

Learning Excursions in the Community

by

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Bachelor of Education, University of British Columbia, 2009

Bachelor of Applied Science, Simon Fraser University, 2002

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## **Abstract**

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This project examines the theoretical and practical benefits of creating learning communities within education and demonstrates how these learning communities can positively impact students, staff, parents, and community members. This project explores the importance of linking the school to the broader community and how a symbiotic relationship can be created, especially in rural communities. A multitude of benefits and opportunities are available to students within these communities, which are demonstrated throughout this project. A number of specific field trips, or what I like to call ‘learning excursions’, are highlighted to provide detailed examples and evidence of these advantages. Students’ responses, learning that occurred, connections to the literature and connections to the curriculum are all reported to give a thorough explanation for each excursion. In doing so, my goal is to provide theoretical reasoning and concrete evidence for taking students on such learning excursions within their respective communities.

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To my family and friends, thank you for supporting me through this journey and always encouraging me to achieve my goals. To my Mom, thank you for being there to discuss, encourage, and provide feedback.

To my community members and staff, thank you for your time and effort in allowing these learning excursions to occur, welcoming students into your businesses and homes, and offering your expertise to expand student learning. I appreciate the support of the community for my students as well as for my new family. Community benefits go well beyond education.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my son, Joshua, who has been with me through the whole process of completing my Masters. Thank you Joshua for allowing me to have a new perspective on life. I appreciate that even at such a young age you have taught me so much. Your smile, energy, and love give me inspiration everyday.

Gracias, mi hijo, mi amor.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Back to Being a Student

I have always enjoyed learning by expanding my knowledge and experiences in life. While growing up, I would join extracurricular activities offered at the school, such as leadership clubs and sporting events. Participating in sports teams allowed me to build sportsmanship, teamwork, and a sense of community. After high school graduation I continued with post-secondary education and obtained a bachelor of applied science in Kinesiology. I followed my career path, which I thought at that time was a fitness consultant. I took on numerous roles, such as a fitness trainer, events coordinator and rehabilitation specialist. I loved learning from others and growing within my areas of interest.

My next career path became teaching, where I have found my true passion. I went back to school for my bachelor of education degree through a program called Teaching Through the Arts. It was a great way to look beyond my area of study in the sciences to gain new perspectives and strategies for learning. Teaching took me from Vancouver, Canada around the world. I loved the experience of travel, seeing new places, working with and meeting new people, learning about other cultures and tasting new foods.

From my experience teaching in South Korea, I gained an interest in Kindergarten. I loved the energy and enthusiasm of my young students. Upon returning to Canada I went back to school at the University of British Columbia and started working towards my early childhood education diploma. The program focused on key aspects for young learners, which were exploration, play based activities, and an

integrated practice. It allowed me to understand the natural way children learn the world around them.

When the opportunity arose to become a student again and join the Port Hardy Cohort at the University of Victoria for a Masters in curriculum development, I did not hesitate to apply. I was eager to get started, but knew my life as a graduate student for the two years would be busy with endless readings, research papers, and the inevitable final thesis or project. The first course set the tone for the program by challenging my thinking and beliefs about education and more specifically curriculum. It led me on a journey of reflection, questioning, and openness. My adventure in learning continued throughout the year and took me to the University of Victoria campus for two condensed summer courses. In anticipation of the heavy workload I contacted the instructors to receive the course outlines and reading list so I could begin before the courses commenced. I was pleasantly surprised to hear the response. The two courses were being integrated and taught by both professors. There were also two field trips planned and we were to be open to having fun during our courses. Field trips and fun in a Masters program were not what I had expected.

### **Field Trip to Mayne Island**

From the moment our cohort boarded the ferry to Mayne Island early that July morning, personal interactions occurred with colleagues and professors. Despite being away from campus, which was considered our “academic” setting, in-depth conversations occurred beyond our required readings, coursework, and assignments. Connections were made and relationships became stronger. There was also a sense of excitement and

enthusiasm amongst us. Upon arrival at Mayne Island we were able to explore the local sites and learn about the community and history. After lunch, a member of the local community greeted us. He guided our group on a hike through his People's land. Throughout the trip we learned about the history and beliefs of his culture. It was an honor to participate in the day's activities and listen to the stories, songs, and prayers told by our special guide on the land and area he spoke of. This experience was not only insightful, but also powerful and inspirational.

## Reflection

In conversation with a friend regarding our field trip to Mayne Island, my friend questioned the reason for field trips in a university graduate program. It was a great question; I had wondered the same thing. We only had a short time in Victoria so why would we spend a whole day on Mayne Island? I pondered this further. If we had stayed on campus and read an article about Mayne Island, would we have learned as much? If we researched a number of journals and wrote a paper on the culture we learned about, would we understand it better? If we had a special guest come to our classroom, would we embody their teachings? The answer to all of these questions is "no". Our field trip to Mayne Island became a *lived experience*. We were able to engage in our learning using all our senses, emotions, and feelings. Our experience was real. We learned first hand from a local member of the community about the land and beliefs while exploring the land ourselves. Because this experience and his teachings came to life, I was able to absorb more from it than I would have in the classroom. This trip also sparked a flourish of in-depth conversations with classmates in person and on our course website. This

further allowed me to delve deeper into my learning. A sense of trust and relationship was gained from our adventure together, which allowed us to support each other and expand on the knowledge and understanding that we learned from our trip. Overall, I had gained more from my integrated experience on this field trip than I would have had in class. I can see now the benefits of this trip and the importance of learning in the community.

### **Community to Me**

Ever since I can remember my family and I were involved in the community where we resided. When we lived in New Westminster, I remember participating in May Day celebrations, such as parades and traditional dances around the Maypole. The community events were festive and social. Everyone knew each other and it was a time to connect. Neighborhood walks, visiting neighbors, and playing at the local playground were regular occurrences. As I got older I was rarely inside our home. Our street and neighboring grass alleys were filled with children of all ages. We climbed trees, built tree forts, jumped ditches, rode bikes, played hide and seek and tag games, and collected tadpoles, frogs, and grasshoppers. There was a sense of trust and security within the community. Neighbors and community members were there for each other. The whole community was actively involved in special events, such as dinners at the Italian community center, celebration of the salmon return, pig roasts, fireworks, and banquets at the Sikh Temple. This was a place where people acknowledged, supported, and learned from each other. It showed me the power of personal connections and community.

Throughout my life I have lived in many cities where I have felt that true feeling of community was lacking. When I went to the University of British Columbia I thought moving to Kitsilano in Vancouver would allow me to be part of a connected community within the city. It is a beautiful place and I really enjoyed living there. I would walk, bike, or run by the waterfront, relax at the neighboring beaches, and shop at the local markets and specialty stores with friends in the neighborhood. However, it never fully felt like a true community to me. Despite the many trips to the local coffee shops or my favorite restaurants, no one ever knew my name or said more than the standard customer service lines. I would walk past people in the neighborhood, but nobody would exchange words with someone they did not know. In my apartment building I rarely saw any of my neighbors. As much as I love the city and all its amenities, I did not feel connected there.

My husband and I relocated to a small town called Port Alice on the North end of Vancouver Island, where we currently reside. Moving from the city of Vancouver to a village with a population of 800 was quite a shift for my husband and me. We had never been to Port Alice before and did not know what to expect. I still remember our first drive into town. We drove North on the Island Highway until we saw the exit sign to Port Alice, which took us on this endless winding road around lakes and up and down mountains. We finally exited to this gorgeous oceanfront clearing, which was well worth our travels.

We have been thoroughly enjoying our time in this small community. People are friendly and wave to everyone who drives by. It is common to see people pass on the streets with more than just a hello, even to strangers. A walk to the grocery store becomes a social gathering. People are genuinely concerned and care about each other. Neighbors

are not just people who live beside you, but people you interact with on a regular basis and become part of your family. People are there to help and look out for each other. While having a discussion with a colleague regarding the importance of people belonging to a community, she expressed the idea of "people weaving parts of their lives into a cohesive and interconnected whole." This statement really resonated with me.

### Teaching in Port Alice

My new teaching position at the three room local school was a primary teacher in a multi-grade classroom. I had never taught more than a two-grade split, so I presumed that a Kindergarten to Grade two class would be challenging. From my four years experience now at this school and in the community, I see how seamlessly it works. Students are closely connected with each other no matter what age or grade. Peer mentorship, leadership, and collaboration occur regularly. It truly becomes family groupings.

