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Canadian contexts for exploring transformative student agency through place-conscious pedagogy

Darron Kelly, PhD, p45dik@mun.ca

Memorial University of Newfoundland

Sharon Pelech, PhD, Sharon.pelech@uleth.ca

University of Lethbridge

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Canadian contexts for exploring transformative student agency through place-conscious pedagogy

Darron Kelly, PhD, p45dik@mun.ca

Memorial University of Newfoundland

Sharon Pelech, PhD, Sharon.pelech@uleth.ca

University of Lethbridge

Abstract

Findings are presented from two case studies of student agency in relation to place-conscious pedagogy in the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Newfoundland and Labrador. For the purpose of these studies, student agency is viewed as transformative and encompasses self-determination, successful attainment of personal objectives, and enhanced willingness to address societal issues (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Goodman & Eren, 2013). Place-conscious pedagogy uses the local community and environment as focal points for teaching and learning (Greenwood, 2013; Gruenewald, 2003; Lescure & Yaman, 2014; Kelly, 2007, 2013, 2014; Pelech & Kelly, 2017; Smith, 2007; Sobel, 2005). The underlying premise for exploring student agency in relation to place-conscious pedagogy is that students who actively participate in understanding and shaping the world around them learn to recognize their potential as agents of personal and social transformation (Kelly & Pelech, in press). Each case study is guided by two interrelated questions: what practices do place-conscious teachers offer students; and how do these teachers understand the relationship of such practices to student agency? Semi-structured interviews with classroom teachers and photographic documentation of teaching practices are used to address these questions. Our research supports ministries of education, school divisions, teacher education programs, and classroom teachers in moving forward with innovative and transformative curriculum redesign (Government of Alberta, 2017; Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2017). This research also contributes to development of more culturally and environmentally aware and engaged youth by recognizing, documenting, and supporting tangible commitments to the educational value of place and local awareness (Webber & Miller, 2016).

Keywords: Place-conscious pedagogy, Student agency, Pedagogical innovation, Transformative learning, Case studies.

Introduction

Canada is geographically and culturally diverse. Our research explores this diversity through a specific interest in transformative student agency. This exploration takes the form of two unique case studies of place-conscious pedagogy with a view to understanding the effect of this pedagogy on the agency of students. The first study documents the pedagogical initiative of an elementary school teacher who lives and works in the small community of Eastport in the Atlantic province of Newfoundland and Labrador. The second study attends to the place consciousness of a multi-grade community project at an elementary school in the prairie province of Alberta.

We theorize that teachers who bring a sense of place consciousness to their teaching can nurture the development of transformative agency for their students (Kelly & Pelech, 2019). Our research, as such, documents the place-conscious work of teachers in order to explore the potential of a place-conscious pedagogy for enhancing transformative student agency. We view this research as crucial to establishing and promoting a “critical” conception of place-conscious teaching—a conception of place-conscious pedagogy that is critical precisely because it supports the transformative agency of students as they learn to restructure their world. For this objective, our case studies are guided by two interrelated questions: what practices do place-conscious teachers offer students; and how do these teachers understand the relationship of such practices to student agency?

We explore these questions through in-depth teacher interviews, and photographic documentation of related classroom practices and projects. We then review, interpret, code, and deductively theme the interview content to further our understanding of place-conscious pedagogy as a practical means of enhancing transformative student agency (Babbie & Benaquisto, 2010; Seidman, 2006). The photographic images are used to further illustrate the practices and outcomes of place-conscious teaching (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999), and as a means of recognizing and supporting the valuable contribution that place-conscious teachers and their students make to social and environmental transformation.

