

Place-based Education in Transition: (Re) integrating Place-based Education into  
a Teacher Education Program

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the experiences of teachers undertaking place-based education in or near Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, including their perceptions of the best ways of implementing place-based education.

In all, seven teachers undertaking place-based education in their teaching practices were interviewed to share their experiences. Qualitative interviews with the aid of an interview guide were used to collect data. In collecting the data, five individual interviews and one group interview involving two teachers were conducted. Content analysis was used in analyzing the data.

Three overarching research questions guided this research. These had to do with the experiences of teachers undertaking place-based education, challenges of teachers undertaking place-based education in their teaching practice, and knowledge and skills needed to implement place-based education. The interviews with the participants were transcribed and coded resulting in ten themes emerging. The themes that emerged helped to answer the three overarching research questions.

The findings suggests that although challenges exist in implementing place-based education, educators can overcome these challenges if they are motivated, adaptable and willing to work with all stakeholders in a place-based program. Finally, new teachers who want to implement place-based education in their teaching practices must understand the local community, understand different teaching and learning methods, and gain knowledge and understanding in safety issues.

Keywords: Place-based education, Outdoor education, Sustainability, Community and Pedagogy.

## **My Personal Inspiration to the Study**

My motivation to accept the offer to conduct this study on place-based education comes from my personal and professional experiences. Growing up in an era where community gardening was being encouraged in Ghana, and also as a child educator working with multicultural children in Finland, have given me much exposure in learning from place and so when the opportunity came I accepted it.

I grew up in a country where there was a political will to encourage every citizen to cultivate food or farm animals in backyards or any unused land space. This political will was known as “operation feed yourself”. The idea was to prevent famine and afford every house an emergency food supply in times of need. As a child I had the opportunity to cultivate vegetables like peppers, tomatoes, onions and black eyed-peas. This experience as a “child farmer” helped me to take care of my plants. Understanding when to water the plants and when not to water them directly helped to care for the plants. Likewise, I gained a deeper appreciation for nature and everything in it. I gained an understanding of how important the various weather seasons were to plants and humans.

These experiences prompted me to show an interest in the early 1990s when the issue of global warming was being trumpeted everywhere. I understood that changes in weather patterns will adversely affect crop yield and eventually lead to famine. My interest in environmental education was therefore motivated by this knowledge gained over the years.

As a child educator in Finland, I was to take kids outside to the community for sightseeing. It was also used as a means to calm them down when they showed signs of

being too rambunctious. I realized the positive effect outdoor learning has on children and the interest children show in outdoor learning as compared to spending too much time in the classroom.

These personal and professional experiences explained above motivated me to take up the challenge to research place-based education. This experience in researching into place-based education has offered me much understanding into the benefits of place-based education.

## **Acknowledgment**

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, place-based pedagogy has received much attention among scholars, researchers, and educators and this has helped propel it into a new direction in scholarship. Place-based pedagogy has also received much attention because of its potential to link students' lives and their experiences to formal education (Eijck & Roth, 2010). Bishop (2004) argued that when students are taught arithmetic and literature, and made to investigate the area in which they live and the stories associated with their surroundings or locality, their conscious level of the place increases and they are helped to appreciate the value of their community. Bishop (2004) argued in his submission that students could be taught most subjects through their locality and by doing so increase their awareness of the locality or communities in which they reside. Teaching from place therefore, means teaching that is based on one's locality.

As place-based education increases the conscious level of students to their locality or community, it helps them become co-analysts of the problems in their community, develop remedies to solve such problems and eventually become engaged citizens of their community (Bishop, 2004). Teaching from place gives "power" (Bishop, 2004, p. 68), and through such power, students are empowered with knowledge about their surroundings, obtain skills to help solve problems affecting their surroundings, and learn to appreciate their communities more fully.

For place-based education to be implemented effectively in schools, however, there is the need for strong leadership in the educational field (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004). Educators have the responsibility to lead the way in helping students gain such

skills and experiences. For that to happen, however, teachers need to gain the requisite knowledge and understanding of place-based education.

This research seeks to gain an understanding of place-based pedagogy from those undertaking it, so as to obtain insight into the implementation of place-based education and enhance the integration of place-based education in the teacher education program at the University of Saskatchewan.

### **1.1 Place-based Education: Examples**

This section offers examples of where place-based education has been implemented in traditional classrooms or subject areas. Implementing place-based education can be through formal and informal education. However, the focus of this study will be implementing place-based education through formal education. Graham (2007) argued that place-based education creates avenues for art teaching and learning that are responsive to the ecology of local communities. Art is part of a “socially responsive process of reflection, critical thinking and transformation” (Graham, 2007, p. 379). When art and education are influenced by place-based pedagogy, students are able to involve themselves in problems affecting their communities. For instance, students, as part of being ecological activists through art works, could line up fish killed by poisoning or exposure to harmful chemicals and create a unique artistic work out of it. This could be presented in art galleries where local people who visit those galleries could be educated to the dangers of pollution. The works of eco-artists “demonstrate[s] practice that are attentive to local environmental issues in ways that are restorative, service-oriented and interdisciplinary” (Graham, 2007, p. 379). When students are involved in

eco-art, it helps them to connect art education to important issues affecting their local communities. Eco-art is a social practice that can help in community reconstruction, help in redefining communal self and develop ecological responsibility in the local context (Graham, 2007). Through art work communities could be helped to articulate ecological problems affecting their local place of dwelling.

Also, in communities where Indigenous people reside, there could be corroboration between elders from the Indigenous people and the local school. Indigenous peoples' place-based value system should be studied (Jolly, Whiteman, Atkinsin & Radu, 2010). In their research, Jolly, Whiteman et al (2010) studied a Cree hunter about his management practices. To the hunter, the reserve land is his classroom; and the bush is the school. So each day as the hunter enters the forest he allows himself to be taught by the forest. He learns from the forest how to sustain himself and also learns how to manage the resources from the forest. Educators and students can learn a great deal from this analogy. Inviting Indigenous people with knowledge of their environment to the classroom and field trips will offer students and educators opportunities to learn about the Indigenous people's sustainability practices and local communities.

Furthermore, a four-year teacher training program in Peru took a radical step to change the curricula that can enable teacher trainees to develop skills that will help them break the status quo of teaching where information given to children is divorced from their everyday lives in their communities (Hart, 1997). In the new curriculum, student teachers are taught how to bring persons from the communities who are knowledgeable about the environment to field trips and ecological excursions. The community member's

mission is to take children into the forest and fields. Such a step has a great impact on the children as well as the community.

Smith and Sobel (2010), identified the local community as an important aspect of students' learning experiences. The local community is easily accessible to a place-based education teacher and students as well. Students engaging in activities in their own local communities will be motivated to help preserve the resources of the community.

Local council and non-governmental organizations whose objective is to advance environmental awareness can take the lead in bridging the gap between students and their communities. Non-governmental agencies like Actionaid, Save the Child, Plan Aid and United Nations International Children Education Fund (UNICEF) have over the years collaborated with local schools to develop programs that help to connect children and the youth to their place of dwelling or communities (Hart, 1997). In one such program in a rural community in Sri Lanka, preschool teachers use traditional Buddhist principles to teach the children basic hygiene in the form of traditional dance, songs and puppetry. Through the traditional practices children learned basic skills from their local communities (Hart, 1997).

In Toronto, Canada, the Toronto district school board has created the Toronto Urban Studies Center. It aims at reconnecting students in the school district to the urban landscape in a way to enrich the curriculum (Skoutajan, 2012). The Toronto urban studies center feature programs such as the outdoor field studies, museum visits, greenhouse investigations and information technology. Each program is unique in a way that connects students to the urban life. The outdoor field studies program connects student

through guided walks, photography, and surveys in the urban centres under the school districts. Through such programs, students learn, understand and appreciate happenings around their communities. An example of an eco-school project that the Toronto urban studies program offers is the eco-school where grade 7 and 8 students map and analyze locations of trees in their school yard using geographic information systems (GIS). It helps students to determine the types of trees to plant and the location in the school or the community. One example of what the students could learn from this project is to learn about soil types for different trees, micro-climates where particular trees will thrive and micro-climates that particular trees create as well as the different tree species locations in the community.

## **1.2 Rationale and Research Question**

This research aims to explore what place-based education is and also how it is implemented from those taking a lead in formal education. In recent years, place-based education has been promulgated as an ideal learning philosophy needed to bridge the gap between students and their communities or local places (Gruenewald, 2003). If it is an ideal learning philosophy, then teacher candidates who are being educated to lead the learning process of students need to acquire the necessary skills needed to teach place-based education effectively. As part of the effort to help student teachers acquire such skills, the University of Saskatchewan teacher education program has developed a new curriculum, which incorporates place-based education. The program seeks to help student teachers acquire or develop the requisite knowledge and skills to implement place-based education in their teaching practice.

By the conclusion of this research, it is envisaged that authorities will be better advised on how to integrate place-based pedagogy into the teacher education program at the University of Saskatchewan.

The main research questions that will guide this study are:

1. What are the experiences of those undertaking place-based education in their institution (K-12)?
2. What are the possibilities and challenges of implementing place-based education?
3. What knowledge and skills are required to implement effectively place-based education in the university teacher education program and in K-12 schools?

The research will further explore the skills needed by teachers to implement place-based education in their practice. The study aims to contribute to the debate about place-based education and the role it has on children's development in schools and in the community. I will start by reviewing various literatures on place-based pedagogy and follow it up with how I will go about conducting the research.



## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this section, I will give a review of literature on place-based education. I will start by giving a comprehensive definition of place-based education and then follow with the historical perspective. In the historical perspective section, I will map the journey of place-based education to the present day. I will then analyze the arguments put forward by researchers and writers on the topic of place-based education. I will also argue in favor of place-based education as a means for ecological sustainability. In the next section, I will defend place-based education as a means of connecting students to their locality and also helping them in their academic achievements. Finally I will look at how place-based education has been implemented around the world.

### **2.1 Place-based Education: The Definition**

Place-based education is learning that is rooted in what is local:

“the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art of a particular place. The community provides the context for learning, student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning” (Smith & Sobel, 2010, p. 23).

Place-based education covers all facets of students learning disciplines to better equip them with knowledge that will help them become engaged citizens.

Place-based education is an example of experiential learning (Roberts, 2012; Knapp, 2005). Experiential learning takes place when the content of the subject matter is taught in such a manner that it connects to students’ experiences (Beard & Wilson, 2006; Kolb

& Kolb, 2005). Experience alone does not necessarily constitute learning, but engagement with and reflection on the experience constitutes learning by bringing multiple perspectives to bear on the experience (Beard & Wilson, 2006; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). By reflecting on the experience and questioning what happened, how it happened and why it happened, learning is actualized. By helping students to question what happened, how it happened, and why it happened in relation to the ecology of their locality, they learn in and from their community. Place-based learning connects experience in the community to the content of the official curriculum, connecting students to the resources and problems of their own locality. In other words, place-based education is localized experiential learning with its boundaries rooted in the locality.

The locality becomes the focus of learning and in turn connects to the global world. This is important, as it will broaden student's knowledge not only on local issues but global perspectives on issues such as pollution, environmental degradation and social justice. Place based-education takes students from the traditional confines of the classroom out to their locality and in that way interrupts the status quo of learning. Although there has been a long history of environmental education linking children to nature, place based-education "extends this connection to specific places [in the locality], people and community" (Clark 2008, p.4; Gruenewald 2004; Gruenewald 2006; Sobel 1996; Skoutajan, 2012).

In this thesis, place-based education is defined as experiential learning where learning takes students from the confines of the classroom to the locality. Place-based education is linked to environmental education being localized and "expanded beyond the

natural environment to include the cultural, social and economic conditions of place” (Clark, 2008, p. 3). Place-based education relies on the strong connection people have with their communities in order to bring about positive ecological and cultural change, a change that will motivate local inhabitants to go green and help salvage the environment.

In the next sub-heading, I will map the journey of learning from place and the connection between Indigenous knowledge and place-based learning will also be established.

