

THE REWARDS OF PROFESSIONAL CHANGE: TWO PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES OF TRANSFORMING OUTDOOR EDUCATION

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Abstract

Embarking on and sustaining professional change is often a challenging process for educators. This is particularly so within a broader context of rapid (r)evolution in curriculum, pedagogical and assessment-related developments in the compulsory school sector in Aotearoa New Zealand over the past decade. Teachers' and school leaders' accounts of professional learning and change in recent issues of this journal have suggested it can be both risky and rewarding, with a range of impacts and outcomes for all involved. In this paper I pick up on the notion of the possible rewards of professional change, drawing on the experiences of two generalist primary school teachers engaging in curriculum and pedagogical change in outdoor education within the Health and Physical Education learning area. Specifically, the contributions of outdoor-based learning in a local bush reserve to teachers' own sense of personal wellbeing and rejuvenated sense of professional identity are explored. Here I speculate about the potentially renewing components of professional change in outdoor education in HPE for teachers themselves.

Key words

Professional change; outdoor education; wellbeing; teacher rejuvenation

Introduction

Change, and responding and adapting to change, is a hallmark of the everyday work of teachers and school leaders. A glance at educational developments in Aotearoa New Zealand over just the past decade reveals a raft of centrally-driven changes influencing teachers' professional practice. Significantly, we have seen the introduction of 'new' official curricula with *The New Zealand Curriculum* in 2007 and *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* in 2008; an array of government policies and strategies aimed at enhancing student learning (for example, *Ka Hikitia Accelerating Success 2013–2017* and *Tātaiako: Cultural competencies for Teachers of Māori Learners*); and the implementation of revised or new national assessment requirements, including National Standards in literacy and numeracy for schools with students in years 1 to 8 in 2010. Whyte, House, and Keys' (2016) recent examination of innovative learning environments, engages with (yet) another development in the educational landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the requisite collaboration and learning undertaken by school staff to respond positively to this change. Further, teachers' stories and accounts of professional learning and change in a special issue of this journal (for example Prince, 2015; Smith, 2015) point to the potentially stressful and frustrating aspects of professional change, as well as the "immense and exciting" challenges and "risks and rewards" (Groundwater-Smith, 2015, p. 41).

This article picks up on the notion of 'rewards' that teachers may experience as a part of conducting professional change, in this instance in outdoor education within the Health and Physical Education (HPE) learning area (Ministry of Education, 2007). Transformation of pedagogical practice in the 'second tier' learning area of HPE in primary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand over the past two decades has been argued to be limited (e.g., Petrie, 2016). This is despite the notable philosophical and structural changes promulgated in HPE curriculum policy through this period (Ministry of Education, 1999, 2007). Petrie (2016), for example, laments the grip of entrenched "practice architectures" or "sayings, doings, and relatings" (p. 538) on what can and does occur in the name of physical education in primary schools. She provides a compelling case of how these practice architectures work together to sustain traditional fitness and sport-related approaches to physical education in primary schools over innovative alternatives. Elsewhere (Cosgriff, 2015), I have

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suggested parallels exist between HPE and outdoor education in this regard. This is evident through scholarly concern about the persistence of decontextualised, commodified adventure approaches in school programming; the creep of ‘experts’ and external providers into outdoor activity provision in schools; and the limited attention accorded the socioecological and more “person-place and relational” (Mannion and Lynch, 2016, p. 86) aspects of outdoor learning. Successfully enacting the holistic visions for HPE embedded in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) in HPE-related teaching programmes appears to be neither straightforward nor a short term endeavour for primary school teachers and their school communities.

Given this broader context, and the dearth of examples of innovative outdoor education in HPE in primary schools and of teachers’ experiences of conducting professional change in this area, my intent here is to share a ‘good news story’. Findings from a collaborative, practice-based inquiry that reviewed and reconceptualised outdoor education are drawn on to add to professional discussion about generalist primary teachers transforming outdoor education in HPE in their local sites. The project involved two primary school teachers (Joel¹ and Mike), the school principal (Cole), and myself. In this article I focus on some rewards of professional change in outdoor education in HPE by exploring the wellbeing-related benefits and sense of rejuvenated professional identity Mike and Joel experienced. I seek here to accentuate positive outcomes for teachers themselves of curriculum and pedagogical change in outdoor education and, in so doing, stimulate consideration about the potential renewal and rejuvenation that teachers may experience from conducting professional change. Although this is only a small case study of practice and no claims are made about the generalisability of findings to other teachers or school contexts, it is my hope that Joel and Mike’s positive experiences may offer points of inspiration for other primary teachers considering or involved in transforming outdoor education in HPE. Before introducing the study and teachers’ experiences, the next section briefly presents some perspectives about wellbeing-related aspects of outdoor engagement as further background.

