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Growing a Nature Kindergarten That Can Flourish

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Abstract Growing a nature kindergarten that can flourish takes a community, careful planning, and sustained support. In 2011, the Sooke School District in British Columbia, Canada undertook the project of creating a nature kindergarten when outdoor programs of this kind did not exist in the Canadian public school system. Inspired by the well-established forest school and nature preschool models in northern Europe, a program to take 22 kindergarten students outside into nature every morning, regardless of the weather, was developed. This article explores how a unique framework and set of guiding principles were co-created by a diverse advisory committee. It also describes how the hiring, education, and ongoing support of the program's two educators — a kindergarten teacher and an early childhood educator — became critical to its success. The article offers an overview on steps taken, including how the idea was born, working within the public school system, building a framework and principles, hiring and education, preparing the educators, learning from our first year, ongoing support, and remaining questions. The authors' intention is not to articulate best practices, but to share key aspects of the program's development and implementation phases that allowed the nature kindergarten to thrive over the last 5 years.

An Idea is Born

Forest kindergartens, where children aged 3–6 were able to spend most or all of their time outside before they entered formal schooling, started in Scandinavia in the 1960s (Knight, 2009; Williams-Siegfredson, 2012). Later, Germany followed their example with *Waldkindergartens* and in the United Kingdom with forest schools. Until recently there were no forest schools or *Waldkindergartens* in Canada.

In January 2011, Frances Krusekopf and Enid Elliot (the authors) met for coffee to discuss their mutual interest in these relatively common educational options in northern Europe that at the time were little known in Canada. Both of us felt inspired to create a similar program in our community on southern Vancouver Island, British Columbia, where many schools have some direct access to forests, beaches or a natural green space. This part of Vancouver Island is the traditional territory of the Coast

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Salish First Nations,[1] who loved and appreciated the land and ocean over the past thousands of years; a place of forests, rocky coastlines, sandy beaches, lakes and meadows. As it unfolded, the Sooke Nature Kindergarten would have students engaged in the forest and creeks of Royal Roads University, the Esquimalt Lagoon, and the beaches of the Juan de Fuca Strait, all just west of the provincial capital of Victoria.

Elliot (Blanchet-Cohen & Elliot, 2011; Elliot & Blanchet-Cohen, 2009) had learned of the Forest School movement when researching early childhood programs' use of outside space and listening to young children speak of their experiences outside. Krusekopf (Elliot & Krusekopf, 2017) had experienced a *Waldkindergarten* in Munich with her 4-year-old son and saw its possibilities for the Sooke School District in which she was a principal. While our interest was primarily focused on the educational possibilities of these programs, we were aware of the growing public concern about children's lack of engagement with nature and lack of time for exercise, as more and more of their time is seemingly spent on computer games or other forms of digital entertainment (e.g., Gordon, 2013; Knight, 2009; Lohr, 2007). There was also a concern that children were having little time for unstructured play in natural contexts in which they could explore their abilities of negotiation, imagination, and problem solving (Scottish Government, 2013).

Developing our nature kindergarten took time, commitment, and many discussions. Having no model of a previous program in the public school system in British Columbia, the program needed thoughtful and careful planning (Elliot, 2014; Elliot, Eycke, Chan, & Mulller, 2014). Gathering other interested individuals from a broad range of backgrounds, we formed an advisory committee to help us plan and organise. The advisory committee came from different segments of our community — early childhood educators (ECE), biologists, park naturalists, First Nations' educators and environmentalists, as well as representatives from local post-secondary institutions, each bringing their particular idea of what the nature kindergarten might look like; each brought with them enthusiasm, energy and generosity of spirit. Besides a belief in the idea of a nature kindergarten, each person came with a personal reason; they remembered times spent outside in childhood, roaming the neighbourhood, making moss gardens in the nearby woods, or climbing logs at the beach. These unique memories from childhood, along with current perspectives, orientations, passions and education, made our discussions interesting, rich, fruitful and local.