## **2.2 Place-based Education: The Historical Perspective**

According to Cajete (1994), the integration of knowledge of a local place, the environment and community to education is centuries old. For instance, traditionally, Indigenous people in North America held a belief system that saw humans as part of a system that connected the natural world and their local community together. Indigenous peoples believed that the “relationship to the natural world forms the basis for their expression of traditional education” (Cajete, 1994, p. 74). The foundation of resilience among the Indigenous people was based on intense understanding of nature’s life cycle; life, struggle, survival, and death. Through this understanding, Indigenous peoples established close contact with their culture and environment (Cajete, 1994; Semken & Freeman, 2008).

To the Indigenous peoples, the land and everything in it, including the rock, trees, mountains and animals are unique as each possesses life and is full of spirit. This “nature-centered orientation helped [the Indigenous people] come to terms with the environments where they lived in a holistic way” (Cajete, 1994, 75). A school of thought among

Indigenous peoples relates various animals like the Eagle, the Beaver, the Wolf, the Bear and the Buffalo as their brothers and sisters. Another school of thought in Indigenous belief systems states, “[o]ur brothers the Bear, the Wolf, and the Eagle are Indians; they are natives, as we are” (Cajete, 1994, p. 76). Based on these understandings, Indigenous people did not exploit the land and only used resources that helped in their survival.

The American psychologist, educator and philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952) popularized the idea of relating place and education among the newcomer society in the late nineteenth century (Garrison, 2006). He argued that learning is active and that students achieve full potential in academics if there is a connection between their experiences and what is being taught. Experience is an integral part of the child learning process. The child’s mind is drawn to the things she or he sees and feels and by gaining experiences from seeing and feeling, the child gains knowledge and understanding (Glassman, 2004). Dewey placed emphasis on problem solving and critical thinking through which the basis of experiential learning was formed. Unfortunately, the educational curriculum over the years has been designed to cater to students’ academic and physical achievements while students continue to be disconnected from their communities or environments (Furman, 2003). High scores in standardized testing have become the yardstick of measuring students’ achievements. With the concept of globalization taking root in educational discourse, student achievement is measured on how students are best integrated into the global market (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004). The global market dictates most facets of the educational curriculum. The more student achievement is measured based on standardized testing and the global market, the more

students become disconnected from their community and environment (Furman & Gruenewald, 2004). This is because more emphasis is being placed on classroom activities that will help students cover the curriculum and prepare them for standardized testing. The results are that students spend most of their time in the classroom and less time studying their locality.

After the Second World War, the belief that greater information about nature and understanding of the various support systems for plants and animals increased. However, this was taken up within a science-oriented style of education with the aim of “promoting awareness of environmental problems and the scientific or technical solutions for them, based on the assumption that when students are taught about these issues, they will learn to care about and protect the environment” (Kopnina, 2011, para. 10). The International Union for the Conservation of Natural Resources (IUCN) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) began a “worldwide awareness in the field of environmental education” in the mid-1960s (Kopnina, 2011, para. 6). This was done through the creating of curriculum on all levels of education. Also, the international workshop on environmental education held in Belgrade, Yugoslavia (now Serbia) in 1975 gave birth to the Belgrade charter, which outlined and defined the goal of environmental education. The Belgrade charter defined the goal of environmental education as, “to develop a world population that is aware of, and concerned about, the environment and its associated problems, and which has the knowledge, skills, attitudes, motivations and commitment to work individually and

collectively toward solutions of current problems and the prevention of new ones” (cited in Kopnina, 2011, para. 7).

In an effort to issue tailored measurable objectives and a clearer definition for environmental education to serve its purpose, the Belgrade charter was refined and updated during the Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education in 1977, held in Tbilisi, Georgia. The outcome of that conference gave birth to the Tbilisi Declaration, which “outlined the aim of environmental education as to create a new global ethic which espouses attitudes and behavior for individual and societies which are consonant with humanity’s place within the biosphere” (Kopnina, 2011, para. 7).

Over the years that followed, environmental education and outdoor education began to merge. Some versions of outdoor education focused on creating awareness through investigations of nature. This idea led to outdoor centers spiraling out and holding the belief that children are able to acquire positive environmental attitudes by experiencing nature (Kopnina, 2011). This belief was based on a generalized paradigm shift on how children were being viewed. In Western societies, children had historically come to be viewed as passive and dependent learners without much agency. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a paradigm shift. From then on children were being viewed more as active agents with the capacity to act in society (James & Prout, 1990). The result has led to a child perspective in research and research is being conducted with children as participants. Children have the tendency to articulate what they believe is happening in their locality and express action and thought about ways they believe will remedy the problems.

The time period from the early 1960's to the late 1990's also witnessed an increase in the numbers of non-governmental agencies established to help in fulfilling the objectives of environmental education. Notable among them was The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) which was founded in 1961 (Kopnina, 2011, para. 11). Another form of environmental education that spiraled out in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was conservation education. The aim of conservation education was to teach about conserving plants and animals and raise awareness to the dangers posed to these organisms. Another offshoot of environmental education from the early 1980s was Environmental Action Research. The aim of environmental action research was to engage the community and students through fieldwork to address local level environmental issues such as waste, pollution, and recycling (Kopnina, 2011; Stapp, 1996).

Although environmental education was successful in creating awareness of ecological problems among students, teachers, and the general public, it faced some criticisms. The criticisms were based on its viability as it continued to be institutionalized (Gruenewald, 2004). Questions were raised about the “purpose and the effectiveness of environmental education as it is constituted in and around general education” (Gruenewald, 2004, p. 72). The purpose of education is to equip people of all cultures with skills and knowledge to effect change in their local community, which is education effecting change in multicultural and political environments. However, environmental education did not equip students with skills and knowledge to help solve problems in their communities and locality as it focused on issues with global perspectives like global warming, emission of green house gases and pollution. These problems are important in

raising the consciousness of students regarding issues affecting the Earth we live on. However, environmental education failed to target specific problems affecting communities and ways of combating them.

Another problem of environmental education was the lack of coordination between curricula and various international conference declarations. Although some of the criticisms were remedied through policy statements and coordinated conferences, the diversity of environmental problems across the world makes an effective coordination problematic (Gruenewald, 2004). Because of this, environmental education has lost a global goal or objective and the definition of it has become vague and ambiguous. Any form of educational activity, which has an element of an environmental issue, is regarded as environmental education. For instance, students taking a trip to the game and wildlife preserve or planting a few vegetables at the back of the classroom or writing a poem about the environment are all classified as environmental education. These activities could not give the necessary skills to students to be agents of change in environmental issues in their local communities. At best it may give students an overview of environmental issues affecting the world as a whole without using the local community as a reference point.

Place-based education emerged in an effort to find a coherent approach to the study of nature and preservation of nature including human communities. Through place-based education students will increase their conscious level of their respective local place, be involved in diagnosing the problems of their communities and become part of



the solution, something many believe environmental education on its own as failed to achieve (Gruenewald, 2003)

Indigenous peoples are connected to their land, and, from their long periods of time living with the land, have practices contributing to environmental sustainability. These practices have been disrupted by colonization. Although John Dewey noted the importance of children learning in and about their own place, a more corporate-oriented approach was taken with the introduction of environmental education programs, and a focus on students learning to be competitive in a global economy.

### **2.3 Place-based Education Evolving: The Proponents of It**

No single individual can claim ownership to place-based education theories as many writers and researchers have published works about place-based education or pedagogy and have helped shape the objectives of it. Hart (1997) argued that when children are engaged in all aspects of research about their locality, it helps them to develop democratic traits. This is because children are aware of happenings in their immediate world and are able to articulate issues that affect them. By giving them roles to play in the investigation of place, children can, “discover that they can accomplish pragmatic and realistic tasks” (Hart, 1997, p.29). Children can be helped in taking roles when investigating issues affecting the environment in their locality and their participation will help them develop into engaged citizens.

When children are engaged in identification of environmental problems in their community, it helps in, “liberat[ing] them from any preconceptions of what is or is not an environmental problem” (Hart, 1997, p.92). By engaging children as co-investigators in

environmental issues in the community, children can articulate the problems in their communities without adults dictating to them what an environmental issue is and what it is not. It also helps children to develop their self-esteem as they are regarded as important members of the community.

Finally, when both children and adults come together to take action on the problems that have been identified, they can play constructive roles in their communities. For instance, they can help by “offering constructive criticisms of the failures of their own communities to be sustainable” (Hart, 1997, p. 193). These sentiments were shared by Wells and Zeece (2007) who argued that children learn about environmental issues from children literatures, either fictional or non-fictional, which are connected to place-based education. In an era where children are losing touch with their communities and places of dwelling (James & James, 2001), it is important that educators and researchers come up with literatures that could help connect children to their local place. The use of developmentally appropriate and scientifically accurate literature could be an effective tool to help children understand their place in and connections to the natural world (Wells & Zeece, 2007).

Theobald (1997) argued that the school systems prevailing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have alienated the youth from their communities. This is because the goal of schools focuses on preparing the youth for successful careers in the globalized market economy. This and other complex factors have led to “disintegrating neighborhoods and the vanishing sense of community” (Theobald, 1997, p. 120). The alienation of youth from their communities is due to a complex set of interrelated factors. It cannot be blamed on

the educational system alone. Theobald (1997) argued that the media distort cultural views and that the goal of the media is to make sure they survive and make profits. Serious environmental problems affecting the communities are usually not promulgated by the media either for fear of losing sales value or harming their main sponsors. Also social and ecological problems affecting ethnic minorities in communities often fail to make headlines in mainstream media (Theobald, 1997). The local public, including students are cut off from knowing the real problems in their local communities. As this lack of knowledge sharing by the media continues, the local public including students lose track of happenings in their communities. This eventually leads to alienation of students and the local public from their communities. Both the educational system and the media are therefore accused of aiding the alienation of the youth from their communities (Theobald, 1997).

Theobald (1997) contended that there should be a new thinking in using the school as a tool for the revitalization of communities. He argued in favor of the provision of “space and time” for all interested people to come together and talk over this idea (Theobald, 1997, p.122). There should be opportunities for inclusive talk where the views of all interested parties can be expressed. For instance, the views of parents, students, and community leaders can be taken into consideration when making changes in schools and educational systems.

Since problems affecting communities are different, each school in its revitalization process will approach the situation differently (Theobald, 1997). This is because, for instance, problems affecting community A are different from those affecting

community B. When issues are approached in that way, the local people benefit since all the energy and effort will be directed to addressing the needs of that community.

Sobel (2004) comprehended that place-based education breaks the status quo of the dominant teaching objectives of traditional environmental education. Place-based education “takes us back to basics, but in a broader and more inclusive fashion” (Sobel, 2004, p.9). While traditional environmental education focuses on natural science disciplines like botany, nutrient cycles and zoology; place-based education teaches more than the traditional environmental education and by building relationships with the physical environments. History, folk-culture, social problems, economics and aesthetics of the community and its environments are on the agenda of place-based education (Sobel, 2004, p. 9). Place-based education looks at the interconnectivity of the physical structure, the cultural perspective, and the economy and environment of the local place.

Sobel (2004) contended that by changing their mindset and ways of doing things, educators and administrators will help schools evolve. This evolution will take place if they are “attentive to particularities of place, climate, community organization, environmental learning centers and parental concerns” (Sobel 2004, p. 10). The goal is to make educational reforms that will focus on the practice of ecological and social sustainability. Practicing ecological and social sustainability will help communities live within the resources the community has and can afford. In the end, the goal is to translate these sustainable practices globally. This can be achieved when most communities in the world practice sustainability by living within the resources of the community. Another benefit of practicing ecological and social sustainability is that people will view the

resources of their community as scarce commodities and will be motivated to think and develop ways of being that are economically and environmentally sustainable (Sobel, 2004).

Although place-based education and critical pedagogy are connected in some ways, they are also different. Gruenewald (2003) suggested that while place-based pedagogy is “needed so that the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit” critical pedagogy is needed “to challenge the assumptions, practices and outcomes taken for granted in dominant cultures and in conventional education” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 3). The combination of these two pedagogies into a “critical pedagogy of place will offer a much needed framework for educational theory, research, policy and practice” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 3). It is this framework that has been missing in environmental education and its related nature studies disciplines like global education, outdoor education, and ecological education. Through critical pedagogy of place, students and educators can question the dominant culture and propose remedies that will be beneficial to their communities and place. Also, by advocating for a type of learning where student engage their communities, place-based education “embraces aims that go beyond preparing students for market competition” (Gruenewald, 2003, p.7).

