Premier's Ausgrid Environmental Education Scholarships

The ‘Hood is Good - A study into Place Based Education (PBE)

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Key message in the words of an internet philosopher

*Be brave - try something new. Remember the ark was built by amateurs but the Titanic was built by professionals.*

My head is spinning from all the possibilities to link children to the security of their place and knowing it and its capacity to meet their needs. Using your local neighbourhood as the centre of students’ learning fits snugly with our Department of Education and Communities’ Quality Teaching Framework. Every community I visited as part of my Premier’s Ausgrid Environmental Education Scholarship study tour spoke in glowing terms of place based education’s (PBE) capacity to engage the wider community and the Indigenous communities were especially delighted to have their information/story valued and used. PBE is the perfect tool to deliver quality teaching learning programs utilising the children’s energy, time and effort to produce real understanding and learning.

What is PBE?

Simply put PBE is implementing the curriculum in the local context. Student of all ages find this very engaging and the data from analysis of PBE reveals high attendance, high academic achievement and the development of social skills. All data on desired outcomes increases in schools delivering curriculum through PBE process.

There was a great variety of strategies used to implement PBE in the variety of schools I visited. These strategies included a few classes involved, a short time each week or all classes all week participating in PBE. Staff commitment was critical for the success of the PBE implementation.

Colleagues from Charles Sturt University, Bathurst campus, told me that David Sobel and David Greenwood had expertise in PBE. I contacted them by email stating and I was pleased to receive a prompt reply with detailed support and guidance. Throughout my entire experience both were endlessly patient and enthusiastic. In the mean time I did some readings to deepen my understanding of PBE. I found David Sobel’s writings to be clear, informative and exciting.

PBE in the United States of America

In Keene, New Hampshire, David Sobel had organised an extensive range of schools, elementary and middle, and environmental education centres, for me with the outstanding generosity of schools and staff. Each had a different perspective to offer especially as I visited a mix of charter schools and state schools.

I visited [Surry Valley Charter School](http://www.surryvillagecharterschool.org/), the school had been closed but the local community wanted the school open so a group in conjunction with Antioch University advocated the need for a school and a School Board. The Board still governs this school of 49 students. The school’s corridors are filled with the students’ work. All signs and information have been hand produced by the children. The latest project the school is involved in is to work with Antioch University to gather information about their local area to be published on Google Earth.

The staff educates students in social skills and constantly model them in context to assist the children to master these vital skills. This also ensures all children receive one message and it is consistent throughout the school as are the expectations of student behaviour by the school staff. Through this process the children learn the language of negotiation. The two-way process of respect between student and teacher and peers ensures each child learns they are respected and valued so barriers to learning drop. All learn that the school is a safe and gentle place. Children manage the transition to a large high school where they thrive because they have learnt how to learn and believe in themselves. Students believe, as a result of their work in the community and the skills they have learnt, they are also citizens and have the right to call city hall or city planning department if there are issues of concern. They are empowered by the capacity to think and develop a line of logical thought.

Parents/careers are invited into the school for Family Night which is held twice a month. This evening is a community builder and all families feel welcome, respected and that they belong. Within a 45 mile radius of the school there are 14 towns so community building is clearly necessary. This feeling of being connected and knowing where they are from has a direct and positive effect on health.

Surveying the local community revealed a very skilled community with people willing to work with the students to teach the local arts and skills – including quilting and farming. All community members were respected equally – farmers, plumbers, loggers. A school-wide project, which included community expectations, was the making of a video promoting a new grocery co-operative built in Keene. The manager visited the school, children learnt about food and where it came from. A local architect visited the school and could teach the children about past land use of the school site. A 5 year old Kindergarten boy from a cattle farm was the ‘teacher’ when his class visited his farm. Everyone listened as he explained all aspects of the farm. Critical thinking is embedded in the curriculum as children complete their work. Students are guided to take care of each other, the planet – to be wise in decision making. A local logger and farmer came in to remove a dead branch and ended up talking to the children about caring for living things and the need that they do care for living things.