Many committee participants resonated with Rachel Carson (1965), who wrote 'A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement … [and] … if a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder … [she or he] needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in' (pp. 42, 45). Carson carefully chooses the word 'companionship', because it is not the teaching that an adult does, but the companionship of an adult that is of true importance.

Working Within the British Columbia Public Education System

The logistics of establishing a nature kindergarten program within the British Columbia provincial school system presented a number of challenges. The British Columbia Ministry of Education has a provincial curriculum that outlines the goals and aspirations for each grade (https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/), and creating a program for this public school system meant that we would necessarily follow the curriculum laid out for kindergarten. As there was no previous Canadian model on which to base our program, we felt we needed to outline the broad principles for educating kindergarten students outside in the local natural landscape, which would guide the development of

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the program, its content and the teaching methods. But not only was an educational vision needed, we would also need to plan for the logistics of safety and risk, decide on what would be the appropriate staff qualifications, the flow of the day, processes for parent registration, and other details. There was a great deal to outline and decide on before we began the program, and there would be even more worked out in the first couple of years of operation.

British Columbia had only recently, in September 2010, implemented all-day kindergarten, so the children attending the planned program would be coming to school for a full day. Our plan was to have the children outside for a half-day every day whatever the weather, and after some discussion, we settled on the children being outside for the morning; they would come back to school for lunch and the shorter afternoon session. Twenty-two children would be outside in the nearby forest with a teacher and early childhood educator. As our discussions continued, we realized that these two educators,[2] would be the heart of the program; the critical question was how to educate, encourage and support them to effectively lead this innovation.

Over our year and a half of planning, from 2011 to summer 2012, our values and visions gained form and substance as we discussed how a day might look, what skills were necessary for the educators, and what risks they might encounter. As we collectively shared our assumptions and hopes for this program, the common vision became clearer and more aligned. Members of the advisory committee all agreed that children would benefit from getting outside into the forest that was adjacent to the school, but describing how that might happen uncovered some of the different perspectives we each brought to the meetings. We did not have the resources to visit programs in Scandinavia or Germany. Krusekopf, for example, had experienced the *Waldkindergarten* in Germany, and another committee member had visited a program in England. Elliot had visited a private preschool program in Ontario that was not part of the formal Canadian education system, which had five children, and she had seen other preschools where children had the chance to engage with nature. At this point there were almost no programs like this in Canada. Some of the members of the advisory committee had expertise in being outdoors with children, while others brought a love of the natural landscape, and others were educators interested in alternative approaches to education.

Some of the naturalists on the advisory committee were focused on teaching the names of the animals and plants and the ecosystems, while other educators wondered how reading would be taught; early childhood educators (ECEs) saw multiple opportunities for play and exploration; the wilderness first-aid experts saw the possibilities for learning about safety; and First Nations educators had multiple narratives of land and beginnings that defined that place where the program would be held. The program, the place, and the possibilities had multiple layers and narratives. As Mannion and Lynch (2016) say, 'learning is always situated and is an ongoing happening and, therefore, could be said to always be locally "performed" as a result of the responses people make within a particular person-place assemblage or enmeshment' (p. 92).

Building a Framework and Principles

Unique principles and values would guide the program, its educators and students. Within the advisory committee we provoked one another to think deeply about how to create and facilitate significant educational experiences for young children. For many of us, this project was connected to feelings of responsibility for the earth and for the particular place in which we live, and we wondered how this program could help children find their own connections to this place (Mannion & Lynch, 2016; Sobel, 2004). As

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we shared our dreams for this program and heard one another's viewpoints and stories, we were all enriched. The vision that emerged from our deliberations valued the multiple relationships that the natural materials and the other-than-human world would offer the children, as well as emphasising the capabilities of the children to negotiate weather, terrain, and those multiple relationships. We felt that by moving kindergarten outside into the natural environment, the larger-than-human setting could, along with their educators, provide the children with rich opportunities for constructing identities as learners, as community members (Berry, 2006), and as beings among other living beings and the materials that make up our world. In such contexts, we felt that the children could build multiple identities (Mannion & Lynch, 2016), including an *ecological identity* (Pelo, 2009; Thomashow, 1996), and have a unique opportunity to form relationships with adults, peers, biota and their local landscapes.