Place-conscious pedagogy and transformative student agency

In the tradition of place-based education and environmental education, the local community and environment provide contexts for place-conscious pedagogy (Chang, 2017; Gruenewald, 2003; Kelly, 2005, 2006, 2007; Kelly & Pelech, 2019; Lescure & Yaman, 2014). As an experiential and deeply contextual approach to teaching, place-conscious pedagogy diminishes the boundaries that often exist between schools and their social and environmental settings (Ball & Lai, 2006; Greenwood, 2013). This aspect of place-conscious pedagogy is crucial. As Gruenewald & Smith (2008) contend, the focus on real work in local communities contrasts dramatically with classroom-based pedagogies aimed at covering standard outcomes and preparing for tests. Place-conscious teachers recognize the value of situating curriculum within the local culture and ecology, and nurture in their students “both relations between humans and relations between humans and other animals, plants and their habitats,” (Avery & Hains, 2017, p. 13). Through hands-on experiences embedded in the local community and environment, place-conscious pedagogy provides meaningful opportunities for students to explore, apply, and advance their curricular knowledge. The resulting improvements in academic performance

are well-documented (Nichols, Howson, Mulrey, Ackerman, & Gately, 2016; Smith, 2007), and recent research has shown place-conscious pedagogy supports the development of informed, active, and engaged citizens (Barnes, 2017; Deringer, 2017; Pelech & Kelly, 2017, 2020).

Biesta & Tedder (2007) describe student agency as a “capacity for autonomous social action or the ability to operate independently of determining constraints of social structure” (p. 135). Much of the current interest in student agency, however, tends to focus on developing and supporting students’ sense of responsibility for their learning. Student agency, as such, emphasizes the role of students in the classroom as independent learners but does not promote the capacity of students to transform and restructure their world. In this sense, research on enhancing student agency is often understood as important for achieving curricular objectives and the regulation of classroom environments, as students are taught to become more active participants in achieving predetermined learning outcomes (Goodman & Eren, 2013).

For the purpose of our research, we extend the concept of student agency beyond its common use in discussions of motivation, engagement, and achievement of curricular objectives. Instead, we adopt a critical perspective wherein the concept of student agency is further intended to capture a strong sense of self-determination, successful attainment of personal objectives and enhanced willingness to address societal issues (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Goodman & Eren, 2013). From this critical perspective, student agency must show a capacity for social transformation and restructuring. In working with this transformative conceptualization of student agency, we explore teaching practices to discover those that foster awareness and meaningful resolution of vital social and environmental concerns. Our research is motivated by and grounded in the belief that students who actively participate in understanding and shaping the world around them learn their own potential as agents of change and become energetic actors in determining their lives and influencing their community (Basu & Barton, 2010; Kelly & Pelech, 2019; Pelech & Kelly, 2020).

The intersect in theorizing student agency and place-conscious teaching is striking. Yet, a strong and direct connection between these two well-recognized features of formal education is underrepresented in the academic literature. The work of McInerney, Smyth, and Down (2011) comes close to making this connection by incorporating critical thinking into place-based education to encourage students to engage in thoughtful examination of local practices and avoid simplistic romanticizing of place. Taking a more direct line, we have argued that place-conscious teaching may be understood from a critical perspective as emancipatory, transformative and supportive of meaningful change in the lives of teachers and students (Kelly & Pelech, 2019; Pelech & Kelly, 2020). Our conception of a critical place-conscious pedagogy entrusts teachers with setting the ethical direction of their work, while placing students in contact with and raising student awareness of social and environmental issues of local interest and concern. As teachers provide local context for issues by embedding them in real-world projects and contemporary concerns, they also call on students to engage in re-thinking and re-making the place they encounter.

From this perspective, teachers who enact a critical place consciousness have the potential to enhance the self-determination and agency of their students—not only as an authentic means of learning the curriculum (Clark, Howley, Resnick, & Penstein Rosé, 2016; Goodman & Eren, 2013), but as a practical means of restructuring and transforming the world (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Kelly & Pelech, 2019). We also take this view of place consciousness in teaching as a critical pedagogy for countering the “non-place” ontological assumption that informs many current educational practices (Bertling, 2018). In this respect, our theorizing of place-conscious pedagogy is untethered from place-based education as we contend that all education is inherently culture-based. While transformative teaching should be informed and practiced in place, a critical conception of place need not itself be place-based or place-dependant. This distinction between place-based and place-conscious makes the study of specific cases crucially important in understanding the potential of place consciousness for enhancing transformative student agency. For our research, evidence of transformative student agency is understood as the key indicator of a critical place-conscious pedagogy (Hays, 1994). Through the case studies presented in this paper, we identify teaching practices that consciously situate learning in the local and that show support for transformative student agency as indicated through acts of self-determination and active restructuring.

