

Teacher Identity and Agency: Learning and Becoming through Place-Conscious Pedagogy

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What does it mean for a teacher to be place conscious? How does this consciousness influence teacher identity? These questions intrigue us and compel our study of the interconnectedness of place, pedagogy, and teacher identity. Place-conscious pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that embeds the school curriculum in the local community and environment (Gruenewald, 2003; Kelly & Pelech, 2019; Powers, 2004; Smith, 2002, 2007; Sobel, 2005). It is inherently cross-curricular in striving to diminish boundaries between schools and their social and environmental settings (Ball & Lai, 2006). Through hands-on experiences of place, students and teachers find meaningful and engaging opportunities to explore, apply, and advance their curricular knowledge.

From a critical perspective, place-conscious pedagogy goes beyond the connection of curriculum to place for improved curricular outcomes. Through interactions with the human and non-human community, it offers students and teachers occasions for analyzing and critiquing local assumptions and practices as they experience the complex connectivity that exists between social and ecological systems (Avery & Hains, 2017; Greenwood, 2013; Kelly, 2007; Kelly & Pelech, 2019). In this sense, place-conscious pedagogy takes students and teachers outside the simple act of social reproduction by engaging them in formative and transformative activities. This opens possibilities for lasting change on social and environmental issues by encouraging and supporting the transformative agency of teachers and students (Hutchison, 1998; Orr, 2004; Pelech & Kelly, 2017). In this chapter, we explore how teachers shape and refine their sense of themselves as agents of change through place-conscious teaching practices.

Connecting Place, Pedagogy, and Identity

Identity, broadly speaking, is how people conceive of themselves and are conceived of by others. Although there is no unified definition of *teacher*

identity due to its conceptual complexity (Barnes, 2017; Bonnett, 2013; Gross & Hochberg, 2016), our understanding of the term recognizes “the sum of processes that the individual experiences...shaped by many components, including the ability to discern, belonging to a community, self-esteem, and self-efficacy” (Gross & Hochberg, 2016, p. 1245). Teacher identity emerges from a fluid dynamic of person and context, “including the physical, social and political aspects of the school environment as well as teachers’ past school experiences” (Barnes, 2017, p. 222). Mueller Worster, and Abrams (2005) also identify ecological and social knowledge as vital components of identity in what they term *place-based identity*. Chambers (2008) echoes this conception in that “being is constituted through the tasks that he or she conducts as he or she dwells in a particular place within a region of places” (p. 116). From an Indigenous perspective, Kovach (2009) argues convincingly that “place gives us identity” (p. 61). Kovach draws on the work of Blackfoot scholar and Elder, Narcisse Blood, in describing how places are alive and “are our teachers” (p. 61). These examples surface the complex and integral relationship of place, pedagogy, and identity. They emphasise the interconnection of who and where we are, and how our self-conception is informed by the histories, bloodlines, stories, and ancestries found in the social and physical landscape (Jardine, 2016; Kovach, 2009).

Our initial interest was drawn forward by the experiences of five educators. An immediately compelling aspect of our inquiry is the social and physical diversity of the places where these educators live. Carissa, an early career teacher in rural Southern Alberta, lives within a semi-arid prairie overlooked by the Rocky Mountains in a community steeped in agriculture. She worked with students to plan and build an outdoor classroom and a vegetable garden that provide connections to nature for her students and produce for the local community. Brad is a high-school teacher living in an urban area of Newfoundland & Labrador. In the spring of the year, he can see open ocean and icebergs from his schoolground. Similar to Carissa, Brad focused on building a greenhouse to grow produce for the community and make practical connections for his students between the local environment and sustainability. Alyssa, Meghan, and Karen (their principal), work at a newly built elementary school on the southside of Edmonton. Their school is on the edge of an urban forest that has become an extension of the schoolground and school building. Along with integrating the forest into their daily activities, the teachers and students are involved in many place-conscious projects that connect them to the local environment and community.

Interpreting Place, Pedagogy, and Identity

Gadamer (2006) observes that the first necessary condition of hermeneutics occurs when someone or something addresses us. At this point, the process of understanding can begin. While conducting research on student agency and place-conscious pedagogy in Newfoundland & Labrador and Alberta, we were *addressed* by the thoughts of teachers who spoke of how creating transformative learning opportunities affected their sense of identity and affirmed a connection to place. Guided by a hermeneutic framework, we began exploring how teachers engage with place consciousness and how this pedagogy shapes their sense of transformative agency.

