by place. The research concluded that place-based writing practices can help empower adolescents, allowing them to connect to their local communities while demonstrating a greater understanding of individual identities (Donovan, 2016). Literacy should be implemented throughout any effective curriculum, therefore, incorporating literacy through PBL can help ākonga learn more about themselves and the different things they associate with. This is an integral part of shaping identities and helping ākonga develop values, knowledge and competencies that will enable them to live full and satisfying lives (Ministry of Education, 2007). When students begin their writing from a conversation of experience or place, they are more effective and authentic communicators. This is because they are writing about something they can resonate with. Research showed that students were more engaged and motivated when they were given the opportunity to write about something they were excited about in the community, opposed to being set a one-size-fits-all essay question (Donovan, 2016). This supports the idea that place-based learning is important and should be

implemented into schools as not only does it increase motivation, but it also helps to establish identity.

PBL is also evident in the value *Tangata Whenuatanga* which is one of the cultural competencies expressed in *Tataiako* (Ministry of Education, 2011). PBL in Aotearoa can affirm Indigenous Māori learners as being Māori by providing contexts for learning where identity, language and culture of learners and their *whānau* is valued (Ministry of Education, 2011). A deficit discourse placed on Māori learners can often prohibit or limit Māori success (Macfarlane et al., 2007). Often educators who are members of a dominant and more powerful culture can impose attitudes on students who belong to less powerful cultures, contributing to deficits being placed on learners. However, the implementation of effective PBL initiatives in culturally diverse classrooms can help to reaffirm multicultural learners. Using local resources including community spaces and people as an education source can contribute to Māori success, thus again reinforcing the importance of identity.

Essentially, for English Language Learners (ELL), PBL can help facilitate education beyond conventional classroom experiences. Epstein (1986) explores the idea that social intervention and community partnerships can build bridges for students needing to develop relationships in an unaccustomed setting. Using PBL can help to cultivate a child's sense of belonging through offering a component missing in the lives of children who are new to a country (Epstein, 1986). Challenges evident for ELL entail the difficulty of fitting into a new school and community. Glinert (2009) argues that integrating community modelling into the curriculum through PBL can help children develop a sense of belonging, along with a more concise understanding of a topic as they are able to physically experience it. Learning through place fills a void in the lives of students struggling with a new language, new societal rules, normative behaviours and pre-established community hierarchy (Glinert, 2009). Students new to a country can form community partnerships and develop a connection through a place, further demonstrating the positive nature PBL has in the development of identities and diversity in classroom environments (Glinert, 2009).

## Implications for Teachers

Teachers play a critical role in developing and supporting the individual needs of students. With education systems rapidly changing because of 21<sup>st</sup>-century teaching and learning, PBL approaches can help educators meet the needs of all learners through an inclusive, community-based approach. PBL pedagogies can yield positive implications not only for students, but for teachers, *whānau* and the community as well. Teachers are more than just curriculum decision makers (McGee, 1997), they are also role models who help to foster good living habits in students, which can be demonstrated in several ways (Glinert, 2009). Often teachers can be unaware of the influence their interactions and ideas have on young, developing minds. Research suggests that an energetic and knowledgeable

teacher creates a more enjoyable classroom in which active learning takes place in comparison to a test-based teacher who will not engage as many students. This shows the importance of knowing your learners and implementing activities that encourage student participation and engagement. A teacher who uses the community as a lens for teaching will be able to note the tuned-in expression of students eager to learn. By formulating lessons that include real-world application with hands-on experiences, teachers will see an increasing interest in learning from students, along with education becoming more enjoyable (Glinert, 2009).

Although the one-size-fits-all model does not necessarily apply to PBL as it is circumstantial, research indicates that teachers who structure their curriculum around generic book-based learning can become easily disconnected from their local environment, meaning they neglect the possible learning that could occur (Glinert, 2009). This is a serious implication for teachers who may not be aware of PBL, meaning they could subconsciously discard learning opportunities for themselves and students. This contrasts with Palmer (1997) who states that we teach who we are, meaning as educators we generally sway toward teaching others the way we were educated. This means that future educators need to be flexible, adaptable and willing to take advantage of the opportunities in local neighbourhoods, local outdoor settings and community partnerships (Glinert, 2009).

Teaching through place and community can be integrated into curriculum depending on the needs of the school and individual learners. PBL can break down barriers between schools and communities by integrating academic classroom activities into place and the environment (Eyler & Giles, 1999; McCarthy, 2009 as cited in Ngai et al., 2009). Using local community spaces such as parks or businesses, and implementing these into the curriculum, can help students gain more authentic learning opportunities. Being exposed to an environment is more beneficial than just being shown photographs or videos. Essentially, using community leaders and resources such as local business owners, *whānau*, government agencies and *Tangata Whenua* can also foster collaboration and partnership, in turn contributing to student learning.

Cooper (2007) explores implications for teachers in respect of educating pre-service teachers on the importance of community partnerships in education. Evidence from previous studies (Cabello & Burstein, 1995; Wiest, 1998; Zeichner & Melnick, 1996 in Cooper, 2007) state that community-based experiences are effective in creating awareness for teachers of the cultural strengths of students and their families. Cooper (2007) concludes that institutions of teacher education need to incorporate community-based learning into the formal preparation process. This would not only help pre-service teachers know how to effectively deliver their content because they know their students better, but will also demonstrate the importance of building relationships with students, families and communities.

By educating pre-service teachers while they are still novices, they will have the tools to take new ideas into the teaching profession that will reinforce 21<sup>st</sup>-century ideas around teaching and learning.

## Conclusion

Despite the potential challenges involved with establishing PBL pedagogies in schools, the accumulated research shows that relationships to place and the community are integral for schooling environments. These relationships allow for teachers to implement new pedagogies that reflect 21<sup>st</sup>-century teaching and learning practices that can be attributed toward the New Zealand Curriculum's future focus of supporting community engagement (Ministry of Education, 2007). Development of PBL can prepare students for the complexities of life, along with educating students to be critical thinkers who think outside of the box, communicators who clearly articulate ideas, collaborators who work effectively, and creative innovators who design and implement new and worthwhile ideas (Kennedy & Heineke, 2014). PBL is an important tool to help teachers develop a growth mindset of education, which in turn, helps improve the experience and education of students. In the diverse and multicultural-world we live in, PBL initiatives can provide opportunities for students to make sense of their own identity, particularly through community resources and partnerships. Place-based education also has the ability to offer more than just academic possibilities for students, which is something that current education systems may be lacking. The role of identities and community attachment from PBL may assist in long-term community involvement, contributing to the ongoing development of shaping individuals to become globalised, life-long learners. Although PBL may be ineffective in some situations or circumstances, there is limited literature outlining these perceptions. Overall, PBL is a way forward in education, and could be implemented worldwide to help students engage further with their education.

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