Rural-regional sustainability through revitalising the commons: A case study*

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Rebecca Miles
Charles Sturt University

Abstract

Place-based education is education that is “grounded in the resources, issues, and values of the local community and focuses on using the local community as an integrating context for learning at all levels” (Powers, 2004, p. 17). The purpose for becoming conscious of places in education is to extend “notions of pedagogy and accountability outward, toward places” making learning more relevant to “the lived experiences of students and teachers… so that places matter to educators, students and citizens in tangible ways” (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 620). Although place-based education is often used interchangeably with a number of terms – community based learning, rural education, project-based learning, service-learning, sustainability education – it encompasses a broad hope by educators to;

‘tear down’ school walls so that the community becomes integral to all facets of student learning – that is, that the school is open and inviting to the community and the community welcomes student learning occurring in many dimensions (Powers, 2004, p. 18).

Situated within this partnership between school and community fostered through place-based education is the opportunity for rural-regional sustainability. Using case study methodology, this paper takes an in-depth look at a community enacting rural-regional, and environmental, sustainability through place-based education. In particular, the paper showcases how school and community have used a degraded community stock reserve to ‘tear down’ the school walls (fences) and perform place through the (co)creation of the Willaroo nature reserve as a place of protection, regeneration and environmentally sustainable practices. This place and its varied uses and users is an example of place being relationally performed in regards to the “flows, mobility and hybridity of meaning” that occurs through and in places (Watson, 2003, p. 145). Furthermore, the story of the Willaroo nature reserve shows that “place is not only local, specific and static” but can be seen as “an emergent effect of globally distributed relationships, and as an actor in those relationships” (Watson, 2003, p. 157). This ‘revitalizing of the commons’ (Bowers, 2005) has (co-)created a place of bio-diversity, regeneration and environmental education fostering rural-regional sustainability.
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Introduction

David Orr (1992, p.90), in his seminal book Ecological Literacy, claimed that “all education is environmental education”. By locating all educational experiences as occurring in, through, and about the environment – the places – in which we live is, in essence, emphasising the importance of place in our educational experiences. No matter where we are or what we are learning, we are always in a place, and these places matter. Through the places we cohabit, move, live in, experience, we generate understandings of our world. We cannot escape place. Education, therefore, is invariably grounded in the places where it is performed or practiced, whether or not the learning that is going on is about that place. Subsequently, there are a growing number of educators advocating place-conscious or place-based education; learning that uses the places that students live as a means of creating connections with environments and communities (Ball & Lai, 2006; Barratt Hacking, Scott, & Barratt, 2007; Cameron, 2003; Dubel & Sobel, 2008; Green, 2007; Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b; Lai & Ball, 2002; Miles, 2008; Powers, 2004; Smith, 2007; Sobel, 1996). Place-conscious education refers to a “philosophical orientation that embraces place as a construct fundamental to the purpose, process and structure of schooling” (Gruenewald, 2005, p. 263). As Albert Arenas (1999, p. 2) argues, without a pedagogy of place “children cannot comprehend, even less feel a sense of commitment towards, [environmental] issues and problems in distant places until they have a well-grounded knowledge of their own place”. Furthermore, David Sobel (1996, p. 9 & 10) asks: “what really happens when we lay the weight of the world’s environmental problems on eight and nine year olds already haunted with too many concerns and not enough real contact with nature?” He goes on, claiming “what is important is that children have an opportunity to bond with the natural world, to learn to love it and feel comfortable in it, before being asked to heal its wounds”. Overall, place-conscious education encompasses a hope by educators to connect classrooms and communities by;

‘tear[ing] down’ school walls so that the community becomes integral to all facets of student learning – that is, that the school is open and inviting to the community and the community welcomes student learning occurring in many dimensions (Powers, 2004, p. 18).

