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Schools Celebrating Place and Community: A Study of Two Rural Schools in Bangladesh and New Zealand

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Abstract

This paper, by a Bangladeshi and a New Zealander, brings together narrative inquiry studies of the leadership initiatives in two quite different rural schools, in Bangladesh and New Zealand respectively. The schools are in communities that might be considered as significantly underprivileged, and generationally alienated from education, within their own countries. Those communities, however, have richness of different kinds. The schools have explored and found ways of connecting with that richness and their experiences can offer ideas to others in diverse locations, including the urban. Both cases are sites of an adventurous approach to meeting the needs of their students. Both illustrate how a rich learning environment can be created when the needs, aspirations and resources of the local environment and community are investigated, attended to, and utilised.

The paper reports the context and innovations in both schools. In doing so, it highlights the dangers of homogenising national curricular concepts that ignore the importance of place and the emplaced identity of communities. It questions where a deficit lies: Is it in the local rural community and its school, or in national and global systems thinking that ignores the significance of the local and particular? It also suggests that the place-based approaches in these two schools offer useful contributions to some of the challenges of education – in urban as much as rural settings – in a world that faces possibly extreme change.

Keywords: place-based; locally relevant; community engagement; ecological awareness

Scene One (*Janinka Narrating*)

“We’ve been harvesting our kumara [a New Zealand form of sweet potato]” the principal tells me. It is an afternoon early in May and the principal is walking me around the grounds of a school in a rural community in the north of New Zealand. We pass the high wire fence of the newly laid court and walk to a large, fenced garden area. The soil has been freshly dug over and there are piles of kumara on the sides. “They need to be left out for a time so that the sweetness develops,” he says. “Then we’ll grade them. The ones that are undamaged we’ll store to feed our manuhiri [visitors] during the festival. Ones like these,” he holds up a kumara with a broken tip, “we need to use earlier.” He points to the far fence: “And over there we’ve got beans and the melons we ate at lunch and some late lettuces.” As we walk back towards the school buildings, we pass the hangi

pit and a new wooded shed. “Our smoke house,” he explains, opening the door and revealing rows of deep shelves. “We set the mullet net and then I teach them how to gut the fish and to smoke them.”

Scene Two (Hasnat Narrating)

“I have a new kettle in my office and some tea bags. We have electrified the school. Come and see how we use them and take tea with us,” the head teacher says to a parent he has met at a tea stall. It is early evening in winter in a village in Bangladesh. After leaving school, the head teacher has stopped at a crowded stall and, after buying a round of tea for all those there, he has started casually chatting. He later explains to me that, as he was new to the school and to the area, he needed to find ways to make relationships with parents.

I thought a tea stall would be the best place to meet common people to talk. People spend their leisure time there and gossip, so I took the chance to meet with them. When I spend time in the tea stall with them, they become free with me and consider me as their own; they express their opinion freely.

He gets back on his motorbike, invites me to get on behind him, and we begin our evening visits to students’ homes. He calls the student’s name when he enters each house. The way parents receive him evidences he is not a stranger to those homes. Everyone has a smiling face, and it seems to create a celebratory moment. It seems they receive their head teacher in their houses like they would receive a visiting member of their family.

Focus of This Article

The two scenes take place in two quite different contexts in two dissimilar countries. What they have in common is that they both involve principals of rural schools, principals who are adventurous and innovative and who want to create the best possible learning environments for their students. This article, by a New Zealander and a Bangladeshi, brings together research studies of the two rural schools led by these principals, one in New Zealand and one in Bangladesh, and offers a discussion of what makes each of these schools vital, particularly how they engage their communities in ways that are culturally relevant and effective, how they recognise the importance of place and the relationship of people to place, and how they recognise and utilise the potential, often disregarded, within their communities. The initiatives taken in each school and the evolving changes offer both challenges and encouragement to mainstream education, both in their own countries and perhaps more widely.

Although we come from different countries, we have worked together for some time in both New Zealand and Bangladesh and have continued conversations about education online, especially since travel has been stopped by COVID-19. We have some shared approaches to methodology and one of these has shaped this article as we will discuss below. Following an outline of our methodology, we briefly examine the concepts of rurality and deficit and review related literature. We then present narratives of our findings from each of the two schools. Finally, we discuss what these two schools offer to our understandings of place and people and how these understandings can contribute to our educational goals and practices.

