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Is this what good pedagogy looks like?

Review Essay of Diverse Pedagogies of Place: Educating students in and for local and global environments. Edited by Peter Renshaw and Ron Tooth.

Introduction

How we teach what we teach, known as pedagogy, is an important consideration for educators. Today, dominant thinking is that some pedagogies are more effective than others for helping students learn (Hattie, 2012; Marzano, 2017; Scott, 2015, UNESCO, n.d.). However, distinguishing exactly what types of pedagogies and strategies constitute best practice for which students under what circumstances is complex because no one approach or strategy works for all students all of the time (Hattie, 2012; Marzano, 2017; Scott, 2015). Nevertheless, teachers do work from underpinning epistemologies and ideologies that influence their approaches to teaching and learning. For example, teachers with positivist epistemologies are inclined to prioritise knowledge acquisition, are proponents of behaviourist, teacher-centred teaching and learning strategies such as repetition, chanting and systematic procedures that promote memorisation. On the other hand, teachers who adopt a postpositivist approach call for rethinking and refocusing pedagogy from the teacher to the students and future and, as such, argue for open-ended, inquiry-based approaches capable of promoting critical thinking and autonomous learners (Christie, Miller, Cooke & White, 2013; Scott 2015). In the field of environmental and sustainability education, support for postpositivist pedagogical approaches is broadscale.

Diverse pedagogies of place: Educating students in and for local and global environments, edited by Peter Renshaw and Ron Tooth, reflects a postpositivist approach to teaching in Environmental Education Centres (EECs) in the state of Queensland, Australia. Each chapter explores how the cultivation of organic place-based learning relationships can generate deep learning that goes far beyond the current wave of over prescriptive, results-driven education sweeping Australia (Anagnostopoulos, Lingard & Sellar, 2016) and its associated programmatic checklists of artifacts and classroom designs (Crocco & Costigan, 2007). Instead teachers from six EECs within Queensland represented in this book draw from surrounding environments and communities to focus learning on local interests, collaboration with and within communities and across disciplines, and an ethic of care towards and action for environmental protection and improvement (p. 197). As a whole, the authors make an insightful contribution to the field of pedagogy in environmental and sustainability education by extending existing scholarship on pedagogies of place (Gruenewald, 2003; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Somerville, 2010; Wattchow & Brown, 2011; Mannion, Fenwick & Lynch, 2013; Greenwood, 2013; Stevenson, Brody, Dillon and Walls, 2013) to document the development of what they call *place-responsive pedagogies*. Peter Renshaw, Ron Tooth and eight authors from the various EECs provide a compilation of pedagogical stories that take us through a series of possibilities for engaging students in learning. As a prelude to the stories, Renshaw and Tooth carefully theorise the place-conscious pedagogies that frame the stories and provide the interesting history of the emergence and development of EECs. Bob Stevenson and Greg Smith, in a final chapter, offer their own reflections on issues brought to light in the book, based on their own history and experience.

I begin this review with an overview of the EECs and their unique contrast to current mainstream Queensland schools, then describe and comment on the theorisation of the pedagogies presented. Throughout the reading of this book, I was continuously drawn to Biesta's work on professionalism (e.g., Biesta, 2015; 2017) and teacher agency (e.g., Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2015). Therefore, I then adopt Biesta's (2015; 2010) notions of qualification, socialisation and subjectification as a lens to explore the pedagogical possibilities presented in the book. I finish the review with a reflection of my own observations and takings.

Queensland's Environmental Education Centres
Within Queensland, it is well known that EECs operate on the fringes of the mainstream education system and that the distinctive educational space they occupy offers affordances not encountered elsewhere. A total of 26 EECs are spread across the geographically, politically and culturally diverse state of Queensland. Each one has hatched out a space within a piece of unique landscape including, for example, forests; tropical reef-fringed islands; beaches; outback and rural settings; estuarine and freshwater habitats. EECs offer a broad range of outdoor and environmental education programs to schools and the community, and provide professional development for teachers (Queensland Government, 2018). EECs sit under the remit of the Department of Education, are bound to the Department's policies and directives, including the requirement for each school to have a pedagogical framework that focuses on improved student achievement, and to align all learning to the Australian Curriculum - the national syllabus (Queensland Government, 2019). However, school practices are imbued in historical antecedents (Groundwater-Smith, Ewing & Le Cornu, 2015) and this is reflected in *Diverse pedagogies of place* where the stories of teaching and learning in seven diverse O&EECs that were originally given "open-ended agendas… with no blue-print for how a centre should be conducted and no pre-scribed curriculum or approach" (p. 5). This has given the principals and teachers explicit permission to exert professional agency (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2015) to develop the place-based distinctive pedagogies. Each of the chapters in this book demonstrates how the authors, who are principals and teachers of a diverse range of EECs, have taken advantage of their unique positioning to develop diverse pedagogies in response to the affordances of their contexts and actors.

