

Building Relationships, Respect and Community

Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors.

Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place).

First People's Principles of Learning

Engaging students, families, and neighbours to build relationships, respect, and community is a topic near and dear to me. The British Columbia Early Learning Framework (BC ELF) states: “children, with their boundless imaginations and sense of adventure, will be the leaders and innovators who will both inherit and re-create our societies in the future.” (BC ELF, pg 21). Thus, fostering a sense of place within our community is imperative for me to support the development healthy, engaged citizens of the world. To do this, I place an emphasis on place-based learning that incorporates teachings from the natural and constructed world we live in. Richard Louv supports my thinking and emphasis on learning about the natural world with his assertion that “an environment-based education movement--at all levels of education--will help students realize that school isn't supposed to be a polite form of incarceration, but a portal to the wider world.” (Louv, pg 226) To achieve my goal of supporting engagement, I use a variety of tools and activities to ensure that my students and their families know that they are an important part of our of class and of our wider community.

I'm am lucky to work in a vibrant, diverse and nature-adjacent community. I do my best to honor these qualities in my teaching. The door is always open in my room. In the classroom, right from the very first day, families are welcomed into the space and encouraged to share it with their children. We have a weekly Monday morning Family Read for families to come in and connect before the start of a busy week. I put out new books every week and make a point of connecting with each family individually during this time. Students are encouraged to share their work with their families or show off something they find interesting in the room. There are soft spaces to sit, natural light and a variety of things to look at. Parents regularly come in to share important family traditions and events- most recently we had a new baby sister introduced to us. The kids learned about the many changes happening in their classmates' family after the arrival of a new sibling, building empathy and understanding. We have had families teach us about Ramadan, Russian Easter, Ukranian Spring Festival, Japan's Children's Day, Lunar New Year in Taiwan and China, Brazilian Carnival, Mexico's Day of the Dead and more. Many families have brought food or a craft for us to make to honor these days. Families have donated items from home for use in the classroom which helps me to celebrate the diversity of the families in our class. When children recognize foods, fabrics and materials that they would see in their own homes they understand that their culture and traditions are something to be celebrated rather than hidden. (BC ELF, pg 23) There is information posted at parent's eye-level in the room and in a special spot outside- this is where our monthly events calendar is posted as well as information about community events and learning in our classroom. In my teaching, I am very careful to use and model the language of inclusivity. I say: “we” instead of “you”, when I call the kids, I use “friends” rather than “boys and girls”, and whenever there is conflict, I do my

best to help the kids use empathy and restorative language to resolve it. We spend a lot of time learning how to express ourselves and our needs calmly, kindly and fairly. A consistent message/quote in my room is: "choose kindness". When there's conflict I ask if people chose kindness, and if they didn't we spend time figuring out how we might do so the next time.

I also team teach on our Friday Community Connections walk with another k/1 teacher which means that our students and their families get to know each other while engaging with our greater community. We do our best to involve parents beyond just being supervisors on these walks- we model the questions we want our kids thinking about and encourage parents to ask each other and the kids the same ones- it's great because that way we are able to ensure that everyone is thinking and connecting with our learning. We also have an intention circle at the beginning and a gratitude circle at the end of all our "Community Connection sessions. The intention circle is a time for us to think about what we will be wondering about that day. The gratitude circle is where we are mindful of the place that we got to explore- thankful for having access to it and make connections to our intentions and observations. Parents and students are invited to share their thoughts with the group. Anyone who feels shy is encouraged to talk to an adult near them to share rather than in the whole group. We choose our destinations according to student interests and invite other community members when appropriate- we had a group of kids who were interested in the rocks we were finding and so we invited a geologist (also a parent at our school) to help us identify different types of rocks. Because we are in a busy urban center, we also make a point of connecting our kids with our community resources such as the fire hall, community center, grocery store, credit union, dentist, library and their staff. Another way that we involve the kids and their families with the community is by creating opportunities for them to practice social responsibility- we brainstorm ways to give back to the community and then do them- they might be a neighbourhood garbage pickup, creating painted rocks with happy messages for our neighbours, singing songs and making ornaments for local seniors in care homes, raising butterflies for our pollinator garden or having a bake sale to raise money for a local cause/charity.

In summary, the emphasis I place on developing my students' sense of community is extensive. Our people, traditions, places and other living beings make up our community. We have many tools at our disposal and when used thoughtfully and creatively, we can create a strong sense of community within our classrooms, schools and other places.

References:

British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2008). British Columbia Early Learning Framework. Victoria, BC: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Children and Family Development, & Early Advisory Group. Retrieved April 8, 2020

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All images were taken by me.