



## 2015-2016 NOII Case Study

**School:** Walnut Park Elementary

**District:** #54 Bulkley Valley

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**Our focus for this year:** In order to increase the engagement of our grade 7 students, we used an outdoor lens as a way to explore content and teach curricular and core competencies.

**Scanning:** The scanning process began last spring (2015). After teaching grade 7 for two years, I was noticing that many of our grade 7 students appeared disengaged and disinterested in school. Also, as a school leader, I got to know some of the students in grade 6 who were struggling. They were strong academically, but appeared to feel disconnected from their teachers and the school. I was inspired by other schools' work with place based learning and outdoor education. I created a brief survey and asked our 50+ grade 6 students' questions about what they felt they needed in order to be engaged at school. Many students indicated that they wanted their learning to be meaningful and connected to the real world, and how they wanted to be outside the school's four walls more often. There were also about six boys in this grade who were having significant challenges being successful in the traditional classroom setting. This was also a huge motivator to look at doing things differently.

We focused on "Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships and a sense of place)" as part of our connection to the First Peoples Principle of Learning.

The OECD principle of learning we explicitly addressed was Principle #6 – Engagement. Learners will often engage in certain activities as a matter of habit, though they are also influenced by their current capacity to engage, as well as factors of motivation and inhibition related to the activity as a whole, part of the activity, its circumstances, or its expected results.

**Focus:** We selected this area because we believed that our students would respond to authentic relationships based on real-life experiences, and that learning should center around a child's entire being – physical, emotional, spiritual and cerebral. Also, living in a small, rural town, our sense of identity is rooted in place. Students need to value and respect where they come from as they are the ones that will need to take care of it.

We also believe that engagement is integral to the success of a child in school. We need to offer a broader scope of learning activities, and because of where we live, we have many opportunities to connect with the community and access community resources tied to the outdoors.

**Hunch:** Some of our students have mastered the job of "school", but I wonder if they are truly engaged. Other students struggle to find success in school. We wanted to address both of these needs. In the past, when we have offered students a chance to explore a passion they have become excited and engaged. For example, two years ago students were able to take part in a school wide "Passion Project" type event and choose an area they wanted to explore. This

received rave reviews from students. In one grade 6 class, students took part in Genius Hour and again got very positive feedback. There were also many students in this grade who took part in our Elementary Hockey Academy and enjoyed being able to pursue their area of interest. These observations made us wonder that if students had more opportunities to pursue their own interests, get outside the classroom more often and connect their learning to the real world, would student engagement, and therefore student success, improve.

We are working hard to make engagement an explicit goal at our school. We are offering more learning opportunities and giving students more choice in what they learn and how they learn it. Despite this, we still have work to do. Most of the time, students are sitting at their desks and don't feel like they own their learning. Also, students are inside most of the day as well. Many students, especially our boys, are feeling the need to be more active physically beyond the 30 minutes of PE they receive during the day. Many of these students also did not feel a connection with their teacher which further fueled their feelings of disengagement.

As a result, we believed that getting out of our classes and connecting to real world learning experiences would be valuable and engaging to our students. We would also be connecting students to others adults in the community, nurturing other positive relationships with adults.

**New professional learning:** As teachers, we explored new areas of professional learning by participating in a book club focusing on "World Class Learners" by Yong Zhao (at the district level). We also used the resource "Tuned Out: Engaging the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learner." These books emphasized the need of going beyond the classroom to connect learning opportunities to real world experiences, and making sure students have voice and choice in the way they access information and communicate understanding. We also looked at other schools that are using a place-based or outdoor education lens.

**Taking action:** Our goal was to plan for 20% of the curriculum to be integrated through the lens of Outdoor Education. This also meant that we would be out of the classroom for about 20% of the time as well. We wanted to look at not only using the outdoors as a way to engage students in their learning but also as a way to engage them physically. Living in the north, we wanted to expose students to physical fitness opportunities connected to the outdoors, especially during the winter months when it can be difficult to engage in physical activity outside. We also believed that as students successfully completed activities in the outdoors, their confidence and self-esteem would increase as well.

In the fall, we integrated science, art, language arts and PE, using an outdoor lens to explore content and competencies. We began by attending a day long Aboriginal Culture Camp led by local Aboriginal leaders celebrating the First People's Principles of Learning. For science, we also worked with local conservation officers conducting river and wild life assessments. For PE and art, we hiked and took photographs of local flora and fauna to create a calendar. Language Arts supported our outdoor themes as well, looking at stories of survival and descriptive writing about nature. We also spent a great deal of time exploring the core competencies of critical thinking and personal awareness and responsibility.

In the winter, students continued with an integrated approach and met a wide variety of learning outcomes using the lens of Outdoor Education. These activities included, downhill skiing, survival skills (making quinzee huts, taking a course in survival swim skills, engaging in rock climbing), participating in Maker Day activities, and exploring trade opportunities related to local resource based industries (forestry, logging, mining; carpentry). Students also

connected with the local high school's outdoor education students to learn outdoor survival skills. Language Arts continued to be integrated throughout as well. The core competencies were woven in as well.

In the spring, students attended a camp where they engaged in a wide variety of outdoor education activities and learned and practiced outdoor skills. Social responsibility was a key core competency focus this term.

**Checking:** Using anecdotal evidence, attendance records and behavior reports, we were able to get a clear picture of how this experience impacted students. Students did display greater engagement during our Outdoor Focus activities compared to other traditional school activities. Engagement looked like on-task behavior, on topic conversation, dedication to task completion, energy and enthusiasm. We also conducted an engagement/ connectedness survey at the beginning of the year and the end of the year. Students could clearly articulate what they were learning, how it was going and where to next when engaged in many of the outdoor activities. This did not transfer easily to the learning they were doing during the rest of the time.

The beginning of the year spoke to the spirit of what we wanted to accomplish more than the second half of the year. With time, we believe we could build a program that could truly meld together the big ideas with the curricular and core competencies.

**Reflections/Advice:** Connecting learning experiences to the real world increased the engagement of our students and allowed them to see that learning goes beyond the classroom. It made students see the relevance of what they are learning. Getting outside the classroom into the outdoors and into the community also made learning fun and exciting too. We both appreciated the goal of 20% of class time being beyond the classroom walls. While we fell short of this goal, we have set the ground work to build on the opportunities we provided.

Engagement increased the more students were able to collaborate and work with others. This included working with classmates between the two grade 7 classes, and working with other students at another elementary school and at the high school.

Providing an outdoor focus hinges on having the right people with the right expertise available. One of our grade 7 teachers had an extensive outdoor education background which was imperative. Also, our community is geared heavily towards people having a connection and love of the outdoors. We were lucky to be able to access these resources. However, it was difficult at times to provide all the opportunities we wanted for our students. Transportation was sometimes problematic, as was liability concerns and lack of proper equipment.

In addition, while most students loved the outdoors, some were reluctant. They were uncomfortable with the risk taking and physicality that is inherent to many outdoor activities. In the future, we would offer a range of outdoor activities so that students could choose those that fit their comfort level and level of expertise.

One important reflection that will guide our next inquiry is that many students showed engagement and ownership in their learning when engaged in many activities we planned to support our outdoor theme; however, these skills and attitudes did not necessarily transfer over to other activities in the classroom. For example, students could work well collaborating and working as a team when building quinzees outside, but when they had to work together to do another activity in the class, they were not as successful (or engaged).