Module 4

Contemporary interpretivist-experiential languages of curricular pedagogical praxis: What are Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Place-Based Education (PBE), and what from these languages need to be retained?

As a kindergarten teacher, I have observed that young learners benefit most when they actively engage with their environment, exploring concepts through hands-on activities that connect lessons to their everyday lives. In my classroom, interpretivist-experiential approaches such as Project-Based Learning (PBL) and Place-Based Education (PBE) are powerful tools that transform traditional teaching into immersive, inquiry-based learning. These frameworks encourage students to interact with real-world issues and use local contexts, helping them build meaningful connections to the material while fostering curiosity and independence. By incorporating PBL and PBE, students engage deeply with their learning, feel more invested, and ultimately contribute to the classroom and their broader community. Through these methods, students build an appreciation for lifelong learning by linking classroom concepts to real-life experiences (Vidergor, 2022; McLain, Chiu, & Zimmerman, 2020).

Project-Based Learning (PBL) in my kindergarten classroom fosters critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration. This approach immerses students in complex topics through projects grounded in real-world issues that resonate with their experiences. According to Vidergor (2022), PBL “is a key strategy for creating independent thinkers and learners, as children solve real-world problems by designing their own inquiries, planning their learning, organizing their research, and implementing a multitude of learning strategies” (p. 2). In the process, students take ownership of their learning, which is essential in building confidence and promoting inquiry-based learning. In a recent unit on “Community Helpers,” I designed a PBL project where students explored various community roles—such as firefighters, police officers, and doctors—to understand their importance. Through this project, students engaged in hands-on activities, created visual representations of these roles, and even shared their work with peers and family members. By engaging with the topic, students moved beyond rote memorization to a deeper comprehension of their community’s structure and the significance of each role within it (Vidergor, 2022). The shared nature of this project aligns with McLain, Chiu, and Zimmerman’s (2020) observation that such collaborative projects allow students to “generate representations, experiment with measures, [and] interpret data,” encouraging active learning through interaction and reflection (p. 649). This collaborative atmosphere allowed students to work together, sharing their findings and exchanging knowledge, which fostered a sense of pride in their work and responsibility for their contributions to the group.

In PBL, students also develop their social and emotional skills by working alongside classmates. The *Project-Based Learning: How it Works and Why It Is So Effective* guide states that PBL “targets students' interests through experience and discussion, making learning meaningful and retained effectively” (PBL: How and Why?, min. 5:30). The “Community Helpers” project is an example of this; by linking learning with familiar aspects of their world, students were able to gain a sense of relevance, resulting in knowledge retention and enthusiasm for learning. The approach further enhances social and teamwork skills, allowing students to work together to design projects such as models of a fire station or a hospital. This effort gave each child a role in a larger project, fostering responsibility and interdependence within the group. Tubach (2023) describes how PBL activities create “safe spaces to authentically discuss and present personal issues... students supported each other and turned their shared experiences and raw emotions into enlightening community events.” This supportive structure enabled students to listen to one another, negotiate differences, and learn to collaborate—essential skills for both personal development and academic growth.

While PBL focuses on inquiry-based projects, Place-Based Education (PBE) centers on the students' local environment as a framework for learning, helping them understand their surroundings and cultural heritage. PBE “utilizes the place in which learners inhabit as a resource to support locally relevant, culturally salient knowledge building during authentic learning experiences” (McLain, Chiu, & Zimmerman, 2020, p. 648). This approach creates a sense of connection between students and their environment by grounding learning in familiar, relevant contexts. In a memorable PBE project, our class explored the local parks and natural areas to observe plants, insects, and animals, and students later used their findings to create a classroom “nature display.” This hands-on learning experience helped students develop an appreciation for their community’s natural beauty and engage with science in a way that felt tangible and relevant. By working with natural materials and observing their environment, students learned valuable lessons about ecology, conservation, and their role in protecting their surroundings. Through PBE, students internalize the material on a personal level, fostering ownership of their learning and a sense of responsibility toward their environment (McLain, Chiu, & Zimmerman, 2020).