People, in other words “are not only shaped by places, but we are place-makers, and what we make of our places, and the character of the places we leave behind over generations, reflects much of our political and cultural lives, as well as our theories of knowing and being” (Greenwood, 2009, p.275).

The concept of place, “especially when informed by the multidisciplinary scholarship on place, can potentially concretize the notion of culture and cultural differences in the lived experience of people in their diverse and unique environments” (Greenwood, 2009, p.274). When students from different cultural backgrounds meet under the auspices of a place-based program, each student can bring to the table concerns and problems affecting his or her community. If that happens for all the students in the place-based program, cultural diversity is concretized or actualized. At the end of such a program, each student will carry with him or her knowledge about different cultures and many ways of approaching solving problems. The power of place is important to place-based educators as a context for diversity because the institution of the traditional school system and strict governmental control of curriculum limit instructors in what they can teach and how to teach (Greenwood, 2009).

The proponents of place-based education argued about the local communities being important in the learning experience of students. Hart (1997) talked about the importance of incorporating the local communities in the learning experience of students, which will assist them in becoming engaged citizens. Hart’s argument was based on the fact that when students are exposed to the environmental problems in the local community and they become part of the solution to such problems, they liberated distorted views about what is an environmental problem and what is not an environmental problem because they have experienced, first hand, the environmental situation. Theobald (1997), argued for a provision in the educational system where all stakeholders such as parents, students, administrators, and community elders will come

together and discuss how to incorporate the environmental problems affecting the local community into the educational calendar. This will help decentralized environmental problem since each community faces specific problem which other community might not be facing. When that happens, students will benefit as they will be exposed to the specific environmental or social justice issues affecting their community. Sobel (2004) argued that place-based education takes us further than what the traditional environmental education offers. Place-based education, apart from teaching about the local communities, also introduces students to the social justice issues about such communities. Students are exposed to a wide range of issues affecting the local communities through place-based education. Finally, Gruenewald (2003) argued that place-based education helps students engage with their communities and through that, the status quo of education where students are prepared for the global market will be disrupted. Students learn to act as agents of change in their communities.

Place-based education, I argue, enhances educators and students' understanding of diversity in schools and classrooms.

#### **2.4 Place-based Education: Towards Sustainability**

Sustainability means “to keep a person or a community from failing or to cause something to continue at its existing level or standard” (Inglis & Aers, 2008, p. 86). This means sustainability is concerned with actors who are both natural and cultural and also social and material; that is the interconnectivity of humans, their local places of inhabitation, their way of living and how it affects their environments, and the physical structures. Sustainability has in recent times been connected to economics, waste

management, pollution, and environmental problems. Practicing sustainability is vital to the future of the planet that is experiencing massive ecological degradation (Beames, Higgins & Nicol, 2012). Place-based education is an approach to teaching that connects students to their local community and helps them to practice sustainability (Smith & Sobel, 2010; Orr, 1992). When students are connected to their local community, they learn to understand the dynamics of the problems facing their communities. They learn to appreciate efforts being made to control such problems and sometimes they have the opportunity of helping their communities plan the methods to be used in controlling such problems. They become engaged citizens and are motivated to give a helping hand to the community. By connecting to their local communities and understanding the problems communities face, like environmental degradation and pollution of the water bodies, students will more likely be motivated to practice sustainability to protect the ecosystem of the community.

Education as a learning process is an important tool by which behaviors and practices can be developed. Although educators “cannot coerce their students to adopt a certain behavior, they play a key role in helping young people develop informed values to allow them to make personal choices” (Beames, Higgins & Nicol, 2012, p.31). Educators through place-based education can help students develop values, which will help them to make choices to benefit their communities. When students are introduced to problems affecting their communities, they will be motivated to practice behaviours that will help preserve it (Chawla, 2002).



Place-based education may prevent individuals or community from failure or help them to continue at a required standard by connecting them to their community and through that laying bare the problems of the community for affirmative action. Gruenewald and Smith (2008) argued that our world is full of discrimination and ecological pollution is engulfing us all at a rate that the earth may not be sustainable for many species. There is the need to engage all members of the community in planning sustainable practices. Community engagement is therefore an important aspect of sustainability.

When community engagement is “integrated to place-based education, learning is connected to action” (Clark, 2008, p.3). The local people and students come together to help solve the needs of the community. Also, through this partnership the educational goal as well as the social, economic, and ecological needs of the community is advanced. This partnership is important due to the growing concern of the disconnections of students from their local culture and traditions and with children showing less interest in local historical sites, local crafts and arts (Grunewald, 2003; Eijck & Roth, 2010). Many practices are affecting sustainability of community and these have to be addressed. Among them are the disconnection of students from their community, predominance of the globalized economy and lack of diverse media (Beames, Higgins & Nicol, 2012). A globalized economy focuses on maximizing profits to the detriment of local communities and to protect their interest, they employ biased media houses to propagate their interest. The oil sands in Canada is a typical example where giant oil corporations employ some

media houses to under report the effect of the oil sands to the ecology of the local communities.

Place-based education helps in bridging the gap between students and their communities, and eventually teaching them the practice of sustainability. Place-based education which takes students out of their classrooms offers students “direct/sensory, intellectual, and effective ways of knowing [their communities]” (Beames, Higgins & Nicol, 2012, p. 32). Sensory/physical experiences are important in human development as it is through our senses that people came to know the world around both physically and biologically (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012). By engaging in the world around them, students might form a common understanding of how their community functions and might lead to critical reasoning skills and personal decisions that will help the community. The “feelings or emotions we experience, when thinking about the planet and our relationship with it, will influence our actions in relation to [practicing] sustainability” (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol 2012, p. 33).

Place-based education helps in giving students that firsthand experience with their community. An example of how students can be helped to develop close contact with their communities is the learning in the watershed program in California (Stone & Barlow, 2005). Students were led to preserve endangered California freshwater shrimps by doing creek restoration work on ranches in Sonoma and Marin Counties, California. Students planted trees along the riverbanks to prevent erosion during heavy downpours. Also, items dumped in the river bodies that could cause contamination to the shrimps were cleared and signposts warning the local habitant about contaminating the river

bodies were erected. The result was those students were able to learn about the interaction between species in the ecosystem of that community. By helping to preserve the endangered freshwater shrimps, they have helped the community to practice sustainability.

Place-based education and sustainability are connected as both offer students unique learning experiences. Through place-based education, students will develop a greater sense of understanding about their local communities and help develop strategies to help solve such problems. Sustainability on the other hand, is concerned with the continuous existing of a person or community in an acceptable manner. Therefore when students engage in their community and help to preserve it, they are practicing sustainability since their community has a better chance to continue to exist and function in an acceptable manner.

## **2.5 Place-based Education in Action: Engaging Students in Learning Experiences**

Place-based education works to reconnect students to their community and their natural and cultural environments. This connection is important because increasingly people are disconnected from their immediate world, culture, nature and community (Clark, 2008). When place-based education is implemented in ways that

truly conjoin school with community and provide opportunities for democratic participation and leadership, student are given the chance to partake in the collective process of creating the sustainable and just world that must come to replace the world of discrimination and waste that has begun to unravel us now (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. 42).

When students are exposed to environmental problems affecting their communities through actively participating in the narratives and discourses, it enables them to articulate the problems from a personal point of view. When that happens coupled with engaging them to discuss the way forward for the community, they develop the habit of practicing sustainability to help preserve their community.

Theobald (2006) argued that acquiring knowledge about a subject is not enough for students but the ability to exert control on the knowledge is the most important. This can only be achieved through a “particular place given particular circumstances” (Theobald, 2006, p. 329). The particular place and particular circumstances are the locality of the students. The student’s locality or community can become an object of curricular change through which students can learn art, history, and music. The community can influence the study of these subjects by connecting the students to practice in the locality. For instance, students can use the community as a reference point in the study of statistics and mathematics. Issues about the environment, health care, and employment patterns affecting the community could be analyzed by students from the community. The findings of these issues could inform policy makers in the community. Therefore “virtually every school subject could provide a viewpoint from which to examine issues [affecting communities] (Theobald, 2006, p.330).

Orr (1992) comprehended that human society has been disconnected from not only the places we have come from, but also the places we now inhabit. Humans, through lack of appreciation and knowledge of the local have been disconnected from our locality and communities. It is important that humans become acquainted with the environment,

which is a part of the ecology in which we reside. Bartsch (2008) argued for the importance of actively engaging youth in community decisions as they are integral members of society and the future of the community inherently affects their future. As members of the society who will be greatly affected by any decisions those in authority make, it is imperative that they are included in decision-making. Including them in decision making will not only empower them to protect their communities but also it will help them with the sense of belonging that will motivate them to connect positively to their locality. Bartsch (2008) stated, “If [students] could see themselves as viable citizens solving real world problems in their communities, then they would have, upon leaving these communities, a clearer understanding of not only their sense of place but how they could improve their communities as adult citizens” (p.68).

Skoutajan (2012), in his study argued that students show much interest when they are in their communities, riverbeds, and forest learning about the places, people and issues that surround them. The studies conducted outside the classrooms include “interviews and survey with teachers, students, and parents” (Skoutajan, 2012, p.36). This is because the focus of learning is making students create deep connection between what they read in the classroom and their experience outside the classroom. The result is that students who are exposed to lots of place-based activities also show great enthusiasm in other curriculum subjects (Skoutajan 2012).

Sobel (1996) argued that there is disconnection between children and their immediate environments. He noted that children have knowledge of endangered animals and ecosystems around the globe due to technology, and yet, children do not know

enough about the very neighborhoods they live in. He discussed that although schools are talking about environmental concerns, there is still disconnect due to the fact that there is still no real contact with the environment. Sobel (1996) suggested that when students are engaged in their local neighborhood streets, it encourages social action by allowing them to participate in the local community. There are great advantages in introducing students to their local environment, which fosters an actual connection rather than discussing ecosystems and environmental issues occurring in a different country, even though the global epidemics seem more pertinent (Sobel, 1996). Being able to relate to the issue and observe its personal connection, students will build a sense of ownership, responsibility, and a tangible connection between their communities and place of abode. Sobel (2004) further stated:

Emphasizing hands-on real world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students' appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens. Community vitality and environmental quality are improved through active engagement of local citizens, community organization and environmental resources in the life of school. (p.7)

When there is active engagement of citizens, including students, in problems affecting the community, it builds strong bonds among citizens. It helps students appreciate what they have as a community and this appreciation covers other disciplines

academically. Since all curriculum subjects could be learned from place, students will develop active interest, which will help them to achieve academically.

Place-based education engages students in a positive learning experience. Through place-based education, students can gain diverse knowledge about their locality. Since the locality becomes a focal point in their learning experience, they learn to appreciate their community and cultivate habits that will help preserve and improve it. This learning experience becomes a positive one since students will learn to understand their communities better and through that they will become engaged citizens.

## **2.6 Chapter Summary**

The review of literature has shed more light on the journey of place-based education. Teaching from place has been traced to First Nations belief systems and has over the years evolved into what is now termed place-based education. Place-based education connects students to their communities and helps them become engaged citizens.

Although the benefits of place-based education have been documented, the focus has been on students while there is not much research on how teachers implement place-based education and the skills and knowledge needed by teachers to run a place-based program. This study seeks to contribute in that aspect as experiences of teachers undertaking place-based education will be analyzed. The analyses of the experiences of teachers in the field of place-based education will inform educators and teacher candidates on how to plan, deliver, and assess a place-based program.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

In this section, I will discuss the research method I employed to collect the data for this research as well as the method of data analysis. I will start by discussing the research strategy, then the method I employed to collect the relevant data for this study. I then explain how data were collected, and finally discuss the ethical consideration for this research.

