



2015-2016 NOII Case Study

School: Departure Bay Elementary Eco School

District: #68 Nanaimo Ladysmith

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Our focus for this year: In what ways can we work together to improve the mental health of our students so that everyone feels that they belong and can be successful?

Scanning: In my kindergarten class this year there were some children who worked with the CDC on anxiety prior to attending kindergarten. There were other children with separation anxiety which surpassed the normal first few weeks of school and some children who were too anxious to speak at school. We chose anxiety as a focus to support these children

Focus: After some professional reading, browsing internet sites, conferring with colleagues, two workshops and becoming familiar with students and their families, we chose to focus on strengthening skills for empathy, compassion, play, calming, expressive language and developing a positive mindset with the students.

Hunch: We knew from research that statistically there would be other children with anxiety not yet diagnosed.

New Professional Learning: We used three primary programs; Mind Up, Fun Friends and Sunshine Circle. All three programs were developmentally appropriate for children ages 4, 5 and 6. I purchased the Mind Up professional book and attended a workshop as well as observing a primary class for a day. I also attended a Fun Friends workshop which included a teacher guide and parents work books and the Sunshine Circle, facilitated by our school counselor.

Taking Action:

- Four of the students attended a Friendship Group offered by the school counselor for part of the year.
- In early winter, the school offered a parent workshop on anxiety and provided community resources links.
- A Kindergarten parent workshop for Fun Friends was attended by almost the entire group of parents.
- A parent workshop on personal safety, parents were able to purchase the parent workbook for a small fee.
- A yoga instructor developed a flow of movements with my students over ten sessions. We continued with the yoga flow each morning before our walk to a local forest or seashore. The deep breathing was a powerful personal tool for calming when a child was anxious.
- Regular use of circle conversations in the classroom so that the children would learn about each other while learning to listen carefully and respond respectfully

- A News Clues program developed by a long time kindergarten teacher and now college professor where students were each assigned a day a month to bring in a special object to share with the class. The student presented and the audience of peers then asked questions, gave specific compliments or shared a connection.
- Another strategy used in many preschool programs is that Everyone is Welcome mantra. In the classroom all children were welcomed into play, seating and work groups, creating opportunities for mixed social groupings and reduced gender play and eliminated cliques. Initially this took a lot of scaffolding. I alternated short bursts of play, began with few learning centres and sought advice from the students themselves about how to work together.
- A local science organization joined us in the forest and seashore to do hands on nature activities. This provided another adult for the children to form a relationship with, enabled us to use small groups for forest/seashore learning and helped the children with friendship skills.
- NS3 facilitator for 10 weeks
- Wild BC facilitator for eight weeks
- Open ended outdoor experiences – to help students with anxiety develop the social skills that would help them with the transition to school. Being outdoors allowed the children space to spread out, nonstop talking, problem solving and lots of negotiating. The biggest barrier is having a second adult for an outdoor program. Fortunately, I was able to trade time with other teachers on staff so that the education assistant was available three mornings a week.
- Worked with Vancouver Island University (VIU) and had a student teacher pod of three adults for four months once weekly. One of the student teachers continued to accompany our class outdoors one morning a week for an additional six weeks. This day was later picked up by another student teacher until the end of April. By then, a grandparent, who had experience with young children, had been coming with us for almost the entire year picked up that day when the student teacher finished her program.
- Sent home a Saturday group electronic email with our weekly schedule so that parents would always feel welcome to join us at the forest or seashore. Many grandparents added their email to our group list and began to join us.
- Wrote a newsletter every second week so that parents knew what we were learning, celebrating and what new topics or inquiries were being launched.
- On our on-site morning, parents and grandparents were invited to start our day with family reading. This provided opportunities for them to visit the classroom and interact with other students.
- To build community we offered a class pot luck lunch once monthly which included children, parents, community volunteers and extended family gathered together for a casual and chatty lunch. There was a variety of foods and I often tried to bring one of my family favourites so that they could learn about me as well.
- created a responsive classroom environment and continuously reflected on the physical environment (was it spacious, inviting and responsive to the students), the daily schedule (did it flow and include plenty of time for the children to play, talk and collaborate), the learning program (was it personalized, developmentally appropriate, fun)? Did our learning environment reflect my personal philosophy of kindness, patience and time?
- Finally, as the year drew to a close we offered a parent make and take literacy/numeracy workshop on play based literacy and numeracy games that they could enjoy with their child over the summer for which 17 of my 22 families attended.

The goal of the parent workshop was to reduce their child's anxiety for grade one by playing the developmentally appropriate numeracy and literacy games over the summer break that the grade one teacher would be offering the first few weeks of school.

Checking: My goals for the students this year was to improve their mental health. I expected to see differences in their mindset from 'I can't' to 'I can'; growth in their empathy, compassion, expressive vocabulary and play skills. It felt in the beginning like an impossible goal, but by the end of the year the goals were met.

Initially, each day as we dressed for the outdoors the timeframe was often forty minutes from start to finish with most saying I can't and being very stressed. I used a phrase from an authority on child development, "I would like you to try, but if you need help I will help you." They would line up in the hall and I would go down the line helping one at a time. As students developed social skills and empathy then they would turn to the person beside them and offer to zip up, pull on boots, hold jackets and fix sleeves.

On the day that the last student said to me "I can do it myself" I was so proud it became a teary moment. Many visitors to our room have commented on how when something goes wrong the teacher is not the first responder and that they notice the children look to each other for support first and how they treat each other with kindness, respect and patience.

At the end of the year all of my students were fully meeting in these areas and ten of the 22 were exceeding. This indicated tremendous growth in my students.

Reflections/Advice:

- Trust the children and yourself.
- The environment, the schedule and mindsets in young children can be changed and should be changed as the children themselves change.
- The value of community - to try to accomplish what we did would not have been possible, yet it was with a community of children, parents, volunteers and colleagues.
- If you decide to pursue big goals that align with your beliefs look around and find like-minded people to work with you.