When a school rethinks the learning environment: a single case study of a new school designed around experiential learning

Manon LeBlanc*, Michel T. Léger, Mathieu Lang & Nicole Lirette-Pitre

Université de Moncton, Faculté des sciences de l’éducation, Moncton, NB, Canada

Abstract

This case study looks at how experiential learning is implemented in a newly constructed school which has adopted an educational approach based on the principles of this pedagogical model. Since its inception, this Canadian K-8 school has chosen to implement experiential learning on both a structural and operational level. Semi-structured interviews with administrators, teachers, students and parents were conducted and subsequently coded to reveal emerging thematic categories from each of these perspectives on learning in a teaching environment specifically designed around experiential learning. Themes from each perspective are categorized and serve as a basis for commentary on initial theory-based research propositions.

Keywords: Experiential learning; Team-teaching; Case study

1. Introduction

Education based on experiential learning is not a new concept. At the turn of the 19th century, Dewey proposed a pedagogical model based primarily on the scientific method. He concentrated his theories on the concepts of research, experience, growth and continuity (1897, 1938). Today, building on Dewey’s vision, experiential learning
is considered to be a process by which learners construct knowledge and conceptualize through activities based on their physical and social environments.

In northern New Brunswick (Canada), a newly constructed school called La Mosaïque du Nord has chosen to base its vision of education, in part, on the concept of experiential learning. The present article starts by presenting the school under study. Then, in order to better structure the case study, as suggested by Miles & Huberman (1991), three research proposals are submitted and ultimately addressed in light of our results in the discussion. Finally, this study aims to better understand experiential learning by asking the following research questions: 1) How do teachers at La Mosaïque du Nord school apply theoretical elements of experiential learning as defined by Dewey (1987) and Kolb (1984), and 2) How do teachers, students, administrators and parents perceive learning at La Mosaïque du Nord?

1.1. The School

La Mosaïque du Nord is a newly constructed school located in Balmoral, serving about 320 students from four surrounding communities in northern New Brunswick (Canada). Inaugurated in January, 2012, this school aims to "renew the teaching-learning process through innovation" as outlined in its guiding implementation document. It strives to move away from traditional teaching where teachers lecture and students play a relatively passive role in the learning process. Instead, La Mosaïque du Nord looks to place students in authentic learning situations which engage them actively and foster meaningful learning through experience.

The school's vision of experiential learning was central to the physical layout of the facilities as well as the structural organization of lesson delivery. For example, the classrooms are organized in distinct areas in the school where students from different learning levels are grouped together, forming several learning sub-communities called “learning cycles” (Kindergarten to 2nd grade, 3rd to 5th grade and 6th to 8th grade). Students work together within each learning cycle and are assessed summatively in the final year of each cycle, allowing them to respect their own learning pace. The creation of a "wider community" also represents a key focus at La Mosaïque du Nord school. The aim is to broaden learners’ horizons, to get them to open their minds to the world. The building is equipped with the latest in technology, from geothermal heating to the most recent educational tools for teachers. Finally, creating partnerships with surrounding communities is an important part of the school’s vision, which speaks of “developing knowledge through community action”. Student learning is thus achieved through the solutions proposed to meet the needs of the community.

1.2. Research propositions

In case study research, it is common to find guiding propositions, which help to increase the likelihood that the researcher will be able to place limits on the scope of the study (Miles & Huberman, 1991). The more specific its propositions, the more a case study will likely stay within feasible limits. Research propositions can help to situate collected data by comparing findings to what can be found in published literature (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In our study, we submit the following three research propositions, all based on existing literature and experiences from professional practice, as suggested by Baxter & Jack (2008):

- Students will be actively involved (as defined by Kolb, 1984) in tasks associated with an experiential learning based pedagogy.
- Students who move from a school with traditional pedagogical views to a school focused on experiential learning will consider learning to be more enjoyable and, ultimately, more meaningful.
- Students who attend a school focused on experiential learning will not only be more actively involved in various educational tasks, but they will also engage in reflective observation, conceptualisation and active experimentation, four stages of an experiential learning cycle according to Kolb (1984).
1.3. Experiential learning: A conceptual framework

John Dewey is widely regarded as the father of the concept of experiential learning. From his early work *Pedagogic Creed* (1897) to the relatively recent *Experience & Education* (1997), Dewey develops a vision of education which is essentially experiential. One could actually consider both experience and education to be, from Dewey’s perspective, synonymous. Of course, if all genuine education comes about through experience that does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative (Dewey, 1997). Four key concepts are at the root of education according to Dewey: experience, inquiry, growth and continuity.