This connection between classrooms and communities is particularly important, and particularly possible, in rural and regional areas. The opportunities afforded within rural and regional Australia for smaller schools, access to strong community networks, often with large school grounds or access to land in need of regeneration, and multi-skilled community members able to share skills and local knowledge, provides an impetus for place-conscious education. The focus of this paper is a case-study of one small rural primary school and its use and development of a degraded ‘commons’ area in fostering both environmental and rural-regional sustainability. Data for this case study was collected over two weeks through interviews with school staff, students, parents, community members and visiting school teachers, observations of lessons and play time, photos taken by students and documents.

Through discussion on how place has been performed by members of this school and community, I attempt to show both ways that the nature and role of the places we cohabit change, as well as how our use of place can enable regeneration and sustainability1. Central to this message is that of ‘learning to love’ the place that we are in, as well as ways of transferring this love for one place to other places, both in an environmental/ecological sense and a social and cultural sense.

Revitalising the commons through a focus on place

Chet Bowers (2006) talks about the need for social and environmental “revitalizing of the commons” within communities and schools as a means of resisting current world trends towards economic globalisation. Bowers (2006, p. 2) defines the commons as being all parts of the environment that sustain life – plant, animal, land, air – and are “available for use by the entire community”. This, traditionally, also included those cultural norms and structures that were non-monetized such as: languages spoken; intergenerational narratives that provided sense of identity and value; crafts; and technology; and knowledge. In turn, revitalising the commons refers to the resistance of the loss of commons through privatisation and enclosure. It focuses on coming to know and use the “non-monetized and non-privatized aspects of cultural and natural systems” (Bowers, 2004, p. 45) and developing an awareness of and sharing in the non-commodified traditions of different groups and communities, particularly indigenous, minority and ethnic groups. In the context of this paper, I use the term ‘revitalising the commons’ as a means of conveying the importance of communities working together and sharing skills and knowledges to regenerate their environment – revitalising both the land and the people working on that land through (co)creating place/s. I will now briefly discuss the concept of place, define place-conscious education, and consider how these interact with rural place.

1The terms place-conscious and place-based education are used interchangeably throughout this paper. Both terms refer to education that promotes a consciousness, care and concern for the places where that education is located.

2 References to sustainability, unless otherwise noted, refer to both environmental sustainability and rural-regional sustainability.
The importance of place has been emphasised by many across a number of fields, including, but not limited to, philosophy, human and cultural geography, and education (see for example: Agnew, 2005; Bird Rose, 2004; Cameron, 2003, 2008; Casey, 1997; Cresswell, 2005; Greenwood, 2008; Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2006; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Harvey, 1993; Hay, 2002; Louv, 2008; Main, 2005; Malone & Tranter, 2003; Martusewicz, 2005; Martusewicz & Edmundson, 2005; Massey & Jess, 1995; McKenzie, 2008; Miles, 2008; Oakes, 1997; Orr, 1992; Payne, 1997, 2006; Powers, 2004; Smith, 2002, 2007; Sobel, 1996; Somerville, 2006; Spencer, 2005; Thrift, 1999; Vaske & Kobrin, 2001; Watson, 2003).

When we speak of place we rarely stop to consider exactly what we mean. Gruenewald (2006, p. 4) claims that “to know anything about the world is to know its places”, and yet place is “one of the most multilayered and multipurpose keywords in our language” (Harvey, 1993, p. 208). It is through concepts (and practices) of place and space that we seek to understand and locate ourselves in the world. In recent times, rethinking on place and space, particularly in human and cultural geography, has tried to see beyond the more simplistic dualisms of local/global and place/space (see Agnew, 2005). Considering the importance and interrelatedness of space and place is necessary in breaking down these dualisms. Concepts of place and space as dependent on each other is seen when envisaging that what makes something a ‘place’, rather than “simply a room, a garden, a town, a city”, is that these places are “spaces which people have made meaningful” (Cresswell, 2005, p. 7). It is the experiences occurring in place that make it differ conceptually from space. Place as a site in space can be charted in a mathematical sense; however, it is the human relationship with, and within, a place that makes it stand apart. Moreover, one person’s experience of a place might be very different from another’s, thus producing a “significantly different place” (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 622).

