

Nature K . . . It's 'THE' Way!: guest blog by Pat Jensen, principal, Dr. R. Bondar

As educators at Dr. Roberta Bondar Elementary, we have the seemingly daunting task, as assigned by the B.C. Ministry of Education's School Act,

. . . to enable all learners to become literate, to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy."

Once we catch our breath after expounding with this mouthful of noble ideals on what our calling in life is all about, we ask, "What do our students 'need' in order to develop into these desired future citizens?" After this, we must consider the question, "So, 'how' do we do this?"

Certainly to establish what they 'need' we turn to the provincial curriculum. To provide the 'how', we begin by pulling together the best practice research results we find from our studies of theory and practice available to us today, such as: Project Based Learning, Neuroplasticity and Brain Development, Response To Intervention, Cooperative Learning, Understanding By Design, Co-teaching, Ongoing Assessments that are Of, For, and As Learning, and the importance of Self-Regulation.

The curriculum tells us what we 'need' and good pedagogical practices give us the tools for 'how' to achieve what we need. We are then left with looking for the vehicle that will transport these practices throughout students' learning experiences to produce happy and prosperous citizens. The vehicle that will achieve this for us is environmental education that begins, at the beginning, with Nature Kindergarten.

The environment provides a unique domain for developing competency in youngsters academically, socially, emotionally, and physically. Immersed in the outdoors, children spontaneously inquire, communicate, enjoy and actively explore their world with energy, enthusiasm and excitement. A Nature Kindergarten program ensures that full engagement is in place in a highly constructionist learning site.

Young children's direct encounter in the natural world with caring and guiding adults builds a life-long stewardship for the environment. As adults, their environmental awareness is heightened due to these early experiences and leads to their involvement in sustainable global practices. Nature Kindergarten shapes individuals who are motivated to responsibly and ethically use the world's resources - for the good of all.

Exploration in the outdoors provides essential experiences for youngsters as they get to know their world through direct contact with the facets of nature. Questions abound as they interact with one another and the features found in their outdoors. Nature responds to their actions, discoveries are made, self-confidence grows. Wet grass is slippery - move carefully, keep your balance, and you won't fall! Through trial and error in a Nature Kindergarten program students build a 'Yes, I can!' attitude. Past learning informs present and future learning that is specific for each child.

The outdoors invites physically active participation. Children intuitively run, bounce, roll, climb, skip, and embrace all that is before them. The key components of what makes a healthy youngster are automatically developed in a Nature Kindergarten regime as they grow in their strength, flexibility, and endurance. Typical of an expeditionary learning experience, task motivation is high!

The critically essential purpose of education to build literate, knowledgeable, and skilled citizens is assuredly in place with a Nature Kindergarten program. The environment provides abundant speaking and listening experiences that serve as jumping boards for meaningful learning across the curriculum. Children's purposeful chatter of the world immediately around them leads into carefully crafted classroom lessons that expand on the language heard to turn it into print, images and concepts. Connections are built, understandings broadened, knowledge deepened.

Cross-curricular competencies of thinking, communicating, and social and personal abilities are seamlessly integrated within a Nature Kindergarten focus. Collective knowledge grows and relationships flourish from purposeful encounters in the real world. Teachers' intentional observations and documentation - in notes, videos, photographs, power points - of students' interactions supports robust learning back in the classroom. Albert Einstein explained the 'why' of environmental education when he stated, "Look deep into nature and you will understand everything better."

Educators passionate about their role in preparing today's children for tomorrow's world delve into the Ministry's Environmental Learning and Experience Curriculums to create safe, successful, and supportive learning opportunities tailored to the needs of each of their students. Nature Kindergarten classes gradually immerse youngsters in the outdoors as their daily experiences outdoors steadily increase over the year. Grab your rain gear, pull on your boots, and get out there - the world is waiting for you and your students! Nature Kindergarten gets learners on the right track . . . for life! That's what we're doing at Bondar!