For Dewey (1997), life is about experiences of social interaction. Therefore, in a school context, experiences have to be intelligently conducted in such a way that one particular experience leads to more desirable future experiences. Still according to Dewey, learning consists in part of the ability to evaluate a given experience. As such, inquiry is involved in experiential learning, which becomes a reflective process through which the meaning of experience is consciously pursued by an individual or a community of individuals. The more one pursues the meaning of an experience, the more subsequent experiences are needed to attain a higher level of understanding. It is in this regard that Dewey talks about the concept of growth. Of course, the direction in which growth has to take place must be specified. As Dewey (1985) puts it in *Democracy and education*, learning is a general and persistent balance of organic activities with the surroundings, and of active capacities to readjust activity to meet new conditions. The balancing of organic activities with what surround us is growth. Finally, the concept of continuity is the last criterion by which experiences can be regarded as possibly being educative. An experience that respects this last criterion widens conditions of subsequent learning and opens the learner to new contexts or environments. Something is carried over from one experience to another and that something falls into the category of continuity. There is no disconnect between the individual and the experience as is the case in more traditional education, where the curriculum is not necessarily established as part of a meaningful pedagogical activity.

In 1984, inspired by Dewey’s work on experience in education, Kolb (1984) presented his Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), in which he identifies four stages of what he calls the experiential learning cycle. According to Kolb (1984), learning starts with a concrete experience. For learning to take place, one must be actively involved in a task and that task cannot simply be of a watching or reading nature. Once the task is done, the second stage of the experiential learning cycle, according to Kolb, consists of taking time to engage in reflective observation, whereby the learner steps back from the task at hand in order to analyze what has been done and experienced. At this point, communication with others is central because questions usually arise from the learning experience. From those questions, meaning must be found. The learner now needs to interpret the events and create relationships between the lived experience and what he actually knows. This thinking process is what Kolb calls abstract conceptualisation. Lastly, the learner takes what he has just learned in theory and puts it into practice. This stage is called active experimentation because, like a scientist, the learner makes predictions and determines what is needed in order to better handle a similar task. Finally, to reach meaningful learning, it is important that the learning context be relevant to the learner (Kolb, 1984).

2. Method

2.1. Research approach

The methodological approach guiding the present study is rooted in the qualitative research paradigm. Since the focus of our inquiry is on the processes of learning in an experiential learning pedagogy, we adopt a social constructivist point of view regarding our findings. A qualitative approach is applied to all aspects of the research design: inquiry, data collection and data analysis. Thus, the present report uses quotes from participants to interpret worthiness of each research proposal and attempts to inductively establish patterns or conceptual themes in order to better understand how students learn in a school focused on experiential learning as their pedagogical foundation.
Our research is a single instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) in which we focus on the concept of experiential learning (Dewey, 1997; Kolb, 1984) by studying the bounded case of a newly constructed school which has chosen to focus its pedagogical approach on the principles of experiential learning. The school under study was selected through theory-based purposive sampling, defined by Patton (1990) as finding manifestations of a theoretical construct of interest so as to elaborate and examine the construct. Case selection was also somewhat opportunistic since the school in our study was new and representative of a novel educational approach.

2.2. Data collection

Our data came from multiple sources, namely four group interviews, 14 individual interviews, various collected documents (lesson plans, school strategic plan, etc.) and from researchers’ notes collected through observation over the course of three separate site visits. During individual and group interviews, participants were asked to talk about their perspectives on experiential learning and learning in general. Here are some of the questions asked to guide the semi-structured interviews: “Talk about your school’s mission statement”, “What sets your school apart from others?”, “What is your perception of experiential learning?”, and “What are some examples of learning activities that made learning fun?” All interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed.