Coming to such a remote school, I was unsure of what resources, materials, or opportunities there would be for the students. I believe there is an assumption that bigger is better, which I had also fallen prey to. Upon seeing the school I was in awe over the amount of technology and resources available for students and staff. Each room including the library has a Smart Board for interactive technology. There is a full Mac computer lab and a PC lab. There are two rooms full of hands on resource materials, a range of picture books to novels, and teacher guides for classroom programs. I was also impressed with the interactive teaching and community involvement that was, and still is, occurring at the school. For example, every month the seniors in the community come to the school to

read with the students. It is powerful to see the relationships build as they read books together, share stories of old times, and eat snacks. This further extends the feeling of family. I feel very lucky to work with the staff and students at this school to allow these opportunities to take place.

Another area of concern when I moved to a small rural town to teach was the field trip options. When I was in Vancouver, I loved taking students to Science World for a day filled with science experiments and hands on lessons. However, I quickly realized how much this town and the North Island have to offer. The close proximity of the mountains and the ocean offers ample opportunities for student learning. Walking to the seashore provides authentic experiences for the students to explore and learn about sea life. Students at this school have gone on whale watching expeditions, kayaking and caving adventures, overnight camping and fishing trips all within their community. I have seen first hand the value in *place based* learning in students' local environment.

## **My Experience and Philosophy in Teaching**

Following my recent graduate courses I have been reflecting on my beliefs, teaching, and experiences during my coursework. I wanted to see how my previous experience and beliefs connect with my new learning and current place in my life and community. I do have a holistic viewpoint and see the interconnectedness of many aspects of life and education. I believe in an integrated approach to learning. My experiences, which also define who I am and how I view the world, have directed me towards teaching primary aged children, with a focus in early childhood education. My philosophies for teaching involve hands-on, interactive activities based on student

interest. Much like Dewey (1902), I believe children have an innate curiosity to learn the world around them and do so by discovery, exploration, and experience. I like to foster this energy while learning in and out of the classroom. I aim to be a facilitator to guide, help, and support students along their path of learning. I have come to realize that the idea of community learning has always been interwoven in my teaching philosophy and evident in my teaching. My goal is to better understand the benefits of place based learning and compile a collection of ideas for student learning in the community.

### **From Field Trip to Learning Excursion**

When acknowledging the important aspects of school, field trips are often the last on the list. Why is this? Are they seen as just fun outings? Can learning occur outside the classroom or school walls? My answer is definitely and if not more. Field trips, as I experienced first hand in my Master's coursework, are experiential learning. By being active in the learning process that occurs on a field trip, the experience becomes a memory and lived understanding. I question, what is a student more likely to remember and embody: a teacher driven lesson plan or an integrated and interactive life experience that ties in with the teachings at school? I believe that it would be the latter. If we termed field trips "learning excursions" would they be viewed differently? Could we utilize them more often?

Some may argue that a field trip or learning excursion does take place. However, there is usually only one that happens at the end of the school year. Through this project not only will I explore the 'academic merit' of learning excursions, but as well as the importance of them happening more frequently and even at the beginning of the school

year. Learning excursions often allow teachers to build relationships and make stronger connections with their students, as well as allow students to bond more with each other. I have also found that some students positively present themselves in a whole different light being outside the traditional brick and mortar school setting. I feel that by having learning excursions at the beginning of the school year it would allow these connections to develop and grow. It would also provide another opportunity for students to express themselves and their learning without the pressures of school. This may ultimately benefit future classroom relationships, views and opinions of school, and the learning that takes place in the school. How wonderful it would be to include learning excursions within the community regularly throughout the school year as part of the standard curriculum.

The term field trip also seems to imply a lot of planning and financial burden for teachers and schools. However, a learning excursion does not need to be an overly planned or expensive trip. Walking out the front door of the school and into the community provides ample learning opportunities for students. For one lesson, my class and I went to a neighbor's backyard to learn about her garden, compost, and living creatures within. We dug up some worms and later did worm experiments based on student interest. Following the student's own experiments, the worms were released. There was no cost involved and very little paperwork or planning. By changing our viewpoints and opening these doors, it allows the community to work together, provide support for each other, and enhance learning. The school is an integral part of the community and so should the community be an integral part of the school.

## Purpose

For my Master's project, I will be inquiring into the pedagogical benefits of taking students on learning excursions within their respective communities. I will explore the importance of linking the community with the school. For me, I believe that there is a positive symbiotic relationship between school and community, especially in rural communities, therefore I will focus on the potential benefits of rural communities including the vast array and opportunities for learning they may provide. In both inquiring into and better understanding the above questions, I will create a teacher's resource grounded in theory and practice that will highlight a number of learning excursion ideas that elementary teachers can utilize and adapt to their specific communities.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### What is Community?

The term “community” is widely used today to describe a variety of different groups of people – both locally and globally. The term community can encompass one’s local neighborhood, as well as learning communities within formal educational contexts. With the advent of the Internet and social media, the ability to create communities has expanded beyond people and organizations that are within close proximity to each other. Defining the term community becomes more challenging, as it now refers to many different scenarios. Wikipedia defines a community as “a usually small, social unit of any size that shares common values” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community>, retrieved on November 20, 2013). Similarly, Blady (2011) states, “[a] community is made of many different kinds of people working together for the same goals” (p. 68-69). She takes a more educational stance by adding that; “everyone looks out for each other [and] solve problems together [while] learning something new” (p. 68). Blady’s definition offers a more thorough explanation of a community, yet I would add that in a community people support each other as well as look out for each other. I would also suggest that a community has a sense of place where people feel they belong and are connected within a larger group. This place could be of a physical nature, such as a town or it could be in a virtual space, such as an online community. A community today has many possibilities.

Samaras, Freese, Kosnik, and Beck (2008) agree that the “notion of community is a conceptually appealing one because it suggests a comfortable, socially supportive context” (p. xvi). However, they do question the use of the term community for so many

purposes, especially in education. They state this term is now “often used as a ‘buzzword’ where, in fact, community may not actually exist” (p. xvi). They also agree that defining learning communities can be difficult.

In examining this complex question about community and learning, [Samaras et al. (2008)] considered the writing of Grossman et al. (2001, p. 942) who argued that the word community has lost its meaning. From the prevalence of terms such as ‘community of learners,’ ‘discourse communities,’ and ‘epistemic communities’ to ‘school community,’ ‘teacher community,’ or ‘communities of practice,’ it is clear that community has become an obligatory appendage to every educational innovation. (p. xvi)

However, Samaras et al. do believe that the development of genuine learning communities can be quite successful in student learning, despite the current fad. They do acknowledge that community can offer much more than a “friendly environment” and “be an integral and powerful force in learning” (p. xvi). In their edited book, *Learning Communities In Practice*, Samaras et al. look at specific examples of successful learning communities in school settings, university settings, and in professional networks.

## Learning Communities

Achieving positive learning communities within education requires a number of variables to be in accordance in order to be effective. Bassett-Gunters, Manske, Yessis, and Stockton (2012) state, “that healthy school communities engage students, staff, and community partners to create school cultures that support the growth, development, and overall health of children and youth” (p. 28). Likewise, Blady (2011) points out a

“learning community includes all of the people who want to ensure that students are successful, [such as] the teachers and their colleagues and administrators, the parents, and we hope, the students” (p. 68). It is imperative to include all participants involved with the students in a learning community, including the students themselves, to ensure that everyone is working towards the same goal. It also allows for open communication amongst these different groups of people. Blady highlights the importance of involving parents in this equation. Her aim is to not only inform the parents, but also to include them “as thinkers, and as ones with valued opinions about learning and especially about their children” (p. 68). Students’ input and contributions are also highly regarded and revisited regularly throughout the school year. Through Blady’s experience of the learning community created in her school and community, a respectful environment was established. Student engagement and choice through inquiry-based learning were key elements in making sure their community followed democratic beliefs (p. 69).

Freese (2008) looks more closely at building a community amongst educators. Teachers are so often focused solely on their students and class at hand, with little or no time for collaboration or communication with colleagues. Freese stresses the importance of teacher interaction and a working community. She acknowledges, Wenger (1998), who suggests the “three important elements of a ‘community of practice’ [are] mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire” (as cited in Samaras et al., 2008, p. 3). Freese describes an ideal teaching situation as a school “where the teachers talked with one another about their practice, observed one another, engaged in teaching and learning activities, and shared their teaching and instructional strategies... in order to become more skillful teachers” (p. 3). Individual teachers are equipped with different

skill sets, knowledge, and experiences. By sharing their specific talents and experiences with fellow colleagues within the teaching community, teachers are then able to learn from each other. They can expand on their teaching strategies and broaden their teaching practices.