The EECs represented in the book's diverse pedagogies set students up for a very different curriculum and pedagogical experience to current mainstream schooling. Australia has followed the United States, United Kingdom and others around the world in adopting an (over)prescriptive education system that (over)values measurement of effectiveness and efficiency (Biesta, 2017). The result is evidenced in the narrowing of school experience and what we conceive the purpose of education and schooling to be. Many teachers report feeling professionally offended by the current trend of mandated curriculum and pedagogy. For example, just the other day one of my teacher friends was recalling how, up until about six years ago, she used to spend one term each year teaching her Year 3 students science through gardening. The opportunities for helping students learn about scientific concepts that emerged as a result of their gardening experiences were endless and, resulting, the learning always went beyond that prescribed in the official syllabus. However, upon commencing her usual work one year, she was abruptly stopped by the principal informing her that learning takes place in the classroom and that she was to stop her gardening activities. Unfortunately, this teacher's experience

is not unique. Other teachers tell me that being seen outside during class time, unless scheduled as part of health and physical education, is at best frowned upon, and at worst reprimanded. Hence, Renshaw and Tooth provide us with a refreshing and important opportunity to refocus our thinking towards the type of education that enables students to "*learn something*… for a *reason* ….*from someone*" (Biesta, 2015, p. 76).

Theorising about pedagogy

The theorisation of place-responsive pedagogies is a unique features that distinguishes the book. Margaret Somerville's (2010) work on place pedagogy and relational concepts of embodiment, storying and contestation provides the foundation for Renshaw and Tooth's imagination of place-responsive pedagogies as possibilities that reach beyond the immediate material features of the places that make up the EECs. Renshaw and Tooth explain that embodiment concerns a two-way mode of learning that takes place "through the relational activity of the body in place – through walking, touching, shaping, smelling, hearing, sensing in place" (p. 12). Storying is a narrative form of pedagogy capable of supporting multiple interpretations and understandings of place. For example, through storying students can learn about and form representations of a place as scientists, historians, geographers or artists. Each disciplinary lens can give way to different perspectives of the place. Last, the concept of contest is about place as a site of contestation that arises from different agendas, epistemologies and ontologies.

One remarkable feature is the knowledge-building that is made possible through theorising about pedagogy and how the process gives way to six emergent and distinctive metaphors that frame each pedagogical story: Advocacy pedagogy, pedagogy as story in/of landscape, slow pedagogy, walking pedagogy, sacred pedagogy, shifting sands pedagogy and edge pedagogy. The pedagogical metaphors emerged through extensive critically reflective professional development conversations between the editors and the authors. Combined with the stories that underpin their development, they offer an interesting window to alternative forms of pedagogical possibilities. Probably very few teachers would or do engage with theorising their own pedagogies, and yet the book shows how such work can lead to rich and meaningful learning. That each pedagogy is inherent and specific to the existence of the centre reminds us that pedagogy may not be as generalizable as some like to think. Whilst Chapter 9 shows that it is possible to share a pedagogical framework, the specificities of the pedagogy are completely relational.

The book's pedagogical stories

What strikes me most about this book is the diversity and depth of the pedagogies, as well as the stark comparison to the rationalist model of education which is currently dominant in contemporary Australian education. Each chapter offers a different perspective and type of development of learning through place pedagogy that speaks to the broader aims of Australian schooling as outlined in the Melbourne Declaration (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008) and beyond what the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA]) seems capable of doing, at least in practice. The Australian curriculum has been criticised for taking a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching and learning that is disconnected from local realities, decontextualized, depersonalised and culturally hegemonic (Ditchburn, 2012). In a geographically dispersed and culturally diverse country such as Australia, this is problematic. There are many different ways to teach and discussions about the difference

between teacher-centred and student-centred instruction is abundant in the literature. The extent to which any one particular approach is better than another will depend on the purpose of the learning and will always require a great deal of teacher judgement. The pedagogical stories told in this book recognise this and provide different starting points to accommodate local needs.

Diverse pedagogies of place challenges contemporary teacher-centred pedagogical approaches with a single focus on academic achievement by taking up and analysing what it means to prioritise place as a productive pedagogical framework. Each chapter uses the distinctive characteristics of its place in combination with learners' senses and feelings associated with the place to elicit a learning outcome that is difficult to foresee, but speaks to developing the whole person. In following Biesta (2009; 2010) education can develop the whole person and provide a good education when it accounts for three dimensions of educational purpose which he calls qualification, socialisation and subjectification. Qualification is concerned with the knowledge, understanding, skills and dispositions necessary to function in the workforce. Socialisation addresses (overt and hidden) community knowledge, norms and values including, for example, cultural, professional, political and religious. Subjectification is about developing autonomous and agentic young people capable of exercising independent thoughts and actions.

