



# **CONNECTING TO CONCRETE:**

An Ethnographic Exploration of Place-Making  
in the Urban Schoolyard

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June 7, 2021

Education 904

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## Acknowledgements...

### ON THE ROAD

First, I would like to acknowledge the traditional ancestral unceded shared territory of the Sumas First Nation and Matsqui First Nation. These two First Nations are part of the Stó:lō Nation. The Stó:lō people have lived in the Fraser Valley for ten thousand years. It is for this reason that we acknowledge the traditional territory in which we reside, work, learn and play.

It is impossible to undertake a journey of this magnitude without having a loving home to return to replenish. Thank you, Oliver, Joey and Ben for being my home, my heart, and for holding space for me during this time. Thank you to my parents and my parents-in-law for the encouragement and support that nourished and sustained me on the way. You gave me the courage to begin and believed in me when I could barely believe in myself.

When I lacked momentum, I was lucky enough to be able to work with inspiring colleagues who constantly push me beyond my comfort zone and hold my hand as they do. Thank you, especially, to my work wife – Marissa; my administrators – AnnaLisa and Michelle; our incredible Indigenous Support workers – Wenonah and Vanessa; and Manmeet, John and Anna. Teaching with you all is an honour and a privilege. Thank you to my students and their parents who have supported me, placed their faith in me, and brought their enthusiasm into every aspect of “helping me with my homework.”

To my Imaginative Education guides - Gillian, Mark, Natalia, Sean, Michael and Allie: You mapped out every step for us without telling us where to look, how to walk, or when to rest. You somehow planned the path and led us along it, while allowing us to make it completely our own. Thank you for your brilliance, humility, generosity and kindness. Your collective presence and the inspiration it bestows is a gift I will cherish as I wind my way further into the unknown.

Thank you to Molly Patterson, Carrie Froese, and Sam Morrison. Having teachers in my early years that stoked my love of learning until it burned hot and bright is what has sustained me through some cold nights of doubt. I carry the embers of those first fires with me yet.

Last - but never least - thank you to my fellow travellers and my Critical Friend Group in particular. I am in awe of your insights, your authenticity, your vulnerability, your talent, your genius, your enthusiasm... but mostly, your huge hearts. I am utterly and profoundly grateful for your companionship over the last two years. I cannot wait to see the beauty and truth you will harvest in your classrooms over the years to come.

**CONNECTING TO CONCRETE:**  
**An Ethnographic Exploration of Place-Making**  
**In the Urban Schoolyard**

**Abstract:**

This Action Research Project takes place in my second-grade classroom in central Abbotsford at the elementary campus of the Abbotsford School of Integrated Arts. My purpose was to use the cognitive tools of Imaginative Education to help students find and connect with the “wild” in their schoolyard and, in doing so, grow in their emotional self-awareness and deepen their ability to empathize. Eighteen students participated twice a week over six weeks (we had two students away for much of this time). Data was collected through multiple means including student surveys, feeling check-ins, student journal entries, photos, class discussions, as well as anecdotal evidence and observations.

*Concrete is a substance used for building which is made by  
 mixing together cement, sand, small stones, and water.  
 (collinsdictionary.com)*

***FRAMING IT IN***

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*“People who don’t construe their own life and don’t frame their own tale,  
 stay on the sidelines,  
 remain only an act without a story and turn into an ‘empty box.’  
 Out-of-the-box thinking and inventiveness remains, then, wishful thinking.”*

*~ Erik Peevernagie, description of his artwork “Everybody His Story,” circa 2000.*

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## Opening:

Every time we talk about Outdoor Education or place-based learning, I think about our schoolyard and die a little inside. While others rhapsodize about the green spaces behind their schools or the creeks a couple of blocks away, I cringe at memories of syringes found, homeless camps under portable stairs and feces in our sandbox.

(Please let it be dog!)

Connecting to nature is something that has always come easily to me. I have many early memories of, what David Sobel calls, “transcendent nature experiences” (2008, p.9). My earliest was running barefoot in dewy grass in our backyard, feeling the



*Fig. 1.0 Playing in the Chehalis River (1987).*

residual chill of the evening at the same time as the impending warmth of a hot July day. I remember relishing the sense of summer freedom and the chance to do whatever we wanted. I remember the mystery and magic that surrounded the creek across the street. Coming home in the dusky twilight with dirt up our legs, mosquito bites on our arms and an ice cream bucket filled with tadpoles. My most

vivid and transcendent memory is standing alone in a grove of birch trees at a family camp, caught in the spell of an autumn sunset that glowed gold off the bark and the leaves and moved me to writing some (very bad) poetry.



I wanted that for my students. Those moments of freedom and mystery and magic. I wanted them to learn how to be still and quiet (For Pete's sake!... Just to be quiet!) and to attune their ears to the subtle music of the nature that surrounded them.

Early on in my research, I came upon this passage in Gillian Judson's *Engaging Imagination in Ecological Education* (2014):

You might be wondering if it is possible to do IEE in an urban or suburban environment...One premise of IEE is that we are surrounded by wildness – by which I mean that which we have not tamed – we can all experience this wildness in meaningful and memorable ways... As students learn the mandated curriculum, IEE helps them understand how their bodies are engaged in the living world, regardless of the context... Did you know there is as much living diversity in one square metre of the soil surrounding a tree (even a tree planted in the city) as there is in an entire school (p.27)?

Initially, I was excited as I read this passage, thinking, “Yes! This is what I need!” As I read on, I was let down. To be honest, it felt a bit dismissive. The message of: “Oh, there is lots there if you look for it!” seemed like a cop out to me. It didn't really acknowledge that there is so much more readily accessible wonder and scope when surrounded by wild spaces. What about when you have to hunt for the wild? How do you connect to concrete?

## **CEMENT**

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*I watched my dad pour it into the mold: glop by glop. My mom held me firmly, as she explained it had to set for a bit before I could put my hand in it. I waited impatiently to leave my imprint in our patio. A piece of who I was, captured – I imagined – for all eternity in the cement. A place-marker to measure my growth against as the years passed. Hours ticked by and, eventually, I had to go to bed. Never to feel my hand sink into its cold goopy-ness. By morning it had hardened and my moment had passed.*

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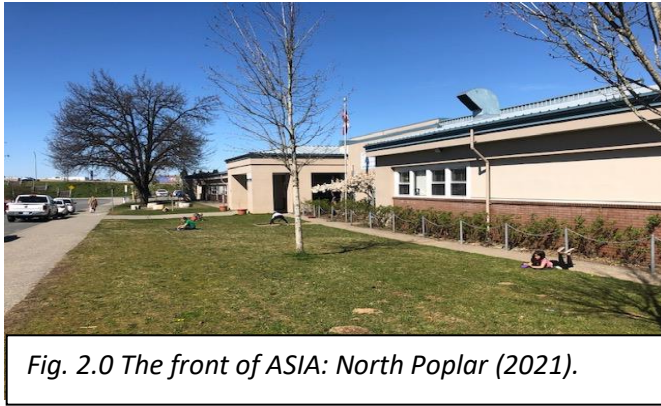
**Personal Background and Context:**

I came to work at the Integrated Arts school in 2007 because of my undergraduate degree in Drama. I loved using the arts to create emotional connections and engagement with the curriculum. In 2013, I realized that I was falling out of love with teaching and experiencing a disconnect between the creative teacher I wanted to be and the habits of teaching I'd fallen into. One of the reasons for this was the change in our student demographic. The number of children in my class who were affected by low impulse control, lack of self-regulation skills and anxiety, were increasing each year. Doing a graduate diploma in Learning through Exploration helped me to adapt my teaching style to better accommodate the needs in my classroom and include play and project-based learning. It gave me a greater appreciation for the emergent curriculum. As I opened my mind, I opened my classroom to all the possibilities and curiosity and wonder that a less teacher-controlled approach offered.

At the same time, we realized that our oldest son was experiencing more challenges than a typical child his age. He was eventually diagnosed with neurodevelopmental disorder, as well as anxiety disorder, panic disorder, sensory processing disorder and ADHD. Being his mom has been an amazing gift! It's given me the opportunity to grow as a person, a parent and a teacher in ways I never could have imagined. As I learned more about how to support my son through his big feelings (most of which was learning how to come to grips with my *own* big feelings), I became more aware of how to support the various emotional needs of my students. As the years have gone by, our catchment has continued to change and 61% of our students are considered "at risk" by the Kindergarten EDI screenings. Social-Emotional learning has

become a key component in my teaching practice; especially since last March when families in our area began to be affected by the pandemic.

### Research Site Context:



*Fig. 2.0 The front of ASIA: North Poplar (2021).*

My action research project was conducted at Abbotsford School of Integrated Arts: North Poplar Campus with my second-grade class. Our school is considered a “choice” school within the district and so we have

students from out of catchment as well as students within our catchment. Many parents bring their children to our school because their children don’t thrive in a traditional school setting and they are attracted to the idea of learning through the arts. This results in a very diverse student population in terms of backgrounds and socio-economic status.

Thanks to a weekly Pod planning time, the staff is highly collaborative and supportive of each other in developing “outside the box” learning and high-quality arts education. A normal year is filled with multiple art projects and two school-wide performances. We joke that newcomers to our staff either love the busy, vital atmosphere and stay or are scared away by the creative intensity.

I’m currently working Monday to Wednesday and my teaching partner works Thursdays and Fridays. We have two full-time EAs. My classroom consists of 20 students: among them we have two students who are ELL, two that are Indigenous, four students who have designated IEPs and one with a pending designation. Two students



were absent for most of the study due to Covid concerns. My classroom parents are communicative, supportive, and as involved as they can be given the current provincial restrictions and procedures in schools.

Out of twenty students in my class, there are five that don't require much support in the areas of self-regulation, social development, and social-emotional learning. Many students struggle with spatial and personal awareness and have a difficult time expressing their feelings without resorting to shutting down, yelling, tears, defiance, or physical violence. Some of this could be the result of the pandemic disrupting their final term of grade one; although, according to our school student SEL survey from last February:

- 38% of primary students have difficulty with self-regulation.
- 26% of primary students do not feel that people like them.
- 30% of primary students cannot identify what makes them angry.
- 24% of primary students do not know when they are starting to lose control.

Our school is in a low-income area within Abbotsford. It is across from three hotels (one of which is a weekly rental hotel that is being used by mental health agencies as housing for patients). We are near two main roads and next to the freeway and the onramp. During summer break, our school has had homeless camps set up on the property and staff must often remove needles, condoms, and human excrement from the playground and surrounding areas on school days. The school has had to “shelter in place” or go into



*Fig. 2.1 Police incident as seen through the school fence.*

lockdown twice this year due to police incidents across the street at the hotel. These incidents have included the use of flashbangs and non-lethal rounds in the past.



*Fig. 2.3 Our Indigenous Garden at the front of the school.*



*Fig. 2.2 Police photo of suspect vehicle boxed in by police vehicles in school staff parking lot May 31, 2021 before school.*

The schoolyard contains about twenty large trees, a playground, a Gaga-ball pit, a sandbox, fields, a paved basketball court, a climbing apparatus and swings. We also have two new outdoor classrooms

(which consist of about 5 large flat stones placed in a circle). Our two Indigenous Support Workers, Ms. Justin and Ms. Fleury, have added an Indigenous garden to the landscaping in the front and are filling it with local plants that have special meaning and purpose to the Stó:lō people.

Our first foray into being outside in the fall, involved our class joining Ms. Justin in adding a fern to the garden and offering tobacco to the giant oak tree, in thanks, before we picked up its fallen leaves for our math activity. Turning the children outside was like tipping a jar of spiders. They flew everywhere and nowhere they were “supposed” to be. They struggled to listen in the new environment. As I walked around, trying to check in and help them settle and participate, little fires started: fights over puddles, silliness that

turned into play wrestling, tears over angry words from a friend, shrieks as a bug flew near them, and overwhelmed children responding by shutting down and refusing to do as asked. I realized that these behaviours were reactions to a new situation and, as I said to my EA, “They just need more practice being outside. We need to do this way more often.”

## **SAND**

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*“Like the sand and the oyster, it’s a creative irritant.  
In each poem, I’m trying to reveal a truth,  
so it can’t have a fictional beginning.”  
~ Carol Ann Duffy*

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### **Research Question(s):**

One of the Core Competencies in the BC Curriculum is Personal Awareness and Responsibility. One aspect that is addressed in that competency is Well-Being. The government website states that

[s]tudents who are personally aware and responsible recognize the factors that affect their holistic wellness and take increasing responsibility for caring for themselves. They keep themselves healthy and stay active, manage stress, and express a sense of personal well-being... They recognize their personal responsibility for their happiness and have strategies that help them find peace in challenging situations.

*(Personal Awareness & Responsibility | Building Student Success - B.C. Curriculum, n.d.)*

Since beginning my studies in Imaginative Education, I’ve been intensely interested in place-based education and the role that cognitive tools play in connecting emotionally with the outdoors. During our Fall 2020 semester, we focused on how environment can be a teacher and I experienced firsthand how regularly spending time

outdoors supported my own emotional well-being. So -- given my interest in social-emotional learning and the inspiration of learning from and connecting to the elements of nature that surround us -- I decided to explore which cognitive tools would support place-making activities within the context of our schoolyard; as well as how these activities would affect student well-being, personal awareness and self-regulation.

**The questions I researched in my project were:**

- Which cognitive tools will increase student connection to place (in this case our schoolyard)?
- What impact will fostering a connection with the outdoors have on the social emotional learning in my classroom?
- In what ways will a shared connection with our schoolyard affect my students' ability to connect with each other and develop empathy?
- How will connecting to the nature in our schoolyard help to increase my own emotional well-being? How will that impact our class community?

**Specific aims for this action research project were:**

- To use cognitive tools to inspire emotional engagement between my students and the "wild" in their schoolyard.
- To increase student well-being, self-regulation, and personal awareness.
- To support the social development of my students by using their shared connection with our schoolyard to foster connections with each other and develop empathy.

I ended our class with Sean Blenkinsop last fall, not just *wanting* this emotional engagement and connection for my class but *needing* it for them and – if I am honest – for me as well. I had dreams of walking amongst seated students who were transported into the world of nature in their own sit spot. Not touching or distracting each other. Not running around or yelling or disrupting classes. Not fighting or irritating their neighbour. Just an hour... or thirty minutes even... of solitude and stillness. As I write this, I hear the truth of my words and also laugh at my expectations. How ridiculous! Thirty minutes

of stillness? With second graders? I was lucky if I could get them to read somewhat quietly for fifteen!

