

Stakeholder Definitions of Success in Place-Based Schools

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Abstract

Place-Based schools are alternatives to traditional schools, especially for under-represented populations. This study assessed stakeholders' definitions of success of the Place-Based model using a qualitative multi-case design. Framed through Situated Cognition and Critical Learning theories, this study challenged traditional measures of success (e.g., standardized test performance). Interviews were conducted with supervisors, educators, and parents of students and triangulated from documents, websites, and observations. Sites utilized were three urban maritime-themed Place-Based schools. Analysis of interviews yielded six themes that defined stakeholder perceptions of student success: career and college preparation, characteristics of students, sense of community within the school, connections to the community supporting the school, quality of educators, and student engagement.

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Objective

Teachers, parents, supervisors, community leaders, as well as other educational stakeholders, have a long-standing struggle to determine if all students are successful. Achievement level disparity between white students, with the best resources, and minorities, who are less fortunate, is extraordinary (Kozol, 2005; ConnCAN, 2012). Instead of propagating status-quo models of education, alternatives like Place-Based education (PBE) schools have been emerging. PBE is learning grounded in local phenomena and students' lived experience (Smith, 2002). Students use their own communities as the source of issues to investigate for learning (Howley, et al., 2011). The content is specific to the geography, ecology, sociology, politics, and other dynamics of that place (Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000). However, with inadequate information about these limited number of schools, it is often difficult to determine what constitutes success beyond performance on high-stakes standardized tests. This study more clearly defined traditional and alternative measures of success and determined how stakeholders assessed and evaluated it.

Theoretical Framework

Since PBE relies heavily on *place* to structure the educational experience, students learn “about”, “how to”, and “to take a stand” simultaneously. These underpinning philosophies are commensurate with both situated cognition and critical theories.

Situated Cognition

An apprenticeship model often utilized in PBE is aligned with Situated Cognition theory (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). PBE schools have strong ties with supervisors in the community who act as mentors and guide through authentic experiences. Lave and Wenger

(1991) indicate, “If apprenticeship is a form of education in which work and learning are seamlessly related, it is nonetheless a form in which the work and understanding of newcomers bare complex and changing relations with ongoing work processes...” (p. 86). Within a community of practice, there is a relationship among persons, activities, and the local environment. Relationships, such as those within PBE, develop over time with other adjacent and overlapping communities of practice. PBE learners move from legitimate peripheral participation within a community of practice, which provides the “interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage” (p. 98). These learning experiences are facilitated using the tools, technologies, and languages adopted by a socio-cultural group, in this case, the maritime society and industry.

Critical Learning Theory

Critical Learning Theory examines social justice and equality which leads to both improved economic and social status (Freire, 1993). PBE can have a direct impact on both employability and economic status for their students. The curriculum of each place is created by invested educators together with their students. The PBE philosophy is well aligned with the *change-agent* concept inherent in Critical Learning Theory. Environmental inquiry’s curricular focus supports the integration of equity and economy by balancing approaches to promote comprehensive development of the individuals’ understanding, skills, and attitudes (Jacobson, McDuff, & Monroe, 2006). The acquisition of cognitive skills and knowledge expands to develop understandings that shape student environmental values (Palmer, 1998). Individual environmental awareness comes from the understanding that concepts, together with experience and concern, lead to action (Jacobsen, McDuff, & Monroe, 2006). Environmental literacy can be defined as promoting awareness, knowledge, ability, motivation, commitment, and skill to

address environmental problems and improve communication skills as a community (Monroe, Randall, & Crisp, 2001). Student PBE experiences help develop cultural beliefs rooted in ecological concerns and subsequent action (Gruenewald, 2003).

Outcomes of PBE

Although there is limited, sporadic research available on PBE, there have been studies to report efficacy as it relates to achievement, especially as it relates to science knowledge and literacy and numeracy skill acquisition. In addition, increased positive attitudes for students towards both education and roles within the community have been consistently demonstrated. Students' increased activism and citizenship has also been observed as an outcome of PBE. A summary of research is provided in Table 1.

Methods

The following research question was addressed: *How was success defined for students in Place-Based schools?*

A qualitative multi-case, multi-site design with an ethnographic stance was employed in this study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Koro-Ljungberg, et al., 2009). The qualitative design was utilized because it allowed the development of a complete picture of how all parts of a system work together to form a whole (Merriam, 2009). The ethnographic stance allowed for an accurate description of the social complexities of culture and various characteristics of PBE (Koro-Ljungberg, et al., 2009; Krefting, 1991). Data were triangulated by methods (interviews, document analysis, observations). Twenty-two adults (supervisors, educators, parents) connected to three urban PBE maritime-based schools in the Northeast United States were solicited and agreed to participate in the study.

Data Sources

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 subjects: nine supervisors/mentors, eight educators, and five parents. For the purpose of this study, educators included teachers and administrators including principals. The semi-structured interview was comprised of six global questions focused on the essence of the research question. Variations in the interview schedule were opportunistically refined and used in accordance with the type of subject.