Mitchell and Mitchell (2008) discuss the reasons why it is essential for teachers to be part of a learning community. They recognize the need for teacher stimulation and motivation. Open communication regarding quality teaching, current research in education, and best practices allow teachers to “navigate the journey together” and “bounce ideas off each other” (p. 9). Previously, teachers have not had opportunities to discuss their own research, learning, or ideas or even share elements of their practice. By sharing with others, teachers can spark interest and motivate each other to expand their learning as a team. Another benefit for teachers’ belonging to a learning community with each other is a support group. From Mitchell and Mitchell’s project of developing a learning community in a high school in Melbourne, Australia, teachers claimed they loved the stimulation and sharing with colleagues (p. 9). It helped them counteract their frustration or failure they had while trying to better their current teaching practices (p. 9-10). Mitchell and Mitchell were impressed with “the depth and breadth of the insights that emerged, as well as the richness of the new practical wisdom, were immeasurably enhanced by having a collective mind and multiple classrooms to extend and refine ideas” (p. 10). Their Project for Enhancing Effective Learning (PEEL) deemed highly effective and even exceeded their expectations. “The collaborative action research helped the group develop synergy” and allow the teachers to become “innovators who fed off each other’s ideas and built up creative practice” (p.12).

The PEEL project also included the academics with their teacher collaboration (Mitchell and Mitchell, 2008, p. 8). They felt it was important to involve all crucial contributors in education, those who are involved with the school and learning outcomes of the students. Despite academic involvement, teachers were given the freedom to take ownership in their teaching and were able to be in charge of their own teaching interventions (p. 8). The outcomes from this project were so beneficial that the students, staff, and academics did not want it to end after the expected two-year time frame. Mitchell and Mitchell reported, “students [had] definite and strong attitudes towards what constitutes learning in school, and equally strong conceptions about learning in general” (p. 12). Since this initiative attained higher than expected results, the idea easily spread to both primary and secondary schools, in Australia and then expanded to other countries (p. 9).

Currently in Canada, learning communities are being utilized within schools to create common languages in education, shared practices amongst staff, and understanding of the overall learning process to better student learning. In Ontario, The Developing Inquiring Communities in Education Project (DICEP) is “comprised of elementary, high school, and post-secondary teachers who believe in a common theoretical framework” (Bell-Angus, Davis, Donoahue, Kowal, & McGynn-Stewart, 2008, p. 19). It is focused on “creat[ing] and sustain[ing] communities of inquiry in which all concerned learn with, and from, each other about matters of individual and social significance through talk and the generative process of knowledge building” (p. 19-20). Like the PEEL project, they aim to “provide a safe, supportive and intellectual stimulating place where group members can get feedback about, and ideas for, the inquiries they conduct in their

particular settings” (p. 20). They acknowledge that teaching can at times be “exhausting and somewhat isolating,” therefore being part of this group “provides the opportunity to talk with individuals who share common beliefs about learning in an inclusive, supportive, and equitable setting” (p. 23). This project had a dramatic impact on educators and students. Educators felt it transformed their practice because they were able to “pursue [their] own professional development as learners and teachers, while at the same time seek to provide meaningful and effective learning experiences for [their] students” (p. 25). Within this community students were also given a “voice in the classroom” and were able to “explore questions about who we are, how we live together, and how we learn best” (p.26). Students affirmed that they felt valued and appreciated by being asked about school and their learning (p. 26).

Learning communities have created successful learning environments for students, staff, and parents. Much research has been documented on the positive benefits of learning communities, however this has occurred predominantly within the boundaries of the school. I would like to consider the outcomes of expanding these educational learning communities to local neighborhoods, thus broadening the concept of learning communities. For these purposes one needs to consider: (1) what are the effects of student learning within the communities themselves?, and (2) how can involving community members enrich schools?

## **Rural Communities**

To expand the notion and possibilities of learning communities, it is important to distinguish the kind of community that the school and students reside in. According to

Barter (2008) urban cities and rural towns have very different dynamics and should be reviewed and approached differently in regards to education (p. 468). A particular feature of rural living is “its need for acceptance as community” (p. 469).

Rural areas have unique qualities such as low populations, reliance on single resource industries, a sense of kinship, place, and mind, and a unique symbiotic relationship between schools and their communities, which make them different from urban centers. (p. 469)

Barter continues to argue that educational research lacks literature and experimentation for rural schools (p. 468). His study, which occurred in Newfoundland and Labrador, aims to expand on rural education research, accurately depict rural education, and understand leading concerns and issues within rural schools. Recognizing, acknowledging, and understanding these differences in rural education are essential.

Barter stipulates, “these issues can play a significant role in determining future curriculum design, curriculum implementation, teacher training, and teacher recruitment and retention, while enhancing community development in rural areas” (p. 469).

Interestingly, a report on rural education in South Africa by the Nelson Mandela Foundation announced “one cannot speak of schooling without understanding the context within which schooling takes place and how rural communities experience education” (as cited in Barter, p. 470). Place or the environment cannot be separated from student learning or the school.

When referring to rural communities or rural schools in research, defining the context of the term ‘rural’ is necessary to understand the authors’ intentions, the authenticity of the study, and cause for implications. Barter acknowledges Miller’s

(1993) widely used definition as “any place where residents live in unincorporated area or town of less than 2500 people and over 30 miles from an urban center” (2008, p. 470). Others have depicted ‘rural’ in regards to population size, population density, geographic location, culture, and access to services and amenities (Barter, 2008, p. 470). Research is greatly impacted by the context of the rural definition used in their studies. Hence, it is “difficult to do comparative studies with consistency or to make recommendations for change that will fit all schools, or even most schools” (p. 470). When trying to assess the needs of rural schools it is necessary to look at the individual community, as each is unique to its setting, location, and composition. Another concern is that rural communities can be looked upon in a “negative light” or an “area in distress” when compared to urban cities (p. 470). However, rural schools and communities have an abundance of beneficial aspects and qualities that enhance student learning. Rural schools offer a sense of ‘connectedness’ amongst students, staff, parents, and other local community members. Barter reflects back on the work of Ferdinand Tonnies, in 1957, where life in community is “intimate, private, and exclusive” and relates to “kinship, place, and mind” (p. 476).

Kinship comes from the unity of being that families and extended families provide, ... place emerges from the sharing of a common locale, such as classroom, school, or neighborhood and ... mind refers to the bonding together of people that results from their mutual bonding to a common goal, shared set of values, and shared conception of being. (Barter, 2008, p. 476)

The bonding and connection within communities is further explained by Sergiovanni (1994), who describes a sense of commitment between people around social

organizations, based on “shared values and relationships... nurtured through interdependence” (as cited in Barter, 2008, p. 476).

Relating these positive features of rural communities to education is paramount. Within these communities there is a strong school-community connection that must be recognized in order to meet the needs of students living in rural areas. These connections range from “school interactions with local government, businesses, and social organizations... [to] families” within the community (p. 471). Khattri et al. (1997) addresses the need to support these connections to establish a ‘sense of place’ for rural students, as well as maintain the “success and survival of rural schools” (as cited in Barter, 2008, p. 471). “A sense of place involves a rootedness in one’s community and the desire to cherish and cultivate one’s local community” (Barter, 2008, p. 472). It is also “sustainable living, living which requires detailed knowledge of a place and a sense of care” (p. 472). Overall, “an understanding of place is vital to understanding the nature of our relationships with each other and the world” (p. 472).

## **Meeting the Needs of Learners**

In order to best meet the needs of students, within all schools, rural or not, educators must focus directly on the students themselves. Understanding our learners and how they interact with the world around them is crucial to understanding how they learn best. A child’s world is much different than the idea of an adult driven school center. Dewey (1902) clearly highlights these differences:

First, the narrow but personal world of the child against the impersonal but infinitely extended world of space and time; second, the unity, the single

wholeheartedness of the child's life, and the specializations and divisions of the curriculum; third and abstract principle of logical classification, and the practical and emotional bonds of child life. (p. 7)

Dewey (1902) acknowledges, "the child's life is an integral, a total one" which is inclusive of their home and surroundings (p. 5). The child, along with their learning, cannot be segregated from their environment or community. Dewey continues to describe how "the child lives in a somewhat narrow world of personal contacts" (p. 5). Their world is based on their limited experiences, close interactions, and personal interests. Therefore, the place within which the child lives becomes central to the student's learning.