Not only that, but I dreamed that in that time of stillness that nature would teach them how to value and monitor their emotions; that they would find the secret in themselves to self-control and serenity. Looking back, I had such fantastically, meticulously organized plans! How could things have gone any differently?

### ***SMALL STONES***

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*We toss the facts and theories and strategies at the minds in our classrooms, like pebbles at a cup. Our students try to catch them and hold them, juggling them all until they can sort them and use them. We patiently explain how to stack them, again and again. We expect them to stick somehow and mean something, but most often they roll around on the desks for a while until they roll onto the floor, or into the recycling bin, or shoved into a backpack, never to be seen again.*

*Eventually, there is no joy in the delivery  
and there is no happiness in the collection.*

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### **Inquiry Rationale & Methodology:**

Interest in outdoor education and place-based learning is gaining momentum in parenting and educational circles. Society is beginning to notice the negative effects of too much screen time and a childhood disconnected from nature and outdoor play.

“Unschooling” or “wildschooling” are phrases that are being thrown around by parents who are recognizing that the education system, as it stands, is not designed to meet the needs of an increasingly larger demographic of children. As David Sobel (2020) points out,

In our headlong rush for global competitiveness, preparing students for college, increased rigor, we have lost our balanced perspective on educating for the head, hand and heart. It is all head, no hand and heart. But if we can keep their hands busy and make their hearts full, they will be happier and smarter. It is time

to revive the pursuit of happiness as an integral component of our national educational agenda (p.1069).

As teachers, we often seek to inject our classrooms with wonder and curiosity. We talk to our students about respect and responsibility. Yet, we forget about happiness. We attend professional development workshops on literacy programs and how to teach math strategies. We go to training sessions aimed at helping us use technology to use screen time to engage students. Sadly, “student happiness” is not a term we often use, or a topic that is often addressed at large. It is something that is usually left to classroom teachers to ensure. Without a doubt, teachers *want* their students to be happy! However, there are very few resources or supports in place for teachers to address it or engage with it in a meaningful way for every student.

Action research seeks to address these kinds of issues. As Fullan and Hargeaves suggest (2016), professional learning and development can help educators “seek deep learning with, and through, students, teachers and parents” to “[b]ecome engaged with good new pedagogies of inquiry, engagement, and activism to make learning deep and connected to the world of today” (p.21). I think the phrase that stands out most to me is “deep learning.” It can be difficult to fully immerse oneself in learning that is district-mandated or is supported by an organization that holds a stake in a specific outcome.

As stated in *Engaging in Action Research*, “[y]ou don’t invest time, energy and care into gathering information unless you have a reason to do it” (Parsons et al, 2013, p.8). I would also add that to be able to implement an Action Research project that carries weight and results in development and change, one must have the freedom and safety to critically examine organizational policies and personal beliefs without being tied to a specific outcome. That is not to say they are completely objective, since “[s]o many of our



human experiences have little to do with logic and objectivity and much more to do with relationships, which are powerfully *subjective*" (Parsons et al, 2013, p.129). In fact, one might argue that the most relational, subjective research is often the most rewarding and can be a project that others in the profession relate to and show the most interest in.

I have conducted a few classroom inquiries, and the ones that generally result in the biggest gains in terms of my professional development, are not the ones that record the way a certain approach positively impacted student reading levels or comprehension scores. They are usually the ones wherein the results crash against my carefully built expectations like a wrecking ball, leaving me standing amongst the rubble and examining my practice and how cutting corners to check boxes has resulted in it becoming ill-aligned with my beliefs. Then I am left to pick up the pieces and rebuild. As they say, "Actions speak louder than words."

Thus, the most effective inquiry projects -- the ones that have yielded the greatest amount of introspection and self-doubt -- were difficult and beyond frustrating to execute. Based on my first few trial lessons with my class, this action research project had the potential to be a *smashing* success.

### **Why Imaginative Education?**

I remember awkwardly going to an information session about SFU's Masters of Education programs and listening to Gillian Judson talk about what Imaginative Education was. She explained that the heart of Kieran Egan's theory is the idea that emotional engagement is fundamental to learning and that imagery and story are key to creating that emotional engagement. In his book, *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape our Understanding* (2007), Egan argues that the three aims of the

educational system (to socialize, to support individual development and to impart knowledge) are “incompatible in profound ways” (p.10). He suggests that these aims might be better met by acknowledging that as people progress through various stages of linguistic and literary development, they connect with learning using different kinds of understandings (somatic, mythic, romantic, philosophic and ironic). Each understanding has specific characteristics and is shaped by cognitive tools that are pivotal in creating meaningful connections between the learner and the learning.

Somatic understanding is the primary mode of sense-making during infancy and extends into toddlerhood, while children are learning language. Their learning is rooted in their sensory experience of the world around them. As their ability to use oral language increases, they move into a mythic understanding and the tools that will engage them the most are binary opposites, fantasy, metaphor, rhythm and narrative, imagery and stories. Once children begin to learn to read and write, they begin to connect with the world using a romantic understanding. This is characterized by an interest in extremes and limits, collections, heroic qualities and the humanized meaning or, as Egan refers to it, the “human interest angle” (p.93). As students begin to be exposed to more knowledge and perspectives, they begin to move into a philosophic understanding, during which they begin to investigate general theories and ideas and it is this shift in perspective that contributes to an intense interest in change agency. Although it often involves opinions formed around absolute beliefs, it is also characterized by an interest in anomalies. As people move from a black-and-white view of issues and begin to comprehend that knowledge is never complete, they enter ironic

understanding. This is characterized by an awareness that there are no absolutes and a longing for the wonder and magic of earlier experiences.

At that information session, Gillian explained all this simply and concisely. I was totally lost. This wasn't what I thought it was at all, and I had decided against the program until she said, "It's essentially about the role of teacher as story-teller..." The corners of my mouth curled up of their own volition and I had to cover my smile because it seemed ridiculously out of place in that moment. I would not have been able to explain why I was grinning like a fool if someone had asked. How could I tell them that the idea of teacher as story-teller filled me with a ridiculous amount of joy? I had found my place.

This educational theory easily combines with place-based and ecological education, in which the key is to create connections to nature and place by engaging emotions and nurturing those connections within students that will inspire an ethic of care within them toward the environment. Thus, the term Imaginative Ecological Education (IEE) has been coined. It is through this lens of IEE, using cognitive tools to inspire the students in my classroom to emotionally connect to the nature in our schoolyard, that I hope to also help them connect with their own feelings and develop their social emotional understandings.

### **Research Ethics:**

After participating in the ethics workshop led by Candase Jensen through Simon Fraser University's office of ethics, I put together a project proposal and sent it to our district superintendent. In it, I outlined the ethical considerations and precautions that would be taken. Upon district approval, I sent a notice to the parents of my students to

explain the purpose of the project and to assure them that their informed consent would be required for students to participate in the research project. Consent could be withdrawn at any time (see Appendix A).

I let parents know that our research would be conducted within the context of my normal instruction and practice. I stated that pseudonyms would be used if specific students or parents were referred to in my report and that faces or names would be blurred out in photos or videos unless specific parent consent was given. Given that I was conducting research during a pandemic, I reassured parents that all Covid precautions, protocols and procedures, as outlined by Fraser Health, would continue to be followed. I also noted that participation (or lack thereof) will have no affect on my relationship with their student, their grades or assessments and is completely voluntary. I indicated that, upon completion, the outcome of the research project will be available to district staff, administrators, or parents (and students) that request it. Happily, all parents not only consented to their child's participation, but also to the use of photos and recordings of their child. I am humbled by the support they have shown and the trust they have placed in me.

In addition to communicating this to parents, I discussed this with my class to let them know about the project and that we were doing it so I could learn to be a better teacher. I assured the students that I thought the project would be fun but that if they did not want to participate, I would have an alternate activity available to them. I pointed out

that if they chose not to participate it would not affect their grades or my relationship with them.

## **WATER**

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*Drops clinging to each other, stretching  
Reaching across the chasm of my window glass.  
Joining, molding themselves together  
To make something new.  
Mingling together.  
Perfect spheres. Elastic. Fragile.  
Delicate. Enduring.*

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### **Literature Review:**

#### ***Class Journal Entry from January 12, 2021:***

*We went outside for a rain concert today. I brought along some empty coffee tins to listen to the different sounds of the rain hitting the tin and the plastic lids. The kids enjoyed it, but again it brought up a lot of issues about who owns what and how to be in relation with each other.*

*Andrea was upset because Katie was kicking a puddle over the tree roots. Ellie was upset about the same. "I told her to stop and she didn't listen to me."*

*I tried to understand. "Did she kick mud on you?"*

*Andrea: "No, but I don't like her doing that!"*

*Me: "Why not?"*

*Andrea didn't have an answer to that. Normally, the rule in my classroom is "Stop means stop." But today her stop was a means to control someone else's behaviour, not to protect herself.*

*Brianna tried to get involved, told Ellie to "Shut up" and then came to tell me. Then stormed away into the school and hid in the washroom. I managed to coax her out with a hug and told her she could stay with me until she felt calmer.*

*Alina and Jessie were trying to soak themselves under the drain spout.*

*Tucker kept coming up and saying he couldn't find a good place. For every suggestion I made, he had a reason for why it wouldn't work.*

*Meanwhile, I had forgotten to send Daniel for reading support... AGAIN.*



*Fig. 3.0 Students enjoying the rain concert.*

*As we came in from outside: Brianna was pouting, Alina and Jesse were dripping, Andrea was crying SO LOUDLY I could hear her from across the field: "My life is horrible!" Ryan and Amani were so wound up they were randomly yelling and Jimmy was flinging and smacking his jacket into a puddle.*

*I came in feeling exhausted and defeated.*

Meanwhile, I was meeting with my Critical Friend Group and hearing about their magical forest walks, and district-sponsored mud kitchens and art shows in Victoria. The juxtaposition of their (seemingly) effortless success and my (very) rocky start was disheartening, to say the least. My task seemed impossible.

I started my research, believing that with all the well-educated, brilliant people who feel so strongly and had written so eloquently on this topic, someone MUST have an article about how to help a very busy class connect with the less-than-inspiring-and-sometimes-hazardous nature in an urban schoolyard, during a pandemic which prevents us from going anywhere that might give these kids a more serene nature to connect with. That isn't asking too much, right?

The first thing I did was to turn to David Sobel for inspiration and I LOVED his book *Childhood and Nature: Design Principles for Educators* (2008). It was very easy to read and I found myself getting so wrapped up in it that I was almost ready to pull my own children out of school and jump headlong into a social experiment of homeschooling/ wild schooling... (Hey, then I would not have to complete this research project that I had designed for myself that felt impossible to do!)

Sobel's (2008) urging "to make a world in which to find a place to discover a self" and "provide that safe place, the tools and materials and the right stories" (p.29) was everything I wanted for my students. Every point he made matched up with what drew



me to imaginative outdoor education: a belief in the importance of free and unhindered exploration, creation and play in the outdoors (p. 10); the way it not only helps children create emotional connections to nature and thus become better activists in the future (p.11), but also what they can learn from nature and how it can easily be connected to the curriculum by a teacher who is open to it (p.19).

I thrilled when I read the quotation by Robert Pyle (1993): "These are places of initiation, where the borders between ourselves and other creatures break down, where the earth gets under our nails and a sense of place gets under our skin...It is through close and intimate contact with a particular patch of ground that we learn to respond to the earth, to see that it really matters..." (Sobel, 2008, p.10). Yearning for initiation, I looked around our schoolyard for inspiration, but the curbs, metal poles and chain link fences seemed to be impenetrable borders that I could not get past. I had hoped, as I read on, that I would come across a chapter that was exactly what I was looking for. However, aside from empty lots filled with potential, Sobel did not really offer ideas for those teachers that have no creeks down the street to walk to, or neighbourhood wooded areas that are safe to play in -- although he did have the grace to acknowledge that lack of free access is part of the problem.

After reading that "[t]he problem with lots of nature education, or really with lots of any kind of education, is that it gets too big, or too abstract, too fast. If we could just abide by the turtle's guiding wisdom that slow and steady wins the race" (p.46), I realized that this was part of the issue my class had been having. I had taken them outside and expected them to make themselves at home in it. But it can be hard to settle in and find your groove when the landscape is un-giving and un-lovely.

I thought about the Vygotsky class I took last summer and decided that what they needed was to have me mediate their experience and scaffold connecting with nature.

The question became: How do I do that?

Gillian Judson's book, *Engaging Imagination in Ecological Education: Practical Strategies for Teaching* (2014), was the closest I could find to acknowledging the challenges presented within an urban setting and suggesting activities that would work in a schoolyard as well as in a creek bed. One of the activities she suggests is finding a sit spot. Judson (2014) points out that

benefits of the SPOT activity include increased opportunities for personal growth, reflection, engagement with place, and the development of attentiveness required for scientific inquiry...Over time, each child can place "roots" or establish emotional meanings in his or her place, ultimately developing a sense of rootedness in place through deepened knowledge and emotional connection (p.63).

Having experienced the benefits of a sit spot firsthand last fall, I suspected that this activity might offer the grounding effect that I suspected my class really needed and would help them to take the time to look deeper than the familiar and uninspiring surface. Again, the advice was to slow down because "[t]he development of an emotional attachment to place takes time" (p.65). So, I broke my project into nine lessons that I thought would teach them how to slow down, notice things, connect with a spot, connect with the beings in their spot, think about how their spot might feel, identify their spot as something more than a geographical place but also a being, play with it, help it and thank it. My Critical Friend Group also suggested that the thirty minutes of time that we had in our back field after all the staggered recesses and lunches wasn't enough, which was something I realized as well. I moved us to the front of the school where we could spend the hour and a half between recess and lunch if we needed to.

I had a beginning, but I just could not quite find a way to pull my head out of the limitations I faced in our setting. In fact, it felt like most of what I had read had not fully addressed the limitations faced by those who teach in an urban setting. I would even go so far as to say it seemed as if those limitations had been dismissed as unimportant or trivial. That frustrated me, if I'm being honest. I just needed to read that someone somewhere had faced a similar situation and here were their tips to create connections in a concrete jungle. However, the message on page 61 that "[o]ur places are sources of mystery and magic that can be evoked in the telling of our stories" and the provocation Dr. Judson presents by asking, "How can you evoke your students' sense of mystery about the storied nature of their places?" inspired me. It helped me to realize that if students could not emotionally connect to nature because of the lack of wild spaces, maybe I could use cognitive tools to inspire that emotional connection. I decided to tie each "lesson" into a cognitive tool and give the class a task to complete before we came inside and wrote in our very special sit spot journal about it.