A note on the research and its relevance

The teachers who participated in this study were welcoming, generous and sincere. They gave their time and openly shared their ideas, opinions and practices—and we thank them for their genuine contribution to our exploration of place-conscious pedagogy and student agency. We would also like to thank the school-district administrators who gave ethics approval for this research and the principals who supported and facilitated access to their schools. Our main research method is semi-structured, open-ended interviewing. Through these interviews, we gain insight from teachers who self-identify as practitioners of place-conscious pedagogy (Babbie & Benaquisto, 2010; Seidman, 2006). We also take digital photographs to document the practices, projects, and outcomes associated with this approach to teaching (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Together, the interview data and photographic documentation provide rich descriptions and sources of information for each case (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999).

Our thematic analysis (Seidman, 2006), in turn, connects place-conscious pedagogy to student agency and offers practical illustrations of teaching that can enhance prospects for long-term social and environmental transformation. Our research, moreover, corroborates Piersol’s (2013) assertion that there is no “magical prescription” that works for this approach to teaching in all settings; each case requires stepping outside to “listen and dig into the stories of place” (p. 64). In this paper, we present two such cases, discuss the unique context and practices associated with each case, comment on the similarity of the cases in relation to student agency and present findings that indicate the potential of place-conscious pedagogy for enhancing transformative student agency.

This research has international relevance for curricular discourses in the areas of pedagogical innovation, student agency and social change (Piersol, 2013; Webber & Miller, 2016). At a national level, many provinces in Canada have renewed interest in comprehensive curriculum redesign that

includes recognizing the importance of place in providing knowledge-rich education: “learning is embedded in relationships, culture, family, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, community, land, connections, memory and history” (Government of Alberta, 2017, p. 5). New curricular outcomes also emphasise community engagement, cultural interaction, and building a sustainable future (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2017, p. 65). Place-conscious teaching practices that enhance transformative student agency are vital for achieving such educational aims, advancing the critical awareness and self-determination of future generations and promoting cultural and environmental sustainability (Kelly & Pelech, 2019).

Outport-outdoor classroom

Once accessible only by ocean, the small outport community of Eastport on the north coast of the island of Newfoundland was established in the 1860s on what had been the ancestral territory of the Beothuk. Eastport was founded as an agricultural community to supply root vegetables by boat to the fishermen and their families who lived along the rugged coast. Still at the center of a productive agricultural region, today Eastport is also a popular hub for tourism offering access to many natural attractions, seasonal festivals, and the adjacent Terra Nova National Park. The town has approximately 500 year-round residents including Jillian, an experienced elementary teacher, who has taught the provincial core curriculum and music for students in Kindergarten through Grade 6.

Jillian grew up on a farm in Eastport and traces her family’s history in the area back over three generations. She recounts how her parents are local farmers and her grandfather was a farmer and, when asked how she connects her teaching to the local community and environment, she answers immediately: “Agriculture—agriculture is going to be the big one for me.” Like Jillian, many of her students are inherently connected with local farming and gardening and deeply committed to organizing and participating in the agricultural festival and heritage fair that is held every autumn on the school grounds. Jillian and her students are also actively involved in the community garden which is located next door to the school and provides raised planting beds for growing vegetables—a community-based activity for which her students often win ribbons at the fall fair.

True to her roots in the land, Jillian is continually looking for ways to embed the school curriculum in the local community and environment. Her place consciousness led Jillian to the idea of having an outdoor classroom at the school. The idea quickly took hold with the school community: “it’s been a really positive experience. We’re a small school in a small community—to make it work you really do have to work together.” The classroom is in a prominent area near the main entrance to the school. The area is relatively open and level with a wooden fence running the length of one side. The fence is used to display student art and crafts, and the classroom has several benches and tables, signposts, storage bins, and a small pond. Much of the area has been left in its natural condition with the addition of a few apple and pear trees and berry bushes. Some cleared spaces covered with filter fabric and woodchips have also been created for students to gather. At the center of one such space is a small greenhouse used for growing seedlings to stock the community garden. In a way, this greenhouse is at the heart of the outdoor classroom because it provides shelter for the growing plants that are essential to sustaining the larger community garden.