The research was funded through a Praxis Grant from the College of Education and the purpose of the study was to enhance the teaching of place-based education in the College of Education by drawing on the knowledge and experiences of teachers in the field who practiced it. The overarching research questions that guided the study were co-created with my supervisor based on what we wanted to learn from teachers in the field practicing place-based learning.

### **3.1 Research Strategy**

Since I was researching about the experiences of my respondents that cannot be quantified in aggregate form, a qualitative research methodology best suited this research. Qualitative research is a type of research that basically inquires into the quality of an experience or situation.

Qualitative method is noted for its capacity of “seeing through the eyes of people being studied” (Bryman, 2004, p.279). Participants in this study had the opportunity to express their experiences in implementing place-based education. Through this study I have gained an understanding of their experiences, which will inform the College of



Education about how to implement place-based education within a teacher education program. The experiences of place-based education expressed by participants through qualitative research can be interpreted as “seeing through the eyes of the participants” (Bryman, 2004, p. 279) because through them, users of the findings of this research will be informed about place-based education.

In collecting data for a research, one of the most important aspects is the type of questions that will aid the researcher to gather information from the respondents. By asking open-ended questions about place-based education, participants were able to give descriptive answers, which helped me in understanding place-based education and developing findings related to this study (see Appendix 3 for the questions).

Purposive sampling method was used to select participants for this research. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) stated that purposive sampling method helps researchers to build a sample that satisfies specific needs. Since this research explored what place-based learning is and how it is implemented from those undertaking it in the Saskatoon region, purposive sampling was the best way to locate teachers who were practising it. Place-based pedagogy is relatively new and not many teachers identify themselves as doing it and so there were not many teachers to choose from. With the help of my supervisor, we handpicked the participants from a pool of teachers undertaking place-based education in their teaching practice across the various school divisions in Saskatoon region.

Eight letters of invitation were sent out with the view of inviting two teachers each from kindergarten, elementary, secondary and special place-based education

programs. Seven teachers responded to the letters of invitation. One of the letters sent to the teachers at the kindergarten level was from a rural area near Saskatoon and the idea was to gain a rural perspective for the study. Seven (7) participants consisting of two teachers from kindergarten, one teacher from the elementary and two teachers from the secondary level, and two teachers from a special place-based education program in Saskatoon or its environs were selected. This created a diversified sample size in the participants by having different teachers from different schools across Saskatoon and its environs sharing their experiences in implementing place-based education in their teaching practices. The views of teachers taking up place based education in different school divisions are represented. This study will enrich understanding regarding implementation of place-based education in various places, and within various school divisions in Saskatoon and its environs.

### **3.2 Data Collection Method**

The method I used to collect data for this research was in-depth semi-structured interviews with the use of an interview guide. Hesse-Bieber and Leavy (2011) stated that an in-depth interview is a conversation usually between an interviewer and an interviewee where there is an active participation of listening and asking. Since this research was to investigate the experiences of those undertaking place-based education, in-depth interviews were the ideal method to use to collect data. With active asking and listening between my respondents and myself, I was able to achieve much by way of accessing relevant information about place-based education for this research.

Kumar (2005) contended that an in-depth interview is a face-to-face encounter between a researcher and a respondent where the former seeks to understand the latter's perspectives, life-experiences, and situations. In other words, an in-depth interview is an encounter between a researcher and a respondent where the respondent shares his/her experiences in the respondent's own words and expressions. By using in-depth interviews, I was able to gain much understanding of my respondent's experiences and problems of implementing place-based education.

I employed an interview guide in my interviews with my respondents and this also helped me in directing relevant questions about place-based education. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) explained that an interview guide is a set of topical questions that forms the researcher's line of inquiry. The interview guide helped me to identify key areas in the research and corresponding questions that were asked of the respondents (see Appendix 3). With the help of the interview guide, I was able to get to the heart of my respondents' experiences. This was evident in the way I probed the participants and also in how the participants passionately answered the questions. The guide also helped me in sticking to relevant questions about place-based education.

As I have already explained above, seven (7) participants who were known to be practicing place-based pedagogy in the various local school divisions accepted to participate. There were five (5) individual interviews and one involving two teachers. All the teachers chosen for this study either implement place-based education alongside their normal traditional teaching or implement it in a special place-based education program.

The participants of this study are teachers from kindergarten to grade 12 in and around Saskatoon.

### **3.3 Data Analysis Method**

Before the data were analyzed, the interviews were transcribed into text either by myself or by the Social Science Research Laboratory at the University of Saskatchewan. Transcription of the interviews was done by carefully listening to each audio recording and then translating them into text. I was diligent in the process and that helped me in transcribing the text or verifying that it was transcribed text successfully. After each interview had been transcribed, the text was carefully read through and sent to the participant to validate that the transcription was correct. I then began analyzing the data.

The aim of data analysis is to provide objectivity in interpreting the data collected without losing their original intent and content. It also provides structure and clear, and systematic understanding of the data gathered from participants through the interviews. In this research, I employed content analysis to analyze the data collected from the respondents. Content analysis involves identifying the themes arising from the data (Bryman, 2004 p. 183). Coding is one important aspect of content analysis that helps in analysis of text and documents.

The use of content analysis in analyzing data is convenient as it simplifies and reduces large volumes of data into organized sections. Thus content analysis transforms the data collected into codes, which helps in analyzing the data. David and Sutton (2004) contended that codes are keywords, themes or phrases that may or may not correspond to actual terms in the text being analyzed. The codes used in content analysis might be

words that the participants used themselves or words that the researcher uses to represent what the respondent said. The idea of using codes is that it pulls from the data information that answers the research questions so that the organization and thematic grouping is easier. David and Sutton (2004) argued the importance of using codes in analyzing data in qualitative research. That is without coding data, analyzing and interpretation the data will be very difficult. In this study, the codes I used were words used by the participants to narrate their experiences of implementing place-based education in their teaching practices. The codes helped me in identifying emergent themes relevant to the three main research questions of this study.

By using codes, I was able to identify the key points in the interviews and attend to the themes that emerged after coding the data. The three main overarching research questions that guided the research were; what are the experiences of teachers undertaking place-based education? What are the challenges of teachers undertaking place-based education? and what skills and knowledge needed to implement place-based education?

Several themes emerged that was grouped under the research questions that guided the study. Thus, themes that helped to answer the question about the “experiences of teachers undertaking place-based education” were grouped under that question whiles themes that helped in answering the question about the “challenges of teachers undertaking place-based education” were grouped under that question. The same was done for the third question, “knowledge and skills needed to implement place-based education. In some cases the themes overlapped but were separated for ease of communication.

In conclusion, the purpose of the study was to enhance the teaching of place-based education in the College of Education by drawing on the knowledge and experiences of teachers in the field who practice it. The purpose of the study led to the creation of three main research questions to guide the study. In order to draw on the knowledge and experiences of teachers undertaking place-based education, seven teachers across Saskatoon and its environs were interviewed. The interviews yielded transcribed interview data. The data were coded using words used by respondents to either express their experiences or challenges or knowledge and skills needed to implement place-based education. Themes emerged from the coded data and the themes that emerged helped to answer the main research questions of the study.

### **3.4 Ethical Consideration**

According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) ethical issues in qualitative research arise because researchers bring into public notice the private lives of respondents. Again, ethical dilemmas in qualitative research arise because of the fact that researchers “want to gain more knowledge while respecting the integrity or privacy of the respondents” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005, p.169). Ethical principles revolve around whether, in dealing with respondents there will be any harm to them, whether there is a lack of informed consent or whether there is an invasion of privacy (Bryman, 2004). Ethical issues are founded in moral principles that every researcher should abide by when conducting research.

Before accepting to be interviewed for the research, the respondents were given a consent form to sign (see Appendix 2). The consent form spelled out the kind of

questions I would be asking, the duration of the interview, potential risk we might encounter, contact information of relevant authorities in case of concerns during the course of the interview and issues of confidentiality. It was made clear to the respondents that they had no obligation to participate in the research and as such they had the liberty to discontinue up to the time when the participants signed the transcript release form. The respondents were kept abreast of all information needed to make informed decisions to be part of the research.

### **3.5 Delimitations, Limitations and Validity**

The delimitations for this research were teachers implementing place-based education in several school divisions in and around Saskatoon. By focusing on this region, I was able to get a diverse but manageable sample, which provided a broad range of experience in place-based education. The participants in this research were selected across the various school divisions in Saskatoon and its environs to give a generalized view of teachers implementing place-based education in their teaching practices in Saskatoon region.

To ensure validity of this study, I made the utmost effort to listen to the participants, record, and make important notes on their experiences of implementing place-based education. Also, I sought feedback from my committee members on the best methods to use in interviewing and taking notes during the interview process. Again, after transcription participants were given the opportunity to go through the transcripts of their interviews and make sure they agreed with any information given before it was used in the analysis of this research.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section analyzes the data collected from the participants. Three main research questions that guided the study were: What are the experiences of teachers undertaking place-based education in their teaching practice? What are the challenges faced by teachers undertaking place-based education in their teaching practices? and what are the skills and knowledge required by teacher candidates to implement place-based education in their teaching practices? Words used by the participants were coded and themes that emerged from the coding helped me answer the research questions. I organized the themes by matching them with the research question they best answered.

Figure 1 below shows the three main research questions that guided the study and also used to organize the data.

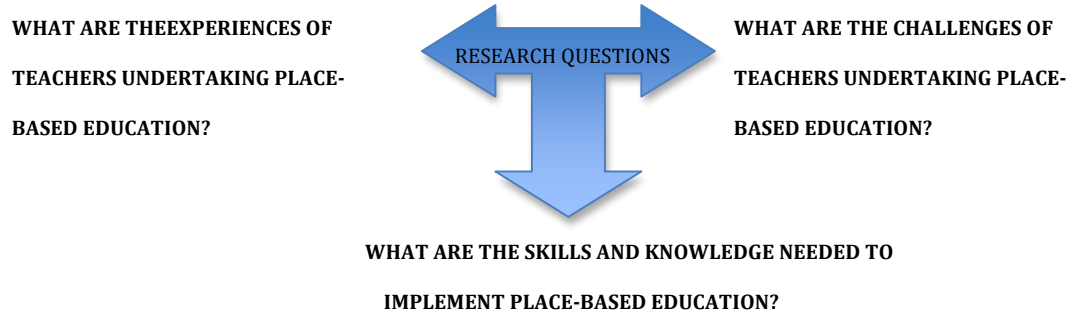


Figure 1.

### **4.1 What are the experiences of Teachers Undertaking Place-based Education in their Teaching Practice?**

In analyzing the data collected from respondents, various themes emerged under this question. The themes under this question were deduced based on the words used by



one or more respondents in explaining their experiences of undertaking place-based education in their teaching practice. Figure 2 shows the various themes that emerged.

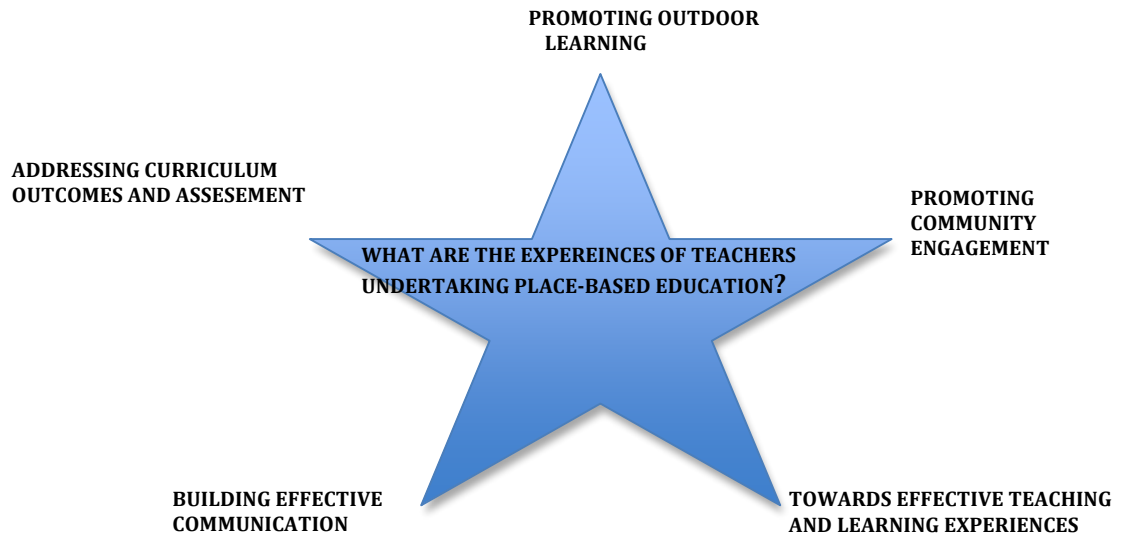


Figure 2

#### **4.1.1 Place-based education: Promoting outdoor learning**

Four out of seven respondents specifically addressed the value of promoting outdoor learning. In the words of one respondent:

I am really connected with a garden idea and having some sort of nature close to my kindergarten. Because growing up I did a lot of playing outside. I grew up on the farm at [small town] and we played outside a lot. I see my own children and I see the children that I teach not doing that as often for many reasons. I did send home a survey with my families to ask families if they felt the same way I did. And they list the same reasons: families are too busy; our children are in many different activities and our families are all working and then electronics are also

something that children put more value in than being in the outdoors. I think my children and my students are not as connected to the outdoors as we were as children. So that was where I started thinking I need to reconnect these children to the earth because if I don't, how can we ask them to take care of where they're from? How can we ask them to clean up and make good choices consumer-wise if they don't love the earth, if they don't love the prairies? That's where I started.