Reading "Imagination and the Cognitive Tools of Place-Making" by Mark Fettes and Gillian Judson gave me some insights into how to support my students in connecting to our place. As I read that "place-making also entails a sense of possibility...that there is more to a place than meets the eye, an inexhaustible and ever-present depth of meaning: and that a place could be other than it is, with manifold implications for the relationships that constitute it" (Fettes & Judson, 2010, p.124), I was encouraged to take our learning deeper than the constraints I felt our situation presented. So much of my energy had been spent dwelling on the impossibilities of our situation that I hadn't stopped to consider the possibilities of our space. "Imagination is

enriched by opportunities to feel, to think, to experience, and is impoverished or constrained by their lack” (p.125) and I had focused on what was lacking instead of the opportunities.

I knew that coming in from recess and moving directly to our outdoor time might be challenging for some students, so I put together a ritual of sorts to help them transition from recess (the tone of which is unstructured energy burning time) to our “sit spot time” (which I had hoped would be more of a quiet, contemplative time). I wanted something that showed the students that this time was set aside and special that they could settle into, some “actions that [would] symbolize or enact a collective sense of place, and that [would] blur the lines between place and self”, (p.130). So, I set up a time for us to have our snacks, have a feelings check-in with our friends, listen to a story outside, do some deep breathing, before hearing our task and taking it to our sit spots.

Our outside time was now framed with ritual, scaffolded by lessons and tasks connected to the lesson that would help students use cognitive tools to create connections with their spot. But I wanted more. I needed a hook to inspire them to use the correct tool in the correct way. I needed some books. I found many that connected to the theme but did not model the tool. I sensed my research had hit another wall and I began to get despondent yet again.

I read some more.

Gillian Judson’s article “The Role of Mental Imagery in Imaginative and Ecological Teaching” reminded me of what drew me to IE in the first place. Story-telling. As she points out “[t]he image, the story form, and other tools of the imagination are

powerful tools for cultural cohesion and identity; they are “a form of currency” that make knowledge meaningful and help convey cultural knowledge” (2014a, p.7). I had decided to use cognitive tools to build emotional connections to our schoolyard and I wanted to model the use of those tools through story. I couldn’t find the resources I needed to do that, so I looked within. I was a story-teller. The power of stories had been what drew me to the theatre for my under-graduate degree. The power of stories had been what I built my literacy program around in my classroom. The power of stories had led me to this cohort and program. If I couldn’t find the stories I needed, I would write them myself. Except, that is a lie. I didn’t write them. The stories wrote themselves. They flew from my fingertips across my keyboard and onto the screen of their own volition. Dr. Judson quotes Eisner when she writes, “Education can be considered, at least in part, as a process of expanding our imagic store, and helping students make connections among its contents.” (p.12). I took the images from our classroom experiences and from the unseen gifts our area outside offered and I turned them into a map of sorts to help my students find the treasure that was waiting for them if they just looked carefully enough.

I hoped that by tying our experiences outside into a class brainstorm and journal write afterwards, that students would be “encouraged to express through evocative language just how they experience the world through their bodies” (p.14). Expanding student vocabulary to help them encompass their experiences outside might also help them to express their feelings in a way that would increase their understanding of themselves and others in general. Giving a name to feelings and being able to describe them and the circumstances they have arisen from is the foundation from which social emotional learning arises.

In addition to the weekly lesson and cognitive tool, I decided to offer an unstructured time the next day as a way for the class to engage with their spots on their own terms and also as a time for me to connect with our schoolyard, myself. In his article “World as Co-Teacher: Learning to Work with a Peerless Colleague,” Sean Blenkinsop (2010) suggests that

We begin by literally interpreting the world as co-teacher...So, we need to know and respect each other first. We need to listen to the other, to allow ourselves to be changed by them...We need to recognize our strengths and those of our co-teacher and more importantly, with humility, acknowledge our own limitations...Within this, we need to be filled with trust, to relish in the play that is learning, and to share this with our students (p.28).

I wanted my co-teacher (or Othuw, as Dr. Blenkinsop refers to her) to have equal time with our class and for me to have time to watch her in action. I knew my students needed time to commune with the wild outside and I needed time to observe my students and how they were putting my carefully planned lessons into action.

I set up a list of quiet activities that the class could take outside to do while enjoying their outside time and included some colouring sheets and sketch paper in their duotangs, just in case they got bored. I had yet to realize that “while we make some contribution to Othuw, we do so in her shadow. We are in the presence of someone who is greater than we are, and this is known to both of us” (p.35). In a moment of re-reading this article I came to understand just how much I need control within my classroom and what a terrible co-teacher I am. I discovered that relinquishing control of the students and trusting another being was very difficult for me. It appears I



have embraced the de-colonizing of education in name only and that I have a long way to go as I work to embrace it within my day-to-day practice.

### **MIX**

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*The weaving of story and experiences.*

*Metaphor, images, emotional connections not just to content, but to ourselves.  
each other*

*our world*

*all the worlds.*

*Where we learn our place in it and then learn how  
vast and huge and breathtaking it all is.*

*What we thought was our raindrop is actually “just” the smallest molecule  
within an unlimited ocean.*

*That when we sink down into the depths of it, we become one with it  
and rise up again.*

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### **Research Design:**

In the beginning, I tried a few different types of place-making activities that were poorly planned or vague in their purpose. My first effort involved telling students to go out into the schoolyard and “connect with a spot.” Some took to it immediately, some took off to the playground, some took it out on each other and started fighting, and one took it as a personal attack on her idea of fun.

“This is boring!” she glowered. “It’s so lame!”

I tried connecting our outdoor time to curricular content. Our weekly class theme was “Rain” and we were exploring states of matter in Science. After reading through *A Walking Curriculum: Evoking Wonder and Developing Sense of Place*, I was inspired by the “Wet World Walk” activity (Judson, 2018, p.20) to take my class outside to do story workshop in the puddles outside and come inside to write out their story. I feel that the best way to describe that lesson is with an excerpt from my journal:

**Journal entry January 7, 2021:**

I tried to have them play outside in the puddles and create a story. While we were playing in puddles, Amani came up to me to complain: “He is playing in my puddle!”

It gave us a great chance to talk about who the puddle belonged to and why. It’s something I want to address with my class. Who does nature belong to? Who gets to take from it? Whose job is it to take care of it? How do we decide?

Carter was getting upset because he had an idea that only involved putting one branch across the puddle but then others joined in and he couldn’t play out his idea the way he wanted to. He just couldn’t accept or work with others sharing in his idea and turning it into something else. He ended up needing to step away for a while to process his feelings.

I thought story workshop outside would be fun and exciting for them but when we came inside, they seemed to have a lot of difficulty with it. Maybe they didn’t have enough time to play it out? It was so new and exciting. Plus, some kids really didn’t know how to play outside. It makes me think we need to go outside more.



*Fig. 4.0 and 4.1 Students using puddles and nature elements for Story Workshop.*

What quickly became apparent was that they needed to have their place-making experience scaffolded. As Parsons et al suggest “[f]iguring out what to do and when to do it is key to project management... some activities might be done at the same time,

others must be done in sequence...and creating a schedule is part of sorting this out"

1. I feel that people like me. (Scale: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) (All the time)

2. I like myself for the most part. (Scale: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) (All the time)

3. I know when I am calm. (Scale: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) (All the time)

4. I know what makes me calm. *Deep breathing very slowly* (Scale: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) (All the time)

5. I like feeling calm. (Scale: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) (All the time)

6. I know when I am angry. (Scale: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) (All the time)

7. I know what makes me angry. (Scale: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) (All the time)

8. I know the difference between angry and anxious. (Scale: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) (All the time)

9. I know when I am anxious. (Scale: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) (All the time)

10. I know when I am starting to lose control. (Scale: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) (All the time)

11. I know at least one strategy to help me when I feel I am losing control. *Deep breathing* (Scale: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) (All the time)

12. I like being outside. (Scale: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) (All the time)

*Fig.4.2 Completed student social-emotional survey.*

(2013, p.80).

So, I started again. This time armed with a plan that I felt very neatly tied all these aspects in together. I would begin and end with a student social-emotional survey to give me some insight into my students' ability to identify their feelings and identify strategies to help them manage their feelings (see Appendices B and C). I set up a timeline of activities that we followed each Tuesday and Wednesday to help

those students with anxiety to feel more secure knowing what was happening during our outdoor exploration time. We took some time as a class to brainstorm activities that we could do during our time on Wednesdays that were independent, calming and quiet, and that didn't require too many supplies or items to carry out. Students would collect their supplies and have them sitting on their desks when they came in from recess.

### **Tuesday Ritual:**

#### **10:20-10:30 (10 minutes):**

Pre-feeling check-in with a friend and snack.

Listen to teacher read a story.

Take some deep breaths.

Hear exploration task.

#### **10:30-10:50 (20 minutes):**

Exploration task outside.

#### **10:50-11:05 (15 minutes):**

Come inside. Discuss.

#### **11:05-11:30 (25 minutes):**

Post-feeling check-in and Journal write.

**Wednesday Ritual:****10:20-10:30 (10 minutes):**

Pre-feeling check-in with a friend and snack.

Listen to teacher read a piece from "Slow Down."

Take some deep breaths.

**10:30-11:00 (30 minutes):**

Choice of: reading, sketching, writing, breathing, building, playing in our sit spot.

**11:00-11:15 (15 minutes):**

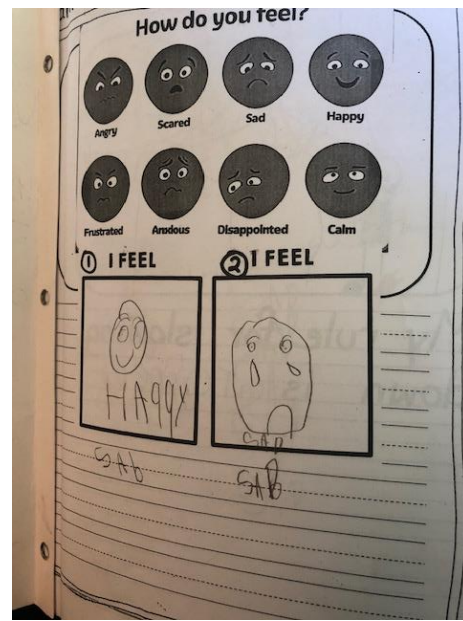
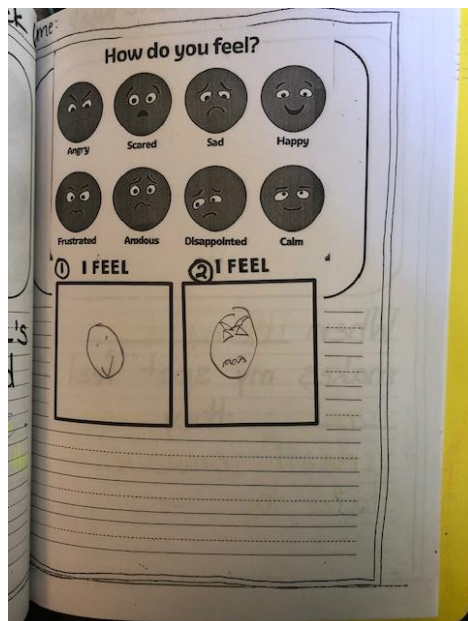
Come inside.

Post-feeling check-in.

Discussion.

*Fig. 4.3 Timeline of activities on Tuesday and Wednesday.*

My hope for the feelings check-ins was that they would provide some interesting data about the students' ability to identify their feelings as well as some support in identifying the different feelings that they might be experiencing, in general. I had thought that perhaps they may come in from recess disregulated (which had often been the case in the past) and would recognize that their time outside made them feel calmer and more regulated. As the following pictures show, that was not always the case.



*Fig. 4.4 and 4.5 Student feelings check-ins. Box 1 is before our outdoor time, Box 2 is after.*

My students were straddling the boundary of mythic and romantic understandings and my project needed to incorporate the cognitive tools from both. Kieran Egan (1997) states, “Mythic understanding involves considerable story-shaping of experience so that events, facts, ideas, and people may be made affectively meaningful” (p. 64). As I put together a plan to mediate their relationship with our schoolyard, I began writing a story for each lesson that was tailor-made to the theme we were exploring (see Appendix D). For the first time I felt like I was beginning to master using IE in my classroom in a way that felt organic and authentic to me. It was proof that I was not just “exposed to new ideas” but that I could creatively fit them into my own vision (Fullan, 1993, p.16). All the pieces are coming together in a way that included Imaginative Education, but also fully encompassed who I was as a teacher and my vision for education. By embracing the role of story-teller and writing my own stories that would highlight and model how to use cognitive tools to connect with our spots, I got to combine my love of words and images into something that would (hopefully) inspire my students to do the same.

The use of story as a cognitive tool is also apparent in the student journal prompts. By discussing their discoveries as a class and then recording them in the journal, students are engaging in telling the story of their relationship with their special spot in the schoolyard and how it was formed, as well as considering the story of that spot as a being unto itself. As Fettes and Judson (2010) point out, place-making is “an active, willed process, not a passive one. A place exists as a place for us because of the effort we expend relating to it...however, it is our mental reaching out to grasp the possibilities of a place, its past, its future, its meaning for us, that really shapes the



relationship” (p.124). The purpose of the journal was to support the students in using cognitive tools to relate to their spot in deeper ways than they may have done if it was simply their spot to play (see Appendix E).

