

## Where to for Place-Based Learning?

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Rural Education Research and Development Centre of James Cook University,  
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in supporting the  
*School at the Centre Trial Program*  
*in North Queensland,*  
the results of which form the background to this paper.

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## Synopsis

### *What role has 'place' in education?*

*School at the Center, a U.S. initiative that falls into the category of 'place-based education', has demonstrated significant improvements in educational outcomes while, at the same time, contributing to rural community development. To explore the transferability of the program to Australian conditions, The Rural Education Research and Development Centre at James Cook University, assisted with Federal funds, undertook to trial the School at the Center ideas in North Queensland. The trial showed that the ideas were transferable and had significant impacts on educational outcomes and student engagement; generated a deal of public interest in the media and in local communities; and promoted closer relations between teachers, students, their schools and their communities.*

*Following comments from some teachers involved in the trial about the lack of introduction of beginning teachers to such effective educational strategies, consideration turned to making the results of the trial available to institutions involved in pre-service training of teachers.*

*But teacher training programs do not have much room for new content to be added and, for new material to be really considered, there must be a strong academic and theoretical base for the initiative as well as the evidence that 'it works'.*

*School at the Center (SatC) is an example of place-based education. Therefore there should be a strong academic and theoretical understanding of what 'place' means to education. However, while place is considered in other disciplinary areas, its meaning for education appears to be largely unexplored.*

### **Where to for Place-Based Learning?**

This paper was written with three aims in mind.

Firstly, to provide a small introduction to my view of rural. This is mostly to give you some idea of what influences me in my approach to rural education and hence why the *School at the Centre* trial was undertaken.

Secondly, this paper will report on that trial of a U.S. place-based education initiative in an Australian context. The trial was undertaken to assess whether the initiative had any transferability to a different yet similar educational situation. This part of the paper directly relates to the theme of this conference - *The School as a Centre in the Community*.

And thirdly, I would like to lead you into thinking about the importance of place and what that may imply for education — especially education in rural areas.

## **Where I come from**

I am lately come to academia, mainly through my political experience in small town governance and the goading of academics with whom I have had some contact. During this time as a small town politician - something that I am still involved in as Deputy Mayor of a rural Shire Council - I have been made acutely aware of the state of rural Australia and the contradictions it contains. But no matter which way the rural scene is viewed, there can be little dispute that rural Australia is in a parlous condition exacerbated by a number of governance issues, with periodic crises merely serving to drive it deeper into that state.

I have also become aware of initiatives coming from different sources that seek to do something about redressing that state.

But what concerns me is that these approaches are almost exclusively reactive in nature. As someone involved in governance, albeit in a small way, I am very conscious of the need for setting positive policy - being proactive, setting the stage for positive things to happen - rather than playing catch-up as things unravel.

In my attempts to find some approach that would allow me to be more effective in this positive stance, I discovered, and have become involved in, the community development movement. By this I mean the broader approach typified by the Community Development Society in the U.S., not the social welfare sub-set that seems to be the Australian flavour. (for example, see Campfens, 1997; Koch, 1999; Moore and Brooks, 1996).

You might say that, despite a number of reservations (Murray and Dunn, 1996, p.163), I subscribe to the view that informed local action can make a positive difference to rural Australia.

## **A U.S. Initiative in rural education**

But I also have a background as an educator. So when I discovered an education initiative in the rural United States that seemed to weld together a proactive approach to community development, enhanced educational outcomes for students, and the development of greater school-community linkages, I was immediately interested.

Subsequent events led to a productive dialogue being established between the Rural Education Research and Development Centre of James Cook University and the *School at the Center Program* in Nebraska. It was during this time of discussion that I became interested in the educational potential of

the Program, something that I felt should be checked first-hand, and if validated, tried out in Australian conditions. With the help of Federal funds, that is what happened. First hand observations of the Program in rural Nebraska and South Dakota did indeed show it had a strong community development focus and could demonstrate significant achievements in that area. However it was the quite startling impact on student learning that came across most strongly. Students were more engaged in their own learning, strongly supportive of their local community, while reciprocal recognition from their local community inspired a greater desire to excel - in education and in local activities. Howley and Eckman's (1997, p.50) findings about a similar place-based program were confirmed.

