



TEACHING & LEARNING  
RESEARCH INITIATIVE  
NĀU I WHATU TE KĀKAHU, HE TĀNIKO TAKU

# Developing a place-based approach to outdoor education in Aotearoa New Zealand

Outdoor ed in our place: "Keepin' it real"

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# Introductory statement

Outdoor education is often thought of as occurring in remote locations requiring specialist staff and equipment. Such an approach is resource intensive and potentially expensive. This project sought to develop 'localised' outdoor experiences that empowered teachers and students to better understand places of significance in their community. By being responsive to the geographical and cultural features in the local area both students and teachers were able to incorporate prior knowledge and experiences and connect these to life 'outside school'.

## Key findings

- A place-responsive approach to outdoor education programmes is a viable and sustainable and fits well with the intent of the NZ curriculum.
- Self-propelled journeys provide students with a sense of satisfaction and an opportunity to take responsibility for their actions.
- Incorporating prior knowledge, both teachers' and students', enriches learning and strengthens connections between participants and the community.
- Localised programmes can provide opportunities for students to be challenged and engaged in learning that is contextualised and relevant to them.

## Major implications

- A place-responsive approach to outdoor education focuses attention on students and place(s) at the centre of the planning process.
- A place-responsive approach requires a rethinking of outdoor education as a set of activities.
- A place-responsive approach encourages a cross-curricula approach to teaching and learning. For example, integration of elements from HPE, EfS, Science.
- A place-responsive approach requires consideration of the local. Whilst there are guiding principles there is no universal prescription; programmes need to be context specific.

## The research

Outdoor education has a long history in schooling in Aotearoa/New Zealand and it is generally believed that it can contribute to students' personal and social development. Current practices that place an emphasis on risk and challenge in outdoor environments can be traced back to the imperial and militaristic antecedents that influenced early theorists and practitioners (Lugg, 2004; Nichol, 2002). If pushing students outside their comfort zone through the use of activities involving risk is believed to be how outdoor education 'works', many schools may feel compelled to contract specialist providers with technical expertise.

It has been argued that the focus on adventurous pursuits, based on balancing risk with competence to achieve a "peak experience", has privileged certain ways of thinking about outdoor education (Zink, 2003). The quest to provide excitement and fun, through increasingly novel or contrived activities, has arguably overshadowed nuanced debate around the educational value of such experiences. It has been suggested that outdoor education programmes have largely been defined by risk rather than educational narratives (Brookes, 2002).

There are a growing number of critiques that have called into question some of the taken-for-granted assumptions that inform current practice; for example, the role of risk-taking, the need to push students outside their comfort zone to aid learning, and the transferability of such learning from the outdoor context to 'everyday' life. These critiques call for reflection and a reformulation of theory and practice to improve the educational outcomes for students (Brookes, 2000, 2003a, 2003b; Brown, 2003, 2004, 2008; Cosgriff, 2008; Hovelynck, 2001; Roberts, 2008; Seaman, 2008; Zink, 2003, 2004).

It is against this background that this project sought to develop a place-responsive<sup>1</sup> approach to outdoor education in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The project acknowledged the critiques mentioned above, but sought to move beyond deconstruction to offer an alternative approach by working collaboratively with teachers to reconceptualise outdoor education taking into account the specific contextual elements in the educational process. By working with teachers to explore place-responsive approaches to outdoor education practice the project addressed the call in the existing literature for more detailed examination of the teaching and learning processes in outdoor education (McKenzie, 2000; Neill & Richards, 1998).

This research moved beyond the dominant discourses of skilled performance and risk management to investigate how place-responsive pedagogy might enrich learning in outdoor education. This project did not replicate an existing study nor did it intend to impose on teachers a model "from on high". The project moved beyond theorizing about the benefits of place-responsive approaches; it engaged with teachers in their practice and sought student and teachers perspectives of their experiences.