Methodological and Conceptual Framework: Walking and Talking

We began this article with a quick sketch of two storied scenes: moments in place, time and involving people and their actions and words. These scenes point to the narrative approach we have both taken in our individual studies. While it is relatively newly accepted as an academic research methodology, narrative inquiry has evolved into a rich array of processes. We follow Clandinin (2013) in regarding lived experience as a wellspring of pertinent knowledge of the

world and of ways its systems, organic and institutional, are perceived and understood. We are also informed by Philips and Bunda (2018), who emphasise the role stories play in communicating embodied and emplaced experiences, and by Windchief and San Pedro (2019), who discuss how grounded stories may serve as means of countering hegemonic discourses. Philips and Bunda highlight that stories can be accessed and expressed in a wide range of verbal, visual and dramatic forms and so, to our understanding, blur the edges between arts-based methods (Greenwood, 2019) and those of narrative inquiry.

Within the broad paradigm of narrative inquiry, we followed a process of engaging with participants that is becoming known as *walking*. We have been encouraged by Springgay and Truman's (2018) advocacy of walking as a means of sharing not only space but rhythmic experience with research participants, but in fact our preference for processes of *walking* as we engage with our participants comes from our own experiences. A significant portion of Hasnat's (2017) research took place as he accompanied a school principal in daily movements around his school and community, often riding on the back of his motorbike. Janinka works a lot with drama and other arts-based processes and has found that immersion with participants in a making process is a powerful means of inquiry (Greenwood, 2015, 2016).

In this article, we report on our walking talks with Iftekhar, the head teacher of Prerona School (Bangladesh), and with Tūkaiaia, the principal of Paiwhenua School (New Zealand). These names, like those of any other participants, are pseudonyms. Although both leaders were happy to use their own names to stand by their work, they recognised the need to protect the anonymity of their students and members of their wider communities.

As well as talking to our participants, we talked with each other and used our dialogue as a deconstructive process. Our extended dialogues have allowed us to identify key elements in the stories we report and, just as importantly, to explore how these two stories may trouble stories of rural educational disadvantage and contribute to stories of what needs to be included in school education.

Hasnat's (2017) inquiry is part of a wider doctoral study of parental engagement in rural schools in Bangladesh, in which he interviewed, and walked with, a range of stakeholders: parents, students, teachers, head teachers and school management committee members. Some of the findings of his wider research, particularly the need for and the obstacles to engagement, have been reported elsewhere (Greenwood & Hasnat, 2017; Hasnat, 2016). Here the focus is on the changes one principal has made for his school.

Janinka's inquiry comes after a long association with Tūkaiaia in which she has seen his leadership and his school's direction evolve. The material here is drawn primarily from a walking meeting in May 2021 but, as is often the case in narrative inquiry (Clandinin et al., 2018), builds upon foundations of previous talks, meetings and projects.

We have selected these two rural schools because we have had the opportunity to study them and have found their initiatives exciting. Readers will hopefully be provoked to identify other schools with other exciting initiatives. Although we highlight some of the provocations these stories offer to educational practice and policy-making, we follow the advice of Clandinin (2013) and let the stories speak for themselves.

Rurality, Marginalisation and Deficit Conceptualisations

Conditions and understandings of rurality differ enormously between countries and sometimes within countries. The population of Bangladesh is predominantly rural and nearly 78.3 % of the secondary schools are situated in rural areas (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics, 2016). While there are wealthy landowners, most of the rural population is landless and

nearly a third live below or at poverty level (Asian Development Bank, 2016). Prerona School is a rural school in a poor region.

In New Zealand about 14% of the population lives rurally, but about a fifth of those live in areas that have a high urban influence (New Zealand Government, 2018) and many schools that were rural a generation ago have become high income urban schools, because of urban spread to acreages and coastal areas. Around 500 schools are considered as isolated or remote by the department of education. Some of these are schools where a majority of the population are Māori living on their ancestral land. Paiwhenua is such a school.

So, it is not useful to try to generalise constructs of rurality across the two countries. Janinka recounts that, when groups of very senior education officials from Bangladesh came to New Zealand between 2016 and 2018, they asked to visit rural schools and were surprised to find solid buildings, technological resources and small classes. Moreover, Paiwhenua is a primary school and Prerona is a secondary school. Nevertheless, Prerona and Paiwhenua have several features in common. Both are located a significant distance from the nearest city and in the heart of country that is based around farming. Both serve communities that, within their own countries, might be regarded as low income and generationally alienated from education. In the Bangladesh context, many of the students constitute a first generation of secondary school attendees and many of their parents are not literate. In the New Zealand context, it has been widely noted that historically education has not served Māori well. For example, the Waitangi Tribunal Report (1986) unequivocally stated: “*We think the record to date is quite unmixd. It [the record of education of Māori children] is a dismal failure and no amount of delicate phrasing can mask that fact*” (p. 36). Māori parents and grandparents are from the generations addressed in the report. Schools have changed somewhat since then, but while statistics (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2020) show improving achievement rates for Māori school leavers, these still lag behind others, especially in lower socio-economic rural areas.