Jillian has no doubt as to the educational value of the outdoor classroom. She can quickly list the subject areas that readily benefit from a transfer to the outdoors: “It’s not hard to fit the curriculum in [to the outdoor classroom]. I’ve taught Art, Language Arts, Social Studies, Industrial Arts, Science—Biology... plant life, ecosystems, insects—it’s all hands on.” The outdoor classroom also acts as a staging area for local excursions into nature: “We take the kids on the trails a lot, too. And they find lots of interesting things.” Jillian views these outdoor activities as an important pedagogical resource “to get students talking about classification... biology... [and other curricula],” and for students’ overall development: “Going outside is good for mental health and developing social skills. Oftentimes we overmanage them in the classroom. Outside, they have a freedom... you see a different side of the students.”

Jillian also recognizes how the outdoor classroom works to build and strengthen school-community relationships: “Our community is really supportive.” Early in the project she invited an expert from the local horticultural society to visit the school and discuss the possibilities for an outdoor classroom. The horticulturalist helped students identify plant varieties that grew on the site, which included strawberries, blueberries, and partridgeberries and pointed out relevant features of the local habitat and geography. Together, it was decided that the outdoor classroom should be a “natural, low-maintenance area,” that preserved the existing vegetation and worked with the natural landscape. The horticulturalist’s visit solidified a collective sense that the outdoor classroom should be an ongoing and developing project—an opportunity for “using the land that you have and working with it to see what works best.”

There is little doubt that Jillian’s place consciousness provides tangible resistance to the disintegrated, non-place experiences of education that work to normalize individualism and materialist culture. It is in understanding the outdoor classroom as an ongoing process, however, that the most vital link between Jillian’s practice of place-conscious pedagogy and transformative student agency is forged. As Jillian explains: “The kids are doing all the stuff. They plant the trees. They built the greenhouse. They need ownership.” As an ongoing project, the students are continually presented with challenges and opportunities for reflecting on and restructuring the outdoor classroom. To meet the challenges and lever the opportunities, students must think and act in direct connection with place. “It’s their project,” Jillian is keen to point out, “it gets them questioning things, figuring things out. I get them at a different level out here.”

Jillian illustrates the shift to transformative agency that occurs when students work to make and maintain the outdoor classroom through a short explanation of what happened to the first greenhouse they built. “Our first greenhouse... it didn’t last the first windstorm,” she says. Given Eastport’s location on the coast of the North Atlantic and Newfoundland’s notoriously harsh winters, the loss of the first greenhouse could have signalled an end to the project. Instead, it set the students re-planning how to better protect their new greenhouse: “Our goal for this year... we’re going to be building a tree barrier.” In the process of constructing a tree barrier, the students will actively engage in restructuring the outdoor classroom to provide protection for what they see as an essential feature of the site: the greenhouse. Whether the tree barrier works to safeguard the greenhouse as anticipated is yet unknown but the students’ agency in reflecting on the problem, setting a course of action, and creating change to help sustain the community garden is clear.



Spring on the north coast of Newfoundland



First thaw at the outdoor classroom



Waiting for seedlings at the community garden



Sustaining community

Poverty, packs, and promises

Approximately 5800 km across Canada from Eastport, there is a place-conscious focused elementary school in the southern portion of the city of Edmonton, Alberta (population just under one million). As the capital city of Alberta, Edmonton is known as the “gateway to the north” because it is the historic and current hub to many of Canada’s northern communities. Edmonton was a gathering place before European settlement for many First Nations people and is situated on Treaty 6 territory, the traditional lands of the indigenous Cree, Blackfoot, Metis, Nakota Sioux, Iroquois, Dene, Ojibway/Saulteaux/Anishinaabe, Inuit, and many others (www.ualberta.ca). Edmonton sits adjacent to one of the largest rivers in Canada, the North Saskatchewan River, which is a natural meeting and transportation route that begins in the Rocky Mountains, meanders through the Canadian prairies and spills into Hudson Bay in Northern Ontario. Canada’s fur traders traveled the North Saskatchewan extensively and Edmonton was originally built as a trading post for settlers. Today, Edmonton is linked to many northern communities through major highways, railroads and an international airport.