This collaborative project developed programmes that were contextualised to take into account the 'places' within which the school and their community are situated. Through the sharing of relevant readings; 'brainstorming' meetings, where ideas were exchanged; and explorations of the local environment the two schools (Ngaruawahia High School and Mount Maunganui College) were able to develop and implement innovative place-responsive programmes for different year levels.

This qualitative study drew on interview data gathered through interviews with the four participating teachers; the first interviews at the beginning of the study were focussed on teachers' existing understandings and practices about learning in outdoor education, subsequent interviews were conducted after the implementation of the new programme and again at the conclusion of the project. Ten students in each school were interviewed in pairs after participation in the programme and members of the university research team participated in and observed both programmes. Interviews were transcribed and analysed based on the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Teacher interviews were returned to the interviewee for feedback and drafts of publications (Brown, 2012; Wattchow & Brown, 2011) were also checked by the interviewees.

Both schools developed local journey based programmes that engaged students in activities that responded to the geographical, historical and cultural context in which they are located. These journeys combined various modes of transport including; walking cycling, waka paddling, and sea kayaking. For example, the Ngaruawahia students paddled waka on the Waikato River from Cambridge back to Turangawaewae Marae at Ngaruawahia and the Mount Manganui students cycled and sea kayaked around Tauranga Harbour (for a discussion of the NHS trip see Brown, 2012). Both groups incorporated marae stays in their programmes thereby allowing students to display cultural competence and connections.

# Findings

Both teachers and students reported on the benefits of becoming more familiar with, or in some cases discovering, features in their local environment. Both schools were able to draw on expertise and knowledge within the school community thereby circumventing the need to employ outside specialist instructional staff. This had two benefits; the first being that the trips were more affordable; secondly, and perhaps of more significance, was the pedagogical benefit of building stronger relationships between staff and students. In initial discussions both Jane and Erin (Mount Maunganui College) expressed a desire for teachers to be the primary partners with students in the learning process rather than outsider contractors being brought in for their specialist skills. Both expressed a frustration with programmes where teachers were sidelined by technical/contract staff who had no ongoing relationship with the students post-programme (see Wattchow & Brown, 2011).

This exploratory project is significant in that it engaged with teachers in developing new ways of conducting outdoor education that were located in places of significance to the school community; each school developed a programme that was responsive to their location, student needs and staff expertise. Through simple methods of travel participants were able to immerse themselves in their local environment. Given the lack of highly technical or risky activities teachers were able to facilitate opportunities for students to take responsibility for planning and leading aspects of the journey. Students were frequently given opportunities to take responsibility for their actions which the knowledge that the consequences of mistakes were not catastrophic. Thus students could experiment and learn from their mistakes. Both students and teachers reported favourably on the opportunity to learn in a safe and supportive environment. Teachers in particular appreciated the opportunity to build and enhance existing relationships with students. This form of outdoor education also facilitated opportunities for cross-curriculum enrichment. For example, students investigated ecological and historical aspects of the places visited, they also integrated information technology skills in the production of a DVD of their experiences. In both schools teachers and students reported on how they enriched relationships by seeing people in a different setting. Whilst this may not be earth shattering news to outdoor educators, it does demonstrate that the building of relationships does not require stress or 'fabricated' team-building initiatives to occur. Students in both schools reported an enhanced appreciation of the cultural dimension of their experiences of the places they visited. For example, the students at Mount Maunganui College stayed at a local marae where the elder explained the stories behind the naming of the places that the students had visited and that were of significance to the people of that marae. This was the home marae of one of the students and he took on a leadership role and several of the students noted about how they saw him in a different, and very positive, light after the trip. He was able to guide and mentor his fellow classmates in areas in which he had expertise.

How teachers understand the teaching and learning process and the connection of place to student learning and personal identity is of importance if outdoor education is to be seen as more than merely the acquisition of skills. This study illustrates that current practices, emphasising risk and challenge as key teaching and learning strategies, are not the only ways to conduct outdoor education programmes. A place-responsive approach encourages teachers and students to develop programmes that are responsive to their needs. This is not a prescriptive approach nor does it impose a simple recipe or model to implement. The teachers in this study considered the following guiding questions posed by Wendell Berry (1987) when designing a programme:

What is here in this place?