Participants included the two school administrators, seven teachers from varying grades, six students from higher grade levels (to ensure the comparison component of our study between a traditional school and one focused on experiential learning) as well as eight parents. All participants were selected through a process of convenience sampling, mainly based on availability. Confidentiality was provided in all aspects of this research as we assigned pseudonyms to members of each participant sub-group and kept data secured and available to involved researchers only (with written consent from all participants prior to beginning the study). Approval was also obtained from the Université de Moncton’s Ethics Committee on research involving human participants following a review of proposed methodology, including all data collection tools.

2.3. Data analysis

We chose to analyze the data from our case study from the perspective of four embedded subunits (Yin, 2003): the administration, the teacher, the student and the parent. Analysis of themes was first undertaken to identify and describe the various themes surrounding the discourse of the case’s 4 embedded subunits. During this process, three analysts independently established codes to represent emerging themes within each case and compared their results. An inter-rater reliability score (Miles & Huberman, 1991) of 90% was then calculated, contributing to a calibration of thematic analysis among researchers and, ultimately, to the validity of our analysis. Majors themes were ultimately isolated for each sub-unit. From this process of thematic coding, the data were then refined through the writing of what we call “perspective narratives”, based on how Giorgi & Giorgi (2003) define the narrative.

A total of four perspective narratives were written, summarizing the views of each of our 4 embedded case subunits (administrators, teachers, students and parents) through both a descriptive and interpretive lens (Van Manen, 1990). Adding to the validity of results, narratives were subsequently returned to at least two participants from three of the four sub-groups for verification of authenticity, a process called member checking or data triangulation according to Denzin (1978). Though we are confident that the students’ perspective narrative is accurate, due in part to our inter-rater reliability score, it should be noted that we were unable to member check this particular narrative since the participant were unavailable. Working with the major emergent themes from the coding process as well as the corroborated narratives, we then proceeded to return to each research proposition to, ultimately, improve on our understanding of how students learn in a school which grounds its pedagogical approach on the principles of experiential learning.
3. Themes & perspective narratives

Thematic content analysis of interview transcripts from all four embedded case sub-units revealed several emergent themes. Researchers then proceeded to isolate major themes common among interview subjects. From the administrators’ perspective, two major themes were identified: centering school management on the student’s needs and fostering student engagement. Three major themes emerged from the teacher interviews: the importance of authentic learning activities, the support for team teaching and non traditional learning environments, as well as the desire for closer ties between school and community. From the students’ perspective, three major themes were apparent: the appreciation of significant learning activities, the positive effect of team teaching and the perception of school as fun. Finally, three major themes were identified upon analyzing data from the parents’ perspective: an appreciation for the school’s pedagogical approach, the school’s strong use of technology and, lastly, the school’s active partnership with the community. Based on these major themes, four perspective narratives were developed summarizing the views on experiential learning expressed by each of the four embedded sub-units.

3.1. The administrators’ perspective

John, the school principal, was part of the planning process from the moment it was decided that a new school would be built. From the beginning, John envisioned a school that would distance itself from the traditional model of teaching. In that regard, describing the mission statement of his school, John wrote that “the success of each student is mandatory, not an option”. Mary, the vice-principal chosen to work with John in setting up this innovative new school, shares his vision and passion for a school where learning takes place through significant experiences to which students can relate. In line with this vision, both school administrators structured their school not by individual grade levels, but rather by grouping students in collaborative communities they call “learning cycles”, set up according to closely related age groups (i.e. K-2, 3-5, 6-8). This grouping strategy allows the teachers to work with students according to their needs and follow their progress over several years as summative evaluation are reserved for the end of a cycle. John adds: “Some groups, working on a specific concept, might have 30 students of different ages while another group might only have four students… both may, at one point, work with a single teacher well versed on the concept in question because they’re not where they’re supposed to be in the program”. According to Mary, the three year groupings give the students more time to assimilate what has to be learned. Since the teachers work in teams of six per “cycle”, and because they have to coordinate their preparation, it gives them the opportunity to collaborate and monitor more closely each student’s individual progress. On the matter of managing the school based on the students’ need, John states that “since we operate in cycles and since we do more monitoring, we have a better picture of where each student is in his learning in regards to the curriculum”.