Experiences of rural place can be a classic example of producing extremely different places. Recently when I returned to the farm where I had grown up, I saw a place of memories, family, history and adventures, whereas my partner saw nothing but an unfamiliar, hot, flat, barren, dustbowl. Although located in the same space, we were experiencing the place in a significantly different way. Regions and nations may command a sense of identity, yet these often remain abstractions for individuals, whilst place, as a site of meaningful action “becomes the geographical expression of the interactions between individual action and abstract historical process” (Oakes, 1997, p. 510). This isn’t to say that places are necessarily benevolent; indeed the same place can be a haven for one person but a place of pain and suffering for another. Furthermore, one person’s experience of place can be both benign and malevolent, as well as change over time. Similarly, ‘rural’ place may at once be a place of sociability, sustenance and home, yet also contribute to depression, isolation and loneliness.

Gruenewald (2003b, p. 624) suggests that the empirical measuring and mapping of the perceptual dimension of places has subsequently become the space for the disconnection “of the human body from the natural world”. Berry (cited in Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 624) uses the term ‘autistic’ to describe how humans “have forgotten how to hear, communicate and participate in meaning making with our places on the living earth”. Spatial analysis of the ways that schools are run reveals that schooling often results in a dislocation of students from the places and communities in which they dwell:

[Through] regulating our geographical experience, schools potentially stunt human development as they help construct our lack of awareness of, our lack of connectedness to, and our lack of appreciation for places (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 625).

Within education, the purpose of becoming conscious of places is to make learning more relevant to “the lived experiences of students and teachers … so that places matter to educators, students and citizens in tangible ways” (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 620). As Powers (2004, p. 18) argues, education that is conscious of and uses place(s) allows students to “see the relevance of what they are learning and therefore become more engaged in the learning process”. The importance of recognising the role of people as place-makers suggests that schools could take a “more active role … in the study, care and creation of places” (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 627). Moreover, through taking a more active role in the ‘study, care and creation’ of places, students and teachers can begin to reflect on how “places, and our ideas about them, became what they are”, as well as allowing students to take a part in the process of shaping, and being shaped by, what their places will become (Gruenewald, 2003b, p. 627).

A number of examples of place-conscious education in action can be seen in David Gruenewald and Gregory Smith’s recent book (Gruenewald and Smith [ed], 2008). From descriptions of teaching place-based education in university graduate courses, to the integration of the aesthetic and place through art in the classroom, and the community and environmental action taken by students in a high school, a focus on place-based education is
seen as revitalising schools and communities through the integration of community and natural resources, environmental justice, community-based teaching, the importance of indigenous knowledge of place, and a community-centred approach to teaching and learning, that not only values and respects young people within the community, but also provides these young people with learning experiences that are both engaging and compelling. Along with others, many examples of schools and communities that use place-based education show how struggling, often rural, communities are revitalised by connections between classrooms and those in the community through grounding educational experiences in the places students live.

The following section takes an in-depth look at a small, rural community enacting rural-regional, and environmental, sustainability through place-based education. In particular, I demonstrate ways that the school and community have used a degraded community stock reserve (the ‘commons’) to ‘tear down’ the school walls and perform place through the (co)creation of the Willaroo Nature Reserve as a place of protection, regeneration and environmentally sustainable practices. I look at the ways in which not only has the community shaped the place, but the place has shaped the community, giving it an identity and uniqueness. This place and its varied uses and users is an example of place being relationally performed, in regards to the “flows, mobility and hybridity of meaning” that occurs through and in places (Watson, 2003, p. 145). Furthermore, the story of the Willaroo Nature Reserve shows that “place is not only local, specific and static” but, rather, can be seen as “an emergent effect of globally distributed relationships, and as an actor in those relationships” (Watson, 2003, p. 157). Place, situated within this partnership between school and community and fostered through place-based education, provides real opportunity for rural-regional sustainability.