It might also be argued that both schools are situated in environments that are very different from those lived in by policy makers. Roberts (2017) critiques the “*implicit metropolitan-cosmopolitan norm*” of the Australian Curriculum and the potential to “*marginalise local knowledges, and rural and remote schools more generally*” (p. 57). We argue that such marginalisation needs to be considered in the contexts of Bangladesh and New Zealand as well.

We argue that the effect of marginalisation is quite different from that of deficit. Cultural deficit theories propose that deficiencies in the home environment of students belonging to certain cultural groups prevent them from performing well in school: not only are the knowledge and skills required in schools not evident in the homes, but they are not valued. In New Zealand in the 1960s, an important government document, the Hunn Report (Hunn, 1960), explained the enormous numbers of Māori students dropping out of school in terms of deficits in their home background. Simon (1986) denounced the deficit model and argued that it concealed the European bias inherent in education and in society. In addressing ways to improve outcomes for Māori students, Bishop et al. (2003) asserted that “*deficit theorising by teachers is the major impediment to Māori students' educational achievement for it results in teachers having low expectations of Māori students. This in turn creates a downward spiralling, self-fulfilling prophecy of Māori student achievement and failure*” (p. 1). They argued that it was schools and teachers that needed to change. Their argument still holds urgency.

In Bangladesh, the low socio-economic background of rural parents and their illiteracy are widely held to block engagement in schooling (Ali, 2011; Kabir & Akter, 2014; Rasheed, 2011). And globally, it has been asserted that parents from disadvantaged families, such as those in rural contexts and in poorer urban areas, are less able to involve themselves with their children's schooling (Chowa et al., 2013; Desimone, 1999; Feuerstein, 2000; Yamamoto & Sonnenschein,

2016) and as a result, students from those family backgrounds perform less well (Downey, 2002) and teachers tend to perceive these parents as apathetic (O’Hehir & Savelsberg, 2014).

That deficits in academic resources exist in most rural schools in Bangladesh, and in many other places globally, is a fact. However, the stories we present argue that material shortages and distance from urban influences do not create deficits in the imagination or resourcefulness of people.

Prerona School (*Hasnat Reporting*)

In my wider study (Hasnat, 2017), I discovered a wide range of problems that prevented rural parents becoming engaged with their children’s schooling. These included personal inexperience of schooling, low paid labouring jobs and survival living conditions, illiteracy, a sense of social inadequacy, poor communications from the school and an expectation that teachers should be solely responsible for children’s learning. “*My son is going to school and learning something,*” said one father, “*and that is enough for me.*” Teachers in turn complained about parental indifference and the difficulties of teaching large classes with regular absenteeism when children joined their parents in seasonal work. A culture of blame, with parents blaming teachers and teachers blaming parents, predominated and had become an established pattern of social discourse (Gee, 1992) that not only shaped attitudes but also values and social behaviours.

My findings were not entirely negative because, when I brought teachers and parents together for a meeting, they moved beyond statements of blame and began to explore ways of collaborating. Nevertheless, a large part of my study involved exploring pervasive problems.

There was one powerful exception to the patterns I was identifying: that was Iftekhar, a relatively new head teacher. I met Iftekhar in the course of group discussions with teachers and noticed that he often expressed different, more optimistic, opinions. I wanted to spend more time with him. He had a busy schedule, but he would call me after school hours to meet him at a local tea stall. Later he invited me to accompany him in his home visits.

It was winter. I travelled behind Iftekhar on his motorbike in the dark and fog on a muddy road. Often, we would set out alone, but after a while another teacher would join us, carrying a torch light and with a thick shawl covering his body. Then on some nights, another person joined us, discussing various students and their families with Iftekhar. Initially, I thought he was an assistant teacher, but later I realised he was a member of the School Management Committee (SMC). During these home visits, I observed Iftekhar’s familiarity with the community and also saw the teamwork that he developed among his staff and SMC members.