The qualification dimension is central to every educator and school system. However, the book reminds us of something that has been lost in recent times in Queensland, and I suspect in many other places: That we teach individuals and, as such, no single pedagogical approach, model or strategy works for all students across all contexts. This stance is reflected in each of the seven stories of pedagogy captured from Chapter 2 to Chapter 8, as well as in Chapters 1, 9 and 10 that begin and end the book. The first chapter, by Renshaw and Tooth, uses the theorisation of pedagogy as place-responsive to emphasise the futility of considering pedagogy in isolation. This is reinforced and extended in the following chapters by, for example, in the case of the Karawatha experience in Chapter 2, providing students with multifaceted "hooks or pathways into learning" that offer students "different kinds of stories written into the landscape" (p. 38). Such learning, I take from Tooth and Renshaw's analysis, leads to Biesta's socialisation and objectification. The seven pedagogical stories are imbued with examples of how students learn about alternative local histories, customs and values and how, in some cases, exposure stimulates agency. Tooth's pedagogy as story in landscape, in Chapter 3, is based on local historical characters and events in such a way that students are enabled to "see the present landscape as the outcome of contested interests that intersected across Pullenvale across time" (p. 15). Tooth convincingly describes how the recreation of characters and events through story, drama and theatre "awaken student voice and sense of agency" (p. 53) to the point that some students "wanted to advocate and influence others" (p. 57). Such change can be considered transformational (Mezirow, 2000; 2009) or epistemic (Sterling, 2010-11) and is not easy to effect. Chapters 4 to 8 reflect similar but different stories. Each author reports on the particulars of the place, the specific place-responsive pedagogy and the subsequent emergent learning. The reader is reassured of the trustworthiness of each storied pedagogy because each chapter is written by an author or authors who have deep roots in the place. Many of the authors grew up in and around the lands surrounding the EECs where they now work. Hence, Renshaw and Tooth argue that ongoing childhood experiences of the places have enabled the educators to develop

"visceral and embodied relationships to the place that necessarily inform the way they engage with students and teachers who come on excursions to the centres" (p. 4). Collectively, the stories have solidified my experience that pedagogy is deeply personal and context-based and that the possibility that a generic pedagogy can be created for teaching and learning across all disciplines and contexts is somewhat fantastical.

Equally compelling are the chapters that precede and follow the stories of place-responsive pedagogies from Chapters 2 to 8. The opening chapter outlines the historical, professional and theoretical underpinnings of the place-response pedagogies. Renshaw and Tooth recount how the EECs came to be, explaining the agendas, tensions and particularities surrounding their origins. They also reassure the academic reader by situating their work within the scholarship of place and pedagogies of place. Particular attention is paid to the on-going custodianship of Indigenous people to the country on which the EECs are located and the environmental educators who have authored the book's chapters. Two chapters follow the stories of place-responsive pedagogies. Chapter 9 explores how schools and teachers can adopt place-responsive pedagogies within currently restrictive administrative and ecological school environments. Tooth and Renshaw clearly articulate the characteristics of a framework for innovating curriculum and pedagogical practice, then provide a case study example that illustrates the process and outcomes. The final chapter, authored by Bob Stevenson and Greg Smith, who have deep roots in the field, provides an analytical comment on the diverse pedagogies of place presented in the book. In terms of application, both chapters 9 and 10 consider barriers and possibilities for transferring the book's diverse pedagogies to other education settings. Stevenson and Smith's chapter builds on to the editors' narration and analysis in chapters 1 and 9, picking up and extending historical, theoretical and pedagogical threads and adding depth.

For the last section of this review, I consider some themes that cut across the chapters and raise questions for me. My thinking is framed by my position as a teacher educator with a deep concern for the future of our places and people, whilst simultaneously working at the margins of mainstream schooling in Queensland. Within this context, my first concern lies with the topical issue around demonstration of impact on student learning (Hattie, 2009; 2012). Hattie's influential work over the last decade in Australian and international circles has led to the funding of research (e.g., Coe, Aloisi, Higgins & Major, 2014) and initiatives such as the *Education Endowment Foundation* in Britain and *Evidence for Learning* in Australia, working to develop tools to measure "great teaching" (Coe, Aloisi, Higgins & Major, 2014). Of course, the definition and evaluation of great teaching is contestable. Current policy trends reflect a very traditional view of learning as mastery of content at the cost of important life skills such as creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving (Prain & Tytler, 2017). As such influential policy driving bodies such as the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) evaluate great teaching through technical questions about effectiveness or competitive questions about excellence (Biesta, 2015). Unsurprisingly, AITSL (2012) calls for a performance and development culture driven by data as evidence of student learning. This is quite different to the approach taken by the book`s editors who provide evidence of student learning based on qualitative data. Here I want to emphasise that I am only referring to evidence of student learning cited by the authors in narrating the stories of their pedagogy. Yet, there appears an obvious disparity between the types of practices valued at the policy level and those