The Commons
Gindaany Springs Public School3 is located in the township of Gindaany Springs in the Riverina region of New South Wales. A twenty-minute drive from a nearby major regional centre, Gindaany Springs has a population of approximately 150 people, and a Public School (K-6) population of 33 students, drawn from both the immediate town and outlying farms. Due to its proximity to the regional centre, a number of the towns’ population travel there for work. Although much of the nearby rural landscape is broad-acre farming, local groups, particularly Land Care, have put a lot of effort into increasing biodiversity and native habitat through educating the local farming community.

Gindaany Springs Public School is physically located on a side road off the main highway through town. The school consists of five buildings: the primary (Years 3-6) and infants (Years K-2) classrooms; the library/staff room; the weather shed; and the toilet block. The school grounds are extensive, given the number of students, with areas of the grounds set aside for a bird garden, with native shrubs and trees, a vegetable garden for the infants class, and a large area where students build cubbies using branches and other nearby materials from the pine trees in the ‘school woodlot’. In addition, there are garden beds around each of the buildings and a small orchard behind the primary classroom. There is also a large concreted area, where students line up, eat, play handball and soccer, amongst other school-yard games, and use for sports activities. At the front of the school grounds is an ‘adventure playground’ for infant students. Throughout the school-yard are large artworks, painted on walls and concrete areas, depicting native animals. On the wall of the store-room is a mural painted by a local Indigenous man, telling the story of the place and its pedagogy, shown by Elders teaching children how to use and treat the land (image 1).

Image 1: Indigenous place mural

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3 All names of people and places have been changed for confidentiality. However, all efforts have been made to retain the name-identity of the place, within the confines of confidentiality, through its pseudonym. Gindaany means “Sugar glider” in the Wiradjuri language. Sugar gliders are small gliding possums that were previously common in the area. Willaroo means “Bush-Stone Curlew” in the local Wiradjuri Language, the language group of the traditional Indigenous Australian owners of the region. The Bush Stone Curlew is a ground-dwelling native bird that was previously common to the area but is now endangered due to habitat destruction and introduced predators.
Adjacent to the school is the Willaroo Environmental Education Centre and Nature Reserve. Originally a stock reserve and public watering place, this four-hectare block of land, that had become degraded and disused over time, has now become a place of regeneration and ‘revitalizing of the commons’, showing the effectiveness of school-community partnerships in co-creating places for environmental learning.

(Co)creating Place

In the early 1990s, two local men in Gindaany Springs had a conversation about the old stock reserve adjacent to the public school. Although degraded and full of weeds and various other types of rubbish (“it was just a bare ugly spot with sheep in it to keep the weeds down!” [Sara, community member]), they thought that it could be turned into “a nice place for the locals to wander around” [John, community member]. Initially planned as a Bush Reserve, then as an Arboretum, the local Land Care group was contacted; they expressed considerable interest in the idea, seeing it as an opportunity to showcase native plants for local farmers and land-owners in order to combat a loss of biodiversity and habitat through land clearing, and to preserve wildlife in the region. After some time spent getting the local Council to change the designation of the place from stock reserve to recreation ground, the school was invited to take part in the regeneration of the block in 1996. In 1998 the Willaroo Environmental Education Centre was officially opened. So began a partnership between school, community and local government that saw the co-creation of a place of bio-diversity, regeneration and environmental education, fostering both ecological and rural-regional sustainability.

