



## **The importance of people and place: Reimagining school curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand**

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EMMA McFADYEN

LEON BENADE

*Auckland University of Technology*

Place can be defined simply as space that matters to humans, exposing their subjective and emotional attachment, transforming space into a site of human significance. This research study explored how participant LEOTC<sup>1</sup> educators understood 'place', and how their perspectives and insights on place could inform local school curriculum design. Place-based pedagogy engages with a geographical location and focusses on understanding local history, cultures and the ecology of a place. Learning in a contextual setting can enable students and teachers to understand how events have shaped *spaces* into *places* and created a sense of community. It encourages the creation and sharing of stories, challenges prevailing assumptions, and encourages the exploration of new or different perspectives. Place-based pedagogy can connect people with a sense of belonging – locally and to the broader world. When schools engage in place-based approaches, their students and teachers have the opportunity to interact with community partners beyond their walls, fences and gates, thus broadening the ways schooling can be viewed and perceived. The concept of place is therefore relevant to school curriculum design, and this study, by discovering the 'notion of place' held by LEOTC educators through their insights and perspectives, is able to suggest how these insights and perspectives on place can inform school curriculum design.

This ecofeminist-inspired research study, influenced by an ethic of care, engaged the LEOTC educators in photo-elicitation and interviews. Ecofeminism originated as a theory and movement related to women and the environment (Estévez-Saá & Lorenzo-Modia, 2018), while an ethic of care stems from relational ethics that assumes human connectedness in context (Clement, 1996; Noddings, 2013). Metanarratives run counter to these theoretical perspectives, and to contest the homogenising perspective inspired by colonial experiences, the term 'western' was intentionally used throughout the study.

Photo-elicitation is a process involving the researcher or the participant providing photographs of a subject and discussing their photographic decision-making through semi structured interviews (Briggs et al., 2014). Thematic and visual narrative analysis of data collected by these methods supported the establishment of findings. The study aimed to contribute to the idea that a place-

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<sup>1</sup> Learning Experiences Outside The Classroom

based approach can be taken to developing a holistic, meaningful and balanced local curriculum – one that privileges a ‘sense of place’ and the relationship between humans and their environments as co-habitators.

## **THE EDUCATORS’ ‘NOTION OF PLACE’ AND HOW IT INFORMS SCHOOL CURRICULUM DESIGN**

Cresswell (2015) outlines theoretical perspectives on place at three levels: first, a descriptive perspective of places as singular entities, with unique qualities and social processes; second, “wider processes of construction” (p. 56); and third, a phenomenological perspective that explores the essence of being human in a place through concepts of dwelling. In this study, all three approaches were evident, suggesting that the concept of place is entangled and complex. Recognising this understanding was made possible by a post-structuralist process of analysis, developed from Soja’s (1999) work on *Thirdspace*. This conceptual work, and the concept of lived-space, is particularly helpful for developing a nuanced understanding of place.

Thirdspace is a concept developed by spatial theorist and urban geographer, Edward Soja. He in turn, was influenced by, and built on, the spatial groundwork established by Henri Lefebvre, an urban theorist, in his influential *The Production of Space* (1991). Using a phenomenological lens, Lefebvre claimed that social relations are affected by space, with space being socially produced. He recognised the significance of human lived experience in space, that is, how “the self, the body, makes sense of the world, and its own experiences of the world” (Benade, 2021, p. 7). Soja (1999) proposed a “trialectics of spatiality” (p. 265), consisting of ‘Firstspace’ (conceived space), Secondspace (perceived space) and Thirdspace (lived-space). The trialectics of spatiality are a “way of conceptualizing and understanding the world” (Soja, 1999, p. 262). Thirdspace consciousness “enables us to see beyond what is presently known, to explore ‘other spaces’... that are both similar to and significantly different from the real-and-imagined spaces we already recognize” (Soja, 1999, p. 269). Thus, Thirdspace is a heuristic enabling perception and comprehension beyond what is directly known. By understanding, at a more complex level, how LEOTC educators make sense of their spatial realities, it becomes feasible to (re)imagine ‘place’ and what it could mean for local school curriculum design. Such design is a task also encouraged by the ‘leading local curriculum guide’ series (Ministry of Education, 2021). The process of this study, which was attuned to Thirdspace, can be applied to any school community as a means of informing its local school curriculum.