(PSA)

PSA realized some forms of disconnect between activities she did when she was growing up and the activities being undertaken by her own children and the children she teaches. From her submission it was evident that changes in family structures and activities available to children in this computer age are reasons why children are being increasingly disconnected from their communities. Also she realized that children cannot be socialized to care for their environment and communities if they stay disconnected from the very environment and community that they are being asked to protect; hence her decision to connect children she teaches to the earth through the place they live in.

Later PSA in explaining how her students behaved while learning from place around the community, stated:

And afterwards I thought did they learn? Like did I cover my objectives? And yes! We talked about what we saw, they talked about what we heard, the leaves crunching under feet and in each other's hands. We talked about what we felt [when] the wind was whipping the leaves against their face. So they were laying down in the leaves making leaf angels. And I asked, so what did you smell? It

smelt old, so they were exploring and using their senses and learning. So to me because of the garden, I've learned that we have to follow their lead outside and they behave differently out there. They are engaged; they want to find treasures. They are into you know finding a ladybug or finding a snowflake on a branch, rolling in the leaves. (PSA)

PSA's students became enthusiastic when they were engaged in learning that took them directly to their environment. They became part of the learning process where they explored what had been taught. From PSA's submission, it was evident that her students were engaged by learning from place where a teacher does not control learning but everybody is involved.

Another respondent, APJ in explaining how he got into place-based education stated:

I've always been involved in my career by using place to stimulate students to be further engaged. So before creating this classroom [...], and before going for my Masters, while I was teaching grade three, four and five, I'd bring my students to parks, we'd go on bike rides, we'd go on camping trips. And I found that for those students to (come) together as a classroom and to have everyone the same, you know, coming together as a team, to take on the challenges that sometime education brings, brought a better learning atmosphere for the students. (APJ)

APJ understood the importance of teaching children outside the confinement of the classroom. In his experience, he realized that teaching in an outdoor place brought a better learning atmosphere which children enjoyed and made the best out of it.

From the experiences of the respondents quoted above, it is clear that they found that place-based education or teaching children in the natural environment helped to promote learning. Children were introduced to their surroundings and that brought an enabling atmosphere for learning to be actualized.

Respondents in this study argued that place-based education promotes outdoor education. In narrating their motivation for undertaking place-based education in their teaching practice, respondents agreed that there is a disconnection between activities students engage in and their local outdoor environment. Therefore, in Saskatoon and region, place-based education must be connected to the outdoors. The local geographical environment, climates are significant in how we manage our lives, our politics, etc. One of the respondents stated that the computer age we live in has contributed to students being disconnected from their communities. Students spend more time in indoor activities than outdoors activities. With place-based education students have the opportunity to become connected to their local outdoor environment by engaging in activities that promote the well-being of the communities. This statement by the respondents is in tandem with Bishop (2004). Bishop (2004) argued that place-based education increases the conscious level of students to their locality or community, it helps them become co-analysts of the problems in their community, develop remedies to solve such problems and eventually become engaged citizens of their community. Students are reported to be enthusiastic and engaged when learning takes place in their environment, something that place-based education promotes (Sobel, 1996) and this is confirmed by the participants.

#### **4.1.2 Place-based education: Promoting community engagement**

Four out of seven respondents in this study stated that place-based education promotes community engagement. By engaging the community, children learn to appreciate their communities by exploring and helping to build it. In explaining how place-based education helps children to engage their communities, this is what one of the respondents, APJ stated:

We're not like an adventure program where we go to the best places in Saskatchewan to learn about a subject but we do emphasize that our students can make a difference in our community and we show them that by actually giving them projects that are happening in the community and, the end result is always a community presentation like to open up to people beyond just the teachers in the program or the parents and [so the] public get to see their work. Actually, some kind of change will actually happen because of our project. We'll build something at the end of the project or sell something, there's tangible result. (APJ)

Based on the submission of APJ, when students are introduced to real-world learning by exploring their communities they help to effect positive change. Students are motivated as a team in helping to find solutions to problems in the community. Also, in explaining how students build community through place-based education, APJ stated:

Well to build community we organize our Fridays to a variety of community jobs that our students are in charge of and these are all jobs that are meaningful to us curriculum-wise because they're parts of the curriculum like in wellness and food studies and horticulture, like they're from those areas, but they also are

meaningful in our program because the completion of these jobs helps our community thrive. (APJ)

Building community helps community to thrive and students taking leadership role helps to achieve this.

Another respondent in stating how students are engaged in the community with the help of collaborators in the community stated:

I think our list is over two hundred people that we connected with in our community. Being at the U of S, or environmental groups, or the City of Saskatoon, or the plant groups or the Forestry farm. It's always making those connections. So I'd say like the first three years was just knocking on people's doors. And just asking, can we connect, can we do something together? And you know most people are really happy, they want to help. They want to have more of a cohesive community and you know you have an influence on education as well. (DAM)

Place-based education alone may not help students become engaged in their communities but they are able to do so when connections are fostered with the larger communities. By initiating connection with equally important members of the community, place-based education helps create an array of collaborators who will help in furthering the cause of helping students become engaged in their communities.

Participants stated that place-based education promotes community engagement. They argue that students learn to appreciate their communities when they explore and help in building it. This is also in agreement with the definition of place-based education

by Smith and Sobel (2008). Smith and Sobel (2008) defined place-based education as learning that is rooted in what is local—“the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art of a particular place. The community provides the context for learning, student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning” (p.23). When the community provides the context for learning, students are engaged in activities to help the community to thrive. The community becomes the focal point of learning as students work within the community to solve problems and through doing that work, they increase their interest to protect resources in the community.

#### **4.1.3 Place-based education: Towards effective teaching and learning experience.**

Four out of seven respondents in this study stated that place-based education helps to promote effective teaching and learning experiences. This is achieved when students are empowered to take the lead in their own learning. When students are empowered, it leads to a learning experience that is independent, relevant, and responsible. This is what one of the respondents said in explaining how place-based education helps to promote effective teaching and learning experience:

That kind of real-world learning increases the motivation, by like tenfold, just to see that students acknowledge that there's a purpose to what they're doing and in order to solve problems like that and work on projects like that as a team.

Everyone has a unique role in the class as we're completing these projects....I don't know what the work is like in regular class, everyone has the same

assignments usually and you don't feel like your work is really that important. If twenty other people are doing the same thing as you, you don't really feel like your work is going to contribute to the collective knowledge or understanding. But in our project-based work, where everyone in the class has a unique role if you don't do it, the class in the end suffers. (APJ)

APJ in this statement shows from his experiences that when students are subjected to real-life situations and problems, it increases their motivation through knowing that what they are undertaking has the potential of effecting change in the community. Again, understanding that their efforts might lead to something positive in a project, students are encouraged to work as a team to successfully complete the project. By successfully completing a project through teamwork, motivation and sense of belonging, students engage in a positive learning experience.

Another respondent in explaining how place-based education helps to promote effective teaching and learning experience stated:

A lot of circle talks as you can see our classroom here is just like couches there's no desks. So very often we'll sit in a circle setting and just discuss issues then from there we ask the kids to participate, because it's that participation that feeds that consciousness. If they sit there very passively, then they're not going to get their brains engaged or you know even, build off each other's conversations (DAM)

DAM identified a minor difference in his classroom setting and that of the traditional classroom setting and although it was minor, the influence it had on students



was enormous. By sitting in circle and not in a conventional classroom, students were able to engage in discussions whereas that would not have been the case in a traditional classroom. Although students are able to engage in discussions and debate important issues in a traditional classroom, the setting in DAM's classroom added more incentives for students to engage in discussion where the teacher in conventional classroom usually takes the lead in a controlling manner.

Another respondent, SUP, in explaining how students are encouraged to engage in discussions in a place-based education classroom setting, stated:

Being able to ask questions, inquiring [and] probably to trust that they will gain something if you leave the building. To trust that the children are capable of coming up with their own theories and then testing those theories and then realizing that they are capable of coming up with their own knowledge when they are out [side the classroom] (SUP).

From the above statements, SUP implied that by giving power to the students, thus empowering them to take charge of their own learning, helps them to actively participate, and through that, their conscious level of their own learning will increase. Increasing their conscious level of their place means students will become aware of happenings in their communities such as environmental and social justice issues, and through that they will be engaged to help in solving some of these problems. Again, when students are challenged to take charge of their own learning, they are able to come up with constructive ideas and theories to solve problems they have confronted.

Also, two participants in explaining how place-based education promotes effective learning experiences through students engaging in independent, responsible learning, stated:

Well it makes learning relevant, and I think it hopefully makes it stick a little bit better, beyond just those skills of collective work habits and study skills and pushing your boundaries. So we're really trying to mold like independent, responsible, respectful and capable citizens. And I think our programs do a really good job of helping kids see what their capabilities are. And I think we've pushed them pretty hard you know there's a hard, heavy academic load as well as adventure education, and the physical education that happens. So it's that's a tricky balance and, I think it sets them up quite well for you know grade twelve and beyond to see what they're capable of and where their passions lie. (SAS 1)

The whole philosophical part of it [place-based education] would be largely connected to the [fact that the] teacher does not hold the power. I mean the teacher has the power the teacher has the power anyway. So drop the power. [Let] each kid has their own power. And instead of the teacher standing in the front and saying; I have got the knowledge, let me give you the knowledge. The teacher stands back and introduce [students] to an atmosphere and environment where learning is just going to go wild. They stand back and they respect the fact that student could be expert. They could know a lot of different things and you want to give the students a chance to show all that they know. (SEP)

Place-based education makes learning relevant to the students according to SAS

1. When students are subjected to a learning experience where there are collective work habits and they are pushed beyond their boundaries, which place-based education has the potential to do, these experiences it molds them to be independent and capable citizens. This development of citizenship is achieved when students are engaged to help in community projects where the outcome will be positive. Examples of community projects that students can be engaged in could be to prevent erosion that could threaten the landscape of the community or arguing with community leaders to relocate landfills that are threatening the health of inhabitants of the community. These positive outcomes emanating from these projects will shape them to be engaged citizens working for the betterment of their community.

SEP on the other hand stated that when students are given power or when the teacher reduces the power she/he possesses, students are exposed to an environment where learning is partially controlled by the students. This will give student a positive learning experience since their learning will be influenced both by their interest and what curriculum stipulates.

Participants stated that place-based education works towards effective teaching and learning experience. When students are subjected to real-life experiences, their motivation to effect changes in the community increases. Students understand that their effort will eventually lead to a positive outcome in the community. This statement echoes that of Skoutajan (2012). Skoutajan (2012) argued that students show much interest when they are in their communities, riverbeds, and forest learning about the places, people and

issues that surround them. The focus of learning is making students create a deep connection between what they read in the classroom and their experience outside the classroom.

