



The Place of Place-Based Education in the Australian Primary Geography Curriculum

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Abstract

The idea for this paper emerged from a recent qualitative investigation which examined the ways in which six Australian primary teachers conceptualised geography and geography teaching (Preston, 2014b). A finding of this research was a strong correlation between the breadth of geographical understandings and the years of experience and age of participants. For early career teachers, conceptions of geography were narrowly confined to information-oriented perceptions. Whereas, the two teachers, with more than 30 years in primary schools, portrayed much more complex understandings. Their conceptions depicted geography as process-oriented and in relational terms, that is, understandings of geography that recognise the interactions and interdependence of people and environments (Bradbeer, Healey, & Kneale, 2004). Both these experienced teachers were also committed to place-based, inquiry approaches to geography teaching and had been using place-based methodologies long before it became a *new movement* in education (Morgan, 2009, p. 521). This prompted me to question why geography education seldom features in discourses of place-based education and to contemplate the oft-cited argument (at least in the United States) that the recent focus on curriculum standards is incompatible with locally responsive curriculum (Jennings, Swidler, & Koliba, 2005).

In order to answer these questions, I explore the intersections and divergences between place-based education and geography education in the Australian context. Drawing on Smith's (2002) and Gruenewald's (2003) conception of place-based education, and the new Australian geography curriculum document, I argue that primary geography education has strong synergies with place-based education methodologies and aims. I further suggest that a geographical perspective can augment place-based education to enrich and broaden students' understandings of the complex interactions between and within places. This argument is balanced with a critical examination of the practice

of geography education acknowledging that the tradition of fieldwork might benefit from place-based education approaches that enable more embodied, socially engaged interactions with places. Thus, I contend, place-based education and geography education are mutually supportive and each can extend the other. The paper concludes with a reflection on the challenges in Australia in preparing primary teachers for the implementation of the new (place-based) geography curriculum.

Place-Based Education

The concept of place-based education is often attributed to US scholars, for example, Gruenewald (2003), Orr (1992, 1994), Smith (2002), Sobel (1996, 2004), Theobald (1997), and Woodhouse and Knapp (2000). It is viewed as a corrective to an educational climate that is perceived as increasingly framed by a discourse of accountability and a focus on standards-based teaching, decontextualized knowledge and mandated testing (Gruenewald, 2003). Advocates argue the benefits of a place-based education approach include: strengthening connections between students/schools and their communities (Smith, 2002), reducing student alienation through increasing the relevance and authenticity of learning experiences (Theobald & Curtiss, 2000), providing opportunity for active participation in democratic processes including problem solving and decision-making (Sobel, 2004), increasing students' appreciation of their local environments (Theobald, 1997), and fostering ecological literacy (Orr, 1992).

Place-based education takes a variety of forms but, in a review of place-based learning practices, Smith (2002, p. 593) identified five common elements. These include:

- using local phenomena as the basis for curriculum development;
- an emphasis on learning experiences that encourage students to become creators (rather than the consumers) of knowledge;

- a study focus that is determined by students' questions and concerns;
- the role of teachers as "experienced guides, co-learners, and brokers of community resources and learning possibilities" (p. 593); and
- increasing the permeability of boundaries between school and community and the frequency of participation and engagement in and with the community.

Gruenewald (2003) extends Smith's five key features by advocating for a transformative approach to place-based education; a pedagogy that is socially and ecologically critical and which has an ultimate aim of "learning more socially just and ecologically sustainable ways of being in the world" (p. 9). Below, I explore the extent to which these key characteristics outlined by Gruenewald (2003) and Smith (2002) cohere with the new Australian primary geography curriculum. But first, I examine some understandings of place-based education in the Australian context. This is followed by an interrogation of the term *place* drawing on the work of Doreen Massey.