### Weekly Break Down

<p>1) Intro to slowing down (Binary opposites) Fast vs. slow Big vs. small Far vs. close</p> <p>Read story: “Fast and Slow”</p>	<p>Task outside: Walk once around the field. What did you notice?</p> <p>Try again, walk slower, try not to talk to others. What did you notice?</p>	<p>Journal: Brainstorm some rules for slowing down. Write the “Slowing Down” rule book together.</p>
<p>2) Noticing (Sense of wonder)</p> <p>Read story: “Arthur and the Magic Window”</p>	<p>Task outside: Use your Magic Window. What did you notice? Pick one thing and find three details about them.</p>	<p>Journal: Write down your one thing. What were three things you noticed about them?</p> <p>Brainstorm some “juicy” describing words together.</p>
<p>3) Picking a sit spot (mental imagery)</p> <p>Read story: “How to Know When a Sit Spot has Picked You”</p>	<p>Task outside: Find your sit spot. Take your time. Make it a spot you like and feel comfortable in. It is yours, you can’t change them.</p>	<p>Journal: Where is your spot? Why did you pick that spot/ how did they pick you?</p>
<p>4) Who owns our spot (story telling)</p> <p>Read story: “The Stories of Abigail’s Spot”</p>	<p>Task outside: We are a part of nature. Look around and name the beings that share your spot and add yourself to that list.</p>	<p>Journal: My spot is shared by _____, _____, _____ and me.</p>
<p>5) Getting to know our spot (heroic qualities) (metaphor)</p> <p>Read story: “My Spot”</p>	<p>Task outside: What does your sit spot do for the other beings you share them with?</p>	<p>Journal: My sit spot is a _____. (What can you compare them to?)</p>



<p>6) The emotions of our spot (Humanizing meaning)</p> <p>Read story: "Feelings are Natural"</p>	<p>Task outside:</p> <p>Imagine how your spot would look if they were angry, sad, happy, scared. What would cause them to feel that way?</p>	<p>Journal: When _____ makes my spot feel _____ she/he/ they _____.</p>
<p>7) Spot as a playmate (Change of context role play)</p> <p>Read story: "Simran's Play Date"</p>	<p>Task outside:</p> <p>Bring a friend to your spot and introduce them. Remember to use "she/he/they" instead of "it." Include one detail about your spot. Then play together.</p>	<p>Journal: I met _____'s spot _____. She/he/they had _____. We _____ together.</p>
<p>8) Gifts (Heroic qualities)</p> <p>Read story: "Katie Learns Gratitude"</p>	<p>Task outside:</p> <p>Spend some time thinking about what your spot has offered you. What have you appreciated and enjoyed? Say thank you.</p>	<p>Journal: Make a thank you card.</p> <p>What is something you want to thank your spot for?</p>
<p>9) Giving back (agent of change)</p>	<p>Task outside:</p> <p>Spend some time lovingly taking care of the front of the school. Notice what needs are there that you can help with. Is it just garbage? Can we weed?</p>	<p>Journal: Some things I notice that need taking care of are:</p>

*Fig. 4.6 A table of the weekly focus, the cognitive tool employed in the story and in the journal entry, and the place-making "task" outside.*

As expected, the data that molded and sculpted my understandings the most were the unplanned moments, the comments that came unprompted and the conversations that resulted. I was glad that I set aside time after each day to record these unexpected oddments and my reflections on them in my own journal (see

Appendix F) as well as to record the class activities, brain webs and comments in photos (see Appendix G) for reference later. These unscripted bits and pieces provide the mortar that cement my data and my findings and build them into understandings that will stand up against the winds of change and the sands of time. (Although this kind of certainty, never bodes well for teaching, and certainly does not jive with the ironic understanding I have been cultivating through this program).

### ***TIME TO SET***

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*"We do not seek these things out and explore them again and again simply for the profit that we might gain in exchanging what we have found for something else. What we have found, in exploring and coming to understanding, to learn to live well with these things is **not an arms-length commodity** but has become **part of who we are**, and how we carry ourselves in the world. **We love them and we love what becomes of us in our dedication to them.**"*

*~ David Jardine, p. 188 of Pedagogy Left in Peace*

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### **Implementation & Fieldwork:**

Looking back, some of my "disastrous" first lessons weren't as bad as I recalled. The "rain concert" that I described at the beginning of my literature review had more value than I thought. As I go back through the videos of the students (see Appendix H), I hear them using their senses to engage with our environment and having fun in the rain. When asked what she noticed, this student replies: "I notice that my jacket, when it [the rain] falls it makes a nice drumming sound."



*Fig. 5.0 Listening to the rain on her jacket hood.*

Two students came to tell me: “If you listen closely to the puddles... like, if you listen closely... you can hear it.”

Another stood by the drain and noticed: “It kinda sounds like a waterfall.”

Another introductory lesson involved me bringing in cedar branches that had blown down in a windstorm and decorative pinecones. Students were invited to bring in natural elements too. Together, we used the last of my homemade playdough that was drying out and made mini treehouses. There were many examples in my reading of how fort-building is an important component of place-making. It wasn't a possibility in our schoolyard, but Sobel (2008) points out that “[p]aracosms are elaborate fantasy creations – imaginary worlds created by individuals or small groups of children... I have found that truly inspired teachers...create paracosmic worlds in their classrooms” and he asks, “How can we use elaborated stories and the creation of imagined worlds as a structure for learning experiences for children” (p. 26-27)? Inspired by this question, I set out to find a way. We used our mini treehouses to play out stories together and the sound bites from the act of building and playing that I recorded in my journal demonstrate students using self-regulation, cooperation, empathy and imagination:



*Fig. 5.1 Listening to the drops hit the puddle.*

### **February 17, 2021**

Jimmy needs play dough and at least 6 people ran to him to offer him some of theirs.

Full bucket of pinecones and I caution “Only take what you need, remember others need some too.”

Brianna responds: “I only need two.”

When Daniel comes late and has no pinecones multiple kids bring him some of theirs. Brianna brings him a golden pinecone (clearly coveted) and everyone gasps at “the golden pinecone.”

Brianna finds a little inchworm and before anyone can freak out about a bug, we look at it under the microscope before letting it go outside. Gasps and wonder and interest all around.

While playing with their treehouses:

Jimmy: “Pretend you saw a giant meteor coming!” Raina: “We’re stuck in space!”

Andrea: “We made little brooms!” Joshua: “That’s supposed to be over here.”

Amani: “We’re pretending someone is stuck in a cave and I’m going to rescue them. We just have to make the cave.”

Shayla: “And then the monster went away.”

Arthur: “We made a door and a floor.”

As we are going out for recess: Mike “Can you collect more sticks outside?”

Two students asked if someone would play with them at recess and in both cases three people volunteered. We connected the need for a friend outside to the need for play dough or pinecones while we were building houses.

Me: “Jimmy, how did it make you feel when so many people offered you play dough?”

Jimmy: “Cared for.”

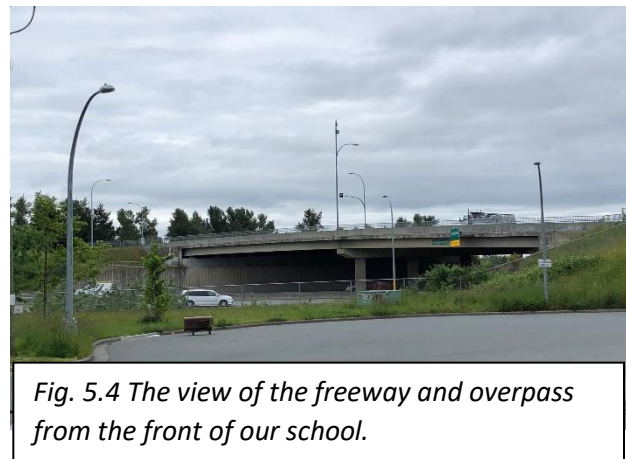
After cleaning up: Joshua “Can we keep writing after lunch?”

*Fig. 5.2 and 5.3 Making mini treehouses for Story Workshop.*



These reminders of the positive experiences we have had while engaging with nature in and around our classroom before I implemented scaffolded lessons are heartening. They remind me of the impact that even these small attempts to connect can have on children's relationship with nature.

Our space provided some very frustrating limitations. The first time we gathered in the outdoor classroom at the front of the school, the kids eagerly did their feelings check-in and I began to read to them. My first story. That I wrote myself. That tied in binary opposites so well. Also, as an aside, I sort of revel in my ability to tell or read a story well. Four years of a drama degree and a natural penchant for the dramatic mean that I love spinning a tale and doing all the voices and dropping my voice so my audience strains to hear it or raising it so it makes them jump. I started to read, beginning to cast the spell... and a helicopter flew loudly overhead. I paused, collected myself and continued. A semi leaned on his horn as he sped past on the freeway a couple of hundred meters away.

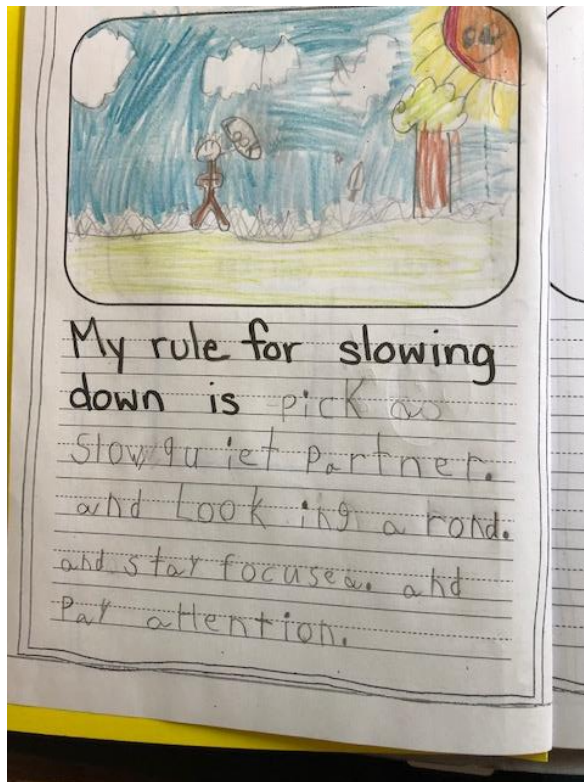


*Fig. 5.4 The view of the freeway and overpass from the front of our school.*

I persevered as an ambulance wailed passed from the hospital up the road.

"We can't hear you!" complained one student, as I limped through the end of that first reading. I began to sense that some images with the words would have helped them connect... Heck! Maybe just hearing me would have helped them connect. We moved on to the task, which went fairly well. Our discussion in the classroom afterwards

went even better and their journal write was the first time that no one complained about writing all year!



*Fig. 5.5 First student journal entry on "slowing down" after our fast vs. slow walk.*

The next day was their free time day. I had them each take out their plastic wrapped towels and an activity to do independently. We had had a very thorough discussion about safety and the purpose for going outside. I brought along a book I had bought with nature meditations about slowing down. This one had pictures. I read it to them outside, this time weaving my way so that they could all see the pictures. Again, fighting the noise of traffic and children shrieking in the back of the school during their recess. My class struggled less with the distractions this time... I suspect because most of the kids had just about given up trying to hear me read.

Off they went to find an area.



*Fig. 5.6 Spending time noticing the patterns of the leaves in the tree.*



Some sat down and settled into the idea right away. Others could not seem to stay away from each other. They found a snail and needed to call all the children near them to come and see. One had a ladybug crawling on her hand and ran around to interrupt and share.

Someone else decided to pick a flower. Then someone else wanted to pick a flower. Then someone had to go to the bathroom but the front door had locked behind us. Then someone was angry because they didn't like this activity. I ran from spot to spot, trying to settle them all back into staying separate and quietly observing.

By Week 2 I was giving up on the idea of reading outside and I was exhausted from trying to mediate their experience and keep them on task while we were outside.

My journal entry from the end of Week 2 reflects this:

*Fig. 5.7 Taking refuge from the rain.*



Our free day was wet and so I had the students under the shelter in the front of the school. It felt crazy. I am putting a ton of energy into getting them to listen to the story. I was hoping to show them how to use their time outside to slow down and use outside to calm themselves. This class has such a hard time with that. It feels like I am fighting them on it and I'm tired of fighting them. It makes me wonder:

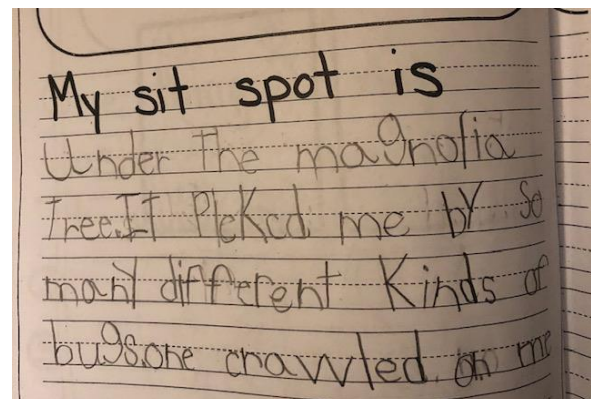
Am I trying to pen in my restless cows? Am I putting too many restrictions on them? Am I trying to dictate and direct their outdoor learning when I should just be relying on the environment to be the teacher? Will they learn anything when I just release them to be?

We were heading into Week 3 and I was getting nervous. The students were just about ready to connect with a spot and the first time I had tried that, it hadn't gone too well. There were three students this time who asked if they could just do worksheets instead of joining in with our outside time, which told me that I might not have done a good job building those connections to the outdoors.

I knew that this time I wanted to make it clear that we didn't own "our" spots, that we referred to spots as "ours" in the way we refer to "our" family. As in: we belong to it, it doesn't belong to us. I decided the best way was to use the story to suggest that our spots pick us and show us with subtle hints that we have to really look for.

This time, we had our snack and story in the classroom before going outside. Being able to read without contending with the noise outside was such a relief! I knew I had gotten it right when all three students who had asked to do worksheets, decided that they wanted to go outside and be picked by a sit spot! The journal entries after show how much their observation skills have grown. It was also interesting to me that students didn't just pick "pretty spots" under trees or by flowers. Katie's journal entry states: "My sit spot is mostly dirt. It picked me by showing me little tofts [sic] of grass blowing in the wind."

Many felt that creatures called them to the spot. Carter writes: "My sit spot is under the magnolia tree. It picked me by so many different kinds of bugs. One crawled on me."



*Fig. 5.8 Student journal entry about sit spot.*



This week's time outside was calmer and more focused than ever before. It felt like the students had learned how to notice the nature around them and connect with it on a deeper level. I felt like their attachment to their space was forming and their ability to focus on engage with the "wild" in their spot was beginning to form. I sat basking in the sun that week feeling like we had started to solidify our learnings. But isn't it always the case that just when you feel the most secure the cracks are beginning to form? The following week split my carefully constructed plans apart.

I had been struggling with constant interruptions during our unstructured outdoor time on Wednesdays... and by that, I mean me interrupting the kids. I spent a lot of time running around reminding students that this wasn't recess and "stopping them from playing" (as I put it in one journal entry, which I now wince at). One would find a snail and everyone would run over to look at it. Then someone would find a bee and everyone would run away shrieking. I was kept busy running from spot to spot and trying to keep them on task (or so I thought).