Iftekhar reported that he considered parents as most important for his school improvement initiatives: “*From my teaching experience, I realised students’ schooling depends on two environments. If I only change the school environment and do not consider my students’ home environment, then we may not get success.*”

He was aware of the gap between his expectations and the reality of parents’ lives. Of necessity, they were busy with their work and knew little about schooling.

Parents in this area were like sleeping, their eyes closed and not looking at anything in the school and in education. My intention was to wake them and create a view of their children’s education and schooling matters. Then they can decide, in their way, what they can do for their children’s schooling, and at least communicate with us.

He realised that an invitation alone would not bring parents into the school. A new strategy was needed. When he opened a discussion with his teachers about possible strategies, they talked about home visits and yard meetings, but showed no interest in getting involved. He determined to start alone.

As he was new to the school, he considered he could take the opportunity to meet parents for the first time at their own houses. In addition, he wanted to visit different students' homes to see the actual learning environment in the home and what role parents played: *"I knew my visit would impact on parents' minds because it is rare in our region. This visit would be a new experience for the parents."*

He was deliberately selective in his first visits: *"I selected students who were irregular in school and were not active in classroom activities. After making a list, I started to visit those houses to meet with their parents and see their home activities."*

Iftekhar acknowledged that his start was awkward:

I have no hesitation to share that in my first few visits I was not well organised. Sometimes I was not clear about what I was going to discuss with the parents and what would be my approach. However, I just carried on meeting with the parents.

He continued to try to improve his communication with parents and built up his confidence: *"I never discussed any negative things about any student initially with the parents. I always started with positive things, and as a result they felt comfortable with me and shared different things about their children."*

Iftekhar reported that he commonly found that both parents and students went to bed early and when they heard his arrival they would wake up, somewhat mystified by his presence:

I found both parents and students rubbing their eyes, and they were saying "we are just in bed now." Parents could understand the reason of my presence in the evening and for that reason before I had to ask them anything they were pledging me that next time they will change their sleeping habit and promising they will care about their children's educational activities at home.

He reported that parents would quickly explain that their children were studying *"just before half an hour ago."* He would reassure them and during the following conversation they would come to a verbal commitment about how to provide for their children's study.

Another common scenario was that families were watching various television serials with their children, and those who did not have television would move to other houses with a television: *"When I saw parents in front of the TV they felt shy and willingly promised that they would not do that anymore. I requested them to work out a limited time for watching TV."*

Iftekhar recounted how he would talk about the importance of time for study, and he found that most parents responded positively and would promise to reduce television time. Nevertheless, he recognised that in the rural context parents have limited opportunity for recreation and this affirmed the importance of recreation for both parents and students.

In addition, during his visit to homes, Iftekhar would check the condition of students' study places. With the permission and co-operation of parents, he would view the place where his student was studying and, if needed, suggest a possible rearrangement. He told me that he focused on the study area because he found a number of houses where there was no study place for the students. For example, a student's home was one room. The student would usually study on the bed and his parents would sit beside him. The student would be disrupted when his parents talked or want to sleep early. Iftekhar recounted: *"I found a chair and then I requested whether his parents could manage a table for him. They were convinced by my request and understood the importance of a table. And they did organise one."*

I reflected that it was common in this rural region for parents not to consider the importance of study place: that it was partly the effect of poverty, but also a lack of awareness of what study entailed. I noted that Iftekhar understood the economic capacity of the rural families and he negotiated a means to ensure a minimally secure and comfortable environment for the students

to study. I reflected that while poverty was clearly an ongoing problem it did not have to be an absolute deterrent for developing a home study environment, but that there was need for someone like Iftekhar to negotiate possibilities.

Iftekhar gradually won trust and co-operation:

After a few visits, parents could understand my motive for visiting; they could understand I came to support their children's education rather than criticising them. So parents started to talk openly about their children's activities at home and their problems.

It is standard practice in the community for people to offer hospitality to anyone who visits to show welcome and respect. Iftekhar often found hesitant faces when he first visited. Some families would not be able to offer any chair for him to sit on. He would take his place on a small stool or on the bed and carry on the conversation:

I could imagine their inner feelings when they could not offer me anything to sit on. I tried to make them easy by my approach so that they did not feel uncomfortable. It did not matter to me where I sat; the important issue was conversation about their children's education and their collaboration.

Some parents felt bad when they could not offer snacks. Sometimes they would quickly prepare types of food that are not normally offered to a guest: "I never refused to take their food, whatever they offered. Sometimes I felt full, and my stomach rejected more food, but I never refused because they might be disheartened." After a few visits he found students' families were ready for him: "Whenever they heard the sound of my motorbike they would know that I was coming and I found them ready to receive me, and were offering me tea and a biscuit." And gradually his teachers joined him.