Nearly concurrent to the development of the Willaroo nature reserve was the school’s involvement in the trial of the Learnscapes’ programme in New South Wales. As part of this trial, Daniel, the school principal, realised that the ‘learnscapes’ did not need to be contained within the school grounds, providing impetus for school-community collaboration around Willaroo. Through the Learnscapes process, the old school fence was, literally, torn down, and replaced by a low mesh fence, allowing for the visual-spatial connectedness between the school and the nature reserve and providing a sense of ownership and caretaking by the school community:

There used to be a teachers residence between here and halfway between here and [Willaroo]. Now, the residence wasn’t here when I came, but the legacy of it was. There was a tin fence right across down there and a tin fence behind and a garage was still there. Well as part of the Learnscape philosophy my vision was that this wouldn’t work unless it was all one site. If you had to walk across the road and that was seen as, you know, ‘that was Willaroo and this was the school’, it wasn’t going to work. The first thing we did was we ripped down the fences and we sold the garage, cleaned the place up and put a gate, put a nice little low fence and a track across and we claimed it and said that ‘this was part of the school grounds’. As far as the community knows, that is part of the school grounds. Technically, on paper, it’s owned by the council and we’ve got a hundred year lease on it. But for all intents and purposes, people who visit, people who come, they see that as one – that’s part of our school grounds. So, we’ve adopted it. And that’s been a critical thing. Even though we don’t fully manage it, it’s just all blurred together [Daniel, principal]

Winning several State and National awards early in the project gave the Willaroo Environmental Education Centre credibility, respect, and importantly support within the community. John and Sara, community members involved from the beginning, believe that what started as an idea with locally-focussed, informal, educative goals has turned into something much more than anyone could have imagined:

Willaroo is not just meant for school children; that’s part of the big picture - we like to engage anyone that’s got an interest in the environment and not just Land Care, but just the general public. It’s been great for the community; it’s given them a sense of pride [John, community member]

Shaping place: shaped by place

Matthew Watson (2003, p. 157) has suggested that “place is an emergent effect of practices that bring a diversity of relationships into the moment of interaction between a person and the materiality of a site”. Similarly, as Gruenewald (2006, p. 5) has argued, “places shape people (identities and cultures) and people shape places”. These practices of place can be seen through the interactions between staff, students, community members, and visitors at the site resulting in changes, both in that place over time, and in other places, as well as changes in elements such as curriculum and pedagogy practices. Furthermore, being in, moving within a place

4 The School Learnscapes Trust is a non-profit organisation that works with schools to develop their school grounds through environmental values and awareness. Information about the School Learnscapes trust can be found at http://www.learnscapes.org
forms a relationship between people and that place, both individually and collectively. The principal of the school, Daniel, discussed his interaction within this place, and the relationship he has with it:

I probably fell in love with this site next door to the school because it’s become part of me. A very strong connection. Because even though it was only a dam I had so much to do with the vision of it and how it was and how it is now. When I pull up in the car rather than unlocking the school I sometimes walk that way. And you know that’s when it becomes part of you [Daniel, principal: image 2].

Similarly Peter, a Year 6 student at the school, reflected on the relationship he had with a particular place within Willaroo that enabled him to reflect on other times, events and places.

I quite like sitting over in the pine trees cos it sort of reminds me of lone pine at Gallipoli… Like all the rows of trees it’s amazing how they’ve been planted that way and I can think about other things as well [Peter, Year 6 student; image 3]

Visiting schools also interact with this place in a way that shapes their environmental education practices and curriculum decisions. In discussion with the teachers of a visiting Year 3/4 class, it was found that a mixture of their curriculum decisions, as well as institutional decisions to help fund bus travel, allowed their students to participate in this place. Similarly, through visiting and performing activities in this place, ranging from simply moving through Willaroo, to participating in observational and orienteering activities, this place had also influenced the teachers’ curriculum decisions:

Now that [the students] have been out here and physically been able to see it they can hopefully actually get their head around how people come here and think there was nothing here and yet we walk around out there and see that there is facilities out there which people use to make homes and places in which they can eat and so we will look at that in conjunction with the Aboriginal heritage and look at some of the stories that go along with it [Carol, visiting teacher with Year 3/4 class]

Performing place
Willaroo and its varied uses and users is an example of place being relationally performed in regards to the “flows, mobility and hybridity of meaning” that occurs through and in places (Watson, 2003, p. 145). The performance of place within the site is evident, both through the story and history occurring in that place, as well as the interactions (both human and more-than-human) that have occurred resulting in material changes to this place.