Place-based education empowers students to take charge of their own learning. When they actively participate in activities that will bring positive change in the environment, this also helps them to increase their conscious level of the environment. Teaching from place gives “power” (Bishop, 2004, p. 68), and through such power, students are empowered with knowledge about their surroundings and motivated to obtain skills to help solve problems affecting their surroundings. They learn to appreciate their communities more fully. Thus activities like sitting in a circle so they can talk to their peers and look at them while they each do their own part of an overall project, and knowing that their contribution is unique and important to the success of the whole gives power and makes learning a memorable experience.

#### **4.1.4 Implementing place-based education: Building effective communication.**

Respondents in this study stated that one of their experiences in implementing a successful place-based educational program is to build an effective communication system. By building an effective communication system, interactions between teachers, students, parents and administrators become easier thereby helping to run a successful place-based program. This is what one respondent said when discussing how communication is built to run his place-based program:

And in terms of communication with parents and students we have phone trees and e-mail lists; we mainly want the students to take the responsibility for communicating with their parents back and forth because sometimes like part of this program is to get kids to be more independent .... all the systems are set up for right away immediate communication. We have the cell phone numbers of our admin, they have our cell phone numbers, and we have that online calendar. And yeah that's all constant communication in that regard. (SAS2)

Apart from the teachers having a list of phones numbers of parents and students, the students themselves are agents of communicating. This makes sense since the students who are in such a program can better give vivid information about the program to their parents. Again, administrators are well informed by teachers in the program through e-mails and phone. Other respondents in explaining how communication helps in running a place-based program stated:

We maintain a website for our people who want to learn about the program. So we can refer when people ask on the street. You can say oh there's a website you can check it out. But on the website we also have a calendar that we continually update with our weekly activities so that students can check that at home and parents can also check that at home. It helps keep everybody in the loop which is necessary for these kinds of programs when you're not necessarily at school every day. (APJ)

Well, I write letters in their folders to the parents to let them know what we were doing. The children have folders that go back and forth to the school. I asked the

parents to complete a survey, about the outdoors and children. And then we wrote the story about the garden on PowerPoint. And so that is also up in the classroom, on the wall so at parent-teacher interviews I had the children tour the parents around the classroom. So they were able to see that documentation of us building the garden. (PSA)

From these statements, it was evident that having an effective way of communicating with parents and other stakeholders in a place-based program is important. This is because most place-based education programs takes students out of the reach of school administrators and parents. It will calm the nerves of parents who might wonder where their children are and whether they are safe or not. The program run by APJ maintains a website where all partners in the program can follow the progress of the program. By updating the website regularly, parents and administrators as well as the general public have up-to-date information on the program. The effect of this is that the program teachers will have enough time for the program as inquiries about the daily schedule by parents or administrators will be minimal, thereby giving them more time to run the program.

Also, PSA maintains a folder where all activities about the program are recorded in the form of letters to the parents. With that, parents are always updated with information about the program. Recording all the activities in a PowerPoint and having the students show their parents when they visit the school also helps parents to have a visual sense of the program in addition to the letters sent them. It might help clear up any

misunderstanding they will have of the program and reduce the amount of inquiries to the teachers. This will give the teachers more time to dedicate to the program.

Another respondent, in explaining the forms of communication she employs to get to the parents, states:

I email weekly. I let them know what we're talking about, what we're doing in the class, again inviting them to participate or offer anything that they have. I do home visits as well that's not as often... maybe every few months I like to try and visit.... and then I'll actually bring photos and documentation to share with the families too so they can see what's going on. So those are the two main ways.

Cause most of my kids come on the bus. I don't even see parents. (SUP)

This statement by SUP showed that depending on the circumstances, managers of place-based programs could improvise a way of communicating with parents. Again, it showed how important communication is in the running of a place-based program. Since the place-based education is a different mode than the regular classroom form of teaching, there is a greater need for effective ways of communicating with all stakeholders.

Building effective communication is important to implement place-based education according to the respondents of this study. Effective communication means being able to share information about activities to all stakeholders in a place-based program. In the era of the computer age, there are many modes of communication that place-based educators can use to connect with all stakeholders in a place-based education program. Respondents in this study stated that mobile phones, internet and letters are

some of the communication tools they use to build an effective communication with parents, administrators and the general public.

Building effective communication as a component of implementing place-based education is an area where there is not much research. The respondents' argument that building effective communication is one crucial element in implementing place-based education successfully intrigued me.

#### **4.1.5 Place-based education in action: Addressing curriculum outcomes and assessment.**

Another theme that emerged from experiences of teachers undertaking place-based education in their teaching practices was how they address curriculum outcomes and assessment. Since place-based educational programs are run within the regular school system, they are required to meet and assess curricular outcomes. Respondents in this study outlined different methods they use to address curricula outcomes and assessment. One of the respondents said:

I don't have specific outcomes but I connect [the activities] to theory of child development and I connect it to the learning and kinda say what they're learning as we do it. Like even when we went out and collected sticks just naturally the kids started ..... comparing them and talking about size. Well that's math. So then I can write about that and connect it to math. (SUP)

SUP takes every opportunity to connect the activities to the curriculum. In the above example, SUP's students explored nature and learned math.

Another respondent stated:



Our kids they do something called curriculum connections. And so they take all their experiences and they have to find how they connect to an outcome in the curriculum, in a certain subject area. Say we go camping to Batoche, it's social studies based but it's also physical, it's also health related. You know history, and there are so many different subject areas that can be covered there. They have to seek out themselves what they've learnt, and then write a paragraph of how they've learned it. They have their report cards next week and they wrote about fifty pages of what they've learned, according to the curriculum. (DAM)

Students in this program are given power to describe what they have covered according to the curriculum. By transferring this power to the students, they have control of their own learning and are able to document for themselves how their learning meets curricular outcomes. It helps them to understand the curriculum pretty well as compared to regular classroom teaching where the teacher determines whether the curriculum has been covered or not.

Other respondents in answering the question of how they address curriculum outcomes stated:

So we have biology, geology, wildlife management, English and physical education and those things are much related. So it makes it very easy for us to touch numerous outcomes, on one excursion or in one project. I think for the first few years of any integrated program there would be maybe a lot of oversight in terms of addressing curricular outcomes and a lot of administrators checking on that. But I think now the student learning speaks for itself in a way. In the sense

that we can show admin any project or any assignment we give them and say it hits this this and this. And, I think they'd be quite satisfied to see that. Like we do checks for ourselves just to make sure, because it is, you know the curricular outcomes are important. So we don't want to ignore those but definitely address them in an integrated fashion. As far as assessment goes we do a lot of self-assessment and peer assessment. (SAS2)

So what we use is a portfolio-based system where students collect evidence of their learning and tie that to the curriculum outcomes. When we start a project I've got to give them a list of curriculum outcomes from the variety of classes that we give credit for in [.....]. And the outcomes that make the list are ones that I know should probably be- or they should probably come up throughout the project depending on what role they have in the project. (APJ)

I do continually look through the outcomes and indicators and as I go through I highlighted everything that we learned through the garden. And I was actually quite surprised in a good way at how much we did cover by building a garden by exploring, just by going outside and asking them questions. Like I said we would go out and play. But now, I go out with the idea of I've got to ask a question to take their learning further. What did you find? Why did you find it there? Where did you find it?, what should we do with it, all of those questions as they explore. (PSA)

These statements by the respondents showed the different kinds of assessments methods available to managers of place-based educational programs. In all these

assessment methods, students take leading role in assessing what they have done.

Whether it is self-assessment, peer assessment or the construction of a portfolio, the input of the students assessing themselves is visible.

In implementing a place-based program, curriculum outcomes and assessment is one area that educators focus on. Since most place-based education programs runs along side the regular school, it is subjected to curriculum outcomes and assessment.

Participants in this study talked about various ways of addressing curriculum outcomes.

Some of the participants connected activities to the curriculum while others allowed students to do self-evaluation but based on the curriculum. In self-evaluation, power is given to the students to evaluate their own learning experience based on the curriculum.

This study reveals the array of measurable tools available to instructors to assess students' participation of a place-based education program.

This category has therefore shed more light on place-based education, which will benefit instructors, student teachers, and other educators interested in outdoor or place-based education. For instructors in place-based education it will further enhance their capacity to effectively implement place-based education in their teaching practice. These examples given by the participants will further shed light on the characteristics of implementing place-based programs and also serve as a guide to student candidates in the field of place-based education.

## **4.2 What are the challenges of Teachers Undertaking Place-based Education in their Teaching Practice?**

This question shed light on the challenges that teachers undertaking place-based education in their teaching practice encountered. Under this question, respondents gave different challenges they go through in implementing place-based education and that formed the foundation of the themes under this question. Figure 3 shows the various themes in this question.



Figure 3

### **4.2.1 Place-based education in action: Implementation issues**

One of the challenges that were identified by some respondents had to do with unexpected issues that arise when implementing place-based education. In explaining the challenges he faces when implementing place-based education, one respondent said:

Getting connect[ed] with the school board, getting them on board to know that they are investing into a different type of classroom; that the startup cost will be a little bit more having two teachers and getting the proper equipment. I know sometimes for legalities the school board likes you to be supervising all the time but we want to empower our students. To say that they can handle taking the bus to go to a certain location, they don't need us to babysit them. So lots of startup conversation like what would a classroom look like, what will be the benefit for our school division, how will we know that this program is working. That is probably some of the biggest startup concerns that they talked about when we were beginning this program. (DAM)

One of the important issues to address when implementing place-based education is getting the school division to approve the program. Since place-based education is usually run alongside the regular educational system, administrators want to be convinced that students will be safe in a place-based program. Teachers therefore have a daunting task of convincing school boards or their respective heads that students under the place-based program will take reasonable precautions to ensure safety, at the same time empowering students to do things without constant supervision from teachers.

Other respondents outlined various challenges they go through in their place-based program. This is what some of the respondents said:

In kindergarten it is more student-led and it is more exploring and cooperation. You kind of have to let go of [the idea that], they're going to get dirty and it's going to be messy; this isn't going to be easy; it's not very warm outside; I don't

really want to go outside. As teachers I think we come to school and we're dressed up [to stay indoors] and that makes us not want to go outside. I think that is something that we have to let go of. As teachers we have to come prepared to get out there. Because every day except maybe if it's minus forty-five we might go outside. (PSA)

I think selling it to students is not tricky but the grade eleven levels is a little bit different than grade eight level. And there are a lot of reasons for students going into grade eleven to not think about place-based. Because there is a number of a grade eleven programs available they have lot of options; they are getting ready for grade twelve and university and there are credits and starting to think about marks and all these things that kind of detract students from it. (SAS2)

From the statements above, it is clear that teachers themselves need a lot of motivation to lead a place-based program. In this part of the country where the temperature drops to minus most of the winter season, it is important that teachers of place-based education programs build self-confidence and are self-motivated to encourage student to go outside the confines of the classroom to explore and investigate their environment. If the teacher shows enthusiastic attitudes in below zero temperatures, it will motivate his/her students to go along with him/her to explore their surroundings.

Another challenge outlined by SAS2 was how to sell the program to students. With grade twelve and University education very close to them, it become difficult to convince student to veer from the normal classroom teaching where they will build their grades to go into grade twelve and eventually university. This poses a big challenge to

teachers in place-based education to convince students that curriculum will be covered even in place-based education and that they will still make the grades to grade twelve and university.

Another challenge outlined by respondents was how to de-school students enrolled in a place-based program. De-schooling used by the respondent meant how students transition from regular classroom settings to place-based education class setting. Students coming from grade ten to a place-based program find it difficult to transition from a regular classroom setting to a style of teaching and learning where they have much influence in their own learning experience. In explaining this phenomenon, one of the respondents stated:

For us the biggest challenge is that [the program] is always dynamic and transformative so depending on your students, you really want to be be student-centered and take their ideas and then allow them to understand that they have the freedom to go to the places where they want to learn. And the hardest part for us is the 'de-schooling process'. Like some students by the time they come to our program they are already ingrained into sitting into desks and listening to the teacher. So for them to be free and to say I'm in charge of my education, [becomes a difficult process] and presently going through that process. We're almost in December and so it takes four to five months of 'de-schooling' the students, to know that they're empowered, to know that they're in charge of their education (DAM)

“De-schooling” process used by respondent was to describe the process students used to transition from regular classroom setting to place-based education class setting. For the “de-schooling” process to take that longer time shows how regular classroom setting have greater influence on students. Although this might hinder the progress of students in the place-based program, the resilience of teachers to help these students overcome the differences in the environment and take charge of their own learning create an atmosphere where learning is actualized.

