



## Networks of Inquiry and Innovation Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network

### 2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

**School Name:** Silverthorne Elementary

**School District:** SD#54 Bulkley ValleSD#57y

**Inquiry Team Members:** Tanya Margerm, Cindy Pottinger, Beth Bell

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**Type of inquiry:** AESN

**Grade levels:** Primary (K - 3)

**Curricular area(s):** Land, Nature, Place based Learning

**Focus area(s):** Core competencies (for example, critical thinking, communication, problem solving), Experiential learning, First Peoples Principles of Learning, Flexible learning, Land, Nature or Place-based learning

#### **In one sentence, what was your focus for the year?**

Will creating an outdoor space/outdoor classroom provide children an opportunity to create, inquire and learn in co-operative teams in kindergarten that will create a strong sense of place? Will children develop a stronger connection to the land and learning environment?

**Scanning:** Briefly summarize your scanning process. How did you use the four key questions as part of the scanning process? What did you notice about the experiences of your learners that were most important to your team?

First we observed that there was a new trend in our school of more at risk children. These children suffered from a variety of challenges and this was evident in their lack of speech, behaviour and basic skills. Secondly, these issues were antagonized by situations where noise, congestion and tasks that were too still. This was derived from questions relating to "how their learning was going"?

We noticed that the children arrived at school stressed and needed time and space to decompress. It seemed most appropriate to let this happen in the outdoors where the children did not feel confined, natural small groups formed and the environment softened the sounds of 22 little people. When questioned, students responded more positively and



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more articulately around learning in the outdoors and nature.

**Focus:** In a few sentences, explain why you selected this area. What changes were you hoping to obtain for your learners?

Silverthorne Elementary is in a semi-urban setting. Many of the children have little to no access to outdoor play. They have limited experience with outdoor cultural events and simply spend very little time on the land or in a natural environment. Providing children with an authentic, local learning environment will allow for deeper learning and the development of inquiring minds. Giving the children opportunities to learn about the sustenance that the land can give, the protection the trees provide and the peace that the air surrounds us with. The learning tools will be from nature and have deep connections to the land. Stories that are told will be in the open air and amongst the trees.

Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors. [First Peoples Principles of Learning]

Examples of the experiences:

- Drumming tent
- Sky Watching
- Weekly Elders story circle (in partnership with the Friendship Centre)
- Tree spot meditation

**Hunch:** Describe your hunches about the ways in which practices at the school may have been contributing to the experiences of your learners that were of concern to you.

I noticed that many of the children seemed to arrive at school in distress. Immediately being confined to classroom and a desk did not allow for the children to decompress and engage in learning. Focusing on fine motor skills and rote memory skills (i.e. spelling programs) did not allow them the space or time to connect or develop positive relationships with the adults or peers in the room.

**New professional learning:** What new areas of professional learning did you explore? What resources were most helpful? What specific designs did you use to support the learning of your colleagues?

Last year I did several book readings (ie I Love Dirt). This year I was interested in exploring international articles about active programs. I followed 'TimberNook' blog. Professional conversations and articles were often inspiring and helped me focus my planning. Articles



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from Canada Forest School were helpful as well. I was able to look at a variety of topics from around the world.

**Taking action:** Describe strategies you and your team decided on and how your actions worked out.

First we considered our outdoor time as an important component of the curriculum. Every attempt was made to go outside routinely for two hour periods of time or more. Our strategy was to let the children's questions guide us and to refer to their inquiries throughout the day during our indoor learning time. We found this lent credibility and importance to their ideas and inspired them to ask even more questions. As many of these children had severe speech delays this was very exciting to hear. Our outdoor time led the both the adults and childrens learning throughout the day.

Secondly, we practiced meditation in the woods each time. When the children began this practice it was very short and with a great deal of intervention. By the end of the year they were asking when we would begin meditating because they were ready to start. The children were able to articulate how their body felt before and after they meditated and sought out other opportunities during the day to 'calm their bodies.' This allowed the students to develop the ability to self-regulate better.

**Checking:** Summarize the differences you made. Were they enough? Were you satisfied?

Being outdoors allows children that may be seen as fidgety and disengaged at a desk to become active leaders, problem solvers and critical thinkers when they are outside. Removing walls from the equation of learning allows the children space and the environment to be imaginative risk takers. What is most exciting though is to see the children becoming truly connected to the land that we travel on.

You could see that during our 'Talking Time' the children stopped answering questions with a smile and 'I don't know' and became detailed thinkers. They were not afraid to wonder and knew that we would look for answers together.

**Reflections/Advice:** Finish by sharing what you learned from this inquiry, where you plan to go next, and what advice you would offer other schools with a similar interest.

It has been such an exciting year with an improved Outdoor Kindergarten program in an



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new school. It was so exciting to watch children with a variety of challenges really come into their own. I would suggest many educators feel that outdoor time is an extra piece, only for very well behaved classes and something to be done when all the 'work' was finished. I have found that the outdoor time was actually critical to finding our way through the curriculum. Children were calmer, more focused and ready to learn because we spent large parts of our day outside. As a result the learning that happened during the day happened naturally and due to their inquisitive minds. There were so many questions, observations and explorations that happened during our outdoor time. Interestingly, we found that many of the children arrived in September with severe delays in speech. Our time outside allowed for extensive conversations and great local vocabulary in a quiet calm atmosphere instead of scripted questions in a classroom setting.

It is our intention to include the primary department in our Outdoor program. As the children move up in the grades we want to provide the opportunities and learning explorations that they have become accustomed to. We are also hoping to have monthly visits from experts/elders to guide our experiences in the woods.

It is important to include all learners in this experience. Do not limit your time in the environment due to behaviour that happens in the classroom. However, do not assume all educators are prepared and ready to lead students in the outdoors. It is important to study safety protocols and learn about the outdoor space before you venture out with your class.