Overall, parents seemed very pleased with the home visits. Parents would talk spontaneously about the activities of the teachers and their initiatives to encourage their children's day-to-day practice. Some parents shared that their children were spending more time with study and less time outside the home, and that they could see changes in their children. Kamrul, a parent, said: "Nowadays, my son is not going to bed early but studying till late at night. He feels that at any time his head teacher may visit to see his activities. At the same time, we are motivating him."

Parents started to contribute at their own levels. Parents' financial situations did not easily allow them to think about their children's nutrition when they were struggling to provide basic food. But now several parents reported that, to ensure nutritious food for their children, they stopped selling their eggs in the market and were offering them to their children as a means to motivate them to study.

Saleha, a mother, explained how she tried to support her daughter's schooling:

In this winter season it is too cold, and you can see our house is not in a good condition; a slight draught always blows through our room so that it is so tough for her to sit on the chair and study. I bought a pair of stocking to make her comfortable during her study at night.

Sattar, a father, made time to sit and talk to his son about school, although he was not himself literate:

I never wanted to know anything about my son's education, but now I am showing my interest. Like, before going to school I say bye to him. I take his books from him and provide food when he returns from school. At the same time, I talk about school activities and want to know about how was his day at school.

Other forms of communication started after the home visits. Parents started casually connecting with the school. When they would come to the school's neighbourhood, they would call in to

exchange traditional greetings. Iftekhar shared his mobile number with parents and requested them to call him anytime. He recounted:

Parents were calling me when they found any gap in my visits to them. As this is a big area, I need to cover the whole area by rotation, and automatic gaps are created. Parents would worry about why I was not visiting. Sometimes parents would call me to invite me to visit and sometimes just to ask about my health.

Increasing parental engagement impacted on teachers' commitment to their students, as Iftekhar noted: "When teachers can realise the invisible pressure from the community then they become regular in their attendance at school, perform throughout school hours and show their seriousness in their work in the school."

There had been a long back history of conflict within the community, Iftekhar reported, and teaching standards had suffered:

After my joining, I received information about teachers' practices of not finishing school hours or the syllabus properly. Some information I received from my office staff. Some other information came from parents and other people who complained when I talked to them. A few senior teachers tried to continue their previous practice which confirmed the information I received.

Iftekhar recounted how he recognised it would take time to involve his teachers in his initiatives for improvement and knew he needed to lead by example:

I would include my name in the first period and last period to motivate other teachers to work hard and finish the last period, and that did not allow them to come to me and claim difficulties. I am conducting classes like other assistant teachers in my school, whereas in other schools head teachers do not conduct a class on a regular basis, but mostly just conduct a period as a courtesy.

After making home visits, Iftekhar would share his experiences with his teachers, and gradually the younger teachers showed curiosity. Nadim, a teacher, confided to me:

It was a kind of shame for me that Head Sir is visiting my area and I am not with him. As I am from that particular area it is my responsibility to show respect and be with him during a home visit. If I do not do this activity, then community people will criticise me.

Steadily, a plan developed, and Iftekhar's "I" changed to "we": "We would make a plan for the home visits where we divided up our area. Teachers could visit different houses based on their convenient time." Nadim described how he and other teachers developed the practice of meeting and chatting with parents: "We visit different houses to meet with the parents on our way to school and when we return from school and that visit is just for saying hello to them. This way we are making a relationship with them."

Iftekhar's work is still in progress. He acknowledges there is more to be done. He wants others to play their part, but realises he is the leader who has to break the ground so others can work the field. As I look back over his story, five key leadership characteristics are apparent. The first is a high level of personal energy and goodwill. The second is a genuine respect for others and a willingness to show it. The third is the courage to lead by example. The fourth is the ability to take well considered risks. The fifth is the sensitivity to allow spaces for others to do their part. The way Iftekhar drew on these qualities and the practices that grew out of them allowed him to create relationships and an environment where parents, illiterate as well as literate, can learn more about their children's educational needs and collaborate with the school.

Paiwhenua School (*Janinka Reporting*)

The road that branches off from the motorway leads quickly into farmland. At first there are newish houses and well fenced paddocks. Then, as the road winds and twists its way between the hills, the wire in the fences sags a little and the houses are smaller and older. After an hour of bends, occasional breath-taking views, incurious cows and one large pig that claims the road, I reach the carved posts at the gate of Paiwhenua School.