*Fig. 5.9 and 6.0 Students noticing ants and a snail friend in our sit spots.*

I decided to take an article outside and model what I wanted them to do: sit quietly and read in nature. I just so happened to grab Sean Blenkinsop's article "World as Co-

Teacher: Learning to Work with a Peerless Colleague.” In it, he reminds teachers about how they treat their co-teacher. How they trust that the co-teacher knows what they are doing and how we learn about our own strengths and short-comings as we engage with someone else’s. He chastens those refer to Nature as a co-teacher in any way less than literally.

*I hadn’t been trusting my co-teacher.*

So, I was quiet and just watched the kids learn. I watched them move from their spot to check out a roly poly in someone else’s and then move back to their spot. I watched them dance around in the shade with books in their hands that they weren’t reading. I watched Brianna and Ellie sit in the sun together for a good long time, playing with ladybugs.

*Fig. 6.1 and 6.2 Students getting to know the ladybugs and woodlice in our sit spots.*



The class may have needed a little mediation in the beginning, but I needed to learn to let go and let my co-teacher take it away, even if things didn’t look the way I had pictured. I noticed that my own social



emotional learning was very positively impacted when I was able to sit back and watch. Time to let go and trust more, I realized.

### **Data Analysis:**

After our first trial lessons outdoors, I had a tendency to think that the feeling of chaos was the result of a lack of planning on my part. Once I started using my carefully pre-measured, controlled, sterilized lesson plan, I just dismissed what came before as inconsequential. I forgot that Sobel (2008) says “[k]nowledge without love will not stick. But if love comes first, knowledge is sure to follow. Too often in schools, we’re trying to inject knowledge without providing the experiences that allow love to slowly take root and then flourish” (p.12-13). Those experimental outdoor experiences that incorporated the senses and the free play worked hand-in-hand with the lessons that tied in the cognitive tools. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I was taking them through a recapitulation of sorts: beginning with the somatic and then incorporating the stories and wonder of the mythic and ending with the heroic qualities and change agency of the romantic. Tying in their outdoor experiences with stories and writing prompts helped to further their language development as well. Students began to use more sophisticated language and vocabulary to describe their sit spots. They also began to recognize and point out “juicy words” (as we call them) in our reading. (Actually, while I was reading. But it’s pretty hard to get mad at a child for yelling out, “Juicy word!” with their eyes aglow and the biggest smile you’ve ever seen).

Suddenly words like “dirty” or “shiny” or “comfortable” or “dry” were being used instead of the standard “cute” or “pretty.” Phrases like “spreading over me” or “feeling disappointed” were beginning to pop up.

This is especially apparent in the journal entries that use a metaphor for their spot:

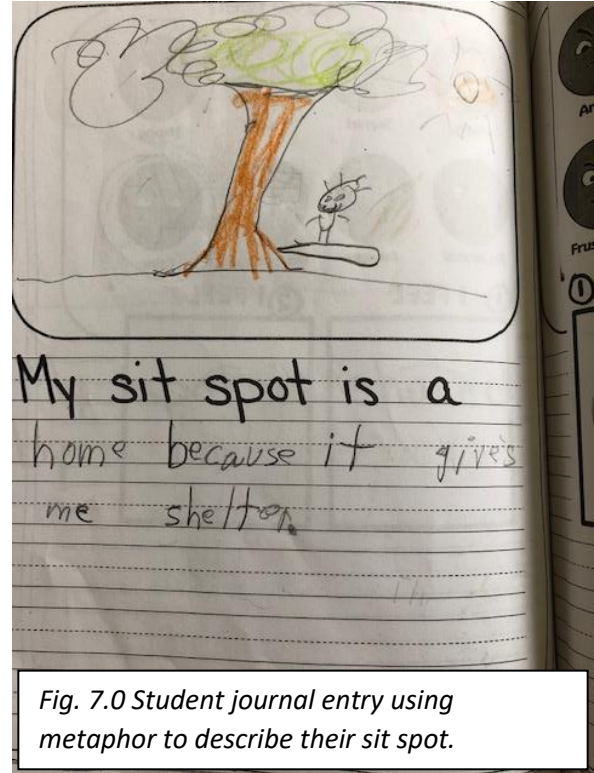
“My sit spot is a warrior. It protects little ants.”

“My sit spot is a safe. It holds treasure.”

“My sit spot is a home. It smells good.”

“My sit spot is a wrestling ring. It is a place where ants fight.”

“My sit spot is a bed. It is cozy and the grass feels soft.”



*Fig. 7.0 Student journal entry using metaphor to describe their sit spot.*

Of course, some had a difficult time understanding metaphors:

“My sit spot is a tree.” (And it was a tree).

“My sit spot is a porcupine and I am the queen and Carter is the king.”

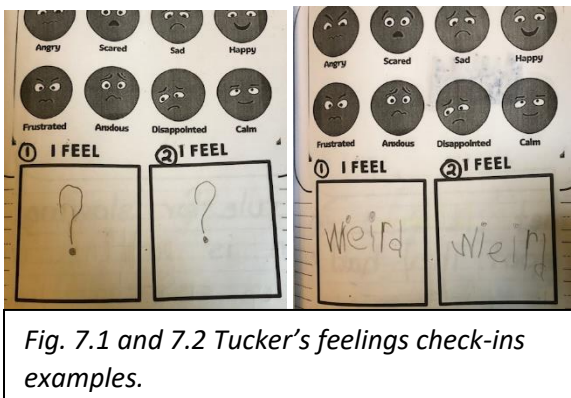
I don't know if the student metaphors would have been as rich without the story and powerpoint images beforehand. This was the first time that I had put a powerpoint presentation together with images to pair with the story, but it was the only way I could think of to demonstrate the non-literal side of metaphors.

To be honest, the stories I wrote are amongst the few things that I am unabashedly proud of. I love them and my students loved them. I had no idea how much, until I wrapped up the project and told the class that I would be reading them the last of the stories. The resounding “Awwwwww!” of disappointment buried itself deep in



my heart with a sad sort of victory. The stories were pivotal in creating the emotional engagement that was needed for my students to connect with their sit spots.

I had hoped that the Social Emotional surveys would demonstrate how the students' emotional engagement with outdoors had also helped them understand themselves and their own feelings better. Interestingly, when one compares the scores from Survey A to Survey B, the scores are lower in the second survey. At first, I was a little surprised, given the growth I had seen in my students' abilities to name their emotions. Especially Tucker who started our project with question marks in his feelings check-ins and, after we had spent some time using feelings cards to support him in naming his emotions, started to write "weird" in his feelings box.



However, when I started to ask the students about their surveys, it seemed as if their scores were lower because they were being more truthful and self-aware in their answers than they had been the first

time around. For instance: After Spring Break we had a few instances where Brianna would insist she wasn't angry (in a shouty voice with balled fists and huge frown). Despite this, she wrote that she knew when she was angry and what made her angry "all the time" in the first survey. In the second survey, she stated she "sometimes" knew when she was angry and didn't know at all what made her angry. Tucker stopped during the second survey to ask what "anxious" meant and, upon hearing some examples of how anxious can feel, then changed his answer stating "Oh, I feel like that all the time!"

These insights demonstrate to me that the students were becoming increasingly comfortable with being honest, with me and with themselves, about their feelings. In class, I am consistently talking about how feelings are not good or bad or right or wrong, they're just feelings. Perhaps considering that other beings besides themselves might experience feelings made a difference in how they viewed their own.

Question	Survey	All the time	Most of the time	Sometimes	Once in a while	Never
<i>I feel that people like me.</i>	A	5	8	4	--	1
	B	4	6	7	--	1
<i>I like myself for the most part.</i>	A	7	8	2	--	1
	B	9	6	2	--	1
<i>I know when I am calm.</i>	A	5	7	5	1	--
	B	1	6	7	3	1
<i>I know what makes me calm.</i>	A	4	6	5	--	3
	B	9	2	4	--	3
<i>I like feeling calm.</i>	A	8	5	3	--	2
	B	8	4	4	2	--
<i>I know when I am angry.</i>	A	11	4	3	--	--
	B	7	6	3	1	1
<i>I know what makes me angry.</i>	A	7	5	2	--	4
	B	10	4	1	1	2
<i>I know the difference between angry and anxious.</i>	A	4	6	3	2	3
	B	3	2	5	2	6
<i>I know when I am anxious.</i>	A	5	4	5	1	3
	B	4	2	5	3	4
<i>I know when I am starting to lose control.</i>	A	9	7	--	1	1
	B	6	2	6	1	3
<i>I know at least one strategy to help me when I am losing control.</i>	A	4	6	5	1	3
	B	3	3	5	5	2
<i>I like being outside.</i>	A	13	5	--	--	--
	B	12	4	2	--	--

Fig. 7.3 Table of student Social Emotional Surveys. Totals are out of 18 surveys. Survey A was completed in March, before the project began. Survey B was completed in May, once the project had wrapped up. See Appendices B and C.

A strategy that we focused on often when transitioning to the outdoors or back into the school was deep breathing. It isn't a new strategy to my class, since we pause to take a few slow breaths multiple times a day. I found it fascinating that in Survey A the strategy of deep breathing wasn't one that came up as often as taking a break or even electronics. However, in Survey B it was the top strategy listed.

*Fig. 7.4 Comparison of strategies identified by students in Social Emotional Learning Survey A and B. See Appendices B and C.*

**Specifying Strategies:**

**Question:** *What makes you feel calm?*

Survey A

Space/ Quiet time/ break IIIIIII

Don't know III

Electronics II

Deep breathing II

Friends/ Parent II

Snuggling with a pet I

Reading I

Survey B

Deep Breathing/ Tracing hand IIIII

Don't know III

Reading/ Colouring III

Snuggling pet II

Friends/ School II

Break I

Electronics I

**Question:** *What is a strategy to help when you feel you are losing control?*

Survey A

Space/ Calm Down bin IIIIIII

I don't know IIII

Breathing III

Colouring/ Reading II

Playing/ Friends II

Power talk I

Brain Dance I

Survey B

Don't know IIIIIII

Deep breathing IIIII

Talk to someone I

Playing I

Space I

Unfortunately, the pandemic interfered and I was unable to complete the last two lessons that I had planned on because I had to self-isolate with my youngest child for two weeks. I was disappointed by the abrupt end to my project and the lack of "closure" for my class and myself. When I came back to class, we had one more class discussion in which I thanked the students for their help. I told them that the project was over and

asked if they had any final thoughts or feedback that they wanted to share. The comments that were shared in response were overwhelmingly positive and indicated that their time with their sit spot had had a positive effect on their emotional and mental health. The list below includes tally marks beside some of the comments because many agreed or said something similar:

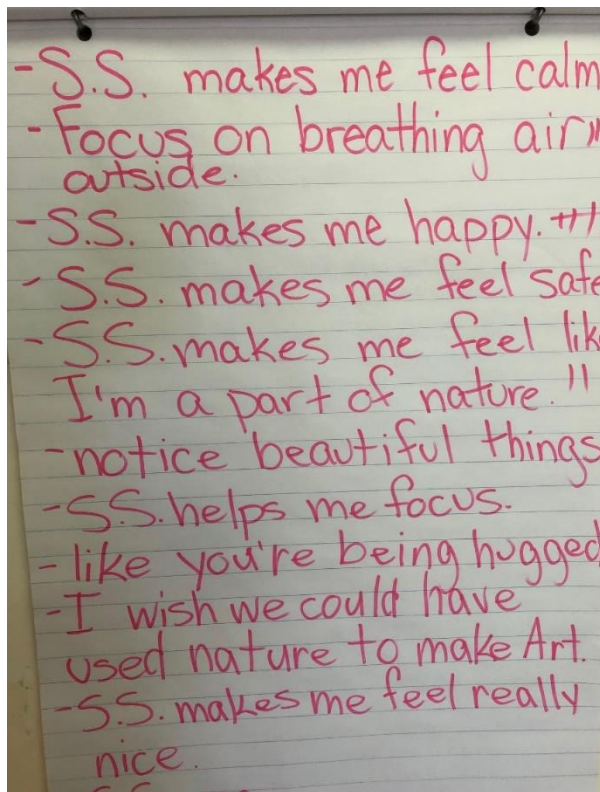


Fig. 7.5 Class discussion feedback.

They include:

- "My sit spot makes me feel calm." III
- "I could focus on breathing air outside." II
- "My sit spot makes me feel happy." IIIII
- "My sit spot makes me feel safe."
- "My sit spot makes me feel like I'm a part of nature." II
- "I noticed beautiful things."
- "My sit spot helps me focus."
- "It feels like you're being hugged."
- "I wish we could have used nature to make Art."
- (To which someone replied that we did when we made the mini treehouses).
- "My sit spot makes me feel really nice."

On the whole, it appears that the project was a positive experience for the students and that they felt that it supported their social emotional learning and growth. I was impressed with the way stories and imagery aided the students into connecting with the outdoors and with their sit spots, in particular.



## CRACKS AND SEAMS

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*“There is a crack in everything.  
That’s how the light gets in.”*

*~ Leonard Cohen*

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### Conclusions:

Once again, the biggest learnings didn’t come from the questions I had set out to answer. If I’m honest, those questions were written with a mind to reinforce the boundaries of the classroom rather than make me a better teacher (however much I’d like to pretend that that wasn’t the case). Let’s take another look at them, shall we?

- Which cognitive tools will increase student connection to place (in this case our schoolyard)?
- What impact will fostering a connection with the outdoors have on the social emotional learning in my classroom?
- In what ways will a shared connection with our schoolyard affect my students’ ability to connect with each other and develop empathy?
- How will connecting to the nature in our schoolyard help to increase my own emotional well-being? How will that impact our class community?

I found that story was the cognitive tool that worked best for me in engaging my students’ and that personalized stories that incorporated more cognitive tools (rhyme, metaphor, heroic qualities, anthropomorphizing, wonder, binary opposites) captured them in ways I hadn’t even hoped for. Our time outside resulted in students that were happier and more self-aware when it came to their emotions. I also noticed that the children were drawn to sharing their discoveries with each other. As soon as one person found a ladybug, the rest were drawn to them as if by magnets. Wonder is a powerful connecting tool!

Funnily enough, the last question was a last-minute addition and it turned out to be the most impactful. I'll begin with an excerpt from my journal from the end of Week 6, where I realized my social emotional growth:

I have to admit when I read that passage in Gillian's book about how you can find nature in any place, I felt like it was kind of a cop out. I didn't really believe her.

But we have enjoyed pokey thorn bushes, and I have breathed in deeply the smell of the roses blooming on them. We have watched busy ants and spiders and ladybugs make their way on important and mysterious errands. We have noticed all kinds of moss and lichen and fungi and wondered if it was a friend or foe to our spot. We have let snails slime a trail up our arms and listened to bird song. We have found tiny worms curled up in cracks in the bark of huge old trees. We have watched the oaks unfurl their leaves into green glory.