Wellbeing and outdoor activity

The positive health and wellbeing-related impacts of being and moving in and around ‘green’ (e.g., bush, parks, gardens) and ‘blue’ (e.g., lakes, sea, rivers) ‘natural’ outdoor settings have been the focus of considerable scholarly attention across varied disciplinary domains. In a recent international anthology, for example, benefits as wide ranging as enhanced learning and concentration; stress recovery; improvements to physical, social, emotional, psychological and spiritual wellbeing; connectedness to nature and place; and enhanced environmental care are claimed for diverse populations (see Barton, Bragg, Wood, & Pretty, 2016). Relatedly, Gesler and Kearns (2002) note the extent to which the concept of “therapeutic landscapes” wherein nature and the physical environment “afford healing powers” (p. 121) is recognised cross culturally. Research has also examined the relational, experiential and mobility components of human-place and nature interactions and their influences and impacts on human wellbeing (e.g. Brymer, Cuddihy, & Sharma-Brymer, 2010; Gatrell, 2013).

National curriculum policy in Health and Physical Education (Ministry of Education, 1999, 2007, 2008) and a range of scholarly work about outdoor education in Aotearoa New Zealand also recognises this synergistic interplay between personal, interpersonal, societal and environmental wellbeing; the outdoors; and movement. Examining the place of outdoor education within HPE at the time of a newly introduced HPE curriculum, Boyes’ (2000), for example, argues the relevance of “critical outdoor education” and its associated exploration of social, ecological and physical interrelationships and influences on health and wellbeing (p. 85). The inextricable and reciprocal links between human identity, wellbeing and outdoor places also threads through more recent scholarly work about the purpose and practice of outdoor education (e.g. Brown, 2012; Brown & Heaton, 2015; Hill, 2013).

Although this article is situated within this broad context of outdoor education curriculum and pedagogical matters and impact, it focuses on the perspectives and experiences of teachers rather than students. The following section now turns to introduce the study and findings.

¹ Teachers’ names as well as the name of the bush reserve are pseudonyms agreed to by research partners.

An introduction to the study

The study was a collaborative, practice-based inquiry undertaken in the teachers' primary school in the North Island that began in late 2013 and continued for approximately two years. It was initiated following a general review of HPE practice in the wider school community that had been triggered by school leaders' exposure to the findings disseminated from a project reimagining HPE in four primary school classrooms (see Petrie et al, 2013 for details). The collaborative action inquiry process entailed us working together as partners in a dialogic enterprise to "... learn from and with each other" (Berryman, 2013, p. 8). We sought to review and reconceptualise outdoor education, one of the seven "key areas of learning" in the HPE learning area (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 22), using the teaching as inquiry process as a guide (Ministry of Education, 2007). Through doing so, we aimed to meet the needs of the diverse learners in Joel and Mike's classes and school-based curriculum goals, as well as give expression to the holistic and socio-ecological intentions of the HPE learning area in the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). We also aimed to identify the conditions that support teachers and a school principal to engage in critical inquiry in outdoor education in a primary school setting. To achieve these ends, the project entailed a series of dynamic cycles of dialogue, practitioner inquiry, teaching and learning, and analysis. During these cycles a range of data was generated, including interview transcripts, teacher planning documents, co-constructed (teachers and myself) whiteboard minutes from research meetings, samples of student work and class blogs, field notes from in-school observations two days a week in the term when new pedagogical approaches were first used, teachers' reflection notes after teaching episodes, and notes on conversations between partners in the field.

The transformation of outdoor education curriculum and pedagogies over the course of the project was considerable, and we found that students' learning aligned well with HPE curriculum intentions and the general aims of the project. While details about the pedagogical and programmatic changes that occurred is not the focus of this articleⁱⁱ, a few points are noted below as additional context for the current discussion:

- Beginning the project with a focusing inquiry (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 35) that considered students' and teachers' understandings and experiences of outdoor education as well as current school practice provided an important springboard for further examination of the priorities for student learning.
- Drawing on place responsive ideas (e.g., Wattchow & Brown, 2011) and wishing to promote student learning about and connection to local outdoor places, teachers oriented their reimagined outdoor education to Rimu Reserve, a bush reserve just beyond the school gates. This was not a space either teacher had previously used before, other than for one-off learning experiences. Rimu Reserve, and students' embodied and ongoing responses to it, became key drivers in subsequent outdoor education curriculum and pedagogical decision-making (Cosgriff, 2015).
- Teachers forged strong links between the reconceptualised outdoor education and the underlying concepts, strands and achievement objectives for HPE in the NZC (Ministry of Education, 2007). We found students developed a "multifaceted, embodied, and interconnected understanding of the reserve, its inhabitants, and themselves in place" (Cosgriff, 2015, p. 33) as well as a desire to care for the wellbeing of the reserve.
- Joel and Mike found interdisciplinary approaches seemed to 'naturally' fall from the inquiry and place-oriented pedagogies that teachers' employed in their transformed programmes.

In this article, data from the final focus group interview with Joel and Mike is drawn on. This interview was guided by two broad questions. The first question addressed the nature and purpose and practice of outdoor education that had happened in each teacher's class that year given a changed student cohort from when the research project first began. The second question related to Joel and Mike's perceptions and experiences of conducting professional change in outdoor education. In line with the rapport and collaborative working relationship that had developed among the three of us over the course of the project, the interview style was informal and conversational. The interview was

ⁱⁱ Interested readers can read more about the reconceptualised teaching programmes and the effects on student learning in Cosgriff (2015).

transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically to identify codes and themes. This article explores the two themes of *benefits for personal wellbeing* and *a rejuvenated professional identity* that related to the impacts of professional change. Both themes have been shared and discussed with Mike and Joel.

Benefits for personal wellbeing

“Feeling better in myself.”

Regularly conducting learning experiences outdoors in Rimu Reserve appeared to positively influence Joel and Mike’s sense of personal wellbeing. Reflecting on the initial excursions in Rimu Reserve over a year earlier, Joel drew attention to how he felt as a teacher “down there going for walks” and his recollections of initially catching himself in “that space [where] you’re just thinking about your work and what’s happening in that” rather than about where he was and what was going on at the time. He found that being enveloped in nature in Rimu Reserve “lifted that [distractedness] hugely for me”, energising him and bringing his mind and attention to the present and what was around him. For Mike, it was a sense of expansiveness that was experienced in Rimu Reserve. He often felt “confined” or “closed in” in the classroom in comparison; given regular time outdoors in Rimu Reserve helped alleviate the sense that the “stresses of teaching” were “closing in on you”. Contrasting indoor and outdoor teaching in this way has some parallels to the experiences of a Scottish teacher who juxtaposed the “freedom” they experienced in nature excursions with indoor schooling as a “form of incarceration” (Mannion, Fenwick, & Lynch, 2013, p. 799). Further, Boyes’ (2011) evocative description of a deeply inspirational and memorable outdoor experience as providing “... a wellspring of nourishment” for what he calls “the dark times when I am trapped in front of my computer for hours on end” (p. 36) also has points of resonance.

Brymer, Cuddihy and Sharma-Brymer (2010) point to the importance of experiences that allow firsthand contact and feelings of connectedness with non-human nature for optimising wellbeing—related benefits. Both teachers’ experiences aligned in some way with these requisite features. For Joel and Mike, the sensory stimulation of observing, touching, smelling, moving and listening in the ‘natural’ world as part of learning experiences was one key aspect of what generated a sense of “feeling better”. Regular embodied experiences moving in Rimu Reserve alongside their students appeared to support Mike and Joel to develop their own feelings of connection to the reserve, its inhabitants and its features. Joel also felt a revitalisation from developing his own knowledge and understanding of the history, different native plants, topographical features, and inhabitants living in the Reserve. As he described it, exploration and then pursuing areas of interest as they arose was “in tune with how kids and how we *all* learn”. Understanding the positive impact of his own “apprenticeship” (Wattchow & Brown, 2011) to Rimu Reserve on his wellbeing only served to accentuate his concern about how “thirty or so kids stuck in classrooms all day must feel”.

Linked to these contributions to Joel and Mike’s sense of wellbeing was a sense of a rejuvenated professional identity that the next section explores.

A rejuvenated professional identity

“I have found my calling again.”

