

## 2014 - 2015 AESN Case Study



**School:** Departure Bay Eco School    **District:** #68 Nanaimo Ladysmith

**Area of Focus:** Transitions

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**Our Focus Area:** Kindergarten is the first introduction to school for many of my students. I wanted this year to be a transitional experience (home to school) for my students so our mornings were outdoors and our afternoons were indoors. It was important to me that the both learning experiences reflect the OECD principles of learning most especially *Learners at the centre*. Our team of professionals share the same beliefs and together we worked on matching practice with beliefs to encourage students to be personally invested in their learning and that learning can be a collective process.

**Focus:** My motto for the year was *TIME, PATIENCE AND KINDNESS*. Throughout the year as I reflected on my practice I continuously asked myself am I using time, patience and kindness in my voice, body language, tasks, learning goals. This guided my decisions on what frameworks would be introduced and practiced, the assessment tools, planning and scheduling as well as greatly impacted my personal relationships with families and learners. For example, loosely mimicking the documentation walls of Reggio, the students and I dedicated the classroom walls to reflect student's thinking, photos, learner stories and connected art (created by the students). The documentation wall was used interactively and kept the learning fresh while providing me with ongoing assessment. Parents received emails, photos and regular newsletters. I conferred regularly with students on the individual learning goals. Other resources were the Kindergarten continuum for social emotional and oral language. For physical assessment I used observation, interviews, photos and videos.

**Scanning:** I noticed early in the year that the students needed to develop either in physical strength, coordination and balance and social emotional (including play skills and expressive language), or both. Using my experience, knowledge and education for early learning I was able to extract these two key learning goals using observation, photos, family surveys and interviews as well as checklists during the first weeks of school as we established our community of learners. I then used this data to inform my decisions on what frameworks I would use and strategies to develop with the learners.

The BC Kindergarten program is play based and allows for the teacher to design the program to meet the needs of the learners. I included place based as a key part of the learning process and

as a springboard for our inquiry work. For example, I was able to plan expanding blocks for exploration both indoors and outdoors and select frameworks to guide and facilitate small group learning within the large learning blocks. This provided the learners with time to practice new skills and routines that enabled them to plan and reflect on their experiences. Place based learning was a large part of the learning framework.

**Hunch:** Our school is transitioning to an eco literacy school with new staff arriving each year committed to innovative teaching, using research based strategies, place based learning and a school wide goal of encouraging our learners to become “personally invested in a collective learning process”( Natural Curiosity). With this in mind the administrator was mindful of the need for a second adult to accompany kindergarten classes offsite both to the forest and seashore. She also ensured that safety protocols be established before all classes went offsite.

**New Professional learning:** Throughout the year, the staff participated in professional development which had a focus on both outdoor education and inquiry. For example, as a school team we partnered with a local school to deepen our understanding of inquiry with same grade teachers, visited a local store to select books with a outdoor and first nations perspective, participated in a Wild BC workshop, worked with local community groups on grounds transformation so that the school goals are supported with onsite learning environments both indoors/outdoors. Some teachers were mentored by district staff experienced with inquiry. Multiple community groups worked with teachers on their programs to support student inquiry. Juxtaposed with the school mindset my district Kindergarten professional learning group is learning about the benefits of place based learning and have a summer book club using Natural Curiosity.

**Taking action:** Knowing the importance of motivation student engagement was a priority in designing the Kindergarten learning process. Students regularly participated and became familiar with learning frameworks like; AB partner talk, turn and talk, think pair share and knowledge building circles. These regular and structured talking and listening frameworks were key strategies to create ample opportunities to learn more deeply in one area rather than a lot of small ideas.

We brought in a variety of facilitators and specialists to sustain their interest, spark creativity and enrich their knowledge using community volunteers, university connections, student teachers and grant monies. For example, during the Bird inquiry, we had local naturalists walk in the forest with us to identify local birds, dissect robin nests in the classroom as well as a local artist sculpted nests with us using clay and natural materials. During the forest inquiry, we were able to access grant monies to visit a larger forest by bus on seven facilitated visits. The visits connected our two inquiries about forest habitats and local birds as well as supported our two underlying goals for physical and social emotional growth.

**Checking:** Students became familiar with their local forest by playing there, learning the names of the plants and trees and becoming knowledgeable about the animals that live there. The primary kindergarten goal is for the children to care about the environment, learning about

their local community, enjoy playing outdoors and realize that they can contribute to the overall environment through recycling, reducing, reusing and respecting the outdoors. The secondary goals were the physical and social emotional.

By the end of the school year students walked to our local forest/seashore quickly without complaint and eventually were able to walk up and down the stairs (about 50) with ease and not out of breath. Using grant monies we travelled to a larger forest and the hikes were over two hours over hilly terrain. Students demonstrated increased stamina during these excursions. During forest play they climbed steep banks, perched on stumps, walked along nursing logs and played running games.

On a social level, the children demonstrated kindness, patience and generosity with each other. The cliques that emerged at the beginning of the year disappeared and all children were welcomed into play with only occasional setbacks (ie: new student or long absences). The students continued to build stamina throughout the year for sustaining interest in projects, listening to each other and focusing on classroom work such as reading and writing. Their imaginative play was rich and we saw many examples of the learning being generalized to other areas of their work/play.

**Reflections/Advice:** I loved our year together and saw so much growth in the children. There was a quiet, happy buzz to our room. I intentionally encouraged the children to create art to decorate the walls, took lots of photos, used nature materials for play and art as well as created small learning areas. We took our curriculum out doors with reading, writing, counting, sorting and lots of oral language. The children grew to respect each other and worked hard on their learning. They were goal setters and regularly conferenced with us on their learning goals. They became reflective about their learning and were able to articulate what they were good at and what they were becoming good at. They were able to talk about their learning with our many classroom guests and each other. For my personal growth working with a team to share ideas, resources, teaching and planning was very powerful and much more creative than working on my own.

I believe that a desired shift in practice can happen with greater success when you have a learning partner. This year I have begun learning partnerships with some colleagues 1-1 as well as working as an educational consultant for teams of four or five. If you are considering making a shift then look for someone on your staff or in your district whose practice mirrors some of your professional goals and ask to observe, start a book club and partner with you.