The experiences of those actors performing in this place are immensely different, with key actors, such as the principal, taking on the main role in educating the students at Gindaany Springs, as well as those from visiting schools, about the environment. Community actors also take on various roles performing in this place, from actively performing conservation through planting and propagating, building structures to be used by others in that place, to more passive performances such as observing and simply moving through the place. Students also perform in this place, amongst other things building structures (‘cubbies’) in the wood lot and using them as props for their imaginative play (image 4). Through these performances they devise flowing and changing
stories with complex rules and hierarchies, allowing them to perform – test out – various social structures, fairytales and fantasy worlds;

Peter: We could show [Rebecca] the pine trees; we usually make cubbies up there
Mel: Yeah, we get to collect sticks and stuff and make cubbies. One year, the Year 6’s and some of the Year 5’s, they made this big hut sort of thing out of all these big sticks that had fallen over and stuff, it was huge and it was really good. And they just made it…
Peter: They had a pine cone war
Mel: Oh yeah, I remember that. Will invented a pine cone war. Will’s like, sort of a horse and army person. They had two teams, I think it was… Well whatever it was, they threw pinecones at everyone. Then it got banned and they got into trouble
(Peter and Mel, Year 6 students: image 5)

Furthermore, the student performances that occur through designing and constructing cubbies allows them to physically be in nature, interacting and learning about the plants, materials, insects and animals that also inhabit their play area, building teamwork skills and exploring different types of social structures. David Sobel (1996) advocates the use of cubbies and forts in children’s unstructured nature play as a way of enabling children to develop an understanding and empathy with the place that they are in, as well as form attachment and care for the structures and places they are building.

The use of this place to perform both ‘community’ and ‘environmental’ allows for both school and community to benefit. Members of the community are used extensively as a resource for teaching students about the environment, whilst the nature reserve has also become a resource for the community, allowing social actions to be performed, benefiting both people and place:

We try to bring in outside people that have got positive experiences of things that are happening rather than doom and gloom things. So it’s about bringing in, networking and accessing. There’s TV shows, and parents - I’ve got some fantastic parents as well that are always coming up with interesting things, seasonal things, so I’ll grab them in, come and have a talk to [the students] about that [Daniel, principal]

We’ve been lucky too because we’ve had TAFE, groups of TAFE students out here doing ongoing work. Rotary club, we’ve had indigenous groups, indigenous men and women doing indigenous land management work and come out and maybe do something. We’ve had quite a few Green Corp groups come out and do quite a bit of work over the years. We’ve had naughty boys and girls do work for the justice department, we’ve had work for the dole groups here. And it’s all added up. Between those groups they’ve done quite a bit of hard work too [John, community member]

Wendy, the Infants teacher, discussed the increase in community involvement in the school through Willaroo, suggesting that there was a lot more involvement now, with volunteers helping out with conservation efforts at the nature reserve, to people wandering through and looking around Willaroo, in turn, increasing the amount of community involvement within the school:
I have noticed, well, by the interest of the community through the school because of the park, there are people here all the time now, a lot more now, like parents come and help and are involved in the school than before and you know they sort of get interested in it with the park and it sort of brings them further over. Yeah the community is right into the school, very involved, not often are there days that go by when there is not somebody from the community doing something [Wendy, K-2 teacher]

Whilst the school and environmental education centre make use of community resources to support the centre, this relationship works the other way as well, with the centre providing the community with opportunities that otherwise would not have been available by allowing for performances of ‘community’ to occur through this place. Furthermore, as the community utilises the Willaroo learning centre those who participate in the activities going on in this place are in turn learning about the environment, in particular the local flora and fauna and biodiversity, as well as the ‘ghosts’, the environmental losses, that have occurred in this place.