Both John and Mary insisted on the fact that all planning was done with the idea that every student had to be engaged in his or her individual learning process. To achieve this goal, the school administration actively tries to generate a pedagogical environment where there are more integrative projects related to day to day activities. Every project is related to the curriculum. For example, a math teacher created an activity based on the TV show Dragon’s Den, where students make a product and present a financial package to their classmates. They also built a community garden so that students learn how to grow their own food. According to the school administration, the students were more engaged because they were active during the learning process. John explains: “They work more in group, they move everywhere in the school, they work in the hallway, in [common areas], not just in the classroom.” Working with their peers, students also seem to be more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. Mary recounts: “In third grade, an eight year old kid went by himself to the teacher and said: ‘Look, I had a hard time with this activity in math, can I put my name [on the board] to receive clinic [time] that would help me with [this math topic]?’ He then put his name on the board to receive a clinic. He took this initiative all by himself”.


3.2. The teachers’ perspective

As a condition of their transfer to the new La Mosaique du Nord school, all teachers had to agree to a teaching structure that was non-traditional and student-centered, with learning through authentic and meaningful activities at the heart of their practice. Lori, one of the teachers interviewed in this study, states that she “could not imagine teaching any other way now … building lesson plans around real-life situations and putting the student in the driver’s seat is, for me, a very effective way to teach”. Francine adds: “They are learning through concrete activities that they can relate to, activities we design in which they are forced to play a more active role”. She continued:

“For example, a group of teachers and I put together a weekly Monday breakfast for the school. My students were in charge of ordering certain foods like granola bars, so I asked them to come up with a survey, distribute it in order to find out how many bars we needed and which kinds to order more of. They were doing science and math, collecting data, building tables and graphs to compare the preferences according to grade level, extrapolating and predicting… and they loved it!”

Teachers are also excited about working in an environment where they are encouraged to take teaching outside the traditional classroom setting. As Phil puts it, “Our students are everywhere… on the floors, in the hallways and other common areas, in the lab, in the multifunctional room, outdoors … and [he adds with a smile], sometimes even in the classroom”. Jill adds that, for her, “teaching outside the traditional classroom and being encouraged by your principle to do so is extremely fulfilling … it’s like I won the lottery to be able to teach here!” Beside their apparent inclination towards teaching in non traditional environments, the teachers we interviewed also expressed their support for the school’s team-teaching policy. This policy seems to build professional relationships that serve to stimulate creativity in regards to lesson planning and delivery. As Kim puts it: “Working in as part of a team, I feel supported by both my colleagues and my principle… when I bring an idea to the table, we all work together to make it the best it can be from a learning point of view”. Jennifer, a grade five teacher with over 10 years of experience, shares her opinion on team-teaching since arriving to La Mosaique du Nord School:

“It’s really a team effort here, making sure each student succeeds by getting what he or she needs. At my other school, I was left alone to look after each student, a very difficult task for one person faced with teaching 25 different learners. Here, you are not alone. You plan and often teach as a team and you are certainly expected to seek out assistance in dealing with challenges relating to one student or another’s challenges.”

3.3. The students’ perspective

Each of the six students interviewed shared many examples of activities or projects that they found significant and enjoyable. All participants talked about their classroom gardening project. Natalie explains: “We planted flowers, pansies I think. And we planted many different vegetables. We tried to grow celery but it didn’t work”. When asked what they are going to do with the vegetables and the flowers, she specifies that “[they] are going to bring the flowers to a nursing home [and] the vegetables to the school cafeteria”. Another student, Charles, explains that growing vegetables is “not as complicated as [he] first thought and that [he] might start his own garden at home”. Another significant project mentioned during the interviews was the raising of butterflies and fish in the classroom. “We saw it happening [the metamorphosis from cocoon to the butterfly] and when it was done, we released them” explains Shawna. The students also hatched fish eggs in a class aquarium and released the hatchlings into the wild.