Hermeneutics is the “tradition, philosophy, and practice of interpretation” (Moules, 2002, p. 4). It is a philosophical discipline or method that cultivates interpretation as an epistemology for deepening our understanding of “what it means to be human” (Smits, 1997, p. 282). Following from Gadamer’s work in *Truth and Method* (2006), our application of hermeneutics attends to questions of meaning and understanding—questions that are complex and nuanced and provide few easy answers (Smits, 1997). Hermeneutic research attends to what happens in the space where a listener and speaker meet. Davey (2006) explains that “philosophical hermeneutics is not interested in the acquisition of facts and information but in what happens as a consequence of embarking upon such a quest for knowledge” (p. 38). Moules, McCaffrey, Field, and Laing (2015) describe studying a topic hermeneutically through a process of reflexivity, dialogue, and interpretation. While themes may emerge in the course of study, searching for predetermined themes is not the aim of hermeneutic inquiry. In keeping with the hermeneutic tradition, we cycled multiple times between reading interview transcripts, listening to recorded interviews, going deeper into the place-pedagogy-identity literature, and sharing our understanding of the material. Satisfied with our engagement in the process, we began to write.

Arriving at Place

In each of these educators’ stories, their arrival at place-conscious pedagogy gives insight into the relationship between place and teacher identity. While some teachers experience a connection to place for much of their lives, others describe a singular moment when they felt suddenly connected—a moment that took them out of the comfort of traditional classroom pedagogy. For Cas-sie, the moment occurred in her first year as a teacher. A presentation at a teachers’ convention inspired her to address the overuse of technology that

disconnects students from each other and the outdoors. The keynote speaker's description of how children no longer played and did not know how to be without their devices resonated with her experience teaching in a Grade 6–12 school:

When we walk around the hallways all we see is kids looking down at their phones and that's their interaction....Kids weren't getting outside a whole lot....And so leaving the convention I just thought, oh my gosh, there has to be something more that we can do for kids....I started researching different outdoor space ideas and we had a really strong group of students who were just wanting to initiate positive things around the school. So I brought it up with my principal one day...[about] setting up an outdoor classroom, an outdoor wellness space just so that kids are even getting more fresh air...and appreciating nature.

Teaching in a rural community that is deeply connected to agriculture, the disconnect between school and the outdoors was problematic for Cassie. She also noticed that many of her disengaged students loved to be outdoors. Four boys, who disliked school, “were all about farm life—building, wrecking things, rebuilding, lots of hands-on kind of work.” Cassie saw building an outdoor classroom as a way to respect the interests of these students—interests that were not recognized at school. Other students had limited experience with the outdoors. To connect these students with place, Cassie included gardening as part of an outdoor wellness space. Students learned about the local climate and geography, they shared crops with the surrounding community, and they interacted with ecological processes (Mueller Worster & Abrams, 2005). Cassie described herself as a teacher who was “not a curriculum rule follower.” Initiating the outdoor classroom and cross-curricular learning gave her an authentic means of attending to student interests while honoring her identity as a teacher.

On the island of Newfoundland, Brad's 14 years of teaching Grade 12 Science and Social Studies and his family background in agriculture inspired his approach to piloting the new provincial Social Studies curriculum. A new curriculum focus is sustainability. Thinking “outside the box,” Brad wanted students to experience this concept first-hand by creating “something sustainable on-sight...totally off grid and green.” He did this by inviting students to design, build, and maintain a 20 x 20 foot greenhouse on the schoolground. Brad said of the project, “If we're [the class] talking about sustainability and food security then what better way but to walk out of the backdoor [of the school] and have a look [at it in action].” Brad spoke of his own experience learning and

how he “was bored with pen-and-paper.” Now, as a teacher, he remains discontented with “the traditional way of teaching.” Brad elaborated, “I would rather be outside than be in the building—that is me. I am outside of the box most of the time...it’s what makes me unique.”

Seeing opportunity in curriculum redesign, Brad was able to engage in a literal and figurative transformation and restructuring of his teaching. He replaced the abstract notion of sustainability with a new and purposeful structure that authenticated his sense of being a teacher. The greenhouse is his conception of “that is me.” Restructuring the curriculum empowered him and his students through the transformative nature of their work. They went beyond “amassing verified knowledge” to authentic understanding (Gadamer, 2006, p. xx). Brad revealed the deep emotional concern of his students for the plants they grew—a concern “they would not necessarily get from a [text] book.”