Through intense and respectful dialogue, a set of principles emerged. We want to strongly note that these principles, developed for the Sooke Nature Kindergarten, are not meant to be universal principles. These are concepts that fit with our intents and purposes, and are not meant as *best practice* rules. In fact, we recommend and encourage any group seeking to create a nature/forest kindergarten to let their own principles emerge from their own context and community.

The pedagogical principles that guided the development and implementation of the initial 2-year pilot program were:

Connecting deeply with nature: Environmental stewardship. Teachers and students would nurture their relationship with nature with care, compassion, and a sense of wonder for the physical world in which they live, by encouraging curiosity, inquiry and a sense of responsiveness, caring and commitment to the environment, and by supporting an understanding of ecology and sustainability.

The environment as another teacher. Teachers and students would appreciate that all living things and systems are connected; this concept is central to the program. Spending significant periods of time in the outdoors should support children's growing awareness of their intertwined connections with natural landscapes and phenomenon. By moving freely in outdoor spaces, learning by looking into and with nature rather than at it, developing self-confidence in natural landscapes, engaging with the sensuality of nature, engaging in unstructured and spontaneous play, and enjoying the sensory awareness of being engaged outside will all provide a rich learning situation.

Learning collaboratively as a part of a community. Children should understand that they are embedded in a circle of communities. Through a growing sense of place, children should begin to appreciate their connections within their local community that includes family, neighbours, friends and local nearby nature. The students would learn and teach with a kindergarten teacher and an ECE, as well as with community members such as Elders, Capital Regional District parks educators, Royal British Columbia Museum curators, grandparents and parents, and build a sense of belonging and community by developing a sense of attachment to their *larger community* (Berry, 1999).

Physical and mental health. With consistent and sustained interaction with the natural environment, children's physical and mental wellbeing should benefit, as being in a green setting fosters mental health and provides multiple opportunities for movement.

We all felt that Indigenous knowledge and narratives must be represented in our vision. The people indigenous to southern Vancouver Island had accumulated knowledge and understanding of their home place. The forest the children would be entering each morning has been a special place of gathering and engagement for several of the local Coast Salish communities. These lands were infused with narratives of place and

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were sources of traditional knowledge of plants, animals and humans. Having Indigenous knowledge holders share some of the land's history and its stories would be important to the children's understanding and appreciation of that place (Somerville, 2013; Somerville, Davies, Power, Gannon, & de Carteret, 2011; Turner, 2005). We felt that the wisdom of the local First Peoples must be included but were unsure of how to articulate this commitment. We concluded that all of the above principles were to be infused with an understanding of *Aboriginal ways of knowing*. While most of the advisory committee was not indigenous, we felt the local narratives and histories were important to share with the children. Kimmerer (2013) speaks of the meaning of the land, the place, to Indigenous people:

> *It was everything: identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustained us. Our lands were where our responsibility to the world was enacted, sacred ground. It belonged to itself; it was a gift, not a commodity, so it could never be bought or sold. (p. 17)*

Gregory Cajete, an Indigenous scholar, speaks of the 'Indian model that sees the world as an intimate relationship of living things' (1994, p. 13); we hoped the children would experience the world outside their classroom in such an intimate manner.

The discussion of principles was an important step in our process, as even before the nature kindergarten started, other schools and educators in both British Columbia and the rest of Canada expressed an interest in what we were doing and thinking. Outlining some of our key ideas provided opportunities for discussion with this wider community. We shared our work at conferences and workshops and heard back from participants about, in particular, our proposal to include Aboriginal ways of knowing into our principles. Several people suggested that from an Indigenous perspective, our wording gave the impression that we were assuming a universal Aboriginal understanding of nature and education. Each band and First Nation on the West Coast and other parts of Canada have narratives and knowledge unique to their land, so we were grateful for this feedback and began a journey to understand what narratives and knowledge belong to the place in which the children would be playing and learning. The First Nations of southern Vancouver Island have stories of wisdom, tales of caution, and knowledge of plants and animals (Turner & Hebda, 2012). There is also the history of colonisation and oppression that demeaned and disregarded both people and stories, but the stories still belong to this place and so their telling is layered and complicated. Learning about this place with its history, flora and fauna and the stories that it has to tell will, hopefully, deepen the children's understanding of their world.