It was pointed out that all grade seven students have one-to-one access to a laptop computer, tablet and interactive white boards. For some students, the ubiquitous use of computers, especially tablets, made learning fun. Melissa explains: “We can use the tablets [for games] once our schoolwork is done and Robert, a fellow student, adds that “[he] learns how to build things while having fun” by using Minecraft on the ipad. They all agree that having access to laptops and tablets is one of the things they really like about this new school. Another enjoyable
aspect of school life at La Mosaïque du Nord, mentioned by the grade seven participants, was the fact that physical education is offered daily to students of that grade level. Mila indicated: “It’s not like at my old school, here we have physical education every day and that is really, really, really fun and everybody loves it”.

When asked about the school’s educational structure, with combined classes taught by more than a single teacher, participants seemed to appreciate the fact that a team of teachers was involved in making sure they succeeded. Pauline gave an example about learning clinics set up by a team of teachers from a particular cycle to help students with difficulties in a given subject. She explains: “If we understand something, it is a lot more fun then when we don’t … during our free period, the teachers offer a clinic on something in math we did not understand and students that need extra help can go to that clinic.” Participants also mentioned an appreciation for the changing physical set up of their learning environment. In fact, each classroom is actually the size of two conventional classrooms with a partition to separate the large room into two classrooms when needed. “In the morning, we start off all together and the wall is opened. Then they close the wall and we separate into smaller groups for math and French classes” explains Lina.

3.4. The parents’ perspective

Parents interviewed expressed unanimous appreciation for the school’s decision to structure lesson delivery and evaluation around learning cycles, especially as it relates to assessment. Students are assessed formatively throughout each learning cycle, but summatively only at the end of each cycle. Lisa, mother of a student in the kindergarten to 2nd grade learning cycle and of a student in the 3rd to 5th grade learning cycle, stated that “[the cycles are] really positive and help those who have more difficulty as well as those who are more gifted.” Four of the seven parents interviewed indicated their appreciation for the administration’s decision to have all teachers work in teams. Arthur, father of four students (two in the kindergarten to 2nd grade learning cycle and two in the 3rd to 5th grade learning cycle) explained that every student “has several teachers looking after [his or her] learning… teachers works together a lot…students go from one teacher to another, regardless of their actual grade level.” He adds: “I find it really interesting.” Parents also expressed their appreciation the fact that teaching practices encourage self-regulated learning on the part of students, placing them at the centre of the learning process. Alexa, another parent of a student in the 6th to 8th grade learning cycle, says that “[her son] always has to do some research himself… he’s not just sitting at a desk and listening.” Tasks performed by students also encourage self-regulation. For example, they are required to manage electronic portfolios and participate in projects which lead to more self-invested learning. In fact, all teachers at École La Mosaïque du Nord implement project-based learning on a regular basis and the parents with whom we spoke all said that their children seem more engaged in their school work. As Arthur put it: “[my child] arrives home passionate about what [he] is doing at school.”

Another major theme identified during parent interviews was a positive impression of the widespread use of technologies in the school by both students and teachers. “[Students] each have a laptop. IPads, iPods… [are] part of learning. It's part of their tools. It’s as if they have it in their pencil case”, said another parent, Maria, mother of a child in the 6th to 8th grade learning cycle. Others mentioned the integration of research using the Internet, the use of presentation software like PowerPoint and the use of the school district’s web portal for online courses, called Clic, to access and complete school related work (eg, electronic portfolio). Technology is also used by teachers, either by integrating the interactive whiteboard to their lesson plans or by using email and even Clic to communicate with parents. This way of doing things seems to please the parents. Lynn, mother of a student in the kindergarten to 2nd grade learning cycle and of a student in the 6th to 8th grade learning cycle stated that, for her, “email is the best way to communicate”. She adds: “I send something then I get an answer… I think we are more aware of the learning that is happening and also if there are assessments and stuff.”