Place-Based Education in Australia

In education literature, place-based education is characterised as a *new movement* or an *emerging field* (Morgan, 2009, p. 521). However, place-based education is not a new phenomenon. In its many forms, place-based education has a long history in cultural studies and natural history studies (Smith, 2002), and, in the Australian context, through outdoor and environmental education. Over the last two decades, writers in the field of outdoor and/or environmental education in Australia have been promoting the efficacy of a place-based approach to help reverse the detachment of humans from the more-than-human world (e.g., Birrell, 2001; Brookes, 1993, 1994; Cameron, 2001, 2003; Ellis-Smith, 1999; Gough, 1990; Martin, 1999; Nettleton, 1993; Preston, 2004; Seddon, 1997; Stewart, 2003, 2004; Wattchow, 2001a, 2001b; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). In my own work as a geographer *turned* outdoor and environmental educator, I have argued for an outdoor and environmental education practice that replaces "abstracted environments with particular places" and substitutes "generic methods with contextually specific learning opportunities" (Preston, 2004, p. 18). In the program in which I was then involved, I was seeking to cultivate and explicitly value the use of local knowledge and local places to improve connections between humans and the more-than-human world as well as providing meaningful opportunities for strengthening community links and action. Similar to Gruenewald's critical pedagogy of place, this

critical outdoor education focuses on contextual knowledge of particular places to develop understandings, and a reshaping, of interactions, relationships and connections with individuals, communities and regions and their environments. This *situationist* approach, Brookes argues, brings "much needed sensitivity to cultural, regional, historical, and social contexts" (2003, p. 119). The critical lens also seeks to interrogate the cultural beliefs and practices that may be contributing to social injustice and ecological destruction, typically organised under headings such as rationalism, patriarchy, individualism, anthropocentrism, and positivism (Brookes, 1994; Martin, 1999). Such scrutiny, it is argued, provides opportunity to develop a capacity to identify and/or choose alternative *mindsets* (Brookes, 1993) or worldviews, that is, those that encourage more socially and ecologically just and sustainable lifestyles.

While geography, as the study of place, has obvious affinities of subject matter and purpose, it is seldom mentioned in place-based education discourse in Australia or elsewhere (Israel, 2012). For example, Gruenewald (2003) provides a comprehensive list of traditions that are connected to place-based education including "outdoor education, indigenous education, environmental and ecological education, bioregional education, democratic education, multicultural education, community-based education . . ." (p. 3); conspicuous in its absence is geography education. This omission is surprising given the distinct and significant contributions of geography to the study of place, particularly its utility in understanding and analysing the relationships between environments (places) and human activities. Geography's spatial and scalar perspectives provide rich insights into the study of place. These perspectives afford a means of analysing the myriad of connections and effects of natural, social, cultural, economic, political, technological and global processes at a range of scales. Geography thus attends to the multiple intersections and interactions within and beyond place. This, I argue below, is crucial to the critical perspective espoused by Gruenewald (2003) and, in the next section, I elaborate on the merit of an outward looking sense of place through Doreen Massey's conceptualisation of place.

Massey's Conceptualisation of Place

Although place is a term at the very heart of geography and ubiquitous in geography education, its meaning is contested in the academic field (Major, 2010, p. 90). Depending on the geographic persuasion, the meanings ascribed to place can be widely divergent. In this paper, I draw on poststructuralist, cultural geographer,

Doreen Massey to critique some views of place commonly associated with place-based education in order to show the ways in which a *critical*, geographical perspective on place can enrich and broaden our “understanding of the social world and how to effect transformation in and of it” (Callard, 2009, p. 219).

Massey (1994a) often defines place by describing what it is not. She depicts place as: not territorially bounded (but open and porous); not having single identities (but always multiple, unfixed and contested); not static (but dynamic, ever changing). She suggests that places should not be viewed as “points or areas on a map, but as integrations of space and time; as *spatio-temporal events*” (2005, p. 130, Emphasis in original). Massey does not deny the importance of the uniqueness of place but argues that the particularity of place lies in the mix of links and interconnections to that which lies beyond (1994a, p. 5). In other words, places are shaped by other places “constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” (1994b, p. 154). A further element of the specificity of place, she argues, is the accumulated history of a place – “the product of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages, both local and to the wider world” (1994b, p. 156). Thus, the assemblage of processes and linkages that construct places extend beyond the local, often at sites far removed in time and place. This outward looking or “a global sense of place” (Massey, 2005, p. 131) provides a relational reading of place; one which considers place as immersed in global networks, distant influences both past and present, and continuously changing.