The photo-elicitation strategy revealed the LEOTC educators’ connections to place and the connections they perceived between people and landscapes. In these connections, complex time-space entanglements are obvious. That is to say, people’s connections to landscapes and places of experience are not frozen in time: they have a perpetual and life-long link to places, and these links, in turn, are shaped by their experiences of place. These experiences may shape, or are shaped by, values of care, respect, and responsibility. Certainly, these values were evident in the LEOTC educators’ interrelationship with place, and they demonstrated care for different worldviews and concepts of guardianship. Their values translate to an understanding of how to repair and heal a community, and

are informed by local knowledge, people and place. This study demonstrated that the LEOTC educators had access to place knowledge and recognised their critical role in sharing and gifting place knowledge.

This study was located in the Tairāwhiti/Gisborne region. To apply a Thirdspace consciousness (Soja, 1999), it is evident that for the LEOTC educators, this region and its settlement represented the conceived space, while their narratives represented the perceived and lived spaces. In their narratives, an indigenous worldview and a western worldview were in contention. On one hand, the LEOTC educators' saw a universe in unison and they could connect the ways of living with a particular landscape, while on the other, they saw a competitive, consumerist influence on place. Narvaez et al. (2019) portray this western worldview as fragmented, disenchanting, and amoral. The LEOTC educators' attempt to navigate between these two socially constructed worlds simultaneously in their work. Being able to negotiate a relationship between the two worldviews is "imperative but not unproblematic" (Penetito, 2009, p. 21), which the LEOTC educators seek to resolve by restoring place and role modelling ways to live in harmony where both worldviews can work dialectically.

Reinhabitation and decolonisation (Gruenewald, 2008) are concepts that can inform school curriculum design and relate to the tension between the dominant western narrative and the marginalised indigenous narrative. The LEOTC educators' discussion of this tension is a reminder that curriculum designers understand whose knowledge has been organised and conceived in the curriculum (Halbert & Salter, 2019). Such understanding can support the critique of those aspects of curriculum which currently exclude the ecological elements of place, and that favour instead a western worldview that separates people and culture from an ecological consciousness. The contrast of indigenous and western epistemologies is a contrast of homogeneity and heterogeneity, a local-global dynamic.

A local-global consciousness is important to school curriculum design, because it provides insight to the fundamental contribution of 'the local' to globalisation (Halbert & Salter, 2019; Perkins & Thorns, 2012). Understanding the local-global dynamic and its relation to societal issues turns attention to thinking how 'the local' is given agency to challenge 'the global' in school curriculum design. A local curriculum can support reinhabitation and decolonisation by looking for ways to reimagine healthy communities. One way is to design curricula that favour the exploration of places. It is through such experiences that students acquire the multi-perspectives regarding place knowledge, which supports 'the local' (as in a school community) with a form of agency to inform local curriculum. Local curriculum knowledge can then filter through to national curriculum and contribute to informing how school curriculum is designed and valued at 'the global' level.

## **CONCLUSION**

Schools are enjoined by the Ministry of Education to "strengthen [their] local curriculum, respond to progress, and reinforce learning partnerships with parents and whānau" (2021, "Leading local curriculum guide series"). This suggests that researchers should continue to focus on place theory and practice, supported by appropriate theoretical conceptualisations with strong links to

ecological care. Such studies have to be cognisant of the need for a “negotiated relationship” (Penetito, 2009, p. 21) between indigenous and western epistemologies, and they must include a concern with finding ways that school educators can mediate and bridge these two worldviews to achieve a collaborative partnership. This study has shown that place-based experiences can support the well-being of people and place, contribute to developing healthy communities, and develop a critical and sensitive understanding of the difference between indigenous and western worldviews. Young (2019) refers to “a great connection challenge” and “current epidemic of separation” (pp. 220-221). He proposes transforming this separation through the process of reconnecting, suggesting a model based on an “intergenerational transfer of skills and connection-based knowledge” (Young, 2019, p. 221). This model could support the repairing of culture and aid “in the reestablishment of a thriving, regenerative culture for future generations” (p. 221). Local curriculum design could be the means to support the navigation of such an exploration with discussion around the ‘reimagining’ of a healthy community. A local-global consciousness could contribute to informing local curriculum design to support a ‘reimagining’ through “relationships, resolutions, and processes” (Seamon, 2018, p. 66). The starting-point is to establish relationships with local community members who hold place-based knowledge to find ways to reimagine healthy, holistic communities and ecosystems together.

The time is opportune for a relational shift in school curriculum design in Aotearoa New Zealand from the concepts and language of a dominant western European worldview on schooling, to one that is informed by and guided by te ao Māori perspectives of place and space—which means having an indigenous worldview in partnership with a western worldview to support living in harmony with a place by encouraging a critical and connected consciousness. There are signs of such a relational shift is happening. It is time schoolteachers take up their place in these discussions.

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