Davey (2006) describes this type of immersive learning as “the venture of living within, hazarding, and responding to the cross currents of ideas” (p. 49). Through venturing within, Brad found a way to share with students his fascination for living systems. His “legacy project” expressed a commitment to place and sustainability that intertwined the emotional and conative aspects of learning for his students (Goralnik, Millenbah, Nelson, & Thorp, 2012). In this sense, the authenticity of Brad’s place-conscious pedagogy strengthened the emotional and cognitive aspects of learning—essential elements of meaningful student engagement with curriculum—while demonstrating transformative agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015).

Cassie and Brad highlight an essential link between identity and place-conscious pedagogy by acknowledging their intimate relationship with the local (Avery & Hains, 2017). Gruenewald and Smith (2010) define this linking of self to place as a process of re-inhabitation, which can lead to a deeper ecological understanding and situating of identity (Ardoin, 2006). Their connection to place drives them to be agents of change for their students and community. The result is a transformative restructuring of curriculum, pedagogy, and relationships as Carissa and Brad re-envision themselves as teachers.

As an elementary school principal in Edmonton, Karen’s place-conscious sense of identity closely informs her teaching and leadership. She strives to maintain space for students and teachers to learn and grow under a shared vision of place-conscious pedagogy. Entering the bright, open foyer of the school where Karen works, you are greeted by two messages: “Let nature be your teacher” and “Every child, every day.” Karen’s commitment to place-conscious pedagogy is deeply rooted in her childhood and growing up with parents who were teachers. Her mother (who, at age 78, is a principal at a neighbouring school) “was a really progressive educator...I remember going [to her classroom]

as a kid...she had a beautiful, little environment for kids and [I was] just being influenced by those places.” Karen’s doctoral research explored themes of school in context, professional identity, and knowledge landscapes (Huber & Keats Whelan, 2010). Each theme grows from a reflective interweaving of place, pedagogy, and identity.

Karen uses her formal leadership to encourage staff to take risks, be creative, and find ways to engage students in authentic learning. She believes children are naturally curious and learn best through place-based inquiry: “[when] you have that vision, and you surround yourself with people who believe that about children, you model it and you live it and then people start to live it around you...people see the possibility.” In this sense, Karen has restructured her school as a site for transformative agency. This aligns with an actualization of her vision for nurturing curiosity in local settings. As a formal leader, Karen understands that “teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being, if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (hooks, 1994, p. 15 as cited in Riley-Taylor, 2002, p. 151). To venture beyond the transmission and reproduction of knowledge, teachers must see a new pedagogy modeled as a feasible and acceptable alternative. By committing to her sense of self, Karen’s leadership has become a daily example for her staff of how to let nature be the teacher for every child.

Alyssa, a teacher at Karen’s school, points to the mentoring and modelling around her that encourages living with students in a pedagogy of place:

I learned from Karen, from other teachers, and it was just the philosophy of the school. It wasn’t anything forced, it just was sort of a natural integration to this is just how we teach....not only place-based education but collaboration....it wasn’t anything like a conversation, it just sort of happened.

Echoing Alyssa, other teachers talked of the space and support they are given by the school administration. This allows them to develop their local awareness, teacher identity, and pedagogical creativity in connecting learning to place. Alyssa and her colleagues are able to address questions from students in earnest as they move the curriculum into the community. After spending a week at City Hall, for example, Alyssa’s Grade 1 students wanted to learn more about Edmonton:

They can learn all about community, belonging, connectedness, their community currently and in the past, influential people....We have Grade

ones that are talking about the Famous Five and who they are, what does that mean, and what [did] they do.

The pedagogical space available for teachers supports a deep integration of lessons with the social landscape. As teachers align their sense of education with practice, “subjects” become uniquely lived experiences for students:

What does it mean to lead our children carefully and generously into such territories [of mathematics, or science or poetry]? How can teachers...help students understand that their work can be a real part of the life of these places, and can make a real difference? What does it mean to become “experienced” in such matters? (Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2003, p. 8)

All the place-conscious teachers we spoke with emphasised a need for room to meaningfully explore topics of interest with their students. In this sense, they understand agency as a necessary condition for making a real difference. Through their agency, these teachers enact an authentic sense of educative practice that, in turn, unlocks transformative experiences for students.

Agency and identity lead to formative and transformative engagement—they lay the foundation for self-cultivation, self-formation, and self-actualization (Johnson, 2014). For Davey (2006) transformative engagement involves “new realignments and reconfigurations of what is already in process. The formative signifies the emergence of something new, distinct from any reconfiguration of what already exists” (p. 42). As Alyssa and her students engaged and questioned the community around them, their sense of empowerment grew. When students noticed a local business did not provide for recycling its beverage containers, they wrote a letter to the company that changed its practices. Such experiences now define Alyssa’s identity as a teacher: “I wouldn’t be able to describe who I was as a teacher...because this is fundamentally what I believe in; community and connection and belonging and purpose and identity and place.” Her sense of place, pedagogy, and identity “harmoniously entwines with the world” and makes a “greater contribution to humanity” (Johnson, 2014, p. 72). By creating space for a harmony of practice, teachers at Karen’s school “maintain and renew themselves by means of their continuous becoming” (Davey, 2006, p. 42). Achieving an equilibrium of harmony and renewal in the lives of teachers cannot be overvalued.