We anticipated that there would be much to be discovered when outside with children. As Alsop and Fawcett (2010) remind us, 'Our curriculum documents seem to arrive bearing little trace of their geographical, material or cultural origins' (p. 1033). We also believed that the relationship that educators and children would develop with each other and the more-than-human world would be powerful, providing insights for both children and their teachers not often able to be found in a traditional classroom. Ann Pelo (2013) wrote that our work as educators is 'to invite children to braid their identities together with the place where they live by calling their attention to the air, the sky, the cracks in the sidewalk where the earth bursts out of its cement cage' (p. 43).

Hiring and Educating

With the concept of nature kindergarten more fully developed, we were left with the critical task of hiring two educators to lead our pilot phase. Finding a teacher and ECE who

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would be able to support children's relationships with each other, the flora, fungi and fauna to be found in the nearby forest was of utmost importance. Public school teachers and ECEs in British Columbia are unionised, and creating specialised job postings in a unionised context can be complex. The roles of school personnel are carefully outlined by union contracts, and hiring practices are governed in part by seniority. There were no real comparable positions within the school district to the ones we wanted to create; yet it was important to find a teacher and an ECE with the skills and courage to begin this new program. With this reality in mind, we looked to others who had developed postings for unique teaching positions, and using these samples we developed two unique job descriptions that reflected, we hoped, the vision, values and skills necessary to carry out the pedagogical principles of our nature kindergarten.

Krusekopf was well positioned as the District Principal of Curriculum and Programs within the Sooke School District at the time, and her positive working relationships with union representatives and School District personnel, including the Superintendent of Schools, proved to be invaluable at various times throughout this project; advocating for a unique hiring process was one of those times. Krusekopf's past experience in working with the president of the local British Columbia Teachers Federation union (BCTF) and the support staffs' union (CUPE, the Canadian Union of Public Employees) on other projects, issues and letters of understanding (LOU) meant that conversations around the nature kindergarten hiring could happen more easily. Krusekopf worked directly with the School District's Human Resources department and the two union presidents to ensure there was transparency around our plans, opportunities to consult, and an interest in working together.

Before the hiring process started, a brief, formal LOU was signed between CUPE and the School Board that addressed unique issues such as flexibility in work hours and denial of bumping rights to ensure that the ECE we hired could remain in the position for the 2-year duration of the pilot phase. While the dialogue with the President of the BCTF local did not lead to a formal LOU, the President was given a draft job posting to review and verbal support was received prior to posting this position. Ensuring these relationships were positive and supportive set the stage for success. Having the School District's approval and engagement, including the Superintendent and Board of Trustees, provided a positive environment for the project to move ahead.

We had carefully and formally set the stage to carry out a comprehensive applicant screening and interviewing process so as to be able to select the best candidates using the specialised job descriptions. Given the local media attention that our program had received even before it formally began, it was not surprising that there were many applications for the two nature kindergarten positions, and in particular for the ECE position. Our interview team — Krusekopf, Elliot, and a school-based principal — brought different perspectives and experiences to the process, and we all agreed on the questions we would ask the candidates. Following the interviews, we completed reference checks. This thorough process allowed us to feel confident in whom we hired for these positions.

Preparing the Educators

After the hiring process, we had to think about the type of educational experiences that would help prepare these two educators to take their students outside every morning while at the same time covering the prescribed British Columbia Kindergarten Curriculum. At this point, there were no particular educational or practical professional development experiences in Canada for teachers who were intending on spending significant time outside with children and few experts to call upon (Gordon, 2013). Our

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funds were limited, so we were unable to go to Scandinavia and northern Europe to visit programs there and learn from their expertise. It was clear that this might be the moment to start a dialogue with other educators in British Columbia about what a Canadian nature kindergarten might be and what might be important to us in our particular Canadian context.

