Feature

An educational project for cultural change: towards a place-based, imaginative, ecological 'school'.

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In February 2010 the Community University Research Alliance (special Environmental Call), a branch of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, agreed to fund our research project: 'Aligning Education and Sustainability in Maple Ridge, BC: A Study of Place-Based Ecological Schooling'. In November the board of trustees of school district 42 voted unanimously to go ahead with the project. The 'school' opened in September 2011 with three 'classes' and a total of 60 students, ages five to twelve. In order to provide a context here are two passages from our original submission.[1]

From the Summary of Proposed Research:

> Public education systems, across the industrialized world, tend to be isolated from local processes of knowledge-building, planning, and decision-making for sustainability. In addition, although efforts have been made over the last three decades to include environmental education in school programs, their overall impact has been limited. Environmental education programs are rarely integrated with the mainstream curriculum, are typically of short duration, often lack theoretical or methodological sophistication, and show little compelling   evidence of having long-term effects on most students' thinking about or engagement with diverse others including the natural world. (Blenkinsop and Fettes, 2009, p. 3)

And further, from the Statement of Relevance:

> One potentially fruitful approach to developing a deeper understanding of this problem, and of what might be needed to resolve it, is therefore to study the development of a public school expressly aligned with local environmental management and planning for sustainability. Such research, as outlined in this proposal, will be long-term and collaborative, and address not only issues of curriculum and pedagogy, but also school administration, school-community relationships, teacher development, learning outcomes and social impact. (Blenkinsop and Fettes, 2009, p. 5)

I shall begin by presenting a number of principles that we developed to serve both as a guide and a corrective to future work. Although it is traditional to establish principles at the outset, as in this paper, because of the nature of this project, which fundamentally challenges traditional values, the principles were developed as the members of the research group themselves developed. There were no fixed objectives at the start, deliberately not; principles emerged slowly and with difficulty out of the collective learning of the group, and as the understanding of an ecological worldview and a commitment to that view established itself. And as the reader will discover in the second section of this discussion the reality of the actual school and its community has meant that many of these principles are in need of some fairly radical re-visioning already.

Principles and values

We seek to grow relationships and nurture practices of learning and teaching that embody the following principles and values.

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[1] For much more extensive information see the school website: http://es.sd42.ca/

1. Place and community. We cultivate learning in, about, with and from local places. This includes spending extensive time immersed in the outdoors, dialoguing with the diverse people connected to these places, and exploring the meaning of places in the context of the broader community associated with them, its past and future. Our hope is to nurture and develop an inclusive educational community deeply rooted in place.

This pairing of place and community may seem redundant. However, one of our specific aims has been to respond directly to what Val Plumwood (2002) has called the 'backgrounding' of the non-human world; it simply drops out of sight and out of mind. We are trying to find ways to have the non-human world constantly present by having school outdoors, and through constant reference to, and engagement with, the environment in which we are immersed. We also propose that it might play an active role in our students' learning. If the natural world is one of the active co-teachers in our school (Blenkinsop and Beeman, 2010), then we learn not only in and about place, but also from it. We believe that we do not just learn from nature in the way Emerson (1968) suggested, but that nature has an active, co-creative role in the process of our learning.

2. Nature, ecology and sustainability. We cultivate learning in natural settings, where we listen for what the more than human world has to teach us. Through the cycle of the seasons and the years, knowledge of ecosystems will be built gradually so that diversity, complexity and sustainability become part of our understanding of the world. How to live sustainably in this place is an ongoing question in everything we do.

Part of the goal is to continually make the natural world a presence and a partner in the project. The choice of 'ecology' rather than the more recognisable 'environment' was made for several reasons, but primarily to side-step some of the metaphorical baggage. 'Environment' has tended to be understood as an entity set apart from humanity. The word ecology also reminds us that within the project we understand ecosystems to be exemplars of sustainable communities. They are places that have much to teach us as we move towards a more ecological worldview. Sustainability is troublesome as a concept because it is often used in connection with technical, and even environmentally destructive, projects. 'Sustainable development' has been used to describe everything from fish farming to the Alberta tar sands. Its recognisability is, however, useful and the task is to link it to nature and ecology.