Place based learning is not only beneficial to the school and community, but most importantly to the students themselves. It is the heart of natural student learning. Dewey (1990) believes that education must be integrated with everyday local experiences in a child's life. Daily occurrences in the child's world are what is relevant to them and stem their future learning. There then becomes a disconnect for children when entering school settings, due to the school's structure and organization.

From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in the school comes from his inability to utilize the experiences he gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself. ... When the child gets into the schoolroom he has to put out of his mind a large part of the ideas, interests, and activities that predominate in his home and neighborhood. Schools [are] unable to utilize [a child's] everyday experience. (Dewey, 1990, p.75)

Along with Dewey's studies, I would like to look at keeping the child at the center of their learning and have the school conform to the child's needs, not the child having to conform to traditional school structure. In doing so, it would prove beneficial to keep the interaction between student, family, school and community free flowing. Not only would student learning be occurring within the school walls, but also outside the school setting. Students would be directly learning by hands on experiences within the community.

### **Taking Learning Communities to the Community**

A child's life is inclusive of their world around them and therefore a holistic approach to education should parallel the innate way a child learns. Children learn through interaction, engaging in the environment through their senses, and living the experience themselves. Authentic learning is closely connected to students' own lives; therefore learning beyond the walls of school and within the community is ideal for student learning.

In my teaching experience, my latest primary class explored the outdoors using their senses on a nature walk through town. With the different natural elements, the students were very engaged in their findings. All students were responding to even the slightest things, such as leaves, rocks and sticks. Upon further inspection little creatures sparked their curiosity, such as spiders, wood bugs and worms. I love seeing this innate wonder and drive to want to learn about the world around them. My aim is to utilize this positive energy and student motivation for learning in my teaching. This outdoor community exploration sparked further learning in and outside the classroom, which applied to all areas of the curriculum. Later we dug in a community member's garden to

find worms, searched through her compost while learning about composting from her, and did worm experiments based on student's own inquisitive questions. I found that learning within the community offered genuine, integrated experiences that were aligned to the students' interests. I feel we were able to achieve more from our learning excursions outside the class, than I would have been able to offer the students solely as a teacher in the classroom.

A child-centered approach to teaching also values place based learning and learning outdoors within the natural environment. Children not only need to escape the structure of the school, but also need a chance for free exploration, especially in their natural surroundings. Unfortunately a child's life today is full of structured activities from school itself to afterschool extracurricular activities, sporting groups, or childcare centers. To return to the needs of our students, educators need to allow for unstructured time, which I call free play, and outdoor exploration.

The variety and richness of natural settings—the wind, the sky, the changing clouds, the moving animals, the cycling plants, the hardness of rocks, the flowing-ness of water, the varieties of colors and sounds, the wide range of permitted behaviors (shouting, running and climbing)... all contribute to physical, cognitive, and emotional development [of children] more than manufactured indoor environments typically can or do (Rivken, 1997, p. 63).

Various landscapes offer very different opportunities to that of children. For example, children's evaluation of the 'attractiveness' of a place tends to be based on the question of 'What can I do here?' whereas adults tend to ask 'What does it look like?' (Wilson, 1997). Children use the outdoors as their creative playground for learning. Maynard

(2007) firmly believes the “natural landscape has particular qualities that meet children’s needs for diverse, stimulating and challenging play environments” (p. 326). Maynard continues to explain how children explore the outdoors, which is very different than classroom interactions. “When outdoors, children are able to find out about themselves and the world around them in a way that would generally not be tolerated in the classroom” (p. 321). As well as they “can build on a much bigger scale and experiment with materials and sound without fear of being admonished for making a mess or being too noisy” (p. 321). This freedom outside allows students to test their boundaries, gain a sense of self, and work on interactions with others. Maynard indicates, “Risk-taking in the outdoor environment has an impact on children’s willingness to take risks in their learning within classrooms and throughout life, while also helping them to gain a sense of responsibility for their own actions and towards others” (p. 323). Moore and Wong’s (1997) study reported, children had more positive social relationships and creative play after their school in California added a meadow with woods, streams, ponds and flowers to their school grounds (as cited in Rivken, 1997, p. 63). Learning outside the classroom can prove more beneficial and even contribute to a more meaningful classroom experience.

As part of British Columbia’s education plan, developing environmental stewardship is part of the learning outcomes for students. It is essential for children to be outdoors and in contact with their natural surroundings to best develop their care and concern for the environment. “It is only by intimately knowing the wonder of nature’s complexity in a particular place that leads to a full appreciation of the immense beauty of the planet as a whole” (White & Stoeklin, 1998). It is this appreciation that leads children

to want to protect and conserve the environment. Palmer (1993) states, “Research indicates that childhood experience of the out-of-doors is the single most important factor in developing personal concern for the environment” (as cited in Wilson, 1997, p. 192). Furthermore, Wilson adds that regular encounters to these natural areas must be on a frequent basis (p. 192). Having access to nature during childhood has been “identified as one of the major predictors of environmental sensitivity and responsible land stewardship” as adults (Chawla, 1996; Palmer, 1993; Tanner, 1980 as cited in Wilson, 1997, p.192). If children are not exposed to the natural environment on a regular basis or have very little contact with living things, they can even develop fears and misconceptions about nature (Louv, 2008).

The concept of play and exploration within nature is not just for early childhood, it is for all students, young and old. Play is the building block of wonder, curiosity, engagement, and thus learning. Exploration becomes an integral part of the learning process for all ages, from infant to adult. For example, all of the students at my school, including middle and high school students, explored the trails and natural surroundings of our local community together. Students looked at plant species, new growth, changes in the environment, evidence of wildlife, and much more. Stemming from this outdoor adventure, students made birdhouses and learned the life cycles and patterns of local birds. They also learned about locally grown berries and foods, healthy eating, and cooking lessons. All of this authentic and integrated learning not only matched curriculum outcomes, but also was student driven. It came from their own curiosity and interest from being in their local surroundings and community.

Other benefits for educators to take students out into the community for learning opportunities are motivation and engagement. Bathgate and Silva (2010) comment on the prevalence of youth who are disengaged from school-based learning and schools with high dropout rates (p. 63-64). They argue, “out-of-school, contextual learning keeps students engaged in learning” (p. 68). Studies done at a secondary school in London, reported “drastic improvements in achievement,” due to supplemental enrichment activities within the community (p. 68). These activities included, “community service-learning projects, university and museum visits, and internships with local businesses” (p. 67). Students were able to “reinforce and apply academic knowledge gained in school, as well as leverage their own knowledge and personal experiences while learning the value of their education in the real world” (p.67). Through these experiences students are able to see a purpose for their learning. Bathgate and Silva firmly believe stronger and more structured partnerships between schools and community providers are needed. They state, “partnerships can not only support increased time for learning, but also spur a more dynamic network of learning opportunities that can keep youth engaged in learning,” which will lower student dropout rates (p. 63). Stronger connections with the community elicit a larger support system for youth, “a tighter web of support with fewer holes to fall through” (p. 66). This tightly connected web of people provides “a stronger scaffold of learning, where youth are supported and support themselves in developing all of the skills and knowledge they need to succeed” (p. 66). The more people involved with supporting the students along their educational path, the more opportunity for positive individual growth.

Partner organizations can also add staff with a diverse range of skill sets and experience that can enrich the learning experiences for youth and increase the chances that youth who are bored, disengaged, and struggling academically can connect with a supportive adult and engage or reengage with school-based learning (Bathgate & Silva, 2010, p. 68).

These connections with community members can develop into strong healthy relationships. Students may gain mentors and positive role models, which they would not have otherwise obtained with experiences solely in the school.

Bathgate and Silva (2010) continue to acknowledge the expanded set of teaching and learning experiences achieved with community connections (p. 67). Leadership skills, civic engagement, global awareness, and teamwork, are imparted on the students from these experiences, that they might not otherwise receive. (p. 67). These attributes are ‘real world’ skills, which are highly regarded by future educational pursuits and employers (p. 67). Zaff and Lerner (2010) agree that there are multiple advantages from learning within communities, however they add that communities equally benefit. Their study looked more specifically at service learning and the effect of positive youth development in high school. Zaff and Lerner (2010) believe, “through service learning, young people experience valued civic participation in their communities and learn to identify community problems, prioritize solutions, and implement problem-solving strategies” (p. 21). These experiences lead to students developing civic motivation, skills, and commitment to contributing to civil society and democracy (p. 21). A study involving high school students in Madison County found “significant increases in civic efficacy, civic knowledge, social capital, and commitment to remain involved in the

community” (p.21). These students were volunteers although, Zaff and Lerner do acknowledge that several other studies have found that voluntary and mandatory participants showed increased voting rates and volunteering (p. 22).