Observation. Naturalistic observations, documented in a reflexivity journal, were conducted as part of visits at each site by studying participants and culture in authentic settings by recording, transcribing, and analyzing statements made without researcher manipulation (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2002).

Documents. Documents including school profiles, local Board of Education reports and statistics, surveys conducted by school administration, information listed on school websites such as mission and vision statements, and news articles were collected and utilized to provide a rich, thick description of each site. They were used primarily for descriptive purposes and secondarily for triangulation purposes.

Analysis of Data

Gall, et al's (2007) protocol of analyzing data closely in order to find patterns, constructs, and themes was used to characterize and describe the phenomenon being studied was used to develop a set of categories that adequately encompass and summarize the data. Recurring regularities in the data were organized to construct themes (Merriam, 2009) and triangulated by data source (interviews, documents, observations).

Trustworthiness

Four qualitative strategies were adopted to support trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Krefting, 1991). Trustworthiness strategies are summarized in Table 2.

Results

The overarching themes that emerged from the data were: college/career preparation, characteristics of students, sense of community within the school, connections to the community supporting the school, quality of educators, and student engagement. They are defined in Table 3.

College/Career Preparation

College and Career Preparation was developed through a rich, relevant, and rigorous curriculum. Stakeholders cited examples of realistic expectations for college admission for students enrolled at sites with a focus on nautical careers and preparation for, and placement in, maritime industries. Supervisors focused on career readiness and obtaining soft skills such as teamwork and the ability to assume responsibility necessary for success on the job, specifically referencing the value of externships for entry into employment and career advancement. Educators referenced preparation for future, whether it was college, private sector occupation, or military careers. Parents focused on the appeal to colleges because PBE schools were perceived by colleges to be unique, interesting, and valuable in preparing potential students.

Characteristics of Students

Characteristics of students that were identified by the stakeholders included the following descriptive attributes: commitment, confidence, dedication, diversity, independence, leadership, maturity, motivation, passion, perseverance, responsibility, and self-discipline. Additional

demographic attributes, such as socio-economic status, were noted. The concept of responsibility was defined as student behaviors consistent with what authority figures deemed necessary to fulfill academic obligations. Supervisors had a focus on students' ability to be good shipmates while educators cited teamwork and commitment to the school. Commitment was observed through parents' perception of the value of their children's own investment in their education.

Sense of Community within the School

Sense of Community included supportive relationships among students and staff, the nurturing environment of the school, the essential role of PBE alumni, and contributions to the surrounding communities. Since the schools in this study draw students from communities beyond their neighborhoods, unique challenges are presented when creating a sense of community among children with diverse cultural, geographical, and socio-economic backgrounds. Supervisors observed and evaluated teamwork. Educators expressed a more elaborate exploration of sense of community, specifically tied to cooperative education models via teamwork, supportive school environments, alumni contributions, and contributing to neighborhood communities. Parents' viewpoints were focused on the school's nurturing environment.

Connections to the Community Supporting the School

Connections to the community commonly included the descriptors: real world applications, experiences, problem solving, projects, and the implications of those connections. Supervisors noted that students were invested in their curriculum through real world design and actual production ventures. Students are supervised at off-campus sites where there is an anchor for acquiring essential skills. Educators identified student development of problem solving skills

in situ, since they had actual situations that required them to repair, fix, or troubleshoot issues that may occur with equipment and tools especially in a nautical setting, such as a boat. Parents noted physical attributes of the school that tied directly to the real world, but few went on to note the impact of those attributes. Parents made observations such as that curriculum was often delivered in boats.

Quality of Educators

Quality of Educators was identified as educators that were hard working, dedicated, and caring. In addition to illustrations of dedication, personal interest, and concern, examples of the perceived quality of educators included appreciation of their professionalism and inquiry-based teaching style. Stakeholders held overwhelmingly positive views of teachers and administrators. Supervisors focused on the importance of the school administration's dedication and skill set. Educators included their sense of enthusiasm and focus on creativity and often stated that they held themselves to high standards. Parents tended to blend their appreciation of educators with the global acknowledgement of the school and its curriculum. Parent statements, such as "I love that school," were common.

Student Engagement

Stakeholders identified student engagement as student focus on their academics studies as well as interest resulting in strong attachment and participation in their school, off-site projects, and externships. Since the students in this study were predominantly low SES, achieving academic engagement was identified as a challenge. However a supervisor provided a powerful statement about engagement:

Every city is next to a massively degraded ecosystem ... and in all those cities there's some small portion of society, normally a small group of rich white people, trying to

restore that ecosystem ... and then there's [sic] hundreds of people trying to figure out how to engage high school kids ... and it's just that linking those two together, is just so exciting, because what if we can get those disengaged kids excited about their education because they're given a responsibility and they're learning job skills restoring their ecosystem.

Teachers noted that the culture of the school supported a curriculum that was engaging to students. School administrators set the climate that promoted teacher creativity by freeing the faculty from the perceived restrictions of meeting the standards of high-stakes testing. Parents identified that their children were engaged because of the supportive environment, which held students to high standards.

Significance

Stakeholders articulated success definitions in four themes: college/career preparation, characteristics of students, sense of community within the school, and student engagement. Quality of educators and connections to the community supporting the school were contributing factors to success rather than methods of defining it. All themes identified in this study were valuable in assessing and supporting student success.