Massey’s conceptualisation of place is significant to understanding place in place-based education. The discourse of place-based education often represents local place as homogenous, unchanging and bounded (Israel, 2012; McInerney, Smyth, & Down, 2011); as “relics of the past” (McInerney, Smyth, & Down, 2011, p. 9). Massey cautions against these *nostalgic* notions of place; notions that, she argues, are founded on a desire for constancy, “a source of unproblematic identity” (1994b, p. 151) and/or “as a haven from the global world” (1994a, p. 10). Gruenewald and Smith, for example, situate place-based education as part of a local movement to “mitigate against the potentially harmful effects of globalization” (2008, p. xiv). Massey claims it is unhelpful to “romanticise the local and to instate the global . . . as . . . the only real struggle to be aimed at” (2005, p. 184). Her critical geographical perspective reminds us that each place has a distinct combination of broader and more local social relations; that places are constructed through webs of power relations and the unequal

distribution of resources within and across places, within what she calls “the wider power-geometries of space” (2005, p. 130). McInerney, Smyth, and Down (2011) concur that we should take care not to romanticise the notion of place in identity construction, pointing out that:

Many urban and rural environments are far from idyllic places for children and their families. It is easy to feel a strong sense of attachment to an aesthetically pleasing landscape . . . much less so to a squalid, unsafe, environmentally degraded place or one that is fractured by social, economic and racial divides. (p. 10)

It is thus important to recognise that social relations in place are experienced and interpreted differently by those holding different positions as part of place.

Geography education’s capacity to utilise multiple perspectives and scales to comprehend and analyse how places work, I argue, is well positioned to support place-based education theory and practice. From Massey’s perspective, such a geography education would attend to a global sense of place; an understanding that place is both “internally multiple . . . [and] also a product of relations which spread out way beyond it” (2004, p. 6). In the following section, I explore these possibilities through the Australian geography curriculum. Here, I return to the characteristics of place-based education, as identified by Smith (2002) and Gruenewald (2003), to consider the synergies, differences and opportunities of place-based education with geography education in the context of the primary geography curriculum.

The Place of Place in the Australian Geography Curriculum

Geography, in the Australian curriculum, is characterised as the study of place. In the rationale of the geography curriculum document, geography is defined as “a structured way of exploring, analysing and understanding the characteristics of the places that make up our world . . .” (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2014a). Place is also one of the seven concepts (Place, Space, Environment, Interconnection, Sustainability, Scale, and Change) through which geographical understanding is developed in the Australian curriculum. Place as a concept is a key idea that “can be applied across the subject to identify a question, guide an investigation, organise information, suggest an explanation or assist decision-making” (ACARA, 2014a). Maude, the Lead Writer of the Australian geography curriculum, explains that rather than defining

these geographical concepts as objects of study, they should be understood in terms of the thinking they produce (2014, p. 44). Thus, in the curriculum document, the concept *place* is described rather than defined:

The concept of place develops students' curiosity and wonder about diversity of the world's places, peoples, cultures and environments. Students examine why places have particular environmental and human characteristics, explore the similarities and differences between them, investigate their meanings and significance to people and examine how they are managed and changed. (ACARA, 2014a)

Place in the descriptions above is not confined to an object of study. In geography, place is also understood as a means of analysis. This is an important distinction and gestures to one of the most potent aspects of geography, that is, its "ability to recognise the connections between different scales and different perspectives" (Shimeld, 2012, p. 41). Places are understood to be located spatially, connected to other places, dynamic and multifaceted. This understanding of place coheres with Massey's open and mutable sense of place described above.

In the above, it is clear that the study of place in the Australian geography curriculum is not limited to the local. However, in Foundation to Year 2, it undoubtedly meets Smith's (2002) criterion of using local phenomena as the basis of curriculum development. The curriculum at this level has a strong focus on students' personal worlds, "the geography of their lives and their own places" (ACARA, 2014a). The ACARA document explains that at these levels students learn about their own place and build a connection with it in order to develop "their sense of identity and belonging" and awareness that "places should be cared for" with a consideration of "how they can contribute to this" (2014a). It also states that interest and curiosity in distant places is encouraged at these levels and students are introduced to the concept of interconnections through thinking about how they are connected to other places. Place is thus conceived in relational terms and, even at this young age, there is opportunity for students to be introduced to the idea that the "lived reality of our daily lives' is utterly dispersed" (Massey, 2005, p. 184).