Gatt, Ojala, and Soler (2011) are in agreement with the notion “that family and community involvement in schools benefits not only students’ learning but also their surrounding community” (p. 33). Their study looked at educational success within the communities in Europe to support social inclusion and embrace diversity. In this case, however Gatt et al. take a stance that “education is a shared responsibility of the whole community” (p. 34). They believe the surrounding community of the school has an obligation to aid in the development of youth. Furthermore, Gatt et al. state, “as society becomes more complex and as more professional knowledge is accrued about child development, learning and social integration, educating becomes both harder and a more challenging task for educators to address by themselves” (p. 34). Upon first reading these comments I thought they were quite bold statements, although after reflecting on the idea, I must say I agree. It makes me think about the belief that it takes a community to raise a child. In return these children grow up to be active contributing members of the community and society.

## Summary

Schools are integral parts of a community and so should a community be part of all schools. There exists a symbiotic relationship amongst the two. A community needs to be defined and looked at individually in order to best meet the needs of its community members. An open working relationship among all facets of a community optimizes

growth for everyone. Community involvement has “positive effects on children, encouraging [students] to continue their academic studies and achieve better grades” (Gatt et al., 2011, p. 36). Students have also shown a significant improvement in their social skills, attitudes and behaviors, understanding and involvement in the learning process, and connection with the natural surroundings leading to environmental stewardship. Due to the myriad benefits of community involvement with education, it is evident educators provide ample opportunities for student learning within the community and beyond the school boundaries. Berman, Murphy-Berman, and Melton (2008) challenge “aspiring innovators to engage in all aspects of a community, to make contacts and develop relationships, to infuse new ways of thinking and doing into the very fabric of the community” (p. 126).

## Chapter 3: My Project ‘Learning Excursions’

### Introduction

My research and collaboration of my literature review allowed me to understand the findings regarding community, learning communities already within schools, and the benefits of community connections and field trips. I would like to align these academic findings with some of the learning excursions I have previously experienced with my students, while highlighting the outcomes I saw as a teacher. Specifically, for my project I will be reporting on three very different field trips and reflecting on the students’ responses, learning that occurred, connections to the literature review and connections to the curriculum. I aim to provide theoretical reasoning and concrete evidence for taking students on such learning excursions within their community.

### Neighbor’s Garden – Worm Exploration and Composting

My intention in teaching primary is to allow for student driven exploration to spark teachable moments and provide opportunities to expand on these child centered learning experiences. Dewey (1902) acknowledges “the child [as] the starting point, the center, and the end” where “his development, his growth, is the ideal” (p. 9). In order to allow for free exploration I would take the students on a number of nature walks within our local surroundings, which provided plenty of unstructured time for discovery and observation. When students would find things of interest, they would call on the rest of us to, “Come Look!” We would listen to the excitement and enthusiasm, as each student would share his or her findings. Questions and comments from other students and myself

would lead to further inquiry and exploration, some of which would be answered and some left to ponder. The goal for me was to have the students observing, questioning, thinking, and speculating, without focusing on the correct answer. Further discussions and study would result.

On one particular outing, following some heavy rains, students noticed an abundant of worms on our excursion. Some worms were in the grass, while others were inching across the road. Since this was drawing a large interest in the group, we stopped along our walk for closer inspection. Students noticed the varied length of the worms, how some were moving and others looked immobile, and that some looked plump and wet, while others were skinny and dry. As a group, each student revealed his or her observations and ideas about what the worm was doing and why. I prompted some questions to extend their thinking by asking about reasons why there were so many worms out this day, why they were so different, and what they were doing. Students' responses included they are hungry and need to find food, which led other students to question what they eat. One student responded, "apples and oranges." "No, they eat bugs," another student replied. Other students thought the worms wanted some sunlight, as it was now sunny out compared to the previous dark dreary days. One student stated that the worms wanted to see their friends and another said that the worms needed fresh air. The dialogue that was occurring was rich in ideas and reasoning. All students were engaged and participating. Seeing this high interest and curiosity directed our learning in the class, and we began a study on worms. The very next day, students were provided with a number of non-fiction and fiction books relating to worms, which they could review during individual reading time by themselves, with classmates, or myself. Also as

a class, I read *Diary Of A Worm* by Doreen Cornin and 2 short nonfiction books on worms, which were followed by class discussions.

Upon talking with a community member one day about our focus in class, she had mentioned how many worms she had in her garden and compost. That same week we were off to explore her backyard garden. We walked out the front door of the school with shovels, pails, and containers in hand to observe and collect some worms. Our worms were going to be used for science experiments in the class to test the students' theories and questions they had raised earlier about the worms. Conversations about respect and care for the natural environment and living creatures also arose. Students were eager to get their hands dirty and search for worms. However despite how excited they were, I observed their concern and consideration for the plants, worms, and insects found while digging in the garden. I heard comments such as, "Don't dig too hard. You will hurt the worms." and "Be gentle with the worms. They are living."

As students were digging in the garden, they made connections to their observations of the worms on our first nature walk. They were comparing and contrasting the location of worms found, as well as the worms themselves. Students were referring to discussions and books reviewed in class. I was impressed by the breadth and depth of information and knowledge students were possessing. They were responding to each other without me having to direct the conversation. There was a sense of confidence and pride in the knowledge and tasks they were presenting. I was fascinated with the collaboration that was occurring amongst the students. When a student had something to share, other students would instantly come over to listen. If a student needed help, other students quickly offered their expertise. In discovering a cluster of worms, one student

excitedly called the one student who had not yet found a worm to come and collect one. Seeing this determination and teamwork from the students was surprising because lessons in the class had drawn out quite different behaviors. In class, some students exhibited some very highly competitive and aggressive responses to each other. At one point I walked into what looked like a wrestling match. Due to some of these behaviors, I had previously been nervous to take the students on field trips. However on this trip, students were quite respectful to each other and to myself. Instead of responding competitively, such as who found the most worms or found the worm first, students were eager to show each other their findings and ensure each student had a worm. After seeing the students' motivation and engagement in their learning, I realized how some students excel in outdoor learning conditions.

Along with finding worms in our neighbor's garden, we learned about composting. Students were shown the steps of composting, while being able to visually see the actual compost itself and be part of the process. Each student was given some food waste, such as eggshells, tea bags, potato and orange peels, carrot ends and apple cores to put into the compost bin. Even though we had just discussed the kinds of foods that can be composted, students were still surprised to see some of the food items they were given. One student who was given eggshells was upset thinking she received something that she could not contribute. She responded by saying, "I have egg shells, but they can't go in the compost they are too hard." In agreement another student said, "Eggshells are not food." One student questioned the tea bag because it had a string and paper on it. I realized that talking about these items was not enough for students to completely understand the process. It was only until they were holding these items in

their hands that it became evident the topic needed further explanation. I loved hearing the students' questions and comments, as it allowed students to delve deeper into their own learning and expand our group conversations. Students continued to compare food waste materials and discuss what should and should not go into the compost and why. In response to the eggshells, a student answered, "They just get squished into smaller pieces." Regarding the tea bags, another student suggested, "You can take off the string and paper." Another student interjected, "The paper breaks down too, so it is okay." A student with an apple core was worried that if she put the apple seeds in the compost, apple trees would grow from it. "There is no sun in the compost so they won't grow," a student reassured her. Students were problem solving and collaborating. After much deliberation, all students decided to put their items in the compost bin. Immediately they were looking to see if what they had just placed on the compost bin was starting to break down already. We continued with a thorough explanation of how the compost works to help students completely understand the process. Students were informed that it takes weeks to months for the material to decompose. They were able to see some distinct layers in the compost bin from previous organic matter, which helped in their understanding. A student made a connection to a pile of grass clippings and leaves in his back yard stating, "I used to jump in the leaves before and now they look like mush in the grass."

Our worm exploration led to understanding how they play a vital role in composting. Students were shocked that these creatures were so beneficial. Students looked deeper into the soil and saw other insects. "Do they help too?" They wanted to know more. The intention was just to grasp the basic understanding of composting, but

here they were wanting further explanations. Our neighbor continued to describe the process in more depth, touching on the microscopic organisms and fungi that aid in creating nutrient rich soil. Students remarked that we should have brought our magnifying glasses. Another student said, "I should have brought my microscope." We finished with discussions about the benefits of composting. I was really impressed with how the students were responding with developed questions and comments. They also remained quite focused and listened intently to what was being said. We left with an abundance of knowledge and information about worms and composting, thanks to our trip to our neighbor's garden.