Finally, it was apparent from talking to parents that École La Mosaïque du Nord is indeed a community focused school. For example, parents talked about the school’s community garden, created through a partnership with a regional organization called Open for Business. They spoke of how this school based community initiative impacts
the classroom, as each learning cycle is responsible for growing specific vegetables and herbs, which are supposed to be later harvested and used by the cafeteria as well as other community members. Parents as well as other members of the community participate in different activities organized by the school, strengthening the ties between school and community. Maria expresses it best when she says that “the community feels that La Mosaïque is our school”.

4. Discussion

The following section looks to build on the conceptual framework initially presented. As a guiding framework in response to our three research propositions, the concept of experiential learning as defined by Dewey (1997), and later by Kolb (1984), was examined in the context of a newly constructed school designed around a nontraditional pedagogical vision whereby students play an active role in their learning. As suggested by Baxter & Jack (2008), the proposed framework should continue to develop as the study progresses and the relationships between the proposed constructs should emerge as data analysis progresses. Yin (2003) adds that returning to the propositions that initially produced the conceptual framework ensures that the analysis is reasonable in scope. Accordingly, we aim to examine the experiential learning cycle outlined in ELT (Kold, 1984), in light of the conceptual themes inductively discovered after studying the case of La Mosaïque du Nord school, by addressing each submitted research proposal one by one.

Proposal 1: Students will be actively involved (as defined by Kolb, 1984) in tasks associated with an experiential learning based pedagogy.

Upon examination of emergent themes from all four participant perspectives, it is apparent that student engagement in specifically designed activities is a key focus according to the school’s administration and teachers as well as the parents. It was clear that the administration’s vision of the school included learning through active involvement on the part of the students. It is equally clear the teachers not only share a similar didactic vision, but that they also enjoy the professional freedoms afforded by their superiors in designing engaging activities where students play a very active role in the learning process. The school-wide implementation of team-teaching as a mode of operation has also been embraced by all teaching staff and is viewed as an important component in delivering significant and stimulating lesson plans. Students and parents also spoke fondly of the adopted team-teaching approach, both specifying their impression that the learner benefits from better pedagogical support. This data also seems in line with what Vienneau (2002) refers to as inclusive pedagogy, an educational concept founded on five principles, one of which is the “optimal individualization of the teaching-learning process”. In fact, teachers indicated how much they appreciate being encouraged to teach outside the traditional classroom setting. Learning outside the classroom was a common theme from the students’ perspective. They spoke of projects such as community gardening, hands-on science experiments, recycling programs and construction of a miniature golf course for younger students. Finally, parents also confirm that they see their children becoming more responsible, more accountable, as they are called upon by teachers to play a more active role in proposed learning activities. In light of these corroborating themes, across all four perspectives narratives, it is our finding that students are indeed more actively involved in “concrete experiences” (Kolb, 1984) in the case of La Mosaïque du Nord, a school focused on experiential learning as a guiding pedagogical approach. Hence, our first research proposition is accepted.

Proposal 2: Students who move from a school with traditional pedagogical views to a school focused on experiential learning will consider learning to be more enjoyable and, ultimately, more meaningful.

To examine this particular proposition, we focused primarily on emergent themes from the perspective narrative of students. The fact that La Mosaïque du Nord school was only constructed two years ago was central to our ability to compare, from the student’s point of view, learning in a traditional setting to one based on student engagement and authentic experiences. Firstly, students did indeed mention that they found school to be more fun since moving to the case school. They spoke of how much they enjoyed learning through activities like growing flowers in the
classroom with the goal of delivering them to a nearby nursing home. Another student spoke of a learning activity in biology where the class grew fish eggs in an aquarium and later released the hatchlings into the wild. In our opinion, such activities, blending social purpose and curriculum, leads to more meaningful educational experiences for students and teachers alike. This community aspect to learning came up often in our interviews and contributes, we believe, to meaningful learning. Students also mentioned that they enjoyed being physically active every day (the school implemented daily physical education) and that they appreciate the integration of technologies in daily learning activities. On that subject, it was pointed out that, in later grades, all students have access to laptop computers as well as tablets, which are sometimes used in such a way as to incorporate gaming and, as Melissa put it, “learning while having fun is a good thing”. In short, our data leads us to consider that a school with an educational approach focused on experiential learning, such is the case at La Mosaïque du Nord school, seems to abate what Dewey (1985) refers to as any potential disconnection to be found between the individual and the experience. Thus, as we pointed out, learning is more meaningful in such a school. We would therefore accept our second research proposition.