Surry Village Charter School

Surry Village Charter School provides the children with many opportunities to be in mixed aged settings- lunch and playtime, reading buddies. Bullying is rare and easily dealt with. A typical day is core academics 9:15 until 11:45, recess outside until 12:15, lunch 12:15 until 12:45, 12:45 until 1pm silent reading. 10-10:30 is snack break. Afternoons are project based. State on-line assessment is completed by the children who score well. The school is on a split campus so while parents and teachers’ assistants ran the school the staff relocated to the other campus for a meeting to discuss being a pilot for a new health program called 5, 2, 1, 0. This is to encourage children eating 5 pieces of fruit/vegetable, less than 2 hours of screen time, 1 hour of physical activity and 0 sugar drinks per day. Healthy Schools Program will support the implementation of this with $200 to assist. Aim is to give children improved access to better food and life style choices.

Wells Memorial/Harrisville Public School

[Wells Memorial/Harrisville Public School](http://www.wellsmemorialschool.org), NH, was my next destination. Real work in the classroom about bear safety was published and referred to in the community. Another class studied rocks and minerals in Harrisville which is like a living museum with many resplendent buildings. They identified the rocks and minerals in the old mill buildings, cemetery, and surrounding buildings - things they saw all the time but didn’t think about. Bitter Sweet, which was imported for wreaths, is now an invasive plant as it was thrown out when no longer useful, formed the basis of another investigation. It spirals around the pine trees which snap off in the snow and ice. This was studied over the seasons to observe changes.

Harris Centre for Conservation Education

Harris Centre for Conservation Education (HCCE) New Hampshire had a pre-school group in. We played games, eg predator or prey, which connected them to the environment, made Native American rain sticks used in celebrations and to attract rain then went on a walk looking for salamanders, which we found. Home time they were encouraged to look for signs of spring in the animals and plants they see. HCCE provides literacy, science and history support for 7 elementary, 2 middle and 1 high school in the Monadnock area for both students and teachers based on the curriculum requirements. Each area has an environmental education centre working with local schools.

Bonivale Environmental Education Centre

[Bonivale Environmental Education Centre](http://www.beec.org/), Vermont had a year1/2 class visiting to study a *vernal pool*. They were shown slides over the seasons to discover the changes. We then went to do a pond study with dipping nets. BEEC is located in a donated farm house and each year the program co-ordinator has to secure funding to ensure the Center continues. BEEC provides lessons for students, consultation service to schools and training. The teacher of the visiting class will do a summer course in forestry or fishing to enhance her next unit of work.

Marlboro Elementary School

[Marlboro Elementary School](http://www.marlboroschool.net), Vermont has 89 students K-8 and enough sunlight to warrant solar panels. Every possible space had plants growing indoors ready to be transplanted to the vegetable garden. Vegetable of the Month is a school-wide program with posters, taste tests and cooking. One family per week is the garden steward during holidays. Large books were produced by the students to record their learning based on themes including Plot of Land Study, Tree study, Adopt a Tree, Vegetable Garden.

Senior students manage recycling, organising its collection and then having it removed from the school. 3/ 4 class managed recycling of contaminated paper resulting 50% reduction in trash. Older children model the class culture to the younger children. There is a focus on food with a cooking corner and children are encouraged to try a new food 12 times. Children are encouraged to read labels on what they eat to be able to make healthy decisions. A partnership has been developed between the school and [Brattleboro Food Store](http://www.brattleborofoodcoop.com) where the food of the month is featured and free education programs are offered.

Fund raising is a visible part of the school’s activities. Items are on sale under an honour system. The expectation that this will be upheld leads to no stealing or vandalism. Money is in the open so the message to the students is that you are trusted.

A teacher’s assistant who previously worked in a wilderness centre took the children into the woods that backed onto the school. The Year 2 children met at the shelter they had built after they learnt to whittle, and told to get a staff member to help them balance as they walked along uneven, undulating slippery paths spotting birds and other animals. A target game, using a wide range of muscles and co-ordination skills was built with 2 large logs in a cross, round section on each end with a line above from which a tennis ball hung. “Get a hitting stick” was his instruction. A child stood on each platform and had to hit the ball. If the ball touched them, they are poisoned so out and another takes your place.