## Reflection

I found nature walks to be ideal learning excursions for my class, as students were always excited to explore the world around them. Our natural surroundings provided ample opportunity to spark student curiosity and interest, which would ignite whole class learning. This child-centered approach to learning supports Dewey's views of the child and education (1902, p. 9).

Subject-matter never can be got into the child from without. Learning is active. It involves reaching out of the mind... [and] organic assimilation starting from within. Literally, we must take our stand with the child and our departure from him. It is he and not the subject-matter which determines both quality and quantity of learning (p. 9).

Education has changed its focus and direction over the years, but 21<sup>st</sup> century learning seems to be focusing on the child again. George Abbott, the Minister of Education

acknowledges, “We need to put students at the centre of their own education, ... make a better link between what kids learn at school and what they experience in their everyday lives, ...[and] create new learning environments for students that allow them to discover, embrace, and fulfill their passions” (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 2).

It was from student observation and interest on one of our nature walks that led to our worm unit, exploring our neighbor’s garden, and compost study. Even though all students were learning about worms as a class, each student was able to follow their own inquiry question. The worms we collected from the garden were used in class, as students conducted individual experiments to test their theories. One student had a spray bottle to see how the worm responded to water. Another student would move his worm from the light to the dark to see the worm’s reaction. A few students worked together to see if the worm would eat pieces of apple, oranges, or bananas. All students were motivated and directed their own experiments. Following their experiments students drew, wrote, or used video to record their findings. Blady (2011) states, “students will learn as much as they can about topics that interest them.” (p. 69). For our class, I found that student interest and learning followed a domino effect because as students explored more, something new inspired them, so then we would learn more about that, which would lead to yet another topic of interest. We would continue on this path of learning through student interest and motivation. For example, the trip to our neighbor’s garden triggered student engagement and interest to explore other insects and creatures of their choice. Later that year, we had a praying mantis egg case in our class and learned about their life cycle as they developed. The BC Education Plan highlights “children [as] natural born

learners” therefore they only need to be given “more freedom to pursue their individual interests and passions within a particular topic.” (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 3).

Our nature walks not only successfully addressed the B.C. Science curriculum outcomes for my multi-grade class, of Kindergarten to Grade 2, but also enhanced students overall learning and experience. During these outdoor excursions students were using their senses directly to observe the world around them. As part of the Science curriculum for Kindergarten to Grade 2, students are expected to “use the five senses to make observations,” “communicate their observations, experiences, and thinking in a variety of ways,” and “use their senses to interpret observations” (Ministry of Education, 2010, pg. 47, 59 & 63). Students were able to share quite detailed observations of their findings while on these nature walks and at our neighbor’s garden. I was impressed with the descriptive language used to explain what they saw, heard, touched, and smelled. At our neighbor’s garden a student commented on the trees that lined the yard, “Look at the rainbow of colors on the leaves. There is bright red, orange, yellow, brown, and even light green.” While digging in the garden, another student commented on the texture of the dirt, “The dirt is rough and hard and crumbles in my hand.” Another student observed the minute holes in the ground and said he was going to follow one down to find a worm. When worms were found, some students were lining them up to see which ones were longer. Students noted the different lengths and widths of the worms and speculated why. Some thought their size was based on the age of the worm and others thought it was because of the different terrain the worms had to dig through. As students explored the garden, they continued to compare, classify, question and predict within their local environment.

On other nature walks students compared local plants and animals, while describing detailed features of them. Footprints and droppings gave indication of animal life, which extended our discussion to other animals that could not be viewed, such as bears. Studies of the local environment incorporated the minute, such as worms and insects, to the vast, such as the ocean. Students investigated living and non-living aspects around them, which led to discussions about nature and man-made objects. Topics about garbage and recycling developed, and were connected to our composting study at our neighbor's garden. Our walks occurred throughout the year, allowing us to look at seasonal changes, foods available, and the history of the land. There is such a rich body of knowledge for students to be engaged with while being outdoors in the real world and interacting with nature. All areas of the curriculum can be integrated with the natural environment, which is evident by the increase in number of outdoor schools and their high enrollment.

Being outdoors and in the natural environment leads to an understanding and appreciation for it. "There is considerable evidence that concern for the environment is based on an affection for nature that only develops with autonomous, unmediated contact with it" (White & Stoecklin, 1998). From our repeated class trips outside, I was able to see how positive behaviors towards nature developed. During our first trips, students initial reactions while looking at plants, bushes, and trees would be to pull them out of the ground or tear a piece off for further observation. Although after a number of nature walks, I observed how students showed more care and concern towards their natural surroundings. Students would still pick up leaves and other unattached items around us, although they would not break apart any living things. We would have conversations

about respecting the environment and how plants are living, but I believe they gained a further affiliation to nature. When we first started our worm exploration, one student knew that worms can survive after being split in two, and had wanted to show us. If I allowed it, I believe he would have attempted it. After observing worms and collecting some for our experiments, it was evident students had started to build a relationship with them. Students had given the worms names, were very gentle when handling them, and had to check on them regularly in the class to ensure they were okay. Maynard (2007) states, “learning about living things” leads to “learning to respect living things” (p. 323). It is these “positive experiences of natural environments [that] can have an impact on the development of children’s sensitivity and caring attitudes towards nature and increase their environmental knowledge” (Maynard, p. 325).

After researching and understanding students’ connection with nature and development of environmental stewardship it makes me question the manner in which we did our worm experiments. We did remove these creatures from their natural habitat, collect them for our informative purposes, keep them in isolated containers at school for an extended period of time, conduct our own experiments using them, and then let them go in a different environment. Were there repercussions to these actions? What were the effects on the worms themselves, the garden and compost? Was I promoting the idea that humans can take any living subjects from the environment for their experiments? What was I unintentionally teaching the students? These questions do create quite a dilemma. I do support and advocate hands on learning, especially to build authentic scientific knowledge. Students did initiate and conduct a variety of inquiry experiments, demonstrating a high level of scientific exploration. How do we ensure students are

building and understanding respect for the natural environment, as well as experiencing real scientific inquiry and experimentation at school? When referring to our worm collection and experiments, our class could have brought the necessary materials and conducted the experiments at the garden or returned the worms in a shorter period of time to their original location. I think initiating a discussion with the students around the scientific process, experimentation, and use of living things would also be of value.

Our learning excursion to our neighbor's garden, not only had students connecting and building relationships with the natural environment, but also with people in our community. Students were talking, making observations, and discussing their findings with each other, family members, the special education worker, our neighbor, and myself. Not only did this offer a greater child to adult ratio for safety purposes, it expanded the knowledge base for the students. Our neighbor had an abundance of knowledge to share about composting, while a family member who worked at the recycling depot also enriched the conversations. Students responded positively while interacting with these community members and were initiating discussions regarding their newfound interests and knowledge. Students were becoming aware that education can occur beyond the school walls of the school and integrated with the community.

In regards to connecting with others, students were eager to share their observations with each other and these community members. Despite not every student having a family member with them on the trip, they connected with other adults in the group. In particular, many children in the class call one grandmother, "Grandma." Grandma visits the school regularly and participates in the majority of school functions. She has built strong bonds with the children and provides support to a number of students

beyond her own grandchildren. I love seeing these positive relationships foster and build. Students who do not have extended family members in town or have lost relatives are able to connect with other members in the community to expand their support systems. These relationships are not only beneficial for the students, but for the community members as well.

Our class connections and learning with our neighbor continued beyond our trip to her garden. She came to our class and collected our separated compost samples to compare the difference in volume and weight of our garbage with and without the compost materials. Students were able to understand first hand how their contributions decreased the amount of waste to the dump. As I reflect on this experience, I feel it would have been advantageous for the students to carry their own compost materials regularly to our neighbor's garden. I also think it would have been beneficial for the students to learn about the garbage process in town and be taken to the recycling depot and dump to further understand the garbage disposal and recycling systems in our community.

Our neighbor continued her connection with the school beyond composting. When she found things of interest, she would come frequently to the class to share a learning opportunity with the students. On one occasion, she brought an eggshell for students to observe and predict the type and origin of the bird. Students were excited to have her presence in the class and continually referred to the trip to our neighbor's garden. It became a lived experience for them, in which they could attach their new learning to. We are very lucky to have such supportive people within our community.