In the middle years, Years 3 and 4, there is also a focus on the local, but the study of the human and environmental characteristics of places at this level extends to places in different locations at the regional and national scale. The importance of the environment to support life and sustainability are key areas of study in the middle

years and an affective dimension is introduced as students "reflect on how people feel about places" (ACARA, 2014a). In upper primary, Years 5 and 6, the interdependence of various phenomena in and beyond the local is again highlighted as students explore "factors that shape the diverse characteristics of different places and how people, places and environments are interconnected" (ACARA, 2014a). At Year 6, a global scale is used to study sociocultural, economic and demographic diversity. The curriculum at these levels attends to Massey's contention that places are constructed through webs of power relations and through the unequal distribution of resources within and across places.

There is, thus, ample opportunity to study local phenomena (Smith, 2002) in the primary geography curriculum. Furthermore, the emphasis on interconnections with other places at different scales (and times) has the additional benefit of adding dimensions to what otherwise could be views of place that are static, essentialised, one-dimensional and contained (Massey, 1994a). As Swift (2004) suggests in her discussion of the United Kingdom *Valuing Place* project,

a pupil's geographical experience would be flawed if teaching geography centred too much on the individual, the local scale and the local place. The challenge... is to provoke a similarly intense learning situation around the global in the local, global interconnectedness. (p. 10)

Engagement in and With the Community

Another element of place-based education identified by Smith (2002), that has strong coherence with geography methodologies, is engagement in and with the surrounding community and the frequent and direct interaction with local place/s. Geography educators have long seen the value of using first-hand experiences outside the classroom as a means of exploring and understanding characteristics of places. The significance of direct experience in geography is also evidenced in the Australian curriculum document which states: "The curriculum should also provide opportunities for fieldwork at all stages, as this is an essential component of geographical learning" (ACARA, 2014a). Fieldwork in this document is described as "any activity involving the observation and recording of information outside the classroom" (ACARA, 2014a).

The emphasis on skill development, information gathering and knowledge acquisition through fieldwork in geography education has some dissonances with a place-based approach to field experiences. Israel (2012, p. 79) points

out that place-based education uses “field-based experiences to enable students to situate themselves as members of social and ecological communities and to cultivate a sense of ethical responsibility for the well-being of those communities”. While it is recognised that fieldwork in geography education can have ethical and affective impacts (Boyle et al., 2007; Fuller, Edmonson, France, Higgitt, & Ratinen, 2006; Hope, 2009; Hougie, 2010; Morris, 2010), it is often seen “primarily as a cognitive process of knowledge and skill acquisition” (Israel, 2012, p. 78). Israel contends that geography education could be enhanced by a place-based framework that connects field experiences with ethical objectives. This argument coheres with my own view that fieldwork, which does not engage the affective domain, represents a missed opportunity for deeper, more embodied engagement with place. In my own practice, I have become increasingly dissatisfied with traditional methods of geographical fieldwork that support a detached view of phenomena. I describe this as the clipboard style of field *work* – a task-oriented event in which participants observe phenomena and record information in order to answer predetermined questions. My discontent with an observed detachment between participant and place, in this type of field experience, prompted me to acquire and use the skills of outdoor education to assist students, through extended experiences in places, to develop relations with, and cultivate ethical concern for, people and places (Preston, 2004). This is less like *work* in the field but rather, an embodied, socially engaged interaction with places with the possibility that, at the end of the experience, participants might think differently about themselves and their surroundings. This place-based approach offers experiences of being in relation to one’s self, others and the world.

Opportunities to engage with local place/ neighbourhoods are also possible through the integration of children’s personal geographies in the primary geography curriculum (Catling, 2005; Catling & Willy, 2009; Catling & Martin, 2011; Catling, Willy, & Butler, 2013; Martin, 2006, 2008). Catling and Martin have been strong advocates for a primary geography curriculum that draws on students’ everyday lives and extends this to help students make sense of their world. In recent years, there has been increased interest in children’s geographies including the study of children’s engagement with, and use of, local spaces (including playgrounds, streets, and neighbourhoods) as well as children’s wider connections with people and places (Catling, Willy, & Butler, 2013). This second point recognises that children are connecting to the broader world on a daily basis through television,

stories, the internet, social media, online games, clothing, travel, popular culture, food and so forth.