Guilford Central School

[Guilford Central School](https://www.guilfordcentralschool.org/), Vermont, surveyed the community to determine what was needed. The local newspaper had closed so this gap is now filled by the school’s gazette published each term which goes to the 1000 residents. Year 8 submits applications for each of the departments, business-running finances, getting advertising; journalists-select topic, set up and conduct interviews, take photographs and publication-using computers to set up and publish the gazette. Class teacher oversees this project. She arranged for me to interview the team who revealed the interviews were the hardest. One chap would pursue journalism another said he could do his homework faster as his literacy skills had improved. Author’s Day was the favourite event as they had tea, fruit and cakes and a cloth on the table. The team liked being part of a small group, improving their reading, reading to the class and receiving feedback. Grade 6 has a Farm to School theme so students realise the benefit of cooking and eating local foods, where they come from and try new foods. Grade 7 works on a history of the local area theme which links them to the local historical society-with access to photographs to be interpreted, their family and personal history. Each theme has life-long benefits and link authentically with the community. The students manage the school’s web site and post their work there. A Grade 7 student asked for time with me to let me know how good PBE is. His family is new to Guilford so he is the one telling them the local history. “Learn about past to understand now,” was his comment. The students are proud of their work and feel confident based on their success at GCS. Senior students were using the kitchen working with a local chef to make pizzas as they would cook for the whole school on Friday. Be careful and polite to each other and keep hands to yourself set the tone for a very successful session. All students were engaged and successful and not all students were naturally inclined to be engaged. PBE is particularly valuable to the troubled students.

Year 2 spends 1 hour per week on curriculum in PBE where the teacher is sure they learn more. Maths task was to weigh, package and sell seeds at $2 per pack. Raised $139 and had been working on even numbers! A little creativity enables a wide range of curriculum work to be covered in PBE.

“If one wants to engage students to tap into their potential at highest level PBE is proven. If the goal is to be good test-takers, regurgitators, disconnected- do conventional school. If you want children to reach high achievement level then you choose PBE.” Principal Guilford Central School.”

Ontario, Canada

[Woodcrest Public School](http://www.lakeheadschools.ca/woodcrest) received a grant so 2 classes could develop a PBE program. The vice-principal had to communicate her plans to the teachers who then became devotees of PBE. The children in Grade 2 studied frogs and made field trips around the local area. When houses were built on the frog sites their critical literacy skills became apparent as they debated what was happening. A spontaneous outcome from their work! Aboriginal elders are valued advisors and the indigenous communities are delighted with the work the students are doing. School is purchasing snowshoes to encourage greater outdoor activity in winter.

Alaska

In Fairbanks, Alaska, I was invited to a *potluck.* Hawaiians and Eskimos were to share local food (beaver, moose, seal, whale, reindeer, and berries) dance and song. Hawaiian songs can have two meanings- the story and politely telling you to do something. They dance and always are reminded they are connected to the earth. Lava is good as it connects them and augments their land. Pauldene is an elderly Eskimo lady who sang traditional songs and also more recent songs to reflect what had happened in her family eg World War ll.

[Effie Kokrine early College Charter School](https://www.k12northstar.org/effiekokrine) is a free public school is for Native and non-Native students in grades 7-12. Traditional and contemporary topics are taught. Students learn to hunt and to give the first seal caught to the community as a thank you. There are a lot of similarities between Australian and American indigenous history. An Eskimo woman told me it was the oil that united the Eskimo peoples. If they did not they would have lost land, language and culture.

[Watershed Charter School](https://www.k12northstar.org/watershed), runs a lottery to determine who attends the school. The family I met in the vegetable garden were excited by the school and said their daughters were experiencing both more social and academic success than at their previous more traditional school.

This is but the briefest thumbnail of the most amazing set of experiences I was fortunate enough to have. A few commonalities:

* + Food and well-being were important areas. David Sobel and others speak of the importance of being connected to place for mental health and general well-being starting with preschool children
	+ Students learn to learn and become confident and critical learners
	+ Indigenous communities are especially pleased with the work done in PBE schools
	+ Students produce high quality authentic work of which they are proud
	+ The wider community develops programs to encourage families to be outdoors exploring their local area such as Thunder Bay library’s [www.thebigborealadventure.ca](http://www.thebigborealadventure.ca) Families collect a map and flip book of tasks and a crayon. At each site there is a marker to make a rubbing
	+ The schools I visited had their share of problems, as does any school and community, but I heard no swearing, saw no bullying, was spoken to by the students in the halls and always made to feel welcome and looked after by both staff and students. Toronto University has produced a publication, *Natural Curiosity – (Building children’s understanding of the world through environmental inquiry. “This is obviously the way that teaching and learning should happen.” – Dr David Suzuki*) which describes how the students drive the learning and engages their natural curiosity through Environmental Inquiry: A pedagogical framework. The various avenues are inquiry-based learning (nurturing the sense of wonder), experiential learning (about the environment, for the environment and in the environment), integrated learning (seeing the big picture) and stewardship (fostering civic responsibility).

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