What will place permit us to do?

What will this place help us to do?

How is this place interconnected with my home place?

This exploratory study offers the opportunity to make a substantial impact on teaching and learning practices in outdoor education with implications for both teachers and students alike. As detailed, current practices in

outdoor education have largely been informed by theories and practices that were generated in other times and places. As such they have not generally been responsive to the social, historical, cultural and geographical affordances and constraints in which New Zealand outdoor education teachers and their students teach and learn. This project placed teachers and learners at the centre of the enterprise of developing an outdoor education pedagogy that reflects their needs and aspirations.

## Major implications

A place-responsive approach moves the focus from viewing outdoor education as a set of activities to outdoor education as a way to view relationships; both with people and place(s). There is a strong body of literature detailing the role that places play in individual and collective identity. As Wattchow and Brown (2011) argue, “outdoor places are much more than mere sites for human activity. They make us and we make them. They are the sources of our identities” (p. ix). Thus a place-responsive approach requires that educators take seriously the significance of place(s). Relationship with place(s) influences how learners see themselves both as an individual and in relationship to the wider world. One of the implications of this position is that educators need to be cognisant of the particularities of the context in which learning takes place, who they are educating and where they are educating. This requires an understanding of the geography, history, ecology, and multiple understandings attached to particular places (e.g., the view of the farmer, tourist, indigenous peoples etc). By utilising Berry’s guiding questions, educators can start to think about the type of programme(s) that might be appropriate for their students in places(s) of significance. Thus outdoor education can, and should, differ in different places rather than being viewed as a set of activities ‘imposed’ or artificially constructed. A place-responsive approach to outdoor education potentially frees educators from technically demanding activities and allows educators, members of the wider school community and students to contribute to appropriate activities (e.g., it could be waka-ama, fishing, weaving a kete, or mountain biking).

Place(s) can be known/experienced in a variety of ways. One of outdoor education’s strengths lies in the provision of embodied experiences (e.g., the feel of a rock face, the smell of the bush). A place-responsive approach encourages a cross-curricula approach to learning about place(s). For example, both schools introduced learning experiences that might traditionally ‘fall’ into other curriculum areas. These included writing tasks, a combination of creative expression or short history pieces on places visited. Ngaruawahia students also incorporated Education for Sustainability (EfS) achievement standards into their journey. Teachers from both schools reported increased interest from staff not normally associated with school camps when they could see how outdoor education could complement their learning area.

Making connections with place(s) more overt and acknowledging that students’ out-of-school experiences have a role has the potential to enrich learning opportunities. Examples include; a student drawing on bush skills gained while pig hunting with his grandfather, to display his competence and knowledge to his peers; a student sharing stories of his forefathers journey across Maungatautari.

Place-responsive approaches, as evidenced in this project, highlight the possibilities for engaging learning areas not traditionally associated with outdoor education. This has implications for enriching learning and drawing on staff expertise that might not traditionally have been available.

Because a place-responsive approach requires consideration of the local it is not possible to prescribe a generic programme that will be applicable in all schools or all year levels. Whilst there are guiding principles (see Wattchow & Brown, 2011 for signposts to a place responsive pedagogy) there is no universal prescription—programmes need to be context specific. Both schools responded to their students and their environment in developing their programmes; other teachers looking to implement place responsive programmes will also need to likewise.

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<sup>1</sup> I have moved from using the term place-based to place-responsive. I am concerned that place-based carries potentially limits where education could occur within (an often undefined) radius from one's place of residence. As I have argued,

To respond is to enter into a relationship of mutual interdependence that requires sensitivity and empathy for place(s) and the people and broader ecological community who dwell there. It is forward looking and considers how human actions effect, not just the present, but also the future. (Brown, 2012, p. 109)