Chapter 12

The School Walls Teach:
Student Involvement in the Green School

Thomas De Vere Wolsey
University of Central Florida, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter draws on the extant literature and interviews with experts in the field as it relates to how students become involved and learn from the features of the school facility itself. In this chapter, three tiers of learning are suggested as overlapping and complementary means of learning in and from the built and natural environment. These include a reflective and visible one in which students have the opportunity to learn from features of the building through labeling, signage, and design features that foreground the design itself. Active learning opportunities are the foundation of the second approach. Involvement in green initiatives at the school and in the community is the basis for the third approach. Planning undergirds all three approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, I visited a school by happy circumstance on the first day of the school year in Indonesia. The students all brought with them brooms, dust rags, and other cleaning supplies from home, carrying them along as they walked to school. At first, I naïvely thought that this was an economic measure to avoid having to pay maintenance and custodial staff; however, it was no such thing. The administrators, students, and parents with whom I spoke had an entirely different view. Simply, it was that students who are involved and care for the school will be more invested in every aspect of what goes on within and outside its walls. This was not a cost-saving measure; rather, it was a deliberate approach to student involvement in their own learning beginning with care for the environment of the school.

It is with this theme in mind that this chapter is named after research with colleagues (Uline, Wolsey, Tschannen-Moran, & Linn, 2010, Uline, Tschannen-Moran, & Wolsey, 2009) in which we gave voice to the school walls through the lenses of the occupants of the facility. The walls are a metaphor for all the voices on a school campus. In this chapter, the school walls, within and without, have the opportunity to speak for green schools as a teaching tool, and to become the catalyst for student involvement.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6312-1.ch012
There are a great many useful approaches that fit within traditional instructional paradigms; however, very few empirical studies demonstrate the efficacy of green school principles as teaching tools. Such practices may be common sense, but additional research is needed to fine-tune and adjust what thoughtful facilities designers and architects consider during planning. Thus, this chapter not only outlines many effective practices for student involvement, it also suggests openings for future research in this area. A review of the extant literature, both peer-reviewed and trade-based, along with interviews of architects, facilities managers, and administrators inform this chapter.

**APPROACHES TO STUDENT INVOLVEMENT**

Three approaches to student involvement are established on ideas that began in the nature education movement (e.g., Cornell, 1979) and are now found in the literature of the green school. The most basic of principles, undergirding all, is that the green school “…serves its educational function” (Chan, 2013, p. 8); that is, the school itself can be the catalyst for learning and the media of instruction. Sly and Stone (interview, October 18, 2013) posed the notion that care is necessary in making the case for green and sustainable initiatives by focusing on what concerns the community beyond the campus. Sly and Stone proposed that the school itself is a resource for learning. Even places such as the school kitchen offered possibilities. That is, the community may not be immediately ready to support green initiatives, but they may be very willing to support initiatives that highlight healthy school buildings; thus, the two notions overlap and can scaffold multiple approaches to the school walls as mediators of student learning.

With this understanding, this chapter constructs a three-tiered approach to student involvement based on their experiences as occupants of the green school. Approaches include a reflective and visible one in which students have the opportunity to learn from features of the building through labeling, signage, and design features that foreground the design itself. Active learning opportunities, often as a feature of a planned curriculum are the foundation of the second approach. Involvement in green initiatives at the school and in the community are the basis for the third approach. At the heart of it all is planning.

Theories of learning provide guidance for design and planning practices as well as for the teachers and students who occupy the school places. Experiential learning theorists suggest a cycle whereby learning is transformed from direct experience to more abstract thought that informs identity formation. Kolb asserts, “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of learning” (1984, p. 38). In green initiatives, a transformation of thought on the part of the students is the essence of learning; unless the learner can construct an understanding of the world that is conceptually different in terms of environmental sustainability, the green initiatives have limited value as a learning tool. James Zull (2002) further compared Kolb’s learning cycle (characterize in as concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, to active experimentation) to the physical organization and processing regions of the brain. In Zull’s reconstructed model, there is a line between reflective observation and abstract hypothesis where the learner’s conceptualization of the phenomenon is transformed. His idea is that without a transformation of experiences, the thinker has no chance of creating a future or identity that incorporates the new learning. Between reflection and abstraction, new ideas that hadn’t occurred before arise. A goal for green planning and features in school environments should be to change the way the occupants (students, teachers, parents, and so on) view the role of their school and their own roles as active participants whose thinking might be changed as