Participants in this study identified various challenges in implementing place-based education. One of the main challenges is getting approval from the school board or head of the school. Since most place-based education programs are run alongside the regular school system and students are expected to cover certain curriculum outcomes, it becomes difficult for place-based education educators to convince the school board or heads that students can still cover the curriculum or syllabus and that they will be safe undertaking outdoor activities. Some literatures in place-based education like Smith (2007) talked about the challenges of the present educational system and how place-based education can help to remedy such challenges. These challenges of conventional schooling as outlined by Gregory (2007) were standardized knowledge associated with established disciplines, reliance on teachers as primary information sources, assessment procedures based on ease of marking, and the control of students. Place-based education is one tool that could be used to remedy such challenges. This study will help student teachers prepare towards some challenges they might face when implementing place-based education in their teaching practice.



Another challenge that came up in this study was how teachers motivate themselves to lead place-based education activities under unfavorable conditions. One of the unfavorable conditions identified by the respondents was minus zero temperatures. Since Saskatchewan lies in the prairies with extreme weather conditions, there is the need for teachers in this area to motivate themselves well enough to lead their programs. It is when they motivate themselves that they will be able to motivate students to participate in place-based activities in minus zero temperatures. This information is important for student teachers in the prairies region that might plan to implement place-based education in their teaching practice. Again, there is not much research in this area; therefore this piece of information will be important for student teachers that will implement place-based education in their teaching practices.

#### **4.2.2 Place-based education in action: Accommodating different students.**

Another challenge identified by respondents in this study is how to accommodate students with different needs. One of the challenges is enrolling students with physical and cognitive disabilities in the place-based program. In explaining the challenges he faces in working with students with disabilities in his place-based program, one of the respondents stated:

We being teachers before like in a traditional sense we are really good at adapting the workload within the classroom. So it's just using those skills again to know if you have a student with a physical disability or an intellectual disability that you're always accommodating. As any teacher you should always adapt if you need to, not force a curriculum on a child but make sure you get the curriculum

that best fits the child on their terms. So we're always adapting like even this year we have some students with Tourette or some students with some really hard learning disabilities. We don't shy away from that because we don't want our classroom to be a you know, it doesn't have to be a perfect classroom, it should be a real classroom and it should have some real challenges (DAM)

Although having students with disabilities is a challenge to the respondent, adapting and using skills already learnt in a regular classroom helps him to manage the situation. Since the classroom is not a perfect classroom but one with real challenges, enrolling students with disabilities in a place-based program will be a recurring situation. However, with a motivated teacher who is ready to adapt and give equal opportunity of all the students irrespective of their ability will go a long way to help all persons be involved in the program.

Other respondents had this to say when narrating their challenges working with students with disabilities:

We do quite a bit of group work....I think probably like all the place-based programs. So that allows for students to shine in different areas as well and there's ways to modify a project within the group to meet the needs of each student. With two teachers it helps [because] you can address individual needs and really differentiate the programming if necessary. (SAS 1 & 2)

[.....] would be my example. She has a (Pierre Robinson sequence), which is all of her membranes inside her neck above her trachea have collapsed. And so when it's really cold and really windy she cannot go outside. So what we've done

is we've brought the outdoors to her. We bring leaves inside and set them on the table so she could also crunch them and she always has a friend with her. (PSA)

And for those students [with disabilities] we just need to find a way for them to contribute in the projects and as I mentioned already that there are projects we've kind of lately been solving them as a team. And when you work together as a team, and you find a role for everyone. You can make everyone feel important and scale the level of difficulty, so that they can all contribute in some way. (APJ)

From the various submissions by the respondents, one skill that is required from teachers of place-based programs is adapting and modifying projects to accommodate different kind of students with different difficulties. This is possible if there are extra hands in terms of personnel to manage the program. Thus having two teachers in the program is always ideal to help manage students with different needs.

Also, working as a team will help students with different needs since other students will help complement their efforts to complete projects. In that way all the students in the program will benefit from each other.

Participants identified ways of accommodating different students as a challenge in implementing place-based education. Accommodating different students means accommodating students with special needs, be it physical or cognitive. Participants stated that although this is a challenge, adapting and using skills already learnt in the classroom helps to overcome it. Finally, from the submission of the participants, teachers can modify activities to accommodate special needs students so that they might not feel outcast or discriminated against.

### 4.3 What are the knowledge and Skills Needed to Implement Place-based Education?

Respondents based on their experiences in running place-based education outlined some skills and knowledge needed by teacher candidates to successfully design and implement their own programs in running a place-based program. The various themes that emerge under this question were understanding the local community, understanding different teaching, and learning methods and understanding safety issues. Figure 4 shows the different themes that emerged from this question

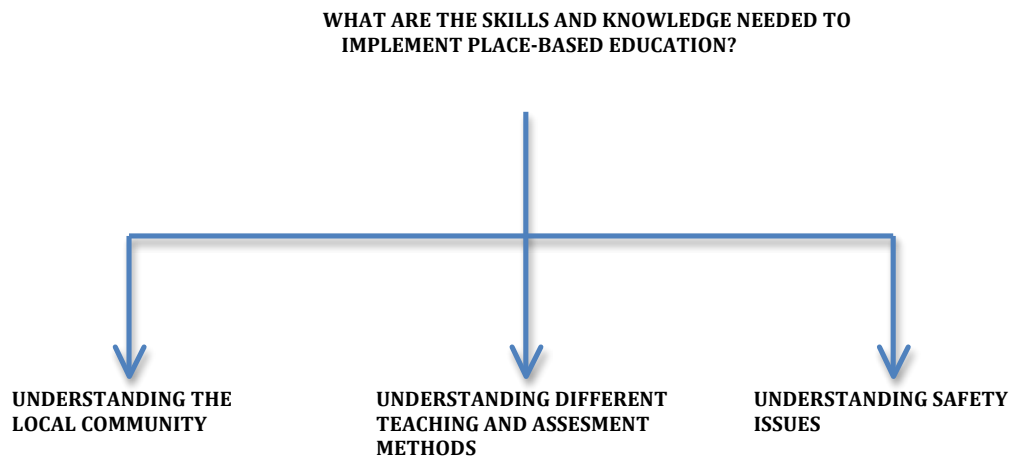


Figure 4.

#### 4.3.1 Place-based education in practice: Understanding the local community.

To implement place-based education in their teaching practice, some respondents stated that teacher candidates should gain an understanding of the local community where the school is situated. In explaining why this is important, one of the respondents stated:

With place-based education if you want student teachers to be able to go out and have careers in this area they have to know [the area] really well if they're going to love it. So there is the need to bring them out and experience these place-based education programs. Most teachers are probably pretty open about sharing their time with students, if all you do is go out to different places and talk about the value of each place and how what activities you could do there- or better do the activities that the students would be doing there, and experience from a student's perspective. Then when university students finish their program, they'll have this huge repertoire of places that they can visit and know the activities that they can do there and what they're like and how to organize them, as opposed to just knowing about the idea of place-based education or having read some books or written some papers about it (APJ)

According to APJ, understanding the local community is important for student teachers to implement place-based education in their teaching practice. Therefore university programs or courses on place-based education should be taught in a manner that takes student teachers out to the local community to get acquainted to the place. Teacher candidates will gain knowledge of the place and be able to design their place-based education program to suit his/her students. Although theoretical knowledge of place-based education is important, it is equally important for teacher candidates to possess the practical knowledge as well.

Other respondent's stated:

Maybe having each teacher candidate have to lead a class like in the community will give them little bit of an idea of what kind of planning might have to go into [implementing place-based program]. I suppose you could do some sort of urban trek or find community resources and bring them together. I mean obviously not every teacher candidate is going to be teaching in Saskatoon. But there are lots of things that you can learn about your community while you're in university that you can then take into the teaching world. And if you don't know about them you can't provide them as a teacher. It will be nice if teacher candidates had an idea about SCYAP or you know City Hall or what the public libraries offer. That seems I guess basic to us but it take time to develop and they need to learn that and see the importance and the value to a student. (SAS1 &2)

I guess maybe [teacher candidates] going to schools [that undertake place-based education] to try to get children outside working in the community or learning about the community through hands-on activities. (PSA)

Both SAS1 & 2 and PSA argued that having knowledge of the community and having hands-on knowledge on how place-based education is implemented is important for teacher candidates. To implement place-based education in their teaching practices, teacher candidates should gain knowledge of the local community and the skills of formulating programs based on the knowledge of the local community. These can be achieved if programs at the university are delivered in a manner that gives teacher candidates the knowledge of the local community and the skills to design, implement and evaluate programs based on the knowledge of the local community. This will help

teachers to plan, develop and implement activities for a place-based program. Most literature argues about the importance of local community to place-based education; however, most of the emphasis is on students rather than pre-service teachers. (Bishop, 2004; Skoutajan, 2012; Clark, 2008; Sobel 1996). Again Smith & Sobel (2010) argue for the incorporation of the local culture and experiences into students' learning experiences. The importance of gaining much understanding of local knowledge by teachers is not much highlighted in research. The College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan is entreated by the respondents of this study to develop place-based programs that will take student teachers to the communities to gain much understanding of the local communities.

#### **4.3.2 Place-based education in practice: Understanding different teaching and assessment methods.**

Another skill and knowledge needed to implement place-based education is for student teachers to gain knowledge in different teaching and assessment methods. Some respondents in this study placed much importance on this theme. In explaining why this theme is important, some respondents stated:

Because if you are given the opportunity to teach in place-based education you're probably also able to do the integrated learning inquiry where you go out and do all sorts of things. So teaching those types of assessments; like how to use exemplars; how to get students to self-assess properly; how to do it enough so

they.... develop a stronger sense of what self-assessment is and how to self-reflect properly. (SAS1 &2)

I think place-based educators should sit down with the College of Education and share what we use for our assessment tools. Because our assessments are different. (DAM)

According to the respondents, since place-based is a bit different from the regular classroom setting there is the need for student teachers to understand the various assessment methods. Also, it will be important for the College of Education to invite teachers implementing place-based education in their teaching practice as resource persons in place-based education courses to share their experience in using different assessment methods with student teachers. This will help student teachers to have a face-to-face experience with people undertaking place-based education in their teaching practices and gain deeper understanding of the different assessment tools available.

Since place-based education uses different approaches in instruction and implementing activities, assessment methods should also vary to accommodate the different approaches used. Participants therefore argued that, with an array of different assessment methods available, student teachers should gain experience in using these assessment tools. Teacher candidates will have the knowledge to apply diverse assessment methods in activities they implement. Again, the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan is advised to help student teachers apply assessments appropriate for place-based learning in their training.



By so doing they will gain much understanding of the various assessment tools available and be able to apply them in their teaching practice. In a wider application, these can be undertaken in a number of ways. Firstly, the curriculum of place-based related subjects at the College of Education can be designed to have both theoretical and practical components. The theoretical components will introduce teacher candidates to the theory part of place-based education. The practical component can be designed to pair students with teachers who are practicing place-based education in their teaching practices. Student teachers will have the opportunity to learn different assessment methods used by these teachers. Student teachers will gain practical understanding of different assessment methods used by teachers undertaking place-based education in their teaching practice.

Secondly, student teachers at the College of Education are assigned to different schools in Saskatoon and its environs. Student teachers can design a variety of appropriate assessment methods and practice it in the schools assigned to them under the supervision of their professors and teachers in these schools. This practical experience will enrich the knowledge that student teachers already have on different assessment methods on place-based education activities.

