

## PLACE-BASED EDUCATION

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### Resumen

Education reforms are changing teaching methodology and curriculum content. Their focus on standards can lead to positive multidisciplinary learning or it can be too narrow. While some education boards spend the school year reinforcing primarily reading, writing and arithmetic skills within a traditional classroom setting in order to have all students succeed on standardized tests, other schools are embracing place-based education. Place-based education is beneficial for both the schools and for the communities involved. Schools around the world are acknowledging the value of place-based learning and are adopting this method of education and community service into their regular teaching practices. The American School of Barcelona in Spain is one such school.

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### Objectives

Since its beginning in 1962, parents, students and staff of the American School of Barcelona have felt a strong sense of commitment to the school and the community.

In 2007, ASB adopted a section of *Collserola* Park and started to work with *Can Coll* (the environmental educational center) in place-based learning in order to foster socially responsible attitudes in ASB's students, meet their diverse learning needs, and, create harmonious connections between the school and its surroundings. This approach to learning is also meant to show the students the importance of teamwork, their place in the world around them and to respect their role as citizens of Earth.

## Theoretical Framework

More and more schools are becoming standards-based which can be too narrow or lead to positive multidisciplinary learning. In many schools, as more and more students succeed on standardized tests, "teaching to the test" is reinforced and a vicious cycle ensues. Do "basic skills" have to be taught discretely in order for all students to succeed on standardized tests? When science education includes the environment and society, language and math skills are applied to real-life situations thus connecting academics to the students' world around them and making their learning feel natural and real. The debate is not about whether or not all children should have equal opportunity to learn, rather, the debate is in the definition of "basic skills".

Place-based education extends basic skills to include science and society by literally taking the learning outside of the classroom. Place-based education creates hands-on relevant learning experiences that become real by directly linking to and occurring in the community. Since it often involves a service component, place-based education is collaborative and community-based, forging bonds between the school and the community. Learning outside draws students into scientific learning and gives them a forum to prepare as future guardians of Earth. Such integrated interdisciplinary methods are responsible for improved standardized test scores, a decrease in discipline problems, and student empowerment.

## Methods

Place-based education occurs any time curriculum is delivered in the local natural or community surrounding: in the school yard or a nearby park. Place-based education can be delivered in such a way that the students are still receiving their lesson in the allotted time slot - instead of changing from classroom to classroom, the students are engaged in learning outside of the classroom walls.

1. Local excursions and guest speakers: ASB students attend the science museum, aquarium and zoo. ASB high school students have journeyed afar to participate in the annual Oman International Student Symposium (2007 focused on water) and in "Habitat for Humanity" in El Salvador.

2. Lessons in the school yard: ASB's pre-schoolers create and maintain a garden with the assistance of older students. Secondary school students use the school yard during science class: to launch rockets, simulate deer population growth, conduct meteorite experiments, etc.

3. ASB's Activities Coordinator identified the community as a resource for extended learning and contacted *Can Coll*. *Can Coll* helps develop place-based scientific education, and facilitates teachers in carrying out activities in *Collserola* Park. (*Collserola* Park is considered the largest metropolitan park in the world. It serves as a leisure area with on-going conservation and reforestation projects.) *Can Coll* offers theme-based education ("The Forest") for younger students while older students can learn about flora and fauna, biogeography, or urban development. Activities with *Can Coll* always start with the center experts meeting

with the school teachers.

4. ASB identified the environmental activities goals:

- a school wide program with a service learning component.
- an on-going approach, rather than a single day event.
- linked to the curriculum by the teachers involved.
- organized through the Activities Coordinator.

5. *Can Coll* assigned ASB 2 areas of *Collserola* with streams, picnic areas needing cleaning, several reforestation areas in need of care, trails requiring maintenance, and tons of trees that needed to be trimmed. In total, ASB now has 200 square meters of park land within Esplugues city limits to use for different tasks.

6. ASB's Activity Coordinator contacted the Esplugues City Council. Esplugues Council supported the project and even provides the school with buses to take students to locations within the park that are too far to walk to.

7. Assembly for all ASB elementary students: *Can Coll* instructors spoke about the park, and left material to share within the school. They also talked about the importance of having the park nearby and the necessity to take care of it.

8. ASB teachers were encouraged to adopt place-based education in one of 2 ways: activities coordinated by the instructors of the park with a service learning component, or activities linked to ASB's curriculum as directed and extended by ASB teachers. All of these service learning sessions were led by *Can Coll* instructors in collaboration with ASB staff. The instructors explained to the students what work the children would be doing, how they would do it, and why this work was important. The instructors continually described how the activities linked to science and society issues.

Examples of ASB's place-based learning:

- documenting which park equipment was in need of repair
- pulling weeds which were impeding the growth of chestnut trees
- clearing the water channels of soil to protect the picnic area from erosion and flooding
- tree diversity studies (watering, measuring saplings; tree adoption. The idea is that each year they will

return to the same area to observe how the trees have changed.)

- use of a template to observe, describe and draw a plant distinguishing the differences between trees and bushes
- biodiversity studies
- clearing and leveling of trails reusing natural materials.
- trimming trees, aerating the soil, and other conservation techniques.
- reforestation

## Conclusions

Including place-based learning as a method of delivering science education creates a win-win-win situation. The students win by receiving a more real education, the environment wins through the service-learning the students perform, and this in turn means the students win again by protecting their environment for their own future.

More and more people are acknowledging the increase in the global population is straining (natural) resources and impacting ecosystems. Future demands will heavily rely on citizens capable of proposing and evaluating environmental plans. While place-based education may not prepare students to be active participants “in a highly technological and consumer-oriented society” it does prepare them to live in ethical harmony with their cultural and ecological surroundings.

*Can Coll* created a wealth of opportunities that some teachers were eager to cease. Teachers are realizing that place-based learning can be designed to fit curriculum or that the learning obtained through environmental service outweighs what might have been done in the two hours inside a classroom. Students are engaged and challenged to become caring and educated citizens of the world. Through a service learning approach, students learn that they can make a difference through their actions. Place-based education empowers them to help create a better world.

ASB classes that did service learning in the park were asked to write a reflection of their experience. These reflections were far superior in quality than other written assignments completed in a “normal school setting”. There is no doubt amongst those teachers involved that the quality of the students’ writing and reflective thinking had improved because of the context in which they had learned. While students connect their learning to their community, they connect the learning to real life and the learning itself becomes real.

Both of ASB’s new place-based objectives were being fulfilled. The improved quality of student work was proof that the place-based instruction was meeting the unique and diverse learning needs of the students. The community service projects that were done and the pride the students felt completing them was evidence that ASB had also begun to create a harmonious relationship between the school and the community.

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## CITACIÓN

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