Just to the south of Edmonton is an elementary school nestled beside an urban forest and river system that is surrounded by newly developed suburbs that cover once productive farmland. As one walks into the school, the connection to the land, the community and the indigenous peoples is palpable. To the right of the entrance, a teepee (raised in ceremony with a local Elder) is snugly fit within the library. The nearby display cases are filled with artefacts from nature and the statements “Let nature be your teacher,” and “Every child, every day,” are printed on banners prominently hung in the wide-open foyer. On any given day, students can be seen making their way with their teachers to spend time outdoors in the forest. They bundle up in snowsuits or put on sunhats and sunscreen depending on the time of year. As well as making regular visits to the forest, students are actively engaged in the local community or spending time at city hall learning about municipal government.

The following case illustrates one of many examples of place-conscious teaching at the school that provide opportunities for students to generate topics and projects based on their experiences within the

community. Allison is a Grade 1 teacher who has been teaching for 5 years, and Sasha (both pseudonym) is a Grade 3 teacher with over sixteen years experience. Together they are committed to connecting students to the greater school community and to the city of Edmonton. Both teachers embrace student agency by allowing curricular work to emerge from student interest in connecting with the community. This project, *Packs and a Promise*, was initiated by student questions that emerged after reading a book titled *The Can Man* (Williams, 2010). The book explores the interaction between a boy and a homeless man who collects discarded soft-drink cans to survive. From this poignant story, the students began to ask questions about the different faces of poverty. One key question that surfaced was, “What is a foodbank?”

Sasha described how her students had heard the word “foodbank” but did not quite understand what it meant. From the ensuing conversation, the students asked if they could go to a local foodbank. Even though this was not initially in Sasha’s lesson plans, her response was, “sure, why not?” Sasha shared how the flexibility proffered teachers within the school structure allowed her to follow the students’ interest. She stated how the field trip, “was just based on a question the kids had during read-aloud... [so they decided to] go and find out—to see what it is all about.” Sasha described how students’ eyes were opened to the fact that, “there are some people in our city, and around the community that might not have enough food for their family.”

From this question and the field trip, Allison and Sasha’s classes began to explore what it was like to live with poverty and the different faces of poverty in their city. This touched the students deeply and created a genuine desire for social change. As Allison explained, “they wanted to know more about their city... they wanted to know what are people doing out there to help people who may be less fortunate?” The recognition of student voice and critical interest in the community highlights the sense of agency found at the heart of place-conscious pedagogy. Not only did students want to understand an important social issue, they also wanted to know who in their community was living with poverty, why poverty existed in their city, and how the community was supporting its less fortunate. Motivated by student interest and desire to know more about poverty and address it in the local community, Allison and Sasha were successful in applying for an educational grant provided by the United Way.

Supported by the grant, the teachers and students began to explore practical means for actively confronting poverty and, specifically, for supporting people in the community who were experiencing homelessness. A total of five classes of Grade 1 and Grade 3 students began to work together as active agents for change within the community. The students decided they would purchase 33 backpacks, fill each of them with a variety of items for warmth and distribute them among local people who were homeless. The students decided on using backpacks when they realized, “when you don’t have a home, all your belongings are with you,” (Sasha). Along with the backpacks, the students included messages for the recipients letting them know they are loved and not forgotten. Sasha described how it was important for the students to ensure that people, “did not feel socially isolated and did not feel like no one cared for them”. The students researched this initiative by inviting a representative from the Hope Mission to visit the school so they could find out about the causes of homelessness and what items were needed most by people enduring the cold Edmonton winter. With this local information, students

determined what they would buy, created a budget for each backpack and went to a local clothing store to fill the backpacks with items such as socks, mittens, toiletries, and other essentials. When students realized the grant was not going to cover all the cost, they organized with the school community to raise additional money to successfully complete the project. The hand-filled backpacks were delivered to the city's Hope Mission and distributed to clients according to need.