The advisory committee developed a 3-day workshop of discussions and presentations, which was intended to provide an orientation for the newly hired educators, Lisa and Erin. We also invited local educators who had expressed an interest in attending, to create a group of about 20 individuals. The participants were all educators who were drawn to the idea of learning outside with children, and each had different experiences with the living, breathing world outside the classroom walls, which added richness and depth to our discussions. This group, which included teachers, a principal, a naturalist and ECEs, helped us think together about this project, offering multiple perspectives and ideas.

Presenting at the orientation workshop were naturalists from Wild BC (https://hctfeducation.ca/wildbc/) who had the experience of going into schools to initiate activities about the natural world, working with their 'vision … to inspire and empower people and their communities to understand and care for the natural world through environmental education'. Wild BC had a number of activities that they offer at a school, such as following animal tracks that they created on the playground pavement, exploring and naming trees, and other activities designed for young children. We invited a kindergarten teacher who taught in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria, along with an early childhood educator who consulted with early childhood programs and the early years programs in school districts, to share information about inquiry-based teaching and learning. Their focus was on emergent learning (Stacey, 2009) and focusing on children's interests and questions.

A workshop participant noted that there was a contradiction between the planned activities of Wild BC and allowing the curriculum to emerge. There are tensions inherent in the educational process, with different approaches about how to balance planning with being awake to the offerings to be found outside. Later, Erin and Lisa told us that they did not use the Wild BC activities, but focused on paying attention to the opportunities they found outside the school walls. Taking away the walls from the kindergarten and moving into the community and onto the natural landscape that exists outside those walls is a move that may challenge some of our educational ideas about kindergarten. As Robin Kimmerer (2013) says, 'there is no substitute for standing in the rain to waken every sense — senses that are muted within four walls, where my attention would be on me instead of all that is more than me' (p. 295).

We also spent a morning with a local First Nations knowledge keeper, Charlene George, who shared some of the traditional teachings from this place. We followed her into the woods to learn more deeply of the relationships that plants offered. These teachings are rooted in the land and continue today. Turner and Hebda (2012) quote local elder Dave Elliott, who said that 'our elders today tell us that when our people were one with the universe, we were careful, not wasteful, because we respected everything we lived with. We used the power of many plants to help us keep this harmony' (p. 31). We had another walk through the forest connected to the school with an enthusiastic biologist/naturalist of our advisory committee. Both of these experiences were useful and oriented us to the richness of life in the forest and the many stories found there.

Over the three days that we discussed ideas and listened to different experts, there was a great deal still unknown. While we had shared activities with Wild BC, discussed educational approaches and were given an introduction to traditional teachings, we were aware that Lisa and Erin would really learn how to do this program when they

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met the children in September. They would learn this as they got acquainted with each other's style of teaching, the children, and the place where they would spend each morning in sunshine, rain and the occasional snow flurry.

Learning From the First Year

Our planning of a year and a half took form; all that we had discussed over the previous 18 months was close to being actualised. Each of us had our own thoughts and concerns as we planned for the program's start. The path forward was still uncertain, and the educators would have to forge much of it with the first cohort of students. Realising that some infrastructure was necessary to provide support in the first year, we created a support team that included Krusekopf, Elliot and the school principal, who connected with the educators each week. We made note of successes and paid attention to questions and challenges, listened to concerns about children, and offered what advice or help we could, while continuing to add to our risk-management plan as concerns came up or risks were discovered.

Both of the educators felt supported by these weekly check-ins. We were able to validate their experience, make small suggestions, and organise what they might need in terms of ongoing professional learning or supplies. In times of uncertainty, it is helpful to have outside support and perspectives, and we offered validation and other ideas.