My memory flies back to two years ago when I brought the Bangladeshi Director General of Education and two of his colleagues to the school. We were formally welcomed then. It was the second powhiri [a formal ceremony of encounter and welcome in accordance with Māori protocol] my guests had experienced, but they were deeply moved and slightly awed, not only by the staunchness of the young children's performance, but also by the warmth of hospitality. It was clear the students had learned quite a bit about Bangladesh and their principal and teachers reached out to create links between their visitors' culture and their own. Ours was not the only visit by international visitors that year. An end of year video recorded visitors from various Pacific Islands, Scotland, and a First Nations group from North America, as well as from various New Zealand groups sharing ideas about health, environmental protection and organic horticulture. The principal, Tūkaiaia, and his team reached out to every learning opportunity for the students and the community.

This time my arrival is informal. The 42 students at the school are all in class and Tūkaiaia is writing in his small office. We sit there for a while and he tells me about the progress the school is making to become one that has accredited full immersion in Māori language. *"It's been a steep learning curve,"* he says. We reminisce about how, a few years ago prior to his appointment as principal to this school, he had been a fairly shy learner of his native language. He had the elders of the community to learn from, but the pressure was on him to really develop his competency and fluency so that he could lead.

Our talk flows over the various pathways in New Zealand for education through the medium of Māori language and culture, events in the community, and future plans, and comes to the sustainability project within the school. Tūkaiaia picks up a green-skinned honeydew melon and passes it to me to feel its weight. *"We'll have this with lunch,"* he says, *"but first let's walk around."*

We visit the huge kumara garden that has now yielded its harvest, and beside it he shows me a raised seedbed densely crowded with young green slips for next planting. Near the garden are high piles of woodchips and other composting and mulching materials. *"Whenever I see a local contractor with these kinds of materials to dispose of, I ask if we can have them for our school."*

Most of the harvested kumara will be stored to fill the hāngi pits during community events, and especially the cultural festival that the school will host in November. Hāngi is a traditional Māori way of cooking food in a pit oven. It is designed to feed large groups of people. The festival is an annual one, bringing groups and their family supporters from over 16 schools in the wider region, including those from the nearest city. Close to a thousand people will converge on the school grounds: there will be food stalls, performances and the buzz of people meeting and reconnecting. The festival is about people and the living culture, music, language and ancestral heritage of the region. Attendance and participation are free but the hāngi and the stalls raise a little money that the school will use in the coming year to take its students on field trips and to build more infrastructures for its environmental sustainability projects.

There will be more than kumara in the hāngi pits. In another fenced area, surrounded by compost heaps, gardens grow potatoes, pumpkins, corn and a range of green vegetables. Students have learned to hoe the ground, plant and mulch the seedlings. Beyond a further fence is a small flock of sheep. Students have been taught how to hand shear the wool, as well as butcher the meat.

Most of the students come from families who live by subsistence farming. Some have come to live with their grandparents to get them away from the cities where they might have been sliding into trouble. Learning how to live in harmony with the land, as well as gain food from it, is a vital life skill. It is, moreover, learning that generates environmental as well as personal benefits: it creates attitudes that shift from fast food, money and waste, to work, recycling and healthy food; it creates love and respect for the earth we live on.

Tūkaiaia points to a new wooden building: *“That’s our latest initiative, our smoke house,”* he says. *“We can now work with the whole process from the sea to the table where we serve our manuhiri. Our children learn how to set the mullet nets and I teach them how to gut and prepare the fish for smoking.”* The learning in the project is multifaceted. The building of the smoke house involves design, construction, knowledge about wood, and skill in using saws and hammers. The fishing is about the use of nets, but it is also about the ecology of the sea and the conservation of conditions that support life in the sea. The fish guts will be turned into liquid fertiliser and provoke exploration of practical chemistry. The smoking is about traditional means of cooking food, and it is also about different uses of fire and the ways various materials and controls of air affect fire.

I ask Tūkaiaia whether the smoke house and garden activities are used as ways of teaching the core curriculum. *“For sure,”* he says. *“It helps us give practical examples of science and maths. It’s one of the things that we can write about and read about. But mainly, I want them to have the practical physical experience of doing it. That’s the most important.”* We talk for a moment about the value of embodied learning. These children are growing up confident. They know how to do things with their own effort, aware that they need to look after the earth and the sea as well as take things from them, and they are finding pleasure in doing the work. It is the kind of learning one carries in the tissues of the body, as well as in the mind.