PBE also promotes a community-oriented approach to learning, encouraging collaboration among students, their families, and local residents. Guajardo (1997) emphasizes the importance of this communal model, noting that the Rural Challenge grant urges rural communities across the U.S. to “rethink the way they teach, namely by placing high value on what is rural and local” (p. 1). Incorporating community members into our lessons has enriched students’ understanding, making lessons more impactful by bringing together multiple generations’ perspectives. For example, during our nature walk, parents shared childhood stories of exploring the same parks. This integration of personal history reinforced the continuity between the students' experiences and those of their families, further deepening their connection to their surroundings. PBE supports students’ cultural identity and self-awareness by emphasizing place-based cultural heritage. Guajardo (1997) argues that “when an individual educates themselves first through their own history, culture, and values, they preserve their identity and help it to continue growing” (p. 1). By incorporating stories, traditions, and symbols from students’ diverse cultural backgrounds, the lessons provide a more inclusive and affirming environment. In this setting, students see their cultural heritage reflected in the curriculum, which is essential for building a positive self-concept and fostering inclusivity.

Combining PBL and PBE in my classroom has created a balanced framework that supports both academic and personal development. Together, these approaches foster academic engagement, promote social growth, and help students build essential life skills. Research supports the effectiveness of PBL, showing that “PBL students perform as well or better than traditional students… Findings indicated that projects were superior when it comes to long-term retention, skill development, and satisfaction of students and teachers” (PBL: How and Why?, min. 5:38). The benefits of this framework are evident in my students' progress as they demonstrate enthusiasm for learning, a sense of agency, and a deeper connection to their studies.

In my classroom, projects like studying weather patterns involve both PBL and PBE principles. Students observed weather changes, recorded them over several weeks, and learned the basics of measurement and scientific observation. This approach encourages students to “generate representations, experiment with measures, and interpret data,” making them active participants in their learning (McLain, Chiu, & Zimmerman, 2020, p. 649). This type of hands-on involvement helps students feel a sense of ownership over their discoveries, building confidence and reinforcing the relevance of their education. Reflecting on the process, students can answer questions like, “What did we learn today?” and “How can we improve next time?” As Vidergor (2022) highlights, these moments encourage students to develop metacognitive skills by engaging in self-reflection, which is crucial for long-term academic and personal growth.

The interpretivist-experiential approaches of PBL and PBE also empower students, families, and communities, creating a more democratic educational experience. Guajardo (1997) describes how these approaches move education from “traditional methods of instruction where teachers and administrators control, to a more democratic educational process where students, and just as importantly, the community, become integral in the decision-making and research processes” (p. 2). This shared model encourages students and families to take an active role in the educational process, fostering a collective sense of responsibility and enhancing the depth of learning.

While the benefits of PBL and PBE are clear, effective implementation requires ongoing professional development. Vidergor (2022) argues that “professional development on the MdCM-based approach to PBL/PjBL, accompanied by training in the design of multidisciplinary content-based units,” is essential for educators (p. 13). Professional development in experiential learning strategies has been instrumental in helping me adapt PBL and PBE to meet my students’ developmental needs. Through workshops focused on these approaches, I have learned to structure and adjust projects to engage students meaningfully and manage challenges as they arise, supporting students in reaching their full potential. In my teaching experience, these professional learning opportunities have also provided insights into creating multidisciplinary units that support various content areas. Training in experiential learning frameworks has helped me integrate math, science, social studies, and literacy in ways that feel natural and connected to my students’ everyday lives. By participating in this training, educators can continually refine their approaches to meet diverse student needs, fostering an adaptable learning environment that empowers students to think critically, collaborate, and engage deeply with the world around them.

Reflecting on the transformative impact of PBL and PBE, I am committed to retaining and expanding these practices one classroom at a time. As educators, we have a responsibility to prepare students not only academically but also as compassionate, engaged members of their communities. Interpretivist-experiential approaches like PBL and PBE accomplish this by embedding learning in students' lives, making the curriculum relevant, inclusive, and empowering. By allowing students to take ownership of their learning and connect classroom lessons to their cultural and environmental context, we nurture a love for lifelong learning that transcends traditional education models. As my students engage with their surroundings through PBL and PBE, they are becoming better learners and what I like to do myself still, is become a better community member. “We are Weslaco!!!”

References

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