3. Inquiry and possibility. We cultivate a spirit of inquiry involving everyone: the natural world, students, parents, community members, teachers and researchers alike. We are committed to exploring multiple pathways of learning and teaching that engage many different ways of knowing and forms of knowledge. Meaningful, authentic, locally-inspired individual, group and community projects play an important part in this process.

The choice of the word 'possibility' was made because of its reference to existential philosophy. For the existentialists the notion of possibility invokes the seemingly endless number of choices available to each of us, to our familial groupings, to our communities. Through the act of choosing we are, in Sartre's words (1946), both creating value and creating the kind of world we want to live in. We need to allow each other and ourselves to make those choices, live with the possibilities and the accompanying responsibilities, and accept the challenge of change rather than passively adapting to an imperfect world.

4. Interdependence and flourishing. We cultivate an appreciation of people both as unique individuals and as members of nested families, communities and places. We seek to understand the complex ways in which we can help each other flourish, and how to build relationships and systems that contribute to such flourishing. We aim to foster respect, care and health in everything we do.

By linking interdependence and flourishing we remind ourselves of the work of philosopher and ecologist Arne Naess (2005) who suggested that one of the pivotal roles and moral responsibilities of humans was to support the maximisation of diversity, complexity and flourishing for all, human and more-than-human alike. The purpose of this principle is to remind us of the danger of trying to sustain, through our failure to choose, a way of living that is currently inequitable and destructive to many while, simultaneously, we need to remember that collectively we should help one another to reach her, his, or its potential. This conjunction of interdependence and flourishing has also led us into an interesting discussion around assessment. If interdependence is a basic principle, how do we

evaluate the learning of students, and how do we assess contribution to the community?

5. Imagination and integration. We cultivate imagination in teaching and learning as a key to deeper understanding, creativity and responsiveness to place and community. We look for ways to integrate learning across the curriculum, bridging language arts, sciences, histories, geographies, mathematics, physical and social skills. We develop educational practices and materials that nurture a sense of wholeness in learning and teaching.

Possibility depends upon the imagination and, contrary to popular opinion, the imagination is not unlimited. We think that by cultivating imagination, facing a world in all its complexity and expanding the range of our experience we shall be better able to affect cultural change.

School Update: A short discussion of the school is after its first year.

What I propose to do with this next very short section is to offer a quick update on these principles and values given the reality of a full year as an operating school. As mentioned above, it appears that there will need to be a radical revisiting, one that involves the now living community of parents, students, the more-than-human world, researchers[2], support staff, administration and teachers[3] rather than the imagined members of a possible community. In some ways it is the latter group that has had the most influence on this need for revisiting.

One of the challenges with a project such as ours that exists within the public education system relates to the financial and political reality of working with school boards and unions, and navigating teacher hiring protocols. This led to a situation whereby the actual teachers who were going to work in the school were selected and engaged very late in the planning process. In fact, the third teacher of the trio was not hired until very shortly before the first operational day of the school. As a result, it was impossible to prepare for the unsurprising disparities that emerged in terms of commitment to educational change, understanding of place-based, imaginative, and ecological education, and preparation between the two years of thinking and planning that went into the design and the people who became directly responsible for the delivery. Indeed, unexpected differences in goals, understandings, and educational process also emerged, and created quite significant rifts, between members of the team who had been involved from the genesis of the project. This has been a huge challenge to the entire project and resulted in difficulties in communication, understanding and pedagogical approach. Elements of this situation are, therefore, not overly surprising given the two groups that we have coupled together. One group has struggled with and been very challenged by new ideas, experienced the pain of transformation and their own roles in the world, and then come together and attached themselves to a vision. Another group has been thrust together, is intrigued by the vision of a different educational approach without much experienced sense of the details and depth of its meaning, and has had to rapidly deliver curricular content to 60 brand new students in an unfamiliar educational environment - the outdoors[4] – with little to no training or experience.