I recall that when I was last at the school, Tūkaiaia had talked about his plans to start work with the river and I ask how that has gone. *“We have started an inanga breeding ground,”* he says. Inanga is a collective term for several species of fish. In their juvenile form, they are known as whitebait. Inanga numbers are declining because of introduced predators and damaged riverbanks; in their juvenile state as whitebait they are a prized delicacy. They spawn where saltwater meets freshwater in estuaries and need specific clean habitat conditions. *“There is a pond there that’s a natural breeding ground. We worked to enhance it. We began with cleaning the rubbish that had been dumped in and around the river. Then we worked on making the environment better for the inanga.”*

Inanga need gently flowing water with enough submerged vegetation to provide cover as well as clear patches for feeding. They lay their eggs during high spring tides in the base of dense grasses in the banks. After clearing out the overgrown pond, students began a search for nests of inanga eggs and set up protections for them. They improved the spawning ground with bales of straw to provide cover, as they worked on the longer-term project of bank restoration. The restoration of inanga habitats is a national department of conservation programme. By playing their part in the programme, the students take responsibility for their local waterways, know they are part of a collaborative endeavour, and are supported by a strong base of information resources. They learn not only that they need to preserve a species if they want it as a food source, but also that a healthy ecosystem is built on high biodiversity. They learn about their own and other creatures’ interdependence with each other and with the land and waterways.

Tūkaiaia tends to act rather than talk at length. However, the school’s video documentaries of the highlights of each year and records of projects speak for him. The work in the gardens is a practical example of the principles of traditional food planting, complemented by recycling contemporary waste materials, such recycling also being a traditional principle. The garden is a collaborative task; it teaches teamwork and solidarity. The fruits of the garden and from the sea

are shared with the community, as well as accounts of the development projects. The sharing allows students and the school to give back to the community and to contribute to family well-being. Workshops are another means of sharing with the community. When a group such as from the department of conservation comes in to teach the school, the community is invited to participate; knowledge is regarded as a community benefit and not just a personal one. Students deepen their sense of identity in relation to people and place and their sense of honour and dignity that comes with belonging.

The videos show other events. Students are seen presenting their conservation plans to the local council. They are seen visiting and learning about marine reserves, and a field trip to one reserve is depicted in a composite mural that circles a classroom wall and is accompanied by stories, charts and explanatory drawings. Local seaweed is gathered for the garden. Honey is harvested. A propagation shed is seen being erected. Students hold up products they are selling: a chili sauce and a bottle of worm wee. The images show a school reaching out beyond its classroom walls to learn about and contribute to the world.

It might be asked whether the school meets its mandated curricular obligations and has positive academic outcomes. In New Zealand, every school is regularly reviewed by the Education Review Office and the report is publicly available. This year's report for Paiwhenua states that most of the students are making accelerated progress and that this has been a positive trend for the past three years.

Before I leave, Tūkaiaia cuts open the melon. It is delicious: crisp and sweet. I leave with a tub of lettuce seedlings and instructions about when and how to put a kumara in a sandy box to generate slips for October planting.

Place and People

As Janinka walked back towards the staffroom with the principal, they met a parent. Janinka made a comment about how exciting the school must be for students. *"They are in a great place,"* said the mother. *"They're learning in the shadow of their maunga [ancestral mountain] and with all their tupuna [ancestors, living and spirit] around them."* Her words underline the importance of place and point to the way the principals of both Prerona and Paiwhenua acknowledged and utilised the power of place in strengthening their schools.

We, the authors, regard place as more than geographical location. Place has natural features of soil, hill, mountain, valley, river, estuary or sea. It carries legacies of history and the hopes, beliefs and experiences of the people who have lived on it. It has affective as well as practical dimensions. It whispers back the stories and arguments it has heard over the ages. It carries reverberations of belonging and power.

Iftekhar shows his keen awareness of place in the ways he approaches the parents of his students and gradually engages them in supporting their children's schooling. He realises parents see the school as a place where he and the teachers hold the power, and they lack power. Instead, he seeks them in places they see as their own and where he is the visitor: the marketplace, the tea stall and their homes. It is only after relationships are established on the parents' own comfortable ground that he can expect them to come to the school and see it as a place they can belong in. He also shows understanding of the constraints of place. Farm labourers and stallholders cannot afford to lose a day's work to come to meetings at the school. Their homes are poor and they need to carefully use their resources to provide materials for their children's study needs. Even more importantly, he acknowledges that, while poverty and their generation's lack of formal education might prevent them from understanding what is involved in schooling, they care deeply about their children and they can be agentic in supporting their learning. By refusing to contribute to the rural blame game, he claims responsibility for improving communication and he makes it possible for parents to also take responsibility.