Place Immersion and Being Comfortable with Uncertainty

Meghan practices inquiry-based learning in local contexts with her Grade 4 students in Edmonton. She shared a story of taking the class on a walk to see if they could see a beaver in the local beaver pond.

Nature always brought something to us. Sometimes we would go out and the magic of what we would find [would emerge]. Sometimes I would go out with a certain intention but something else magnificent would happen, I had to allow it to unfold.

Along the way, a student found an abandoned wasp nest. Nature had brought something to them that Meghan did not anticipate. Had she worried, in that moment, about her lesson plan or unit outcomes she may have missed the magic. Instead, Meghan trusted in her sense of place and pedagogy. The wasp nest naturally drew the students into a new aspect of their world and Meghan worked with their wonder to raise questions and begin the search for answers. This is the heart and the spirit of place-conscious pedagogy for teachers like Meghan:

The land is teeming with signs; whether they are tracks of coyote or that of an old fence post, these clues weave us into the stories and spirit of place. It may take time for the stories to unfold...I have found that children with their keen eyes and excitement for details...help us to rediscover the extraordinary in the ordinary. (Piersol, 2013, p. 68)

It is a pedagogy that requires being comfortable with uncertainty and open to the extraordinary. Place immersion, by nature, can be “uncertain, indeterminate—where the teacher cannot answer the question—where the question remains a question” (Gallagher, 1992, p. 76).

The appearance of the wasp nest and unfolding of curiosity continued back in the classroom where students began a more detailed and careful inquiry. Students developed questions and wonderments for further discussion as the nest was opened and studied. This activity gave authenticity, meaning, and force to the subsequent learning. The class shared information on the difference between wasps and bees, how they live, the importance of each species within the local ecosystem. Soon after, an email from a nearby beekeeper motivated the students to invite experts to their school to talk about the role of bees in the environment, how honey is made, and the wonderful and surprising interdependence of people and bees. If Meghan had not been open to the opportunity offered by nature and the curiosity and wonder of her students

this deep learning may have been missed. Jardine (2006) observes that we do not “have” experiences:

Hermeneutically we are *had* by experience. We suffer it or undergo experiences. We do not possess them. Experience, hermeneutically conceived, is something that happens to us over and above our wanting and doing... for hermeneutic work, my experiences are best understood as ventures or journeys through something. (p. 14)

Meghan’s approach to teaching embraces the notion of venturing—she and her students venture through local places on their way to understanding the world around them. The learning that happens with each new venture affirms her trust in a pedagogy that necessarily mingles with uncertainty. For Meghan, the uncertainty and risk of these ventures is far outweighed by the authenticity she sees in place-conscious pedagogy:

It helps students understand the connectedness and how we are all connected. It speaks to me fundamentally about how we look at things, how we look at consumption, how we look at waste, and how we look at the moose that passed [through the school parking lot] and it all comes back to how we can preserve and care for [nature] and why it is something we should be thinking about.

There is a clear sense in which inquiry in local settings is fundamental to how Meghan understands her teacher identity—to how she looks at things. Moreover, she wants students to see their connection to the natural world as an important precursor to caring and transformation. Place immersion can be a risky venture but as Meghan eloquently states, “It allows you to be true to yourself, who you were meant to be and how you were meant to be with the world.”

Concluding Interpretations

We would like to thank the educators who gave us such a wealth of ideas for our work: Cassie, Brad, Karen, Alyssa, and Meghan. In listening to their words, we were struck again and again by a conviction that place-conscious pedagogy offers the best means of educating for transformative agency. They gave conclusive illustrations of how classroom teachers can re-envision curriculum and restructure education by staying true to a locally grounded sense of self. Their students see where change is needed and turn abstractions into actions.

Consciousness of place gives meaning to the work done by these teachers, and preserves and renews the integrity of their professional practice. It fortifies them for journeying with students to living fields of interconnected knowledge and learning. By asserting their agency, these educators have constructed an integration of place, pedagogy, and identity through which they “become someone in the process of coming to know about the world” (Jardine, 2006, p. 281).

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