The program was driven by a simple approach, for *School at the Centre* had only two key components. The first is that up to twenty percent of the curriculum should be contextualised to place, and the second is that the school and its students should make a conscious contribution to the local community.

### **Did SatC work in an Australian Context?**

The answer is - a resounding yes. So much so, that months after the trial came to a close, teachers at several schools, who volunteered to be part of the trial, continue to use SatC strategies in their planning and teaching activities.

Some examples of what was done at volunteer schools:

School-community newspaper. An initiative based on SatC ideas and begun before the visit by the Director of the U.S. program. Has a strong community reporting focus. (Years 8-10 and in 2002 has space made in the curriculum for the activity).

Work for the Town Visitor Centre (a) welding of two artworks featuring mining themes (b) painting and renovation of internal walls of the building. (Years 9-10).

Ongoing (rotational) displays of student work in a section of the Visitor Centre dedicated to the local school. (P - 10).

Preparation of sales material (cards and notebooks) for the Visitor Centre as part of a unit of study 'My Community Needs Me'. (Years 1-2).

Local issues study - land use, local government planning. (Years 8-10)

On-going music performances for the Geriatric Centre (begun before SatC was introduced but now given increased educational legitimacy). (Years 4-7.)

Biographies of local senior citizens developed from interviews and the completed work presented back to each interviewee. (Year 3-4).

Study of local street names leading to a publication of origins (Year 4-5).

Our school, our community unit of study.

Planning presently under way across four different year levels on local environmental issues.

Major initiative relating to health and community links presently starting - involves a community reference and strategy formulating group.

Planning of Children's Centre (kindergarten and childcare) in conjunction with school, community, and government agencies. Funding confirmed.

Planning for bird interpretation initiative targeting visitors to the area (school is host to nesting bower birds). Picnic area under construction and interpretive bird signs have been painted.

*Appreciating My Local Area* unit of work.

Student involvement in producing craft for sale at local markets.

Sunday bike ride involving students and parents with fun activities at end of each riding stage.

Rural crops and farm visits (first of three study units - farm crops, farm animals, feral animals and plants)

School garden to grow examples of farm and other crops.

One of the most startling innovations based on SatC ideas was where an upper primary class has been set up as a complete rural community - there is the banker, the real estate agent, the grocery store, employees and so on. Twice a week, this *classroom community* is the focus of school work - running the community, carrying out all tasks, doing everything 'for real'. Teacher and school principal point to amazing changes in student confidence, willingness to learn, and knowledge of real community issues and job roles.

It must be acknowledged that, at the time of writing the final report required by the funding body as part of the acquittal process, some volunteer schools did not identify specific activities that related to the SatC trial - for example, a cluster of four schools in a small mining town. However, at a subsequent visit, the principals of two of these schools spoke about notable activities, based on SatC, that were occurring at their schools. This underscored the SatC approach that encouraged long-term planning *in the curriculum* as the basis for contextualisation. Planned activities did not always fit the timeline of an acquittal process.

Since then, several of the volunteer schools have indicated activities that will continue well after the SatC trial becomes but a memory. Again, this further demonstrates the strength of the curriculum planning approach taken by SatC.

## Why did it work?

Several possible answers have been identified relating to the take up of SatC ideas:

1. School at the Centre did not make any demands on teachers other than those they were willing to give. This willingness at least partly derived from teachers being personally comfortable with SatC ideas and philosophy. The SatC philosophy - rural place is deserving of inclusion in the curriculum - figured strongly in introductory presentations at school visits.
2. School at the Centre relies on voluntary effort. Once that effort has been committed to, there is internal motivation to continue the effort.
3. SatC offers a way of looking at the construction of learning experiences specifically for rural places to which teachers may not have previously given a great deal of consideration. School at the Centre does not come with a 'grab bag' of what others have done. Teachers are treated as professionals well able to make decisions about the most appropriate learning situations for their students.
4. School at the Centre does not propose a new panacea, a new way of doing things, an 'out with the old, in with the new'. SatC acknowledges that good teachers are already using a number of teaching strategies similar to those espoused by SatC. What School at the Centre offers is validation that these strategies work, and encouragement to expand those strategies in future teaching situations. In some situations there even appeared to be an element of endorsement - even permission - for teachers to do things they had always wanted to try.
5. SatC does not level criticism at teachers for achieving less than some outside expectation might place on them, nor imply that teachers are not already doing good work.
6. SatC does not rely on personal skills of a motivator or 'whiz-kid' approach. It relies on teachers being comfortable with their own ways of presentation. SatC values teachers as professionals.
7. SatC acknowledges that classroom teachers, and their communities, are the best judges of what can be included in a curriculum to enhance learning outcomes for their specific student cohort.

