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Ecological Urbanism

Case Study Assignment

1. Title

Promoting Environmental and Community Service through Place-Based Learning: American School of Barcelona's Collserola Park Environmental Project

2. Location and Dates of Operations

The American School of Barcelona is in Esplugues de Llobregat, Spain, a small city within the Barcelona metropolitan area. The majority of the school's place-based learning occurs in the Sant Pere Martir area of Collserola Park. The school was founded in 1962 and the Collserola Park Environmental Project began in 2007. It costs roughly 10,000 to 15,000 euros a year to attend ASB.



3. Abstract and Keywords

As a collective institution, the American School of Barcelona (ASB) believes that students' learning needs can be better met and socially responsible attitudes made by connecting the school with its surrounding community. Since 2007, ASB has worked with Can Coll, the environmental education center at Collserola Park (the largest metropolitan park in the world), to take its place-based learning approach outside school grounds. As a part of the Collserola Park Environmental Program, ASB students work in the area of the park closest to the school, Sant Pere Martir, doing a variety of environmental work depending on their grade

level. For example, students conduct tree diversity studies, pull weeds, clear trails, plant new trees, and more. Teachers from ASB and instructors from Can Coll then connect the work students do in the park with classroom curriculum and link their activities with larger societal issues through service learning sessions. This model of place-based learning has created an attachment between students and the park since they are given real responsibility over maintaining it. Further, a service is done for park authorities as they benefit from the maintenance work done by students.

4. Type of Case

The American School of Barcelona case is an example of place-based education. According to the Place-Based Education Evaluation Collaborative (PEEC), “Place-based education immerses students in local heritage, culture, landscapes, opportunities, and experiences as a foundation for the study of language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects. Place-based education encourages teachers and students to use the schoolyard, community, public lands, and other special places as resources, turning communities into classrooms.” ASB’s work in Barcelona’s Collserola Park is an example of place-based learning because the program connects students with their local community and the park serves as a laboratory for students to learn about natural systems and the impact of urban development. In addition to working in the park, this program also has a “lessons in the schoolyard” component where students do environmental and science work on school grounds (Parker and Vernet 2009).

5. Mission and Goals

The mission of the Collserola Park Environmental Project is to: “foster socially responsible attitudes in ASB’s students, meet their diverse learning needs... create harmonious connections between the school and its surroundings... show the students the importance of teamwork, their place in the world around them and to respect their role as citizens of Earth” (Parker and Vernet 2009).

ASB has identified four goals as a part of this program:

- “A school wide program with a service learning component.

- An on-going approach, rather than a single day event.
- Linked to the curriculum by the teachers involved.
- Organized through the Activities Coordinator” (Parker and Vernet 2009).

6. Context: Origins, Organization, and Operation

In 2007, the Activities Coordinator at ASB contacted Can Coll, Collserola Park’s environmental education organization. Two specific individuals at the school, Marta Vernet, the Activities Coordinator, and Robin Berting, the Community Relations Coordinator, felt strongly that education would be more relevant to students if skills were learned outside of the classroom and through experiential learning opportunities (Berting and Vernet 2012a). Can Coll assigned areas of the park to ASB in need of maintenance, provided material to the school about the park, and conducted service-learning sessions with ASB teachers for students to learn about the work they would be doing in the park and why it was important (Parker and Vernet 2009). The third leg in this partnership is the Esplugues de Llobregat City Council. The council granted a piece of land to ASB to look after in the area of Collserola Park closest to the school. Further, they convinced Can Coll to send educators to that area instead of needing to bus students to Can Coll’s center far within the park (Berting and Vernet 2012a).

7. Programs

Lessons in the Schoolyard:



“Lessons in the Schoolyard” is a component of ASB place-based learning program where students participate in a variety of environmental and science activities depending on their grade level. Pre-schoolers plant and maintain a garden with the help of older students and, according to Parker and Vernet (2009), “Secondary school students use the school yard during science class: to launch rockets, simulate deer population growth, conduct meteorite experiments, etc.”

Collserola Park Environmental Project:



The Collserola Park Environmental Project is the key focus of the American School of Barcelona’s place-based education program. Can Coll has assigned ASB about 200 square meters of Collserola Park where students conduct tree diversity studies, pull weeds, clear trails, plant new trees, trim trees, and more (Parker and Vernet 2009). According to Berting and Vernet (2012b), students do this park work “several times per year.” In addition to monitoring students’ work, Can Coll also conducts “service learning sessions” where the

environmental educators work with teachers to connect the work students do in the park with classroom curriculum and link their activities with larger societal issues such as the impacts of urban development on the environment. The main purpose of this program is to foster environmental literacy and create environmentally conscious students (Berting and Vernet 2012a). According to Berting and Vernet (2012b), “[This work]...has sharply heightened their awareness of the fragility of the park, has shown them how they can make a difference and, for the majority of students who have been involved since the beginning, the program has provided them with a deep sense of attachment to the park, its trees and facilities.”

8. Assessment (SWOT)

As an expensive private school, an obvious **strength** of ASB [as it relates to place-based learning] is that it does not face severe budget restrictions that a public school might. Further, since it is a private school, one could presume that it has more flexibility in choosing its curriculum than a public school that has to report to its district. Great strengths for the Collserola Park Environmental Project are the proximity to the park from ASB as well as faculty and teachers that have gotten on board with the notion of place-based education. Further, vital partnerships with Can Coll and the Esplugues de Llobregat City Council have allowed this program to operate smoothly and with support from the community.

Opportunities for ASB could involve exploring partnership options with other local nonprofits or working in additional natural areas in the surrounding neighborhood like community gardens.

While this case provides a good example of a fairly “traditional” place-based education program, it has some **weaknesses**. Firstly, how much influence is there on the students if they are only working in the park just a couple of times a year? Staff members from the school have written a number of gloating articles about the program but it would be helpful if there were outside literature that could speak to the effect on students. Another weakness is that this program is almost entirely focused on environmental education and science curriculum and there is not much exploration into other disciplines like history or the arts. Further, this program is particularly targeted to the wealthy international students who attend ASB. This could severely impact the reach of this program on local, likely less wealthy children who

may be able to benefit more from a place-based curriculum. Like other place-based learning programs, some **threats** could include the loss of dedicated staff and ability to maintain momentum, partnership fallouts, and disinterest from parents who do not want to pay thousands of euros a year for their children to clean up a park.

9. Lessons for Philadelphia

The biggest takeaway for Philadelphia from the Collserola Park Environmental Project is that there can be a successful place-based learning program off school grounds but still in the community. Learning about the environment and community by actually walking around and seeing it and experiencing it is key to learning the real-world applications of this curriculum. This should accompany place-based education initiatives in green schoolyards in West Philadelphia. Getting out of the school also promotes the advancement of city and community partnerships (such as with local friends groups), as the ASB example demonstrates, which can come with funding and technical support.

The program in Philadelphia must go above and beyond ASB's work, not just in terms of the students it targets but what it actually teaches. While it is important to build environmental literacy and teach students the importance of respecting their environments, they must also learn that their environment is more than just trees and streams. The "environment" includes local history, dedicated community members, the built form, and more.

Works Cited

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