One aspect of Joel and Mike’s rejuvenation related to the alignments they each drew between their commitment to regular, emergent and place-oriented outdoor education and students’ enhanced motivation, engagement and learning. Bringing place into pedagogical practice and seeing the result of “curious and engaged” learners left Joel feeling like he was teaching “the sorts of things that students need to know now and in 20 or 30 years time”. He thought these were not only “really important” in HPE, but in education more generally. Joel’s belief in the powerfulness of a “contextualised curriculum” meant he took every opportunity now to be “mindful” of how experiential, place-responsive experiences in Rimu Reserve or other locales could be productively woven into all aspects of teaching programmes, not just HPE. Taking a “step back” and questioning “what are the best ways to engage kids” had become central to his pedagogical practice and helped counteract a “narrowing of curriculum” and the “pressures” he found to be associated with National Standards and reporting regimes. Similarly, Mike noted the “buzz” he experienced in “*that* moment [when] ... kids tell me amazing things that they’ve done or found out about their local environment

... [and] the looks on their faces” and how this reinforced for him the importance of locally-based outdoor experiences for rich curriculum learning.

A sense of rejuvenation also came from the ‘freedom’ both teachers found when place, rather than activity or a distinct subject discipline, ‘drove’ their curriculum and pedagogical decision-making. Akin to some teachers in the study by Mannion et al. (2013) who experienced teaching outdoors as “... a space for exploring a new, less constrained professional identity” (p. 799), Joel and Mike thought outdoor learning in Rimu Reserve offered “limitless” and unexpected opportunities for achieving a range of curriculum-related goals within and beyond HPE. Mike found it “much more invigorating and refreshing” when teaching wasn’t about “... the same turning of the wheel every day”. Both teachers also acknowledged the sense of freedom they experienced was in part due to and reliant on the wider school culture and senior leaders’ support for curriculum innovation and experimentation. This, however, did not come without accountabilities, with Joel noting that being given so much autonomy also meant he felt “a great responsibility to do well with that”.

Mike’s experiences of embracing experiential, inquiry and place oriented approaches in outdoor education appeared to be a particularly timely stimulus to rejuvenating his sense of who he was and wanted to be as a teacher. After almost two decades of teaching, he had found himself recently wondering if he was “burning out [and] starting to think, ‘Ahhhhh, is this as good as it gets?’”. He noted he was keenly feeling the “pressures” of requirements like National Standards. The “outdoor education pathway” that he was now following left him feeling excited and like he had “found his calling again”. The feeling that he had “gone back ten years to what I used to be like, before I started to get hammered by the pressures” also meant he was looking forward to what lay ahead professionally:

I see myself doing so much more ... I just feel like I’m more totally outdoor ed. Now ... You can reconnect your kids into language and reading and maths through engaging them in outdoor life ... It’s about making sure it’s a global sense of ‘I do have a place’.

Concluding thoughts

The contemporary educational and policy landscape presents a challenging backdrop for primary school teachers making or prioritising curriculum and pedagogical change in ‘second-tier’ areas like outdoor education and HPE. Stimulating professional dialogue about the potentially renewing impacts of professional change in these learning areas for teachers as well as students may therefore be a productive step in encouraging a change agenda. In this article a small case study of two generalist primary school teachers’ experiences of transforming outdoor education in HPE highlights some positive impacts for teachers’ personal wellbeing and professional identity.

Joel and Mike’s transformed outdoor education was largely oriented to Rimu Reserve, a local “place of meaning” (Brown, 2013) in their school neighbourhood. Both teachers experienced spending time moving, exploring and learning in and about Rimu Reserve alongside students as making positive contributions to their holistic wellbeing. An embodied feeling of expansiveness that contrasted with both the physical ‘confinement’ of being inside the classroom and the ‘weight’ of the stresses of teaching, and enjoyment and valuing of the multi sensorial and kinaesthetic elements of interacting with Rimu Reserve point to some of these benefits. Teachers’ rejuvenation was also fuelled in part by the pedagogical scope that teachers found Rimu Reserve offered, especially when they adopted flexible, inquiry-based and emergent teaching approaches. Both Joel and Mike valued seeing students’ enthusiasm, curiosity and caring for the reserve fostered through Rimu Reserve, which in turn fostered their own sense of belief in outdoor learning. Mike’s ongoing pursuit of an outdoor education pathway in his everyday teaching, provided an important ‘injection’ of enthusiasm and revitalisation that appeared to be somewhat of an antidote for the “burnout” that he had been experiencing at the time.

This case study of Joel and Mike’s experiences of conducting curriculum and pedagogical change in outdoor education is obviously contextually specific and small in scale. In sharing the wellbeing-related impacts of professional change in outdoor education, I have endeavoured to focus attention on the potential rejuvenatory effects for teachers of outdoor education pedagogical practice that focuses on developing connectedness to local outdoor places. In so doing, it is my hope that others may be

prompted to consider how such outdoor experiences might not only benefit the students they work with, but potentially themselves.

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