Tūkaiaia's practice brings further aspects of place to our attention. He too acknowledges that his school is situated in a particular place with iwi [tribal] affiliations and with a legacy of history, language and expressive arts. In addition, he teaches his students how to live from and take care of their local place. He enables them to learn that they are emplaced human beings and that their health, happiness and pleasure is interrelated with the well-being of the place where they live.

Revisiting Cultural Capital

Both leaders recognised the capabilities as well as the needs of the communities their schools serve. Bourdieu (1985) is famously accredited with formulation of the concept of cultural capital. He discussed it in terms of the culturally derived knowledge and culturally valued manners and assets that facilitate social mobility and enable holders to utilise educational opportunities. Schooling is easy for those whose cultural capital matches that of schools; those with different backgrounds may feel excluded. In Bangladesh, the lived experience of many rural parents does not include a heritage of schooling or an understanding of what schooling involves. Not only does this preclude parental engagement with the school, but it also makes it likely that their children will find what happens in school unrelated to their lives, and this can lead to absenteeism and dropout. In New Zealand, there are often marked differences in cultural values as well as in lived experience between rural Māori parents and the pervasive, though ever shifting, cross-national mainstream. To engage and empower students, schools need to bridge the differences.

In the various approaches of Iftekhar and Tūkaiaia, the cultural knowledge and experiential lifestyle of the local community are acknowledged and respected. Because of that acknowledgement, those knowledges and values become useful capital in supporting children in their schooling. And in turn, the schools seek to increase the wider social capital of the community through what they offer in education.

Provocations from Prerona and Paiwhenua

Specific initiatives that are useful in New Zealand may not be appropriate for Bangladesh, and vice versa. Nor can the initiatives described in this article be automatically transposed to other schools in the same country. What can be learned from both schools is respect for and alignment with place and the emplacement of their students and communities. National education policies and curricula are tools for promoting equity across classes and regions. However, to be effective in achieving equity, they need to be adaptable and adapted to local conditions, needs and opportunities.

Within their national contexts, the rural communities Prerona and Paiwhenua Schools serve have a richness of different kinds from those that are commonly expected in urban schools. The schools have variously explored and found ways of connecting with that richness. Their experiences offer provocations to other schools and their leaders and to curriculum and policy makers. They propose questions about assumptions of deficits: If they are believed to exist, where does the deficit lie? Does it lie in the local rural community and its school, or in national and global systems thinking that ignores the significance of the local and particular?

We discussed earlier that a culture of blame tends to predominate in Bangladeshi discourses about rural education. Policy makers talk about uncaring parents. Teachers complain about calling meetings which parents do not attend and about parents pulling students out of class to provide day labour. Parents claim that if teachers did their job properly their children would be successful. We have suggested that playing the blame game not only reinforces negatively stereotyping attitudes, but also precludes change. Iftekhar's example shows that change is possible and rural parents can become actively engaged in their children's schooling. His practices offer a conceptual model of how a school leader can accommodate existing constraints, open dialogue, create a communicative space and enable respectful collaboration.

While the conditions in Paiwhenua School might seem luxurious to rural communities in Bangladesh, it too has had to overcome challenges. Urban attitudes may consider rural schools as safe and enjoyable places for children, but not as places of academic achievement, innovative thinking and futures planning. The environment in Paiwhenua is enjoyable and supports academic outcomes. In addition, it is strongly futures focused. It provides its students with not only the knowledge and skills, but also the embodied experience to be able to sustain themselves and their community within the resources of their region. COVID-19 has given us a painful lesson in just how important such knowledge, skills and attitudes are. Moreover, we live on a planet at risk. Knowing how to live in balance with nature and how to heal some of the damage that has already been done is perhaps the most important learning education could provide.

In Bangladesh, poverty and illiteracy are significant problems in less affluent urban areas, as well as in urban ones. Prerona School offers a working model of how parental engagement and consequent support for students' learning can be fostered, despite these problems. Despite growing ecological awareness, New Zealanders across the board still need to learn how to sustain and be sustained by our environment. Paiwhenua offers a working model. Both schools are projects in progress: they too are in the process of learning. In doing so, they locate themselves as leaders as well as constituent parts of the wider field of education, nationally and perhaps globally.

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