## Grocery Store – Our New Learning Environment

For one of our class neighborhood trips we ventured to the local supermarket, where students received a thorough tour and interactive experience with all aspects of the store. My original intention for this trip was for students to have an understanding of community workers. However, like most of the other field trips to local services in town, this excursion exceeded my expectations. Students were not only shown and explained the role of each of the workers, but also able to take part in some of the responsibilities. For example, our demonstration of the bakery section included students helping to bake cookies. Of course these cookies were not for sale, as we got to taste them after they cooled, but students were still able to understand first hand what the job entailed. They watched other products be packaged, labeled and put on the shelf for sale. Students made comments about the process and speculated how much time and effort was needed to bake for the public. One student acknowledged, “We would have to be here all day to make chocolate chip cookies for everyone.” Another student quickly responded, “Not everyone likes chocolate chip cookies.” A different student disagreed, “No, look at how many trays can go in these big ovens together.” Then he proceeded to count how many cookies were on each tray and then add how many trays were in the oven to get a total. Some students were making connections to types of cookies, baked goods, and foods they made at home with their families, while other students were highlighting items that were purchased and consumed at home.

As we continued through to the back of the store, students were shown where the large trucks bring the stock for unloading, where the boxes and products are stored, and how they are handled. Students were excited and felt privileged to discover new sections

of the store and experience the activities of a retail store beyond the public's access. "Wow, look at how big the fridges and freezers are," announced one student. Another student agreed, "I cannot believe we get to go in there." One employee demonstrated how she prepares and cleans some of the produce using large tools and devices to ensure the products are of good quality and presented well. Students helped remove waste, determine which produce should be stocked and why, and where they should be allocated in the produce department. Students were offered a choice of a single fruit item to eat, such as an apple, orange, or pear. Students observed the features of the produce, while connecting what they had just learned about the stocking process. "Oh look at that round red apple, it looks just ripe for eating," one student observed. Another pointed out that the bananas were too green and should not be out yet. Students continued to walk through the produce department analyzing all the different items while critiquing the quality of the produce. The level of detail and description in their dialogue was fascinating. Student interaction, collaboration, and learning continued to develop. One student wanted to choose a carrot, however other students interjected that carrots are not fruits. Another student went around naming all the fruits she knew and saw. I encouraged more discussions by asking what the differences are between fruits and vegetables. Students moved about the area comparing fruits and vegetables, while coming up with similar characteristics. "Fruits are softer and vegetables are harder," one student said. "I know, fruits come from trees and have seeds," declared another student. We continued this rich discussion of speculation and reasoning as students picked their fruits to eat.

In the meat department students were shown where the slabs of meat are hung, along with the machines and tools used to cut them. The butcher presented strings of

animal intestinal casing for sausages and demonstrated how the meat is ground as the casings are filled. He also packaged some meat products, showed how they were dated and displayed for selling. Some students, whose eyes and mouths were wide open, seemed shocked to see this process. Their comments were, “Oh gross! This is disgusting,” while others were intrigued and wanted to know more. Some seemed to be disconnected from where our food comes from, as one student questioned, “That is a part of a cow?” When looking at the intestinal casings, another student asked, “Those are from an animal?” Others thought it was cool and made connections to hunting with their families. “Dad and I go hunting. He shot a deer and threw it into the truck. He had to cut it up and Mom makes chili.” “I won’t eat deer,” a student replied. The butcher explained that some people bring their deer meat to the store to be butchered. Students were involved in a thorough conversation with the butcher about where meat comes from, how the store processes it, and what people purchase from the store.

As we explored the store students recognized the designated departments, while describing certain food products that belong there. Students were able to practice grouping, sorting and classifying skills. At the store front students were instructed by the manager to pick a food product and bring it to the checkout. Students were guided behind the cash register and able to ring in their own item using the till with assistance. After all of the students rang in their items a total was completed and displayed on the register. The students behind the cashier were eager to announce the total that was due for payment. In a pretend manner they looked at me for payment. I continued the act by handing them an imaginary twenty-dollar bill. During our trip to the supermarket,

students were able to experience first hand the role of a cashier, along with the majority of other positions in the store.

Due to such support, student interest, and learning opportunities I decided to take the students on another excursion to our grocery store during our healthy living unit. In the class prior, students had learned about the Canadian Food guide, including the various food groups and daily requirements. We had also prepared some meals and did some baking together, although I had always chosen the recipes and purchased the ingredients. For this occasion I wanted to include the students in the process. I had students look up recipes online, talk with family members and bring in special recipes to the class. As a class, we decided on our next baking endeavor. In small groups students divided the ingredient list so that each group had an equal number of ingredients to purchase. Students wrote their own grocery lists, grabbed reusable shopping bags, collected their money, and we were off on a new adventure to the store.

Family members joined our trip and one helped oversee a group, although they were instructed to let the students take responsibility in finding the targeted ingredients. Students were very confident while navigating their way around the store. One student explained to his group, “We have to go past the fruits and vegetable to the back of the store and in the fridge to get the eggs.” He had set out a game plan for his group members to follow. Skills of collaboration, problem solving, and leadership were evident within each of the groups. One student, who is usually shy, became a democratic leader, as she had each of her group members choose an item to find from the list so it was fair. Another group exhibited a more dominant leader as he delegated an item to each student in his group, while another group found each item together as a team. Other students

within the groups seemed to be in agreement with each other as no conflicts arose with any of the leader's decisions.

As students were shopping for their ingredients, they were connecting their knowledge and experiences from our last trip to the grocery store, as well as trips to the store with their families. "Bananas are in the produce department of the store," announced one student as she led her group to that department. Once there another student responded, "Oh those bananas are brown." A different student picked them up anyway and put them in her basket. She confidently stated that her mom bakes and likes to use brown bananas because they taste better and get squished anyway.

Students also displayed a great understanding of food items based on knowledge gained from lessons and activities completed in class. For example, students were relating some of their ingredient list items to the designated food group. One student commented, "We need to get butter, that is part of the milk group." Her group members agreed and said they need to go by the big fridges, where the dairy products are. Other students contemplated about some of their food items and which food group it belonged to. "What food group does flour belong to?" one student asked. By process of elimination they determined that it belonged to grain products. One student concluded that you could make bread with flour so it had to belong to the bread group. In another instance, a student was determined eggs are part of the dairy food group, while another responded, "No, it is part of the meat group." They came to ask me for verification, but I encouraged them to explore the problem further. Despite the difficult concept to understand, after discussing it with their group members they were in accordance that it was part of the meat and meat alternatives group.

Once students had successfully found their grocery items, they were instructed to go to the cashier for payment with the money they had previously been given. At the register, some students were trying to calculate their items themselves, while others wondered if they had enough money to pay for all their food products. Once tallied, one student asked the cashier if their group would get change back from a twenty-dollar bill. She proceeded to help them figure out the equation. As their purchase was almost seventeen dollars, she guided them to use numbers and not think of it as money. One student used a counting up strategy from seventeen to get the number three. The cashier instructed him to now add the dollars back. “Oh, we get three dollars back,” he answered with a big grin on his face. Other students were working with numbers, estimating, and calculating their own answers and reasoning. The correct answers were not of concern, I was just happy to see students using their numeracy skills. From the experience of purchasing their own groceries, students were able to understand some real life uses for money and using numbers.

On our trip back to the school students seemed proud of their accomplishments and excited to use their purchases to make banana bread. The day ended with us enjoying our homemade banana bread as a class, while discussing our wonderful experiences.

## Reflection

As I reflect on our trips to the supermarket, I realize the myriad of learning opportunities available to students. For our community, I must acknowledge our local store and its employees for opening their doors to our school and class to allow these special interactions to occur. The amount of time, effort, and care provided to our

students demonstrates the community's investment in the children's education. I do believe that without their support these activities would not be possible. I also feel that in a larger urban center these interactive tours and types of trips would be more difficult to accomplish. Due to our close community connections with our local market, we were able to transform our learning environment from classroom to grocery store with ease. Bathgate and Silva (2010) acknowledge the community schools movement currently in the United States, which is "developing partnerships with community providers to improve student learning and strengthen families and community" (p. 69). They are "integrat[ing] core academic work with health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement efforts to draw on a range of resources to improve outcomes for students, school, and communities" (p. 69).