Yes, we hung on the iron posts or sat on the pavement. We were grateful for the concrete roof overhead on the rainy days. Even the noise of the freeway nearby and the odd ambulance siren from the hospital down the street and the helicopters overhead seemed to fade into the background and become less noticeable while we were absorbed in the wonder of a roly poly crawl on our hands and then transform into an impossibly perfect, tiny sphere.

So, I guess Gillian's passage wasn't the cop out. I was copping out. Using the challenges of our site as an excuse not to engage with the gifts that were sitting there all along waiting to be discovered.

Her passage was a challenge. I am so glad I accepted it.

It's worth noting that (with the exception of one child, one time) the children returned to the classroom after our outdoor time in good moods, bursting with energy and ideas. Our discussion and journal writing were the least painful writing assignments and there was only one student that displayed some resistance to it (and even that was usually avoided by early intervention and scribing).

I, on the other hand, was returning to the classroom feeling frustrated, drained and despondent. I had all these plans and lessons to teach them outdoors and trying to keep them gathered and listening – even if just for 5 minutes at the beginning or the end – felt nearly impossible. I was trying to rein them in. I wanted them to commune with

nature, but on my terms. I framed in our learning. I mixed up the ideas and portioned and poured it out into carefully planned and scaffolded lessons. But Nature will always call what is hers back to herself.

The students would fly out of the school doors into Nature's waiting arms. Delighted, they ran. Jealous, I tried to hold them back; but the cracks had formed and the green was already creeping into them.

It wasn't until I took Sean Blenkinsop's article "World As Co-Teacher" outside to "read" while I monitored and tried not to interfere in their learning. I read it again and the truth of his words and my situation pinged in my gut. I am the concrete. I am the student. I took them outside – yes – but also brought the four walls of the classroom with us to pen them in.

I have realized that it isn't my role to carefully help the children find the "Wild" – they are the wild. My job is to make the cracks in the concrete and get out of the way so that they can grow.

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## Appendices:

### Appendix A – Letter of Informed Consent

Dear Parents and/or Caregivers,

I am currently working on my Masters of Education in Imaginative Education and Curriculum development through Simon Fraser University. This program enables me as an educator to reflect upon my practice and its impact on my teaching, as well as on my students' learning, with the intention of developing my own best practices. As part of my studies, I have developed an inquiry project to explore how connecting with nature can impact social emotional learning in students. I anticipate that my inquiry will provide me with insights that will help me develop a meaningful way for my students to self-regulate and develop socially. It will also help me to reflect on my practice as a professional and improve my teaching.

My inquiry will be primarily based on my own observations and reflections on my work as a teacher. Over the course of the next two months, I will also collect student work samples, surveys, reflections, videos, and photographs to inform my understanding of my practice. All elements of my inquiry will take place within the context of my normal instruction and practice. I am also hoping some parents will be willing to fill in a short survey about their beliefs about learning and outdoor education.

This letter of informed consent is part of my ethical responsibilities as a teacher-inquirer. I am asking your permission to use your child's work samples, surveys, reflections, videos, and photographs to present to members of my graduate cohort and my instructors to demonstrate my own learning. As part of my responsibility as an educator, professionalism around issues of confidentiality will be ensured. Consistent with the ethical protocols of teacher inquiry, if your child is mentioned in the presentation of my work, an alias (pseudonym) will always be used to respect and protect his/her privacy, and faces will be blurred out in photos or videos (unless given your permission). In addition, all Covid-19 protocols and procedures as outlined by Fraser Health and the Ministry of Education will be followed (as they currently are in our school).

I would like to reassure you that regardless of my inquiry, my ethical best practices as a teacher will remain the same. This inquiry process is not intended to assess, place, or evaluate your child in any way, but will serve to strengthen my teaching practice. Regardless of your decision, the integrity of the relationship I have with your child will not be affected, and you can withdraw your consent at anytime.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at [krista.rutschmann@abbyschools.ca](mailto:krista.rutschmann@abbyschools.ca). Please feel free to email me back with consent, if you wish, or sign and return the form that is attached. Thank you for your consideration in this matter. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Krista Rutschmann     Grade 2, ASIA North Poplar

**CONSENT BY PARENT / GUARDIAN TO ALLOW PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH PROJECT**

Project: Action Research Project on Using Outdoor Education to Enhance Social Emotional Learning

Simon Fraser University

I have received and understood the Study Information Document, and have discussed it with my child, and consent to my child's participation in the activities described.

Please print the following information:

Name of Parent, Guardian or other: \_\_\_\_\_

who is the (relationship to student): \_\_\_\_\_

of student's first name: \_\_\_\_\_

student's last name: \_\_\_\_\_

This consent applies while my child is a member of the Division 10 Grade 2 class with Krista Rutschmann and Manmeet Grewal at ASIA North Poplar.

Parent/Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date (use format MM/DD/YYYY) : \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

I also consent to my child appearing in photos or videos of class activities which are shared with teachers and researchers and on the project website. I understand that my child will not be identified by name and that these images will focus on the positive achievements and abilities of the students and their engagement in learning.

Parent/Guardian Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date (use format MM/DD/YYYY) : \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

## Appendix B – Student Social Emotional Survey

### STUDENT SOCIAL EMOTIONAL SURVEY

**I feel that people like me.**

(No) 1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 (All the time)

**I like myself for the most part.**

(No) 1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 (All the time)

**I know when I am calm.**

(No) 1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 (All the time)

**I know what makes me calm.** \_\_\_\_\_

(No) 1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 (All the time)

**I like feeling calm.**

(No) 1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 (All the time)

**I know when I am angry.**

(No) 1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 (All the time)

**I know what makes me angry.**

(No) 1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 (All the time)

**I know the difference between angry and anxious.**

(No) 1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 (All the time)

**I know when I am anxious.**

(No) 1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 (All the time)

**I know when I am starting to lose control.**

(No) 1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 (All the time)

**I know at least one strategy to help me when I feel I am losing control.** \_\_\_\_\_

(No) 1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 (All the time)

**I like being outside.**

(No) 1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 (All the time)



## Appendix C Samples of Student Surveys

STUDENT SOCIAL EMOTIONAL SURVEY (A)

I feel that people like me.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I like myself for the most part.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know when I am calm.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know what makes me calm. reading  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I like feeling calm.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know when I am angry.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know what makes me angry.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know the difference between angry and anxious.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know when I am anxious.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know when I am starting to lose control.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know at least one strategy to help me when I feel I am losing control. no  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I like being outside.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

STUDENT SOCIAL EMOTIONAL SURVEY (B)

I feel that people like me.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I like myself for the most part.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know when I am calm.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know what makes me calm.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I like feeling calm.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know when I am angry.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know what makes me angry.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know the difference between angry and anxious.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know when I am anxious. 3 Feel that all the time.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know when I am starting to lose control.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know at least one strategy to help me when I feel I am losing control.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I like being outside.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I feel that people like me.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I like myself for the most part.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know when I am calm.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know what makes me calm.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I like feeling calm.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know when I am angry.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know what makes me angry.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know the difference between angry and anxious.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know when I am anxious.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know when I am starting to lose control.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know at least one strategy to help me when I feel I am losing control.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I like being outside.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I feel that people like me.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I like myself for the most part.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know when I am calm.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know what makes me calm.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I like feeling calm.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know when I am angry.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know what makes me angry.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know the difference between angry and anxious.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know when I am anxious.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know when I am starting to lose control.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I know at least one strategy to help me when I feel I am losing control. deep breathing  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

I like being outside.  
(No) 1 2 3 4 5 (All the time)

Survey A is on the left and Survey B is on the right. One can see how the same students scored themselves differently the second time. The top one is Tucker's. The orange marker shows how he changed his answer after he asked what "anxious" meant.

## Appendix D Samples of Outdoor Education Stories

### OUTDOOR EDUCATION STORIES

#### 1) FAST AND SLOW

Boom! Thunder rumbles and the rain spills from the clouds. Drops race through the sky, pulled by gravity. Pushed together to get bigger and heavier and fall, faster and faster, towards the earth.

They land on the leaves, one by one, dripping onto the ground, clumping together in dips below the tree. The clumps connect and become a puddle. The water trickles down, down, down deep into the smallest cracks in the dirt – all the way to the tree's roots that sip them up and sustain him through the rest of the hot, dry summer.

Whoosh! The wind rushes through the trees and tugs the leaves off with her -- sending them dancing through the purple sky, tossed about by the crisp breeze until they settle in the mud below.

The water weighs them down and bit by bit softens pieces of leaf, breaking them down into tinier and tinier bits over the days and weeks, until the leaves are no more and just part of the soil that feeds the tree. Giving back to the tree they fell from.

Brrrr! A snowflake flies through the grey sky. Shooting sideways like a frosty meteor until she smacks into a branch of the tree and clings to him as he is thrown this way and that by the relentless onslaught of snow.

As the temperature drops each ion within the water moves slower and slower, grabbing hold of one another, pushing and crowding together until there is no room to move freely anymore. The water hardens, molecule by molecule until they are still and heavy and solid. Holding firm until the sun's energy comes to free them into moving liquid once more.

Buzz! The bee's wings flap so fast they are a blur as they propel him through the spring air. Steering him above the grass, through the leaves, around an incoming bird and straight into a waiting blossom, her orange nectar waving and calling him over.

The sun's rays hit the earth, as minute by minute the days get longer and the air gets warmer. The tree wakes up and beat by beat pushes sap up from his roots, into his trunk, up through his branches until buds form at the very tips. Slowly unfolding into leaves and blossoms that will drink in the sunshine and the rain once again.

Wheee! The planet spins her way through space. Constantly turning our little spot towards the sun to light our day. As we play below the sunbeams, calling to our friends -- laughing and racing each other through the school field and around the playground.

Then the Earth turns away from the sun and the land begins to still. The birds in the tree settle sleepily in his branches, and the children bury themselves deep under their covers, closing their heavy eyes. Their breathing slows. In... and out. In... and out. In... and out. And they drift into sleep.

And so we move in ways big and small, through winter and summer, fast and slow.

## 2) ARTHUR AND THE MAGIC WINDOW

Arthur had a bad case of the “zoomies.” No matter where he was going or what he was doing, he always did it at top speed. He just couldn’t seem to slow down!

On the walk to school, he would run ahead. “Arthur! Slow down! You’ll get hurt!” called his mom. Buuut Arthur had the zoomies, so he wouldn’t slow down. He’d just race by yelling “Zoom! Zoom! Zoom!”

In class, while his classmates would work carefully, Arthur would rush through it. “Arthur! Slow down and do your Printing neatly!” his teacher reminded him. Buuut Arthur had the zoomies, so he wouldn’t print neatly. He’d just scribble quickly and hand in his work yelling, “Zoom! Zoom! Zoom!”

As he was going out for recess, he would tear down the hallway. “Arthur! We have to walk quietly in the hallway!” whispered the line leader, Abigail. Buuut Arthur had the zoomies, so he wouldn’t walk quietly. He just kept running down the hall yelling, “Zoom! Zoom! Zoom!”

When it was snack time, and his friends were eating their food politely, Arthur stuffed his entire treat into his mouth all at once! “Arthur, chew carefully or you’ll choke!” warned his friend Katie. Buuut Arthur had the zoomies, so he just sprayed food out of his mouth as he yelled, “Shoom! Shoom! Shoom!”

Outside play time was Arthur’s favourite time! He’s run around the field so fast that everything else was blurry and he’d yell, “Zoom! Zoom! Zoom!” He was running so fast, that he didn’t even see the flowers that were blooming. Katie stopped to sniff their delicate scent.

He was running so fast that he didn’t hear the birds chirping. Katie stopped to listen to their sweet song.

He was running so fast that he didn’t notice the sunbeams shining through the clouds. Katie stopped to feel their warmth on her face.

Before they knew it, outside time was over.

During Art, Katie suggested that they draw the flowers that were blooming.

“What flowers?” asked Arthur as he scribbled on his page with markers.

“The ones we saw during play time!” said Katie.

“I didn’t see any flowers!” replied Arthur.

“Arthur!” Katie cried, “You’re so busy zooming around you miss all the miracles!”

Katie took her scissors and cut a yellow piece of paper into a frame.

“Here!” Katie handed the frame to Arthur. “Take this Magic Window. Next time we go outside, take it with you. Sit on the ground and look VERY CAREFULLY. Maybe then you will see the Miracles that you miss!”

Arthur took the Magic Window from Katie, but when she wasn’t looking, he put it in the recycling bin.

“Magic Window... yeah right! Zoom! Zoom! Zoom!”

What Arthur didn't know was that Abigail went behind him and fished the magic window out and she took it out with her during the next recess. She sat down near the tree she always sat by at recess, and put the window on the ground and looked and looked. She looked so hard that her eyes nearly crossed, but she didn't see anything.

"I guess Arthur was right. This is stupid." She whispered to herself as she put her head in her hands and cried. She cried because she was lonely and sad. She cried because she didn't have any friends to play with. Mostly she cried because she really needed some magic and it wasn't there.

Then, as her tears fell down onto the grass, she started to notice something. Between the grass there were bits of moss. It just looked like tiny bits of green, but when she got up close to it, she noticed there were tiny fronds and leaves within it. Then she noticed an ant pulling a crumb. The crumb was twice the size of the little ant and yet it tirelessly dragged that crumb across the dirt below the grass. Then she noticed a little earthworm poking a tiny head out of the soil.

The more she looked the more she noticed and she realized there was Magic in her Window after all!

Arthur had been zooming around the field... "Zoom! Zoom! Zoo – OH!" He tripped over Abigail's foot as she lay on her stomach staring at the magic inside the Window.

"OW!" he cried as he fell onto the grass beside her. Then he noticed what she was doing.

"What are you looking at?"

So Abigail showed him the moss and the ant and the earthworm. Then they noticed a tiny red spider making its way up a blade of grass. Arthur forgot all about the zoomies and sat watching the spider as it started spinning its web connecting one blade to another.

They were so captivated by the magic spell of the spider spinning that they almost missed the bell to come back inside.

Arthur got up and ran in. "Zoom! Zoom! Zoom!"

Because some things are just meant to go fast.

### **3) HOW TO KNOW WHEN A SIT SPOT HAS PICKED YOU...**

There is a spot outside where I sit,

It's a place where I kind of sort of just "fit."

It's my safe place away from the noise

And I don't need to be distracted by toys.

Others may ask, "How did you pick it?"