There’s catering opportunities for the Red Cross and the hall committee to do a bit of fundraising [in the Willaroo Environmental Learning Centre] [John, community member]

Community groups hire [the Willaroo Environmental Learning Centre] out. Now while they’re in there, what are they going to see? They’re going to see animals, they’re going to see stuffed [taxidermy] animals, they’re going to see messages everywhere, they’re going to, you know, people who formally weren’t, might have been a bit sceptical, coming to a beautiful new building, and walking through landscaped gardens and things. It’s a very special place to do a course or a meeting ... We have a lot of professional development courses for teachers and schools come and use it now, and training. It is booked fairly heavily for that, because it’s a unique setting, a unique environment. And while they’re there they’re not inside all the time, they’re outside appreciating nature [Daniel, principal].

Local-global place
Gindaany Springs represents both elements of the local, allowing particular human performances in that place based on its locality, and of its place in the global, through the flows and networks occurring in and around it. The story of the Willaroo nature reserve is an example that shows how “place is not only local, specific and static” but can be seen as “an emergent effect of globally distributed relationships, and as an actor in those relationships” (Watson, 2003, p. 157).

As can be seen through the above discussion on aspects of Gindaany Springs, the school and the environmental education centre, the place(edness) of the school and nature reserve is both very local, located and bound within a particular geographical space, yet at the same time transient, flowing and mobile in the changes that occur in places as well as the experiences that occur within it and those who experience it. Willaroo Environmental Education Centre, and through connection the school, is a place that has local and global ties and interrelationships, and is also an actor within those relationships. Figure 1 shows the environmental education centre as the central section with flows and networks, from its very nature as a place, bringing about material changes in the school, the community, the region and even internationally. The effects of these changes, of course, go both ways.
An example of some of these changes can be seen through comments from teachers and community members discussing visiting communities and schools that have left with ideas and inspiration for changing their own place(s) after spending time in this place. Similarly, changes and effects flowing from this place can be seen through the principal and gardening teacher spending time with schools in the region, showing ways of linking curriculum decisions with environmental education outcomes and the places that they have available to them:

    Plus there’s the spin off too, where other people have come to have a look and said “oh gee, we have a patch of land by our school or behind the hall or the river flat area so we can do the same thing” [John, community member]

    [Daniel and I] are meeting up with this other school, to give them ideas, I’m no expert but I will just tell them what I have found out and what we are trying to do at our school, and that just means that there is another school out there going to do that with their kids and it’s just getting back to nature [Julia, gardening teacher]

The principal, through his involvement in the development of Willaroo, has formed networks with schools and environmental education centres globally, in particular in the United Kingdom and Scandinavia. This has allowed differing ideas, knowledges and pedagogies, transferred from different places, to be used in the environmental learning of children from this school and the nearby region. Similarly, through these networks and connections the school and community has been host to principals, teachers and students from these places, themselves having an impact on the place. Finally, this place has provided the community and the school with something beyond simply a pleasant place to spend time in. Through its networks and flows, the performances occurring in that place, the reserve has been of significant benefit to the community as well as providing the community with a unique identity.

I know the benefits to the school, the community, the region; and it’s helped us survive. A lot of small schools have really struggled around the country and we’ve been one that’s been able to hold our own and probably even grow a bit [Daniel, school principal]

**Conclusion**

Places define who we are and what we do; caring for and having concern for place enables rural and regional communities to develop their sense of identity and pride in their community. One way of promoting rural-regional sustainability is by fostering the use and regeneration of natural places within communities. Through focusing on the places where they live and committing to ‘revitalising the commons’, rural communities are provided with opportunities that encourage regenerative and sustainable living and sense of community. Rural-regional communities learning how to care for their place(s) provides community members with skills that allow them to transfer their care and concern for one place to another, as well as provide the means of assisting new members in the community ways to develop a care and connection to that place.

Education that focuses on and uses places, particularly in a rural context, is one effective way of strengthening community and giving the community a sense of pride, care and concern for its places. Additionally, it encourages and fosters a sense of care for the environment, both local environments and on a global scale. As I have argued throughout this paper, place-conscious education is an important element in enabling rural-regional sustainability.
References