Proposal 3: Students who attend a school focused on experiential learning will not only be more actively involved in various educational tasks, but they will also engage in reflective observation, conceptualization and active experimentation, four stages of an experiential learning cycle according to Kolb (1984).

As indicated in our interpretation of the first research proposal, we believe that focusing a curriculum on the principles of experiential learning, as a school, leads to higher student engagement and more active involvement of students in educational tasks. In other words, students attending a school focused on experiential learning clearly seem to attain the first stage of an experiential learning cycle according to Kolb’s (1984) ELT. As for the three other stages of Kolb’s cycle, our case study does not reveal data in support of their integration. In fact, our interpretation of emergent themes, from all four perspective narratives, point to an attaining of higher stages which is mitigated at best. For instance, the collaborative nature of the school seems to lend itself well to meaningful learning projects, which appear to lead, at least potentially, to opportunities for reflective observation, conceptualization and active experimentation on the part of students, all higher stages of Kolb’s (1984) ELT. An example of this is one teacher’s attempt to build on notions of math and science by organizing regular visits of his grade one class to a neighboring grade two class in order to measure and graph the growth of plants grown for an entirely purpose. Though students were actively observing and reflecting on patterns of growth, were they indeed conceptualizing or even experimenting for that matter? We do not believe so. In fact, we believe that students at La Mosaïque du Nord school, though seemingly active in significant and authentic learning activities, do not adequately and consistently attain the three higher levels of a complete experiential learning cycle according to Kolb (1984). Therefore, we must reject our third research proposition and point to the need for further research in ways of fully implementing all four stages of Kolb’s cycle.

5. Conclusions: Lessons learned

Building on a conceptual framework based on the works of Dewey (1985, 1997) and Kolb (1984), our data points to a clear need for schools looking to implement an educational approach focused on experiential learning to further develop their curriculum in order to better represent all four stages of Kolb’s (1984) cycle of experiential learning. In the present case study, we note that La Mosaïque du Nord school did in fact succeed in implementing a curriculum based on the principles of experiential learning, albeit on a relatively basic level.

At the start, we posed the following research questions: 1) How do teachers at La Mosaïque du Nord school apply theoretical elements of experiential learning, and 2) How do teachers, students, administrators and parents perceive learning at La Mosaïque du Nord? To help answer these questions, we first list successfully implemented elements of an experiential learning pedagogy in the case at hand. In the context of La Mosaïque du Nord school, we believe the following elements contributed to an educational praxis favoring experiential learning:
1) All lesson delivery is done through team-teaching, allowing for more creativity and knowledge sharing.
2) The school is designed around learning communities, called “cycles”, according to grades (K-2; 3-5; 6-8).
3) Technology is optimized to facilitate teaching as well as communication, among teachers and with parents.
4) Educational activities are designed to offer authentic and significant learning opportunities.
5) Both teachers and administrators look to include the community in some way during the learning process.

In conclusion, in addition to these positive elements, we believe it is relevant to put forth a list of recommendations, based on our findings from the present case study as well as on the works of Dewey (1985, 1997) and Kolb (1984), thus helping to better inform other schools interested in implementing a similar educational approach. Here are those recommendations:

1) Teachers and administrators should strive to incorporate more meaningful and concrete involvement on the part of parents and the surrounding community at large.
2) Lesson plans should strive to go beyond actively involving the student in the learning process, incorporating opportunities for reflective observation in regards to a given concept or notion.
3) Students should be encouraged to actively experiment (Kolb, 1984), making predictions around learned concepts within a relevant context, thus leading to more meaningful learning.

Acknowledgements

This project was funded by the Université de Moncton’s Faculté des études supérieures et de recherche.

References