narrated through the book's pedagogical stories. Further exacerbating the gap is a shortage of explicit detail on the research methodology. Other than a couple of lines in Chapter 1 and some further expansion by Stevenson and Smith in Chapter 10, limited evidence is provided for the untrained reader that the research approach involved in-depth and systematic observations, discussions, theorising, critical reflection and writing and re-writing of chapters. So, whilst not disregarding the impact of EEC experiences on students' learning – of which evidence is provided, and putting aside any arguments about the epistemological validity or reliability of the methodology or evidence offered, what concerns me is that because "the logic of how to produce 'good' education is now so focused on audit and assessment and data" (Yates, 2018, p. 143), a failure by the editors to explicitly address tensions in conceptions of impact on student learning, and a lack of detail on the research methodology weakens the book's potential influence on mainstream schooling. In Queensland, the State Schools Strategy (2019-2023) expects all government schools to follow an explicit improvement agenda. Schools demonstrate performance through 10 indicators, including the following:

- Scan and assess evidence widely, including multiple measures of student achievement and school reviews to determine the focus for improvement.
- Dig deeply into data and evidence to identify a significant problem of practice.
- Utilise the School improvement planning guide to improve student achievement.
- Plan how you will know and measure student progress.
- Review the impact on student achievement using the standards of evidence (Department of Education, 2019, p. 2).

Considering that EECs are part of the Queensland education system, how does the book's evidence of student learning through place-responsive pedagogies align with the Department of Education's expectations? How does the evidence of student learning in the book's EECs reflect the Department's expectations for demonstrating impact on student outcomes? My purpose here is not to criticize, but to make inquiries geared towards broadening the book's potential reach.

A second point relates to the long-term impact of the experiences. I agree with Stevenson and Smith that the way that some of the EECs address the concepts of reinhabitation and decolonization is impressive, however, I am left wanting to know more about the long-term impact of the experiences. This point also speaks to the role of schools. It is my experience that visits to EECs are short-term (from one to four days), one-off occurrences. Excursions to EECs form part of most Queensland schools' yearly timetables. Teachers contact an EEC and negotiate a program and time. In the best cases the EEC experience forms part of a unit of work, however, in many instances it is an isolated activity. The research on the effects of such experiences is contested, but generally suggests that short-term isolated outdoor experiences or programs are ineffective for effecting long-term positive changes in students' environmental understanding, attitudes and knowledge (Rickinson, 2001). Perhaps this is a consideration for future work, rather than a limitation of the book. Nevertheless, it does point to a weakness in the consideration (or lack of) of research limitations. This speaks to my third point, which concerns the human-nature divide. The book's editors emphasise the agency of the materiality of place and argue that place-responsive pedagogies aim to understand and improve human-environment relations. That the adults in the book get this is clear: Most of the teacher-authors make

references to the relational human part of place or environment. However, I am curious about the extent to which this aim is realised for students. This is because there are a number of instances throughout the book where authors narrate stories of change alongside student quotes that position nature as a powerless non-agent external to humans (Dickinson, 2016) through, for example, talking of EEC places of learning as *the nature*. Arguably, the framing of transformational learning places as *the nature* reflects a framing of nature as a passive, mute, nonagent outside of humans and without power (Mitchell, 2002) that contradicts any possibility of long-term change. While such framing might be expected within the constraints of the systems in which we exist and for students of primary school age who, arguably, will not have developed the language, I find it hard to reconcile student conceptions of humannature with long-term change. So, the question that arises for me is: When and how do students undergo such a conceptual transformation?

Finally, I turn to the question at the title of this paper: Is this what good pedagogy looks like? The answer will depend because pedagogy is a social construct that is highly politicised and, thereby, can mean different things to different people. On the surface, pedagogy simply means the methods, strategies or ways of teaching (Loughran, 2006). Indeed, this is how it is taken up in many schools. However, such a conception of pedagogy is inadequate for understanding the complex processes of learning. A more sophisticated understanding is provided by Van Manen (1994), who argues that pedagogy is a relational experience between the teacher and children that sparks learning. The case studies presented in Diverse pedagogies of place certainly do appear to spark learning as a result of relationships between people and place, at least in the short-term. The challenge is convincing policy makers operating under currently restrictive, accountability driven regimes that place-responsive pedagogies can lead to powerful learning for a range of contemporary learners.

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