I would like to finish this piece with some direct reference to the current principles in light of our growing body of preliminary results. With regard to place and community, it is apparent that the students have a growing affinity to being outdoors and to some of the particular places where they have spent significant amount of time during this year. However, in an intriguing way, there still appears to be a level of subtlety or depth missing in this connection for some of the children. For example, the students built forts in two different locations, one early in the year and one later in the year. This is a powerful learning process which led to interesting possibilities with regard to the exchange of materials, the transfer/development of skills, questions of community governance, and care for the natural world. The damage of the fort area was less severe in the second location than in the first location and there was active protectionism going on as several students created "no go" areas. Nevertheless, the default position for this small community continues to be human centered in terms of rights to build/manipulate, hierarchical in terms of local governance (choosing an older child to be leader), and somewhat under explored in terms of extending possibility by the teachers. With regard to interdependence and flourishing there is a real sense of community amongst the entire student body. The elder students enthusiastically demonstrate their consideration and care for their

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[2] Made up of about 10 graduate students and professors.
[3] Made up of 3 fulltime teachers, 2 support teachers, and a vice-principal.
[4] It is important to note that there is no school building at all. Everything occurs in distinct places in the community.

younger compatriots. This has been commented upon by most of the parents and visitors. There is also an obvious sense of flourishing for some of these same students. There are parents who regularly say that their child likes school for the first time in their life and is much improved in her/his social interactions and behaviours at home. Also, we have seen real growth in specific areas such as fine motor skills (particularly amongst the younger students), numerous reports of leaner and stronger bodies, a greater desire to be physically active after school, and a sense of self as capable problem solvers. However, there has also been a strand of comments from the parents, particularly those of older students, that suggests some children are finding school under stimulating, lacking in follow-up, and short on intellectual challenges. Thus, we appear to have a situation where some skills and students are flourishing while at the same time others are not.

This selective flourishing carries over into the ongoing discussion of place and the role of place in the school. Although almost all the classes are outdoors and there are lessons situated in place and about place, there still appears to be a large amount of time where the place remains a backdrop to the pedagogical process. Indeed, the teachers themselves have commented that they are not really letting the voice of the place appear in their lessons. Part of the challenge here appears to be how foreign the very concept of place as co-teacher really is. It seems to involve a fairly significant transformation of how a teacher understands the project of teaching itself and involves a noticeably different set of skills. For example, the place-based co-teacher must have a deep knowledge of both the generalized curricula and the particulars of place, and rather than plan in the traditional sense (objective first), must be able to plan in both a more specific and more expansive way. Thus, when the seemingly spontaneous voice of the place emerges the teacher is able to recognize the opportunity and build upon the moment such that content is covered in a way that each student is touched and challenged appropriate to the way and direction they are moving and being supported to move. Therefore, the more specific planning involves a profound understanding of each student; where they are, what they truly understand, where they are going, and the kinds of things that might support them in that direction. The more expansive planning involves preparing oneself for the possibilities of the next moment/day/week such that any particular that might arise can be supported/directed into that which aligns with each student. For example, the discovery of bear scat can be used to challenge one student to expand their geographical knowledge, another their concept of the digestive system, a third their range of artistic creativity, and a last to better understand themselves as consumers in the world.

Finally, one of the results of these above discussions is that there appears to be definite gaps in the concept of integration for the school which causes ripples through all of the principles. These appear in the integration of self with place, of students and their own education as whole situated beings, of the range of demands made upon teachers by the public curriculum and the places and moments that appear every day, of place and eco-system as potential example for cultural possibility, and of all the members of the community as equal, vital members of this new "eco-system".

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