



2015-2016 NOII Case Study

School: Silverthorne Elementary

District: #54 Bulkley Valley

Inquiry Team Members: Tanya Margerm

Contact: tmargerm@sd54.bc.ca

Our focus for this year: Our goal was to incorporate local, authentic, outdoor learning opportunities throughout the seasons.

Scanning: As in most schools, the children came from a variety of social and economic situations at home. But most importantly, it was their first experience in school. Watching the students learn and play showed me that the four walls could create situations that caused anxiety, inhibited creativity and did not necessarily encourage physical and social learning. The activities were largely being teacher directed and the children looked for adult intervention. Those children with higher sensitivities often shut down or became overwhelmed. As a result, adults often took on a supervisory role rather than being engaged in what the children were learning and speaking about. After attending an Outdoor Kindergarten workshop this fall it was my intention to find ways to take the learning outside consistently and for longer periods of time.

Focus: We wanted to explore a deeper form of thinking in kindergarten by asking big questions as well as letting the children form big questions and giving children the time and space to 'figure it out' and work together. We were hoping that the children would transition into the school setting with less anxiety and that spending time outdoors would allow them to create a real and in-place understanding of their environment.

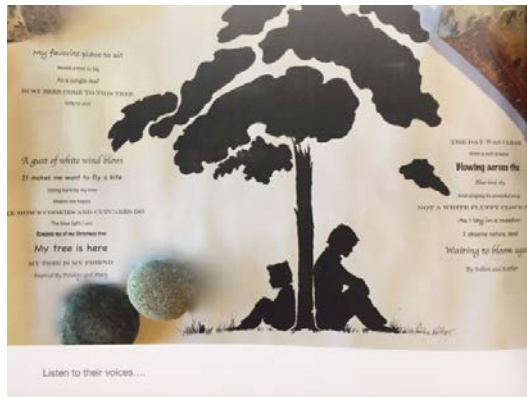
Hunch:

- the physical confines of the room didn't allow kindergartens to move and explore in the way they needed.
- too many of the activities did not allow the children to think deeply and were focused on compliance and containment
- very little content was authentic or local

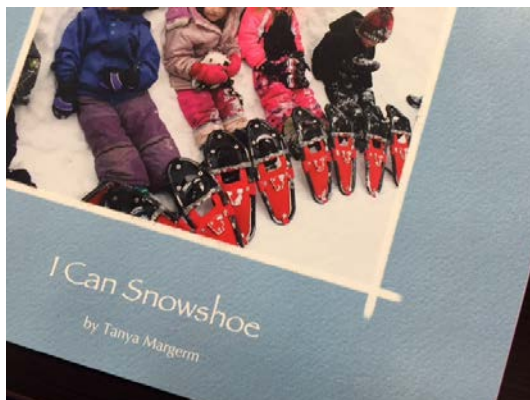
New professional learning: Attending an Outdoor Kindergarten workshop at Royal Roads in the fall gave me an opportunity to network with other professionals that were exploring this form of learning. I was able to use two resources extensively in developing deep thinking questions as well as ways to guide play and activities to promote team approaches to problem solving, ('I Love Dirt' and 'Moving the Classroom Outdoors').



We created a book/portfolio of the year's growth in the kindergarten class. Sharing this portfolio and the artifacts from the year at the end of year NOII celebration in Prince Rupert allowed me to connect with teachers in the region who were interested in pursuing this in their classrooms. As a result, a team of teachers will be coming to shadow my classroom in the fall...what a great opportunity in a small rural community to share ideas.



Team teaching (Grade 12 Writing and Kindergarten) was an exciting project to finish the year. It is often misunderstood that all that can happen in the forest is simple play. Creating a lesson about Voice for a Grade 12 writing class and developing descriptive language through simile for the kindergartens was as natural as the meadow we were in.



Creating leveled reading books for the class that highlighted our outdoor activities. Developing the story to represent the children's experiences and adventures. The children were so excited to read about themselves and their learning.

Taking action: Our intent was to schedule a minimum of two-hour blocks of time in the forest twice a week. This allowed for parents/children to be prepared to be outside and parents also began to schedule time in the classroom during this time. In addition to the large blocks of time, I also had three small blocks (1/2 hour) in the outdoor play area we created (not playground time). To conclude each season, a whole day activity was planned to celebrate our work outdoors.

We were able to maintain this schedule for a majority of the year. During this time our activities ranged from question walks (walking with our scientist eyes) to group construction projects (heavy work building igloos, forts and water ways) to art (snow painting to create fairy trees) during our long blocks. During our short blocks we created centres where the children could create (tool bench-sanding wood sculptures, music wall, tire gardens – fairy gardens, blocks – heavy fire wood).

End of season days were set up as a celebration with 'tools' for the children to create their own activities (magnifying glasses, blocks of wood, spray bottles with coloured water, recycled Christmas trees). The expectation was that the children would create their own fun and enjoy our northern environment for the whole day!

Checking: When we look back over the year we are inspired to do more, and take more time to spend exploring our natural environment. Give more time to the children to drive the learning. We would like to develop more strategies to accomplish this in the face of difficulties in the classroom. I found that the internal workings of the school sometimes interfered with developing that consistent pattern of getting outside.

Spending time outdoors allowed children that might have been seen as fidgety and disengaged at a desk become leaders, problem solvers and critical thinkers. Observing and documenting conversations with the children (portfolio) really showed that they weren't just parroting back concepts but had their own ideas!

Reflections/Advice: Making the time in our busy days to slow down and go outside will pay off. The children and I learned so much more about what it meant to be connected to our region. Having a sense of place that was authentic and real.

When we began this project I didn't realize how it would develop the children's relationship with the land and each other. All of the children were far more involved and committed to supporting each other's ideas and creations. Group projects became a natural and co-operative part of our everyday learning. Each child happily moved from leader to supporter in a group without tension or competition.

Watching children go from blindly walking through the woods (thinking all marks on the trees were from beavers) to seeing them search out antler rubs in the spring was amazing! Asking questions, critical thinking and problem solving became authentic and personal.