The first year was challenging for Lisa and Erin; later, Lisa would say that it was the hardest year of her teaching career. They had to figure out what was important to take with them when they left the confines of school, what routines were useful, what behaviour was comfortable for them. Checking back with the original pedagogical principles and their own belief in children, they reflected on how their practice was emerging. They needed to feel that their actions and practice were relevant and meaningful. Children, they learned, could handle their own clothing and backpacks, could learn to handle a cold and rainy day, could climb the trees and play with sticks.

All teachers are encouraged to plan, but for Lisa and Erin, going outside meant being more spontaneous as a plan made on a sunny day was impractical on a rainy day. One could not plan for a dead vole in the path or for an owl who came to visit the site and sat overhead, watching closely. Responding in the moment meant listening carefully to the forest and its breathing, vibrating presence. Lisa and Erin had to listen to the children and their concerns and passions. Davies (2011) reminds us, 'human, animal, earth and other matter — all exist, and exist in networks of relationality, dependence and influence' (p. 30). Lisa and Erin needed to be aware and open to 'the patterns that connect, to that which connects us to others; abandoning ourselves to the conviction that our understanding and our own being are but small parts of a broader, integrated knowledge that holds the universe together' (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 65).

Lisa and Erin also analysed educational situations in order to modify them as they observed and listened to the children. For example, calendar time is a common practice in kindergarten. Every morning the whole class names the day and the corresponding date; however, the educators soon realised that the children found this boring so they abandoned the practice. A more effective method of learning the days of the week happened when they told the children that Mondays and Fridays would be free of ninja play. The children began to pay close attention to when Monday and Friday occurred.

Continuing Support

Ongoing professional development was important. Inviting educators such as Ann Pelo, Claire Warden and Dr Louise Chawla to visit and share their ideas and feedback was useful and helped all of us shift our practice and thinking. Both teacher and ECE also

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asked for specific input. As they became confident with the logistics of being outside each morning, they turned their attention to more ideas about encouraging the children's inquiry-based learning. Krusekopf, Elliot and the educators took a field trip to a school in Burnaby, British Columbia that was working with this model, which inspired further thinking about the educators' practice. This school, in turn, was curious about how the educators worked with being outside for significant chunks of time.

Each visit or visitor added a new layer or another perspective. Ann Pelo (2013) reminded us that children learn to pay attention and to have empathy with the wider world as 'empathy is cornerstone in an ecological identity. Empathy turns us to the living world with imagination and curiosity, with courage enough to let go of our habitual and easy understandings, with willingness to experience the vulnerability of disequilibrium' (p. 147). Claire Warden (2010) shared ideas and strategies on how to provoke children's interests.

All of this external contact and inward investigation helped create a more detailed map to understand what education and support is needed for teachers and ECEs who take children outside on a consistent basis. In 2018, after five+ years of teaching, the educators have a clearer understanding of how to encourage the children to be a group that supports each other, how to listen for children's questions and concerns (Blenkinsop, 2014; Hoyland & Elliot, 2014), and how to build on those interests.

Still Left With Questions

As widespread interest in our nature kindergarten emerged, we needed to consider how best to support other districts or groups who wanted to create a program like ours. School districts contemplated whether a program like this might fit for them or how to modify it in order to fit their situation. Many individuals approached us asking for a guide to creating a nature kindergarten. From the start, we were not interested in promoting a prescriptive 'one-size-fits-all' approach, and so it was never our intention to create a particular curriculum or guidebook of activities. We have shared what we have learned and hope to hear what others have learned; each program should make its own decisions and find its own pathways.