Stakeholders identified student experiences that dovetailed with situated cognition theory (Brown et al., 1989). This was especially evident via the apprenticeship model of mentoring students in PBE theme-related careers. There appeared to be less support for critical learning theory (Freire, 1993): the tangible benefits of the experience students gained seemed to significantly outweigh their self-concept development of responsible stewardship.

Stakeholders in this study regarded graduates of PBE schools as successful. This was true whether or not they considered traditional measures of achievement, such as graduation

from high school or performance on standardized tests, or subscribed to some of the alternate measures of success explored in the study. The concepts here are not generalizable and should be examined from a transferability standpoint, as deemed appropriate.

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Table 1
Evidence of impact of PBE on students

Study	Overarching impact	Comments
California Student Assessment Project (2000)	Achievement	PBE students performed better on standardized tests in language arts, math, science, and social studies.
Ernst and Monroe (2006)	Achievement	PBE students have increased critical thinking skills.
Gautreau and Binns (2012)	Achievement	PBE students have increased achievement in ecology knowledge.
Lieberman and Hoody (1998)	Achievement	Standardized test scores of PBE student in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies are higher when compared to traditionally instructed peers. Increased impact on low SES student populations.
McInerney, Smyth, and Down (2011)	Achievement	PBE students have increased problem solving skills
National Environmental Education and Training Foundation (2000)	Achievement	PBE students have increased math achievement and increased reading comprehension.
Place-Based Education Evaluation Collaborative (2010)	Achievement	PBE students have increased literacy and numeracy skills.
Ferguson, Phillips, Rowley, and Friedlander (2015)	Attitudes	Student agency is developed when teachers make curriculum meaningful and engaging.
Gautreau and Binns (2012)	Attitudes	PBE students have a positive attitude towards science.
Lieberman and Hoody (1998)	Attitudes	PBE students have improved self-control and decrease discipline and classroom management problems
Place-Based Education Evaluation Collaborative (2010)	Attitudes	PBE students have improved environmental, social, and economic awareness.
Powers (2004)	Attitudes	PBE students have increased student engagement

Table 1 (*continued*)
Evidence of impact of PBE on students

Study	Overarching impact	Comments
Anderson and Gurnee (2016)	Roles	PBE students assume rights and responsibilities of citizenship as authentically as possible
Evans and Kilinc (2013)	Roles	PBE students have increased engagement with community life.
Gruenewald (2008)	Roles	PBE students have increased engagement with community life.
Hennessey (2001)	Roles	PBE builds the capacity of students to become active leaders in the community by strengthening human and social capital capacity.
McInerney, Smyth, and Down (2011)	Roles	PBE creates collaborative roles between schools and communities
McTier & McGregor (2011)	Roles	PBE students have improved employability within the community
Powers (2004)	Roles	PBE students become active participants in their communities
Russell-Ciardi (2006)	Roles	PBE students become more involved in community action.
Smith and Sobel (2013)	Roles	PBE removes students' sense of isolation

Table 2
Techniques to Improve Trustworthiness

Strategy	Criteria	Application
Credibility	Triangulation	Data were triangulated by methods and by sources.
	Member checking	All interview transcripts were reviewed by their respective subjects.
	Interview technique	Opportunistic questioning was utilized. Questions were removed or expanded based on previous responses.
	Structural coherence	Inconsistencies in the data were interpreted and explained.
	Pilot (mock) interviews	Pilot interviews were conducted to frame the scope of the research questions and direct the focus of the research.
Transferability	Thick description	A complete description of the methodology was described including verbatim transcription of the interviews.
	Expert review	Experts reviewed research techniques, the script, and the interpretation of participant responses.
	Theoretical framework	Study was aligned to a theoretical framework to assist in organizing data collection and interpretation.
Dependability	Research methods	Consistent, documented, field-accepted methods were utilized while conducting the study.
	Data analysis	A code-recode process was implemented during analysis. An expert audit of data was conducted.
	Triangulation	As described above.
	Reflexivity	A reflexivity journal was maintained.
Confirmability	Confirmability audit	Cross validation and an expert audit were utilized.
	Triangulation	As described above.

Table 3
Theme Definitions

Theme	Definition
College/Career Preparation	The focus placed upon preparing students for post-secondary academic or employment opportunities which are held in high regard
Characteristics of Students	Student socio-economic status as well as personality traits such as: commitment, confidence, dedication, diversity, independence, leadership, maturity, motivation, passion, perseverance, responsibility, and self-discipline
Sense of Community within the School	Creation of supportive relationships among students and staff, the nurturing environment of the school, the essential role of PBE alumni, and contributions to the surrounding communities
Connections to the Community Supporting the School	Connecting academic experiences, challenges, projects, and the consequences of those connections that have practical applications for the student
Quality of Educators	The extent which educators are held in high esteem by students, parents, supervisors, and fellow teachers, to the extent that teachers contribute to student success
Student Engagement	Student interest and focus on their academics studies, off site projects, externships, and the school community