Well, let me tell you my little secret.

It's a secret that I don't share a lot...

I didn't pick *it*. I was picked by my spot.

Spots pick their people in all kinds of ways...

They might give you shelter on the rainiest days.

Or they may allow you to soak up the sun's rays.

And suddenly, you have a spot.

They may offer you a colourful show.

Or sing you a song with the water that flows.

Or bring you a bird friend that you get to know.

And suddenly, you have a spot.

They may blow a sweet breeze right in your face.

Or show you the sparkling of planets in space.

Or let loose some leaves that you watch float with grace.

And suddenly, you have a spot.

They might send you a ladybug to crawl on your hand.

Or an earthworm that pushes his head up through the sand.

Or a spider that lowers his web as he lands.

And suddenly, you have a spot.

"What do I do with a spot?" You might ask.

Having a spot is a most special task.

Get to know it by watching and listening and caring.

Take care of it by not stomping or scaring

All the other beings that live in that spot.

When you stop and look, there sure is a lot.

You see your sit spot hasn't just picked you,  
You share that spot with other beings too.

#### **4) MY SPOT**

When you look at my spot, what is it you see?  
You see someone's sitting there. Probably me.  
But if you came closer, sat still and listened...  
My spot is covered in jewels that glisten  
Because the bright sun hits webs covered in dew  
And the spiders spin busily making them new.  
My spot is a fortress for bugs that won't fail  
Or a bumpy road to climb for a curious snail.  
My spot is a symphony full of bird songs  
Sung with such heart, so joy-filled and strong.  
My spot is an oven baking brown earth  
Or a mother that nourishes the seeds that are birthed.  
My spot is a sculptor whose waves mold and shape  
The rocks they run over on their way to a lake.  
My spot is a brave knight protecting her fruits  
Or fireworks that crackle under my boots.  
My spot is shelter for little one's in his nest  
Or a bed that invites me to lay down and rest.  
My spot is a smile, reaching out a kind hand.  
What am I to my spot? Well... I am her friend.

#### **5) FEELINGS ARE NATURAL**

When the sky gets dark and the rain begins to pour down the trees and drip onto the ground, does it mean that she's sad? Or are they like the happy tears that glisten in my mama's eyes when I give her a gift that I made myself?

Perhaps it is both. Thank you, Rain, for washing the world clean and watering us, whether you are happy or sad.

When the thunder grumbles and the lightning forks and flashes through the sky, does it mean he's angry? Or is it like the deep, rumbling laughter of my grandpa and the sparkle of fun in his eyes when he teases us?

Perhaps it is both. Thank you, Storm, for clearing the clouds and charging the air with energy, whether you are angry or silly.

When the wind whips through the branches and howls and whistles and batters the house, does it mean that she is afraid? Or is it like my big sister who dances and spins and leaps about, shrieking with joy?

Perhaps it is both. Thank you, Wind, for your movement and music, whether you are afraid or joyful.

When the bees walk all over the flowers, does it annoy them like my big brother when I crawl all over him? Or are they excited to be tickled and poked like my little brother who giggles and grins?

Perhaps it is both. Thank you, Flowers, for the colour and sweet smells you bring us, whether you are annoyed or excited.

When I take a colourful rock from the creek because they seem to beg me to pick them up, do they worry that I will take them from their family and home? Or are they the adventurous type who can't wait to see the places they will travel to while they are nestled in the warmth of my hand?

Perhaps it is both. Thank you, Rocks, for age-old wisdom and far away places you remind us of, whether you are nervous or brave.

When the sun shines bright and warm, does it mean that he is peaceful and calm as he sits among the clouds? Or is it like my dad who shines with sweat and pride when he is busy tending to and growing things in our garden?

Perhaps it is both. Thank you, Sun, for the way you stir our blood to work and grow, whether you are peaceful or busy.

When the moon is full and bright all alone in the dark night sky, does she feel lonely? Or is it like when my grandmother wraps me in her warm quilt and quietly hums me to sleep, watching over me lovingly?

Perhaps it is both. Thank you, Moon, for your comforting light and rest in the night, whether you are lonely or loved.

My world allows a place for all these feelings. They are not good or bad. They are not right or wrong. They can be big or small.

When I accept that all these feelings have a place within me, so I have a place within the world.

Each one is a gift.

Each one is a chance to learn and connect.

And I am grateful.

Thank you, to all my feelings.

## 6) KATIE LEARNS GRATITUDE

Katie was having a tough morning. Nothing seemed to go her way. It was like the whole world was conspiring to make her go, "Ugh."

When she went to make her breakfast, she realized that they were all out of her favourite cereal.

"Ugh!" she said as she slammed the empty box back onto the counter.

When she went to grab her sweater, she realized it needed to be washed.

"Ugh!" she cried as she threw it into the laundry bin.

As she walked up to the school, the bell rang and she realized she was late.

"Ugh!" she moaned as she ran to class with her backpack bumping against her back.

At school it didn't get better.

Her teacher was away and the substitute seemed grumpy.

"Ugh..." she mumbled to herself.

At recess she tripped and skinned her knee.

"Ugh!" she exclaimed as the principal cleaned the cut and put a band-aid on it.

At lunch she realized her dad had made her sandwich on brown bread. She hated brown bread.

"Ugh..." she groaned as she threw her lunch back into her backpack.

By the time her nana picked her up from school she was in a terrible mood.

"How was your day?" Nana asked as they started walking home.

"Ugh!!!" yelled Katie. "Everything was terrible! I hate my life!!"

"Wow!" replied her nana. "Sounds like you are having a hard time."

"Nothing is going right! Not one little thing!!" cried Katie, as she kicked a pine cone into the grass.

"Hmmm," Nana nodded thoughtfully. "Whenever it seems like everything is bad, I try extra hard to notice what is good and be grateful."

"UGHHH!" Katie rolled her eyes, annoyed.

They walked together in silence a little while before Nana looked up at the lavender-coloured sky shot with bright sunshine.

"I just love autumn days like this," Nana remarked, "Those purple clouds and the golden trees make me happy. Thank you, Sky! Thank you, Trees!"

Katie's hand came up to touch the tree bough that reached down to her, but she didn't say anything and they walked on.



“Oh! Did you see that little squirrel running up the tree? Isn’t he busy?” Nana pointed to an oak tree as a grey squirrel poked his head up and chattered at them cheekily.

“Thank you for the lecture, sir!” Nana chuckled.

Katie couldn’t stop the tiny smile that tugged at her lips as they walked on.

“Mmmm! It smells like someone is cooking something tasty for supper. Doesn’t that smell wonderful? Thank you, neighbour, for that delightful smell!” sniffed her nana.

Katie inhaled deeply and spicy notes of curry wafted to her nose from an open window nearby. She breathed it in again and again until it was gone as they walked on.

“Oh! Mr. Mitchell is walking his dog! That pooch is such an adorable, little goof! Hi Barney!” Nana laughed as Barney ran up and greeted her fingers with a lick. “Thank you for the kisses!”

Katie giggled as Barney jumped around, licking her face as she petted his soft fur. Then they walked on.

As they walked below the giant maple tree on the corner, Katie heard the crunch of leaves under her boots. It made a great sound. She stopped and crunched them a little more.

Her Nana smiled at her. “Those leaves make such a satisfying sound when we walk through them, don’t they?”

Katie nodded, grinning.

“Thank you, leaves!” called Nana.

“Thanks!” Katie waved as they walked on.

When they got to Katie’s house, she saw Dad’s car in the driveway. As she opened the door, the smell of fresh-baked cookies greeted her nose.

“Surprise! I got off work early and thought I would bake your favourite after school snack!” Dad wrapped her in a big bear hug.

“Thank you!” she snuggled into his warm sweater.

“How was your day?” Dad asked as he poured her a glass of milk.

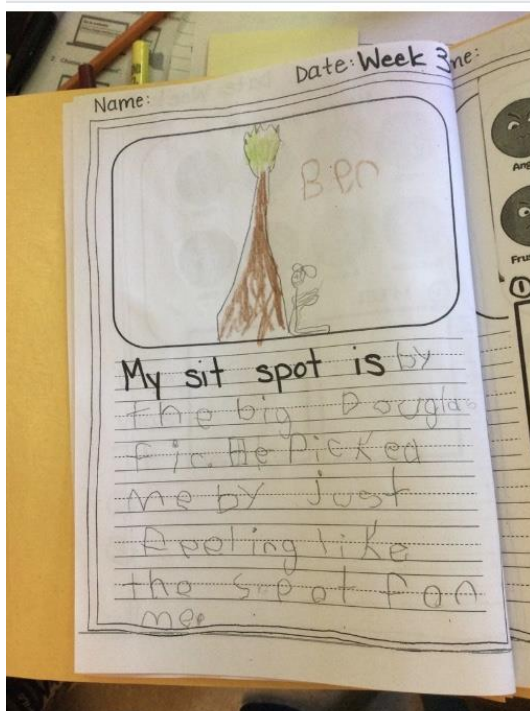
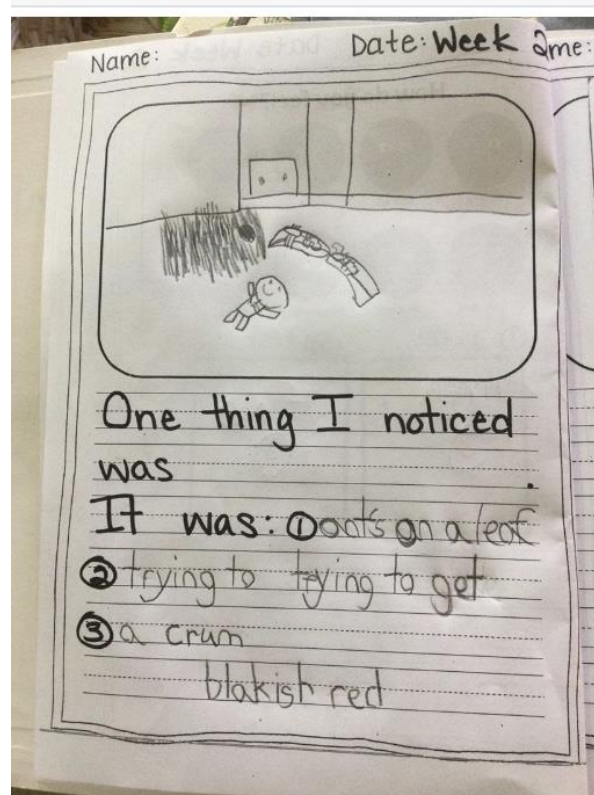
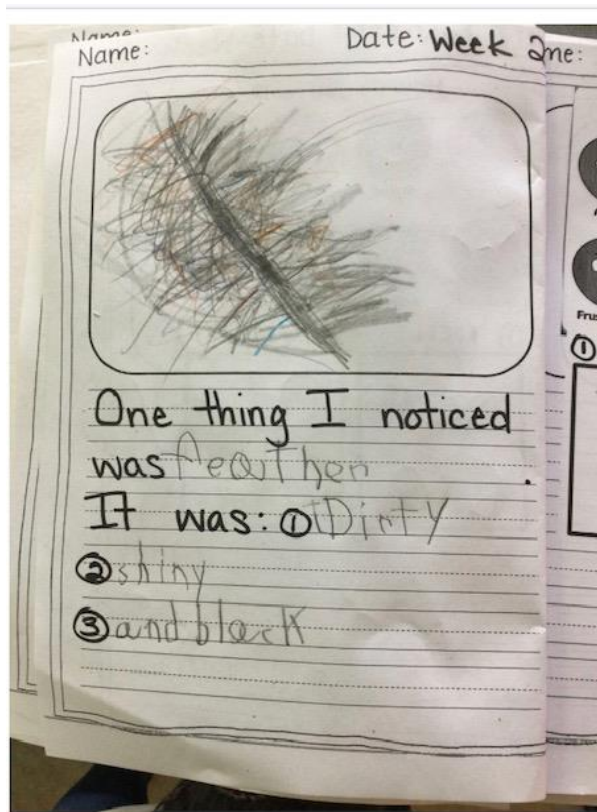
“Actually...” Katie thought about all the bad things that had happened.

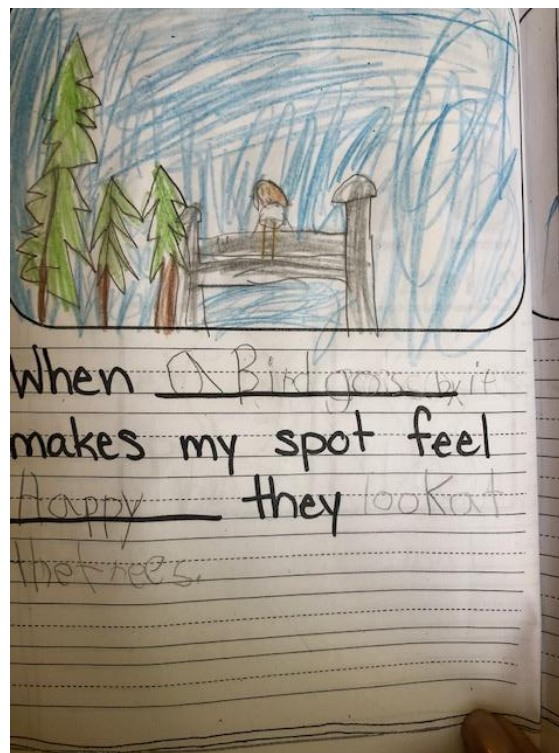
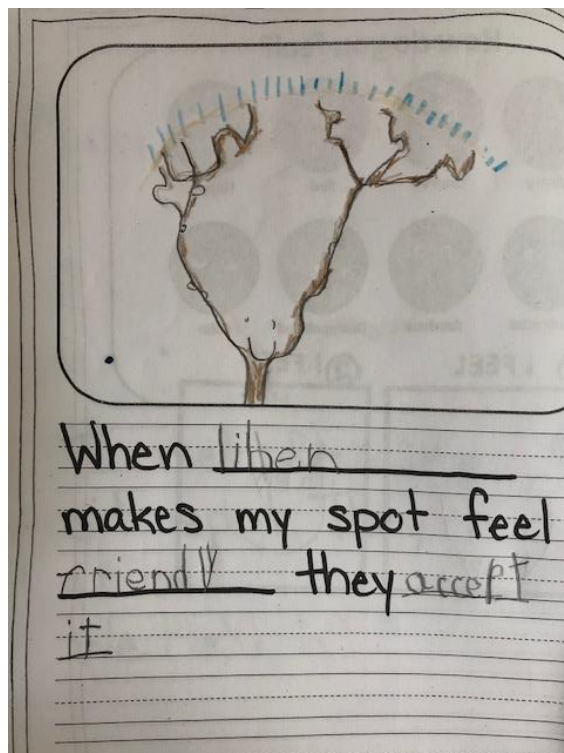
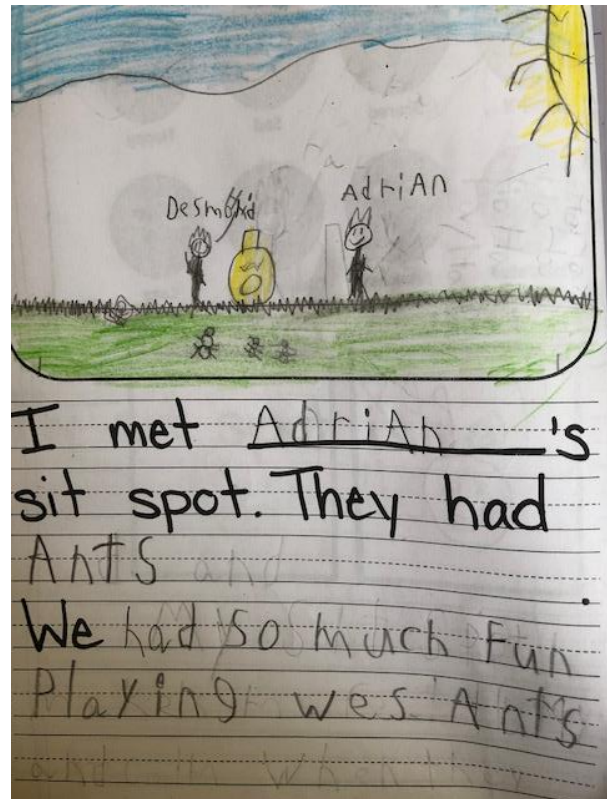
But then she remembered how Arthur had saved her a seat next to him even though she was late. And how the principal had been so kind and given her a lollipop after bandaging her knee. And how Abigail had offered some of her lunch when she heard that Katie didn’t like hers. And how patient Nana had been with her mood on their walk home.