Each location will have its unique histories, knowledges and narratives, and opportunities for experiences. Gruenewald (2003) reminds us 'if human beings are responsible for place making, then we must become conscious of ourselves as place makers and participants in the sociopolitical process of place making' (p. 627). Grounding children in their place, their 'larger community' (Berry, 1999), Pelo's 'wider world', engages their whole being. Their bodies, minds and hearts are immersed in the 'flesh of the world' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). In connecting holistically to their place, children come to an understanding and knowing of themselves and their world. The richness of the forest, the beach, the other-than-human life outside the classroom allows children 'a reciprocal relationship with objects and landscapes, weather, rocks and trees, sand, mud and water, animals and plants, an ontology founded in the bodies of things' (Somerville, 2007, p. 234)

Some professional development programs have been created since we first designed the orientation workshop for our educators. These programs, such as those offered by Forest School Canada or Coyote Mentoring, introduce educators to some basic skills needed for taking children outside; however, we have felt that a more focused, in-depth and place-based educational approach is important. The process of arriving at our own values and principles was critical and ensured that we were clear about their meaning and possibilities. While our context is Canadian, we are also on the Pacific Coast and have a different history of colonisation and different narratives, based in Coast Salish

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traditions, from other regions of British Columbia and of Canada. Skills and activities presented by the previous mentioned programs are useful as a springboard, but it is important to have a strong local foundation of values and beliefs. Thinking deeply about the learning that is possible in a natural setting, challenging assumptions about children, the other-than-human world, and the meaning of education can deepen how we approach our pedagogy.

While we have not developed a training program or manual over the past six years, we have collaborated with many educators interested in beginning a similar type of program. This collaboration has taken place both formally and informally through workshops, presentations, university courses, symposiums, email communication, and phone calls. Our focus was on the concepts of place-based learning, environmental stewardship, Indigenous epistemologies, and emergent learning. Through photographs, videos and anecdotal stories, we have provoked thinking, encouraged reflection, and inspired rich pedagogical dialogue. Our intention has not been to share best practices, but to provide an understanding of the broader goals and principles guiding *our* nature kindergarten program. Mentoring others has been a catalyst for our own learning and thinking; being asked *how?* or *why?* has often led us to examine our own practice, and make revisions or additions.

In this process of growing the nature kindergarten, we have had to listen closely to each other, to the different people who have connected with us, to the forest and beach in and with which we have learned. Our advisory committee offered a variety of perspectives that were valuable; the children shared their ideas, theories and connections; educators continued to think and wonder. There was a great deal to listen to and to think about.

Having an explicit philosophy and values for an educational program outside of the school walls provide guidelines for thinking. Paying attention, and listening and wondering with children, parents and community will keep the guidelines dynamic. We are still at the beginning of this journey of learning in and with a natural setting with children and educators, and there is a great deal to learn and understand. We are currently supporting the start of a second nature kindergarten program in the Sooke School District. This is an important opportunity to apply what we have learned to a similar, but new school community and educator team. They will bring their own gifts to this journey and expand the ideas we have currently. We anticipate that more learning will take place as different successes are celebrated and unique challenges are overcome.

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Conflicts of Interest

None.

Endnotes

[1] 'First Nation' is a term used to describe Aboriginal peoples of Canada who are ethnically neither Métis nor Inuit. This term came into common usage in the 1970s and 1980s and generally replaced the term 'Indian', although unlike

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'Indian', the term 'First Nation' does not have a legal definition (indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/terminology/).

[2] We will use the terms 'educator' and 'teacher' interchangeably as these two positions were working in partnership.

Keywords: early childhood, education, environmental education, Indigenous knowledge, learners, outdoor education

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Enid Elliot, PhD. I am an early childhood educator who has been continually surprised, intrigued and delighted by the babies, children, families and early childhood educators with whom I have worked, played, and journeyed. I am currently on faculty at Camosun College and am an adjunct professor at University of Victoria. My current questions concern the pedagogies that emerge as educators and children explore and engage deeply with all the layers of the natural and material landscape found outside school walls, as well as learning from Indigenous worldviews and narratives that honour our connections with the natural world.

Frances Krusekopf, MEd. Educational experiences in Mongolia, Texas, and more recently the Sooke School District in Victoria, Canada honed my skills as a learner, teacher, and school leader. A proud first-generation Canadian, my childhood was strongly influenced by my parents' German roots. Spending time outdoors was always valued and encouraged, and led to my strong desire to develop an educational program where young children could learn in natural settings.

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