When asked about how this project connected with provincial curriculum objectives, Allison and Sasha explained that the learning activities incorporated multiple subject areas while providing students with a context for applying curriculum and developing a deeper level of engagement and understanding—a deeper student experience than would have been offered by “worksheets and tests” (Allison). As Allison clarified, “I think any of their interests can fit into the curriculum. It’s our job as teachers to try to make it work.” Sasha agreed in that her Grade 3 students “were a lot more engaged, and [had] a deeper understanding of not just the content, but also of the skills and processes.”

Along with learning the prescribed curriculum, both teachers described the sense of pride, strong development of agency, and voice that clearly emerged for their students. Sasha even noticed an impact on how students treated each other in the classroom as they showed greater empathy and consideration. Sasha recounted how this project led students to see themselves as leaders in the school and the community in that they made a tangible difference and “spoke up for what is right.” Allison went on to describe how, through projects like this, students learn to see themselves as important contributors to their community and recognize their capacity to restructure the social conditions. Sasha further shared how parents had commented on the developing agency of their children as they learned about critical issues in the community and became engaged citizens: “students are going home and they’re actively talking about [the project], trying to get their family involved.”

As students exercised their growing sense of agency, they also widened their influence across the school, local businesses and even into the political realm. The classes involved in the project held a school-wide poverty awareness assembly at which students presented what they had learned about poverty and homelessness in Edmonton. Over thirty parents attended—many more than usual—and showed their support for the students: “parents were really, really inspired, and really proud of their children and how passionate they were,” (Sasha). Parents were able to see their own children as change agents within the community and how their work had a real impact on the quality of life for many people. Even the local member of Alberta’s Legislative Assembly and the Deputy Premier visited the school and emphasised that the students, “were not the leaders of tomorrow, [they are] the leaders of today,” and, though they are young, “they have a voice,” (Sasha). With this level of recognition, the students clearly saw that their work was making a difference in their school and community. They became the experts in understanding poverty and its specific nature at the place where they lived. In sharing their knowledge and demonstrating concrete action for transforming poverty, efforts at the school expanded to include a school-community food drive to stock the local foodbank. The food drive surpassed expectations and fostered a further initiative for students to visit the local Mustard Seed shelter for the homeless to help prepare and serve food for people in need.



Student summary of *Packs and a Promise*



Promises for packs

Place conscious and transformative

Place matters. We hope the two cases presented provide some sense of the place-conscious pedagogy occurring at Canadian schools. These cases are, however, only a small sample of how teachers and students are paying attention to the places where they live as a means of learning to act in the world. Though drawn from different sides of the country, each case speaks eloquently of the connection between place consciousness and transformative student agency. What the outdoor classroom in Eastport and backpacks in Edmonton have in common is a wonderful sense of how student agency can be grown and nurtured into something transformative through thoughtful and responsive teaching.

The place-conscious initiative of Jillian, Allison and Sasha also shares a sense of knowing where to begin. Echoing Jillian's observation that students "need ownership," Allison expressed how important it was for students to have a voice from the start and throughout the learning process: "students need to have their voice heard and they need to have a say in their education. I feel really passionately that these kids are going to be lifelong learners and we are a piece of their introduction to education." This openness to student interest can be challenging, but it can also counter the year-to-year routine of school and provide a source of resilience for teachers. As Sasha observed, the exciting part of working with students on place-conscious projects is the continual renewal of the learning context—that, "year after year, it's not the same." While the specific context may change, the commitment to place remains the same: "I believe in community and connection and belonging and purpose and identity and place," (Allison). For these teachers, the commitment to place seems to spring from an essential sense of its value in their own lives—a sense of self-identity that is affirmed by the positive outcomes of engaging students in the local. For Jillian, connecting her students to place is an authentic act of caring: "I want to know they are going to be good human beings who take part in the community—this helps with that!"

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