Children’s geographies also encompass imagined places as well as spaces where there is a “fantastical mixing of the material and the imaginary” (Jones, 2000, p. 42). Inherent in the work of children’s geographies is a recognition that children experience the world differently to adults (Yarwood & Tyrell, 2012) and frequently subvert spaces within adult structures to build their own geographies (Jones, 2000). The places and spaces of children’s geographies are thus permeable, flexible, variable and multidimensional and have obvious synergies with Massey’s conceptualisation of place. Catling and Martin (2011) argue that children’s experiences of and in localities such as “affordance, appropriation, subversion, exploration, social interaction, space and place knowledge, and environmental improvement” (p. 328) are largely not valued by the academic discipline of geography. They contend that such knowledge, understanding and experience is valid and *powerful* and “should be engaged with and not treated as lacking or impaired and needing simply to be replaced or amended” (p. 328). These authors call for children to be viewed as creators of knowledge rather than as recipients of *hand-me-down* curricula (p. 332). This aligns with the intent of an inquiry approach which frames the Australian geography curriculum and is elaborated in the next section.

Inquiry in Place-Based Education

In the above paragraphs, I have shown that geography education, to varying extents, attends to two of Smith’s place-based education criteria – that is, using local phenomena as the basis for curriculum development and participating in and with the community (through fieldwork and attending to children’s geographies). The remaining three aspects of place-based education identified by Smith (2002) are:

- an emphasis on learning experiences that encourage students to become creators (rather than the consumers) of knowledge;
- a study focus that is determined by students’ questions and concerns; and
- the role of teachers as “experienced guides, co-learners, and brokers of community resources and learning possibilities” (p. 593).

These characteristics strongly align with geography education’s inquiry approach. This is illustrated in the description of inquiry-based learning in the Australian geography curriculum:

Inquiry-based learning assists students to develop their capacity for self-management. It gives them a role in

directing their own learning and in planning and carrying out investigations... This enables them to become independent learners who can apply geographical understanding and skills to decisions they will have to make in the future. (ACARA, 2014a)

The document explains that “[i]nquiry will progressively move from more teacher-centred to more student-centred as students develop cognitive abilities and gain experience with the processes and methods across the years of schooling” (ACARA, 2014a). As well as being central to the pedagogical approach for teachers of Australian geography, inquiry is viewed as a methodology for ongoing, lifelong learning for students. One of the five core aims of the Australian geography curriculum states that geography seeks to develop in students “the capacity to be competent, critical and creative users of geographical inquiry methods and skills” (ACARA, 2014a).

A Critical Pedagogy of Place: Gruenewald

Another of the core aims of the Australian geography curriculum is to ensure that students develop “as informed, responsible and active citizens who can contribute to the development of an environmentally and economically sustainable, and socially just world” (ACARA, 2014a). This statement has clear synergies with Gruenewald’s (2003) call to link school and place-based experience to “the larger landscape of cultural and ecological politics” – what he terms decolonisation and reinhabitation (p. 9). A critical pedagogy of place, he claims, involves firstly learning to live well socially and ecologically (reinhabitation) and secondly, recognising and changing ways of thinking that prevent us living well in our total environments (decolonization). Geography’s contribution to Gruenewald’s requisition is well articulated in the commitment in the Australian geography curriculum to sustainability as “both a goal and a way of thinking” (ACARA, 2014a). There is an acknowledgement that sustainability depends on “the maintenance or restoration of the environmental functions that sustain all life and human wellbeing (economic and social)” and “[a]n understanding of the causes of unsustainability” including human actions and “the attitudinal, demographic, social, economic and political causes of these human actions” (2014a). The curriculum is also cognisant of the contested views on how to progress towards sustainability and that “these are often informed by worldviews” (2014a).