8. The twist that SatC gives to school-community partnerships - that schools should consciously examine the direct contribution they can make to their host community - adds a poignancy to the learning situation that motherhood statements about the 'value of education' seldom can achieve. That the community can see immediate, often tangible contributions from the school raises the level of community approval of what teachers are doing. Teachers, in turn, tend to feel more appreciated.

9. Further, by widening the amount of community knowledge and contact that teachers have, the potential for teaching staff to form 'educational enclaves' divorced from community affairs and existing only to further system agendas, is made far less likely. Community knowledge allows for greater local content to be introduced into the curriculum.

Of the nine answers listed, it appears that a combination of two provided the key explanation for SatC's success. These were: the low key approach that made no demands on teachers other than what they were willing to give; and the basing of SatC on a clearly stated and highly acceptable philosophical foundation and implementation strategy that treated teachers as professionals well able to make their own decisions about appropriate educational strategies for their students.

The obvious question that must now be answered is 'If the trial was so successful, where to from here?' And this leads to the third part of this paper.

### **Where to for place-based learning?**

One answer to 'where to from here' would be to join the project submission treadmill to seek further financial support to keep SatC going. But balanced against this are two realities.

One is the finite nature of project funding - it will ultimately cease.

Secondly, there is the need to respond to a very telling remark that came from several teachers. They expressed concern that in pre-service training they had not been introduced to place-based learning ideas.

If an answer could be found to the second reality, the first would cease to be an issue. If SatC style actions could be incorporated into the pedagogical learnings of student teachers, they would carry this

into what they do in classrooms as part of their 'normal' practice. Place-based education would be part of their teaching repertoire.

## **Place based learning in pre-service studies**

Militating against incorporating knowledge about place-based education in pre-service studies are the already full programs that make up the majority of those courses in our teacher training institutions. Approaching those who make the decisions about course content with a proposal to add or increase the attention given to a specific teaching orientation - place-based learning - would need a well developed argument that is at the same time academically rigorous, have a strong theoretical underpinning, and which can demonstrate success in the field. While SatC and place-based education in general can certainly demonstrate the latter - it works! - I have reservations about being able to mount a telling argument that is rigorous, academically sound, and underpinned by theory. It appears to me that what is fundamental to mounting a strong academic argument revolves around the importance of place - both physical place and its milieu - to education and learning. However, in a cursory search, I have found little research that cuts to the core of the importance of place, and the link between place and its implications for education and learning is almost barren of work. Instead, I have found plenty of definitions and assertions of importance - the literature on rural (rural = place) is a prime example. (Not that 'place' is only rural!) But simple assertions do not answer fundamental questions about the importance of 'place' nor explore ways that place may influence social, psychological, emotional, economic, or intellectual activities of people - let alone the possible implications for 'place' on education.

In brief, I pose the fundamental question 'Does place have a role in human development?'

And, pre-empting the answer, I go on to ask why, as education and learning are also closely coupled with human development, is there a lack of literature exploring linkages between education and place?

I have asked these questions in several forums to date and have few answers, only further questions.

- is 'place' needed to create a balanced person?
- is place a universal or are there gradations of importance at an individual level?
- can 'place' influence learning?
- can one 'place' be replaced by another?
- and if so, what is the transition like? Is there a time component?



- what does it mean to be dis-placed?
- if place is important, what are the consequences of 'placelessness'?
- are there alternatives that can fulfil the same roles (assuming there are some) as place does?
- is there a greater meaning for 'place' if you are indigenous?
- does 'homeland' exist?
- is 'place' a myth?

Is this an area of research that needs attention?

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