#### **4.3.3 Place-based education in practice: Understanding safety issues.**

Since place-based education is organized and often implemented outside the classroom, respondents identified safety issues as important for student teachers to gain a strong understanding. In explaining why safety issues are important in place-based education, one respondent stated:

They definitely need to address risk management. Risk management I think is making sure you have knowledge of the situations you're going to be in. And thinking about all the different scenarios that could possibly happen and how you could minimize and manage risk. So an example might be when you're out camping, you don't run around, you walk carefully. (SAS1&2)

I think probably just to have some basics. I don't know what that exactly would entail but maybe if that would be a whole course. I think something to address the risk management because if you're taking them out and all over the city, you must address some safety concerns but then the preventative stuff needs to be addressed. But how much of it I don't know. Maybe ten hours or couple hours or maybe a whole course for a term. (SUP)

Taking students out to parks and camping needs a lot of organization as well as attention to safety concerns. Because of the various dangerous situations that students might encounter outside the classroom, there is the need for teacher candidates to gain much understanding on safety issues. This could be done by the College of Education creating a course on risk management and safety to be taught as a short course or a whole academic course. It will help teacher candidates understand the various dangers and ways of managing them when implementing place-based education in their teaching practices.

Other respondents also shed light on their experiences concerning risk management and safety. This is what one of the respondents said about their experiences with their students on camping and field trips and how they handle safety issues:

Well like when you take the kids out do you set out a set of dos and don't? We teach them how to transport themselves. We've been getting better at that and we have certain guidelines about how to bike. Our concern with them biking around the city is they travel in giant mobs and when you do that you kind of think that you're invincible so we've got some limits on that and help them make that transition from someone whose been dependent on their parents to pick them up all the time to someone who is more independent. (APJ)

Risk management we do have a category for that. We don't try to pat our students too much. Like we probably do some of the riskiest things just by biking around the city. You know our division sees that as someone could get hurt every day.

Well we've never had an incident. If you prepare the kids early enough, you teach them common sense, you teach them that they're vulnerable, not invincible, and then you teach them how to be aware of the surroundings you know, to look more than six inches in front of you and to assess everything. For us those are just life skills that you need to have. You need to have those life skills. (DAM)

Although place-based education gives student more power to manage their own learning, guiding them in terms of risk and safety is important. Most place-based activities are held outside the confines of the classroom; therefore, students will be exposed to lots of dangers as compared to regular classroom. Teachers leading these activities should understand and foresee dangers that students might encounter and prepare them on how to manage such dangers.

Although regular classroom setting has its own dangers, which mostly are indirect or not readily visible, such as bullying and intimidation, place-based educational activities expose students to variety of dangers. There is the urgency for place-based education teachers to gain knowledge of safety issues and how to manage such issues. According to some of the participants, safeguarding students is important and issues surrounding students' safety and protection should be embedded in all the curriculum.

This can be done by the College of Education designing programs that teaches student teachers about issues surrounding safety and managing dangers outside the classroom. The curriculum of such a subject at the College of Education can be designed in such a way that personnel from the fire, police and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) collaborates with professors at the University to teach such a subject. Student teachers at the College of Education will gain understanding of safety issues and ways of managing emergency situations from professionals in the field. This experience will give student teachers the confidence to undertake activities in a place-based program knowing that he/she has the skill and knowledge to manage emergency situation.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Investigating the importance of place-based education by interviewing teachers across Saskatoon and its environs has been an eye opener for me. With limited personal experiences in outdoor activities and learning, this experience has enriched my knowledge and understanding of place-based education. However, an oversight occurred during the interview process. The interview guide that I used was supposed to have an explicit reference to the experiences of teachers undertaking place based education in their teaching practices and also a guiding question about the skills and knowledge needed to implement place-based education in the third research question (see Appendix 3). Nevertheless, I believe that I obtained solid data in response to the research questions because the conversations with participants were robust and informative in these areas.

The norm of education where students are taught in regular classroom settings lacks coherence and there is disconnection between theory and practice. While Darling-Hammond (2001) argued that a conventional model of education lacks coherence with unrelated courses, which have no clear focus in relating to students' experiences. Sobel (2004) argued about the lack of connection between theory and practice in traditional models of education. Therefore, Darling-Hammond (2001) and Sobel (2004) both agreed that the present education system lacks coherence and there are disconnection between theory and practice. These sentiments were also raised by some of the respondents in this study.

Some of the respondents stated that disconnection between theory and practice has made students less motivated to learn. Also, some of the respondents stated that

disconnection between students and their community has made student less engaged in their communities. Although place-based education is planned and implemented alongside the regular school system in these instances, it has been around for centuries in the form of Indigenous education as the review brought out. The benefits to students are uncountable.

This study shed more light on the experiences and challenges that teachers undertaking place-based education in their teaching practices encounter as well as ways of managing challenges. Based on these experiences and challenges, teacher candidates are given some advice that could help them as they prepare to start their careers in place-based education.

The study has reaffirmed some of the arguments put forward by the proponents of place-based education. Place-based education helps to immerse students into their local community and through that student becomes engaged citizens. This is achieved through various projects that students engage in. These projects are usually designed and implemented using resources of the local community to help students gain diverse views of ecological problems and social justice issues in their community. Thus place-based education forms close bond between the community, school, and the student. The close bond helps students achieve a positive experience and become engaged citizens.

The benefits of place-based education to a student's life are diverse. In an era where students are less motivated in the classroom just as the literature review points out, place-based education programs can be used to spike up genuine interest. Students exploring their community and engaging in positive learning experience increases their

motivation to continue learning; whereas, the conventional form of schooling lacks coherence and opportunities for authentic participation research in community life. Since most place-based education programs can be integrated into the classroom lessons, it can offer some motivation for classroom activity while students use the knowledge gained from such activities to solve real-life problems both in their communities and their normal way of life.

The findings of this study can be summarized into a mini teachers-guidebook on place-based education. This guidebook would summarize the experiences of teachers undertaking place-based education in their teaching practices. This will help teachers who are planning to incorporate place-based education activities into their teaching practices to gain knowledge of what to expect and some tips on how to overcome such expectations.

The guidebook can be arranged in chapters where students, teachers, community leaders and professional share their experiences in implementing place-based education. In the first chapter of the guidebook, students can share their experiences of engaging in place-based education programs. This will give a head start to new teachers who want to implement place-based education in their teaching practices about how to design, organize and implement place-based education programs.

In the second chapter of the guidebook community leaders who have gained experience in place-based education can share their experiences. These experiences by community leaders will benefit teacher candidates and teachers who want to implement place-based education in their teaching practice.

The next chapters of the guidebook can share the challenges of teachers undertaking place-based education have in their teaching practice. This information will help also give student teachers and teachers planning to implement place-based education in their teaching practices foresee challenges and ways of overcoming such challenges.

The next chapter can summarize the skills and knowledge needed to implement place-based education. This will help student teachers who want to undertake place-based education to do personal self-study of their knowledge and skill in this area and to catch up on areas where they might be lacking knowledge and skills. The College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan could help design this guidebook to aid student teachers and teachers planning to implement place-based education in their teaching practice. Finally, the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan can use the findings of this study to incorporate the skills and knowledge needed to implement place-based education into the curriculum.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1

#### Letter of invitation

Dear xxxxxxxx

I am a Masters student in the college of education, University of Saskatchewan. I am conducting a research into place-based education. The topic of my research is *Place-based education in transition: (Re) integrating place-based education into the teacher education program*. I am interested in finding out the challenges and possibilities of implementing place-based education and also gaining understanding of place-based education from those undertaking it.

I would be pleased if you could share your experience by participating in this research. Participants for this study will be interview and the interviews are voluntary. The interviews will last between 60-90 minutes. I would appreciate a response if you think you will be able to facilitate this study.

This study has been reviewed and received approval by the Research Ethics Office, University of Saskatchewan. For further information about this study please contact Prof. Dianne Miller, Head of Educational Foundations department at 306 966 7724 or email [Dianne.miller@usask.ca](mailto:Dianne.miller@usask.ca).

Thank you

Best Regards

Sampson Twum

Department of Educational Foundations,

College of Education University of Saskatchewan 28 Campus Dr. Saskatoon,

S7N 0X1 Tel : 306 716-7586

[sat543@mail](mailto:sat543@mail)



## **Appendix 2**

### **Consent Form**

**Project Title:** Place based education in transition: (Re) integrating place-based education into the teacher education program at the University of Saskatchewan.

#### **Researcher:**

Sampson Twum

Department of Educational Foundations, College of Education

University of Saskatchewan

28 Campus Dr. Saskatoon, S7N 0X1

Tel : 306 716-7586

[sat543@mail.usask.ca](mailto:sat543@mail.usask.ca)

#### **Supervisor:**

Dianne Miller

Head and Grad Chair, EFDT

College of Education

28 Campus Dr

Saskatoon, SK

S7N 0X1

306 966-7724 (VM)

306 966-7644 (fax)

dianne.miller@usask.ca

### **Purpose of the Research**

The research is to collect data on how place-based education is implemented and the information collected will be used in integrating place-based education into the teacher education program at the University of Saskatchewan.

### **Objectives of the Research**

1. To gain understanding of place-based pedagogy from those undertaking it.
2. To gain insight into the challenges and possibilities of implementing place-based education.
3. To seek advice on integration of place-based education into the teacher education program at the University of Saskatchewan.

### **Procedures**

You will be asked to describe your understanding of place-based education. Also, you will be asked about the benefits and challenges of implementing place-based education. The goal is gain insight into the activities of place-based education. Interviews with the aid of an interview guide will be used to gather data. Interviews will last 60-90 minutes. The interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed. After your interview, you will be given the opportunity to add, alter, or delete information from the transcript. At any time within the process, you will have the right to withdraw and your information will be deleted.

The findings of this study will be used in the completion of my master's thesis, a requirement for my degree. Also, the information will be used to advise authorities on the

integration of place-based education into the teacher education program at the University of Saskatchewan through a report to the Undergraduate Program Committee and the Associate Dean of Undergraduate Studies, Partnerships, and Research. Finally, the information may be used as a basis for conference and journal papers.

### **Potential Risks**

There are minimal risks associated with your participation in this research. You will be at liberty to refuse to answer any question, which makes you feel uncomfortable. You will be free not to give any information that might lead to a recollection of negative feelings. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript and have any information you do not wish to share deleted or omitted. At that time, you will be asked to sign a transcript release form.

### **Confidentiality**

To protect your confidentiality, titles such as respondent A will be used in place of your name in relation to your data. The name of your school or organization will not appear in final reports and identifying details will be minimized. Data obtained during the interview will be stored in password protected storage. You will have the opportunity for debriefing after the interview and any identified risk will be address. **It will therefore be possible that you will be identifiable because of the nature of your work by people close to you or people who have knowledge of your work.**

### **Right to Withdraw**



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Name of Researcher                      Signature                      Date

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This interview guide was supposed to have an explicit reference to the experiences of teachers undertaking place based education in their teaching practices under research question 1 and also a guiding question about the skills and knowledge needed to implement place-based education in the third research question.

### **Appendix 3**

#### **Interview Guide**

##### **Research question 1**

What are your understandings of place-based education?

1. How did you come to be involved in place-based education?
2. What are the effective start-up approaches in beginning a place-based program?
3. What are the important ideas, philosophical approaches, and tools and techniques in implementing a successful place-based educational program?
4. How do you integrate children with special needs in place-based education?
5. What collaborations do you have with the community to run a successful place-based program?
6. What kind of communication strategies do you use to run a place-based program? (With parents, students, administrators, etc.)

##### **Research question 2**

What are the possibilities and challenges of implementing place place-education?

1. What are the primary benefits of place-based education?
2. Tell me one of your success stories.
3. What are the main problems that arise in running a place-based program?

4. What are the effective ways of managing such problems if they arise?
5. In your experience, how do children respond to a place-based program?
6. How do you address curricular outcomes and assessment?

### **Research Question 3**

1. What do you see as the most important things for teacher candidates to know in undertaking place-based pedagogies?
2. What experiences would assist teacher candidates in understanding the benefits of place-based pedagogies?
3. What advice would you give to the College of Education in order to enhance teachers' capacity to undertake place-based learning?
4. What should we be teaching about assessment and risk management in regard to place-based learning?