Suddenly, it seemed like the whole world had been trying to cheer her up. Maybe Nana was right after all.

“Pretty good!” Katie answered.

## Appendix E Samples of Student Journals





The bottom left entry was by a student who was fascinated with the lichen on the tree. He was curious about whether the tree saw it as a virus (his words) or a friend.



## Appendix F Samples from my Journal

**Feb.22, 2021**

Activity: picking a sit spot outside.

- not everyone had a sit pillow and the rain meant that we could choose to stand in our spot.
- students were encouraged to use our senses (except taste) to find three describing words for our spot.
- we talked about being care-takers of our spot, not owners. Referring to “my sit spot” like we say “my family” – as in we belong to it, not as in we own it or it belongs to us.
- talked about finding a safe place, that is separate from someone else’s. Not going outside to play.
- Alina and Jessie wanted to play, and soak themselves under a drain spout. Again.
- Brianna couldn’t find a spot. I showed her to the rose bushes and showed her the crocuses that were just coming through the earth. I told her that it looks like nothing now, but this spot will be the prettiest to watch the spring come. Still not interested. She chose the railings outside the Hand in Hand portable. As did Tucker.

Lots of kids gravitated towards trees.

- I was surprised about how many words the kids came up with. They had no problem at all!
- Jimmy picked a crocus and opened it. He wanted to give it to his mom. We looked at it under the digital microscope. But I think we’ll have to have a talk about helping ourselves to nature.

**Feb. 24, 2021**

- We went outside to spend some time in our sit spots. Just getting to know them.
- 6 kids wanted to change their sit spots. I said no. Although I did move them to better spots. Should I have just let them change?
- Stopped Ricky, Andrea and Shayla from playing.
- Stopped Katie and Daniel from playing.
- Daniel said he needed to find a new spot because Katie was distracting him.
- Jessie and Raina wanted to find spots together. I said no because of playing.
- I prepped the kids with the fact that these were individual spots. But maybe I should have just let them play?
- How do I help them to be still long enough to notice?
- Carter laid down with his jacket over him. (not playing, but what was he noticing?)
- We need some jobs to do in our spot. Something to guide their perspective taking.
- I need to make some plans.
- Should I spread out the parameters so they can be in a place that I can’t observe them directly?
- More questions, no answers.
- Going to work on some stories to help guide their sit spot time I think.

**April 28 (Week 5, Day 2)**

I did way better about just allowing things to be. I stepped in a few times when I felt like student interactions meant that they were not attending to my co-teacher. I noticed a couple of birds in one of

the young trees, chasing each other flirtatiously. I noticed a smaller bird sound the alarm about a crow and chasing it away. I realized that I was so busy watching my class before that I hadn't been attending to my co-teacher either. It helped me to just sit and be a passive observer. This has been a challenging class and I am beginning to notice the toll that being on high alert for three days a week, every week, is taking on my mental health. I desperately need these times of repose during the day for my nervous system to recover.

I will begin building in more breathing breaks into the day for them and for me. I will try to do some outside so we can learn to relax into our nature time. I am sure that my stress level has an impact on my students, as much as I try not to let it. Next week we will be having our play time first and inviting someone else into our spot. Then connecting with our feelings and our spot the second day. I have decided to speed up our last two weeks because I feel like they were unnecessarily stretched out. Once the project is done, we can spend more unstructured time in our spots. Maybe they will be ready then.

### **End of week notes (May 6):**

I started doing the SEL surveys with students today and it was really interesting. Some kids were the same, but some kids actually assessed themselves as less able to know when they are calm or angry or anxious than they did at first. I did a little digging and while they rated themselves as less able to identify strategies or feelings... they actually expressed themselves with more openness and understanding than they did in March. Some examples:

Tucker: "I actually don't know what that word (anxious) means."

So, I gave him some examples of how anxiety might feel.

Tucker: "Oh, I feel like that all the time."

Me: "Okay, what are some strategies you use to help you feel calm?"

Tucker: "I don't have any. I never feel calm."

This goes a long way to explaining why he had trouble with the feelings check in. It also goes a long way to explain why he had difficulty sitting quietly and calmly in his spot or connecting to it at all. But he didn't know to ask or even verbalize this in March.

Brianna was another one who scored higher in March. But this time she has recognized that she doesn't actually know when she is angry all the time. Anger is an easier emotion for her to identify, but there have been lots of times when she shouts at me that she isn't angry, as her hands are fisted at her sides and her face is scrunched up. This time she recognized that she doesn't always know, in March she felt that she always knew.

More kids stopped and asked what "anxious" meant again. Or told me that they didn't have any strategies, but then started listing the deep breathing we do outside.

It reminded me a lot of that ironic understanding... that the more we learn the more we realize what we don't know.

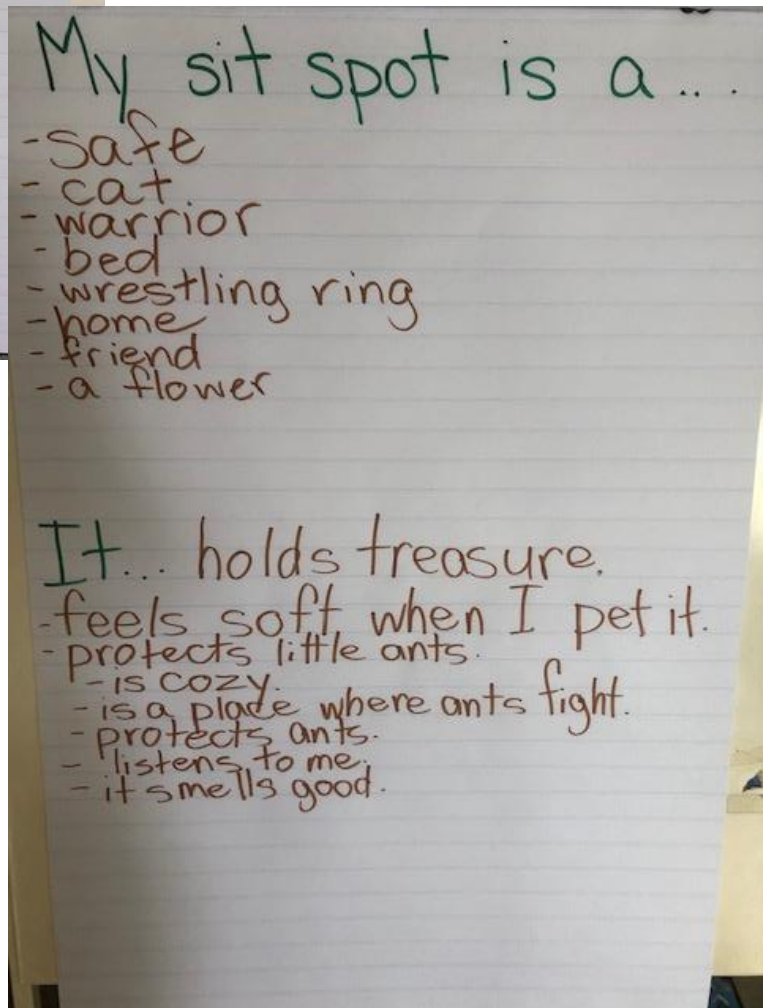
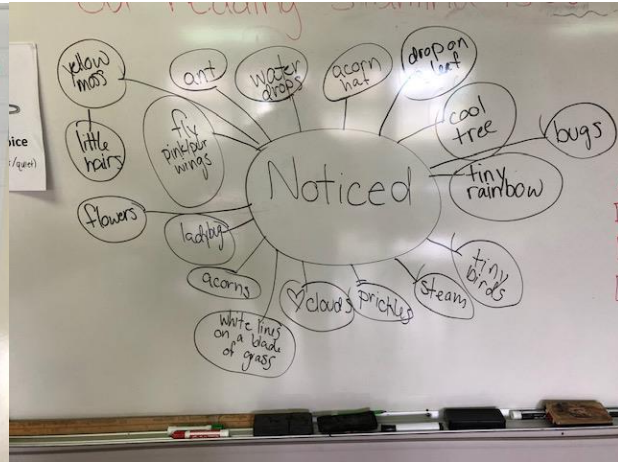
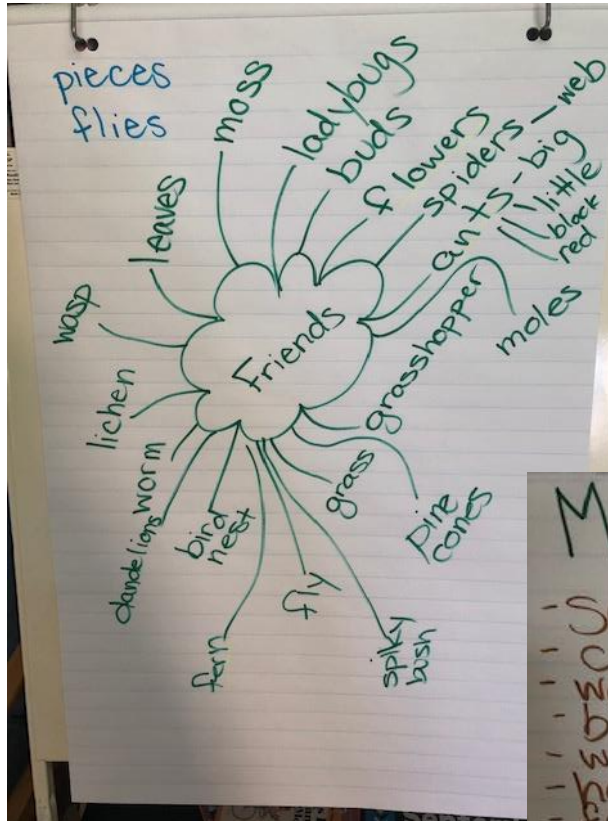
## Appendix G Photos











These photos are examples of the class brain webs. All of the ideas you see were contributed by the students during our class discussions after our outside time. These webs helped the students verbalize what they had noticed and also served as a word bank for their journal entries.

## **Appendix H Transcribed Student Statements from our Rain Concert**

### **Video 1:**

Me: "So what did you find? What do you hear?"

Student 1: "Ummm, I kinda hear, like....(finger motion) dic, dic, dic, dic, dic, dic..."

Me: "Cool! What did you hear, (student name)?"

Student 2: "It kinda sounds like a waterfall."

Me: "Ooh! I like how you compared it to something else. What's down there?"

(looking down the water drain).

### **Video 2:**

Me: "So what did you notice out here?"

Student: "It makes a cool, um, sound..." (gestures to his coat hood).

Me: "When it's hitting your hood?"

Student: "Yeah."

### **Video 3:**

Me: "Show me what you were doing!"

(Students kick puddles over tree root)

Me: "That makes a cool sound, hey?"

(Another student stomps in the puddle)

Me: "Oh, that makes a cool sound! (Student name) what about you? What sound can you make?"

Student: "She doesn't want the water to go down here."

Me: "Oh, okay! Let's stop and listen to the rain on your umbrellas!"

(Students listen and smile)

Me: "Can you hear it?"

(Student nods)

### **Video 4:**

Me: "What did you want to tell me? So what did you guys do?"

(Camera shows that the students have moved the coffee tins to the drain spout by the portable)

Me: "What did you call it (student name)?"

Student 1: "The rain's playing a drum."

Me: "The rain's playing a drum! That's cool! And then what did you say what did you say it sounded like over here by the drain spout, (student name)?"

Student 2: "It's sounds like someone's mooshing..."

Me: "It's what?"

Student 2: "It sounds like somebody's moshing water?"

### **Video 5:**

Me: "What did you want to share?"

Student: "If you listen closely to the puddles... um, you can actually hear, like, like... it's kinda quiet, but if you listen closely, it like makes a sound kind of like..."

Me: "Close to the puddles? Like... which one? Show me. Like this puddle over here? Like this one over here?"

Student: "Mmm-hmm."

(We go over to the puddle to listen).

Student: "You can actually hear it."

Me: "Cooooll..."

### **Video 6:**

Me: "What did you notice?"

Student: "I notice that, my jacket, when it falls, it makes a nice drumming sound."

### **Video 7:**

Student: "So we basically put this here..." (puts the coffee tin in the puddle)

Me: "Okay..."

Student: "Then we have to basically try to put our foot on it. Then go like this..."  
(Another student demonstrates how they are using it as a step to get across the puddle).

Student: "So basically..."

Student 2: \*yells\* "I need to go again! Go again!"

Me: \*laughing\*