In the year level descriptions for the primary geography curriculum, there are sound examples of content that support Gruenewald’s reinhabitation and decolonisation. In Foundation, students learn “about their own place and [how] building a connection with it contributes to their sense of identity and belonging and an understanding of why and how they should look after places” (ACARA, 2014b). Year 1 “continues to develop the idea of active citizenship as students are prompted to further consider how places can be cared for” (2014b). At Year 2, through the concept of interconnection, students investigate “their links with places locally and globally” and, at Year 3, they explore similarities and difference between feelings about places and how “feelings about places are the basis for actions to protect places” (2014b). Year 4 focuses on sustainability and “the different views on how sustainability can be achieved” including an understanding that “sustainability means more than the careful use of resources and the safe management of waste” (2014b). At Years 5 and 6, students explore the interconnections between people and environments/places at various scales including global.

Contrary to the arguments (often originating in the US) that state and national curriculum standards conflict with the purposes of place-based education (Jennings, Swidler, & Koliba, 2005), the above analysis suggests a complementarity between them. The geography curriculum is not only amenable to studies in and of place. It also advocates for a critical engagement with “attitudinal, demographic, social, economic and political causes” of unsustainable practices in and beyond place (ACARA, 2014a). This supports Gruenewald’s (2003) transformative aim of “learning more socially just and ecologically sustainable ways of being in the world” (p. 9). While place-based education is not formally cited in the final curriculum document, it was explicitly included in the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Geography* document (ACARA, 2011) that preceded the curriculum document. In this text, a place-based perspective is situated as one of three perspectives that frame investigations of place in geography education. Further, this document speaks to my desire for a more embodied, relational approach to studies of place: “A place-based perspective also includes an exploration of people’s aesthetic, emotional and spiritual connections to places and landscapes and the ways in which people’s lives are shaped by where they live” (2011, p. 4). It would be interesting to know why these statements were not included in the final iteration of the curriculum document.

Conclusion

Smith's (2002) five elements of place-based education have been used to highlight some affinities between place-based education and primary geography education in Australia. I have also pointed to divergences between the two traditions, namely conceptions of place and the conduct of field experiences (bearing in mind that both traditions have many forms and the degree of affiliation or deviation may vary). Drawing on Massey's outward understanding of place – a conceptualisation that attends to the networks of social relations and the “links and interconnections to that ‘beyond’” (Massey, 1994a, p. 5) – I argue that geography can make productive contributions to the scholarship of place-based education. Through analysis of the Australian primary geography curriculum, I have demonstrated its potential to attend to Massey's notion of an outward or global sense of place. This rich understanding of place, I argue, can expand the learning possibilities of place-based education. I have also contemplated the contributions of place-based education to geography education. In particular, I noted the benefits of a place-based approach to geography fieldwork – one that promotes more embodied, socially engaged and ultimately, ethical relationships with place. This was followed by an exploration of the opportunities in geography education to further engage in and with communities (local and beyond) through the integration of children's personal geographies in the primary geography curriculum. Finally, some of the ways in which the Australian primary geography curriculum offers scope for a critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald, 2003) was explored. Analysis of the curriculum indicates that place is an explicit and central element in the primary curriculum and there is some opportunity for critical inquiry.

Returning to the research findings that were the provocation for this paper, I cannot help but feel a little pessimistic about the implementation of place-based curriculum and a critical pedagogy of place in the primary geography context. The research findings indicated that pre-service and early career in-service primary teachers had very limited conceptions of geography (Preston, 2014a; 2014b). In these conceptions, it was clear that “place remains a convenient container for factual details about different parts of the world” (Major, 2010, p. 90). The success of a geographically-framed place-based education, as described in this paper, lies in an understanding of the multidimensionality of the discipline and a conception of place that attends to the complex assemblage of linkages, processes and social relations. Simplistic, unidimensional conceptions of geography and place, I believe, will limit the

potential for rich and meaningful learning in, through and for places.

While there are examples of teachers currently using place-based approaches to facilitate effective geographical learning experiences in primary schools, research suggests that this is not the norm. Nor is it surprising given that there is no requirement for specialist geography training in geography for primary teachers and the diminutive time devoted to the area in teaching courses (Kriewaldt, 2006). The geography education community has been very successful in promoting the value and importance of geography and producing high quality curriculum. The challenge now lies in supporting the next generation of primary teachers in the implementation of the curriculum.

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