By touring the neighborhood, including the grocery store, my goal was to fulfill the Kindergarten and Grade One prescribed learning outcomes in the Social Studies curriculum by having students "identify types of work done by people in their community" (Ministry of Education, 2010, pg. 51 & 65). From our extensive experiences at our local store, students were able to meet other Social Studies outcomes, along with other areas of the curriculum. For Language Arts, students were demonstrating well-developed oral language when conversing with staff members of the store, family volunteers, each other, and myself. Students asked specific questions regarding the employees' roles and responsibilities on our tour of the store, while connecting and extending their learning beyond these parameters. For example, when we were at the back of the store learning about the new stock coming in, one student questioned where the food actually came from. The employee added that it comes from a manufacturer, still

other students wanted to know more. A conversation was initiated about how foods are grown, harvested, manufactured, and brought to the grocery store. Unfortunately we did not continue to explore this area of student interest after our trip to the store, but looking back I realize it would have been a beneficial prospect to examine further.

In regards to the Language Arts outcomes, students were also able to practice reading and viewing. Nonreaders were recognizing and sounding out letters around the store, while readers were reading food labels and learning new words. Students who were writers were also responsible for creating the grocery list of ingredients for their group. When students were having a hard time reading or recognizing letters while shopping for their designated ingredients, their group members offered assistance. One student said, “I found the baking powder.” Another student informed him that the food item was baking soda not baking powder and proceeded to point to the individual letters while sounding them out, “S-o-d-a.” Not only were students practicing their own literacy skills, they were assisting others.

Especially during our second excursion to the grocery store, students were able to understand first hand awareness and purpose of money, another Social Studies outcome for Grade One and Two, as they purchased their own items. Each group was given twenty dollars to collect and buy their ingredients. Students continued to practice their numeracy skills by looking at individual prices of items, rounding off products to the nearest dollar, adding items together, estimating their total, and subtracting to calculate if they received money back. I found students to be utilizing skills beyond their specific grade outcomes for Mathematics. For example, Kindergarten students demonstrated use of awareness and

use of numbers beyond ten. Grade one and two students were using decimals and rounding numbers to whole numbers.

Areas of the Health and Career Education curriculum were also addressed, such as reviewing healthy foods and eating practices, categorizing jobs and skill requirements, and identifying community connections and sources of support. As I review my original goals for these field trips and reflect on the responses I saw from the students, I recognize that much of the curriculum can be achieved in other learning environments, such as the grocery store. These learning excursions allowed students to have integrated, holistic, and real opportunities to touch on many subjects of the curriculum and even surpass their expected grade level requirements.

For our second trip students entered the store with a sense of purpose and determination to obtain their groceries. They took ownership over the task and remained focused while achieving it. Students also displayed collaborative and problem solving skills as they determined how to navigate the store, how to find the items, and how to know which food product to choose from the shelf. Group members continued to help and support each other throughout the process. I was able to witness critical thinking skills, as well as improvements in attitudes and behaviors. Students were invested in the process of these learning experiences and demonstrated their motivation in completing them on their own, without adult direction. It would be beneficial for student learning if all lessons and activities could have such student engagement and focus.

## Camping Trip

The end of the school year was quickly approaching and I wanted to organize a year-end field trip for the class. I recognized students' enjoyment and interest in the outdoors from our previous nature walks throughout the year. I also acknowledged our beautiful location on the island and opportunities available for camping. A two-day overnight camping trip was planned for June. In preparation I contacted registered professional foresters from BC Timber Sales, who are in charge of the Smokey the Bear Forest Fire Prevention Program. They usually do a yearly visit to the class, but they offered more of their services to help prepare us for our local camping trip. One of the leading foresters and Smokey the Bear visited our class a number of times each with a specific lesson. For example, one presentation focused on tree and plant identification. Afterwards students were given a variety of tree samples to help them find and identify trees in the forest near our school. On another occasion students learned about how to build a campfire, fire safety, and forest fire prevention. Animal awareness and safety protocols were also addressed, as students were informed the correct procedures to follow if they encounter an animal. The forester demonstrated bear and cougar hides, animal skulls, and animal posters for the students to learn about these animals. My goal was for students to be part of the process in preparing for our field trip and have them take some responsibility. One day I brought camping gear to the school for students to practice setting up tents and ended up turning our field into a campground. Students also participated in making a class meal plan and list of the ingredients for our two-day camping trip. Students were enthusiastic about participating in these lessons and tasks knowing it was all building up to our final excursion.

Upon arriving at our campground, students were instantly working together to decide how our campground should be set up and where the individual tents should be placed. There were differences in opinion, but I encouraged them to provide explanations and work together. One student commented on the distance the tents needed to be away from the fire pit for safety. Another student stated that the bushes and trees would protect us from the wind so we should be the tents beside them. In response another student announced that she was nervous to be so close to the forest with all the animals. After a collaborative decision was made, I noticed students taking leadership roles in setting up the camp. Some were taking initiative and trying to set up their own tents by themselves, while others were directing their family members, and a few were not able to focus on setting up their tents as they were too eager to explore the natural surroundings around us.

Our first exploration as a class was a beach walk. Family members, students, a special education worker and I scoured the vast shoreline to observe and collect shells and driftwood for mobile projects. “Look, at all the shells. There are way more shells here than at our beach,” declared a student as we approached. Students started their collections. “This is a huge clam shell, it is a whole shell with two halves,” one student announced. Another student picked up miniature shells and was contemplating how she could incorporate them into her mobile. Other students were intrigued by the variety of shells that were visible on the sand and continued to compare them before adding them to their bags. One student decided she wanted to collect all different shells, while another wanted shells of all the same colors.

Despite the abundance of shells collected, we continued to scour the shoreline. Students were turning over rocks and sea life was emerging. “I found a crab,” one student

shouted. All other students ran over to observe. A student added, “Oh cute, it’s so little and red. Look at him run so fast sideways.” They tried to follow the crab by turning over more rocks and discovered more crabs of all different sizes. “It’s a whole family of crabs.” One parent noticed a starfish on a rock by the dock to show everyone. Other students commented on the colors of the sea anemones. One student continually looked out to the water to see if any fish were jumping because she said when her family was there the previous summer fish were practically jumping right into the boat. Her dad laughed and agreed.

We continued to explore the length of the beach, with no great concern of time or agenda. We walked all the way to where the river meets the ocean and new conversations emerged. “The fish come from the river to the ocean, but only when they are adults because the ocean has salt in it.” A student noted that the water in the river was flowing to the ocean but pointed to the junction and said, “That is where the water is mixed, so the fish must hang out there before going into the ocean.” They proceeded to talk about the differences between a river and an ocean, how the salmon travel from one to the other, and speculated on how the fish adapt to the changes. In response to talking about the salmon, some students made remarks about the best fishing spots. Our planned activity after lunch included fishing, which could have also attributed to some of these conversation topics. Some thought it was best to be by the river because it is smaller and therefore easier to catch fish. Another student commented that the water seemed clearer so you could see the fish when you cast your line. It was concluded that our fishing station would be by the river.

After lunch, we broke into three smaller groups and rotated stations. One parent led a forest walk through a nature trail around the campground and along the river. Another parent directed the fishing station, while the special education worker facilitated the mobile creation area. I was able to walk amongst the groups to help where needed. When walking through the forest students were connecting with our lessons from the forester and were naming some of the trees they encountered. "Look. This is a spikey spruce. Feel its needles." While inspecting it, two other students were contemplating if it was a pointy pine and proceeded to smell it. "Nope, not a pine. You are right," announced one of the students. The parent leading the group explained some of the other plants and bushes throughout the walk expanding our knowledge of our surroundings. Students found the walk adventurous because the trail narrowed and got rugged. In parts we had to climb over branches and under toppled trees making it like an obstacle course. Students were laughing and giggling, and especially thought it was funny that their family members had to follow suit. At the fishing station, students were shown how to attach a lure to their rod, cast their line into the river, and reel it in. The students that had brought their own rods and knew how to fish willingly guided other students through the process and added their own suggestions. One student stated, "If you cast at an angle up the river you have a better chance of catching a fish." He proceeded to point at a forty-five degree angle. The other student followed his directions step by step while casting her line. I was happy to see such interactions occurring amongst the students. The father also thanked the fishermen for their help and advice. When I finally arrived to the mobile station students were creating some very intricate mobiles. They were happy to use their findings on the beach as part of their mobiles. One student talked about her special shells she

found on the beach and how they had to be part of her mobile because she wanted to give it to her mom, who was unable to attend our trip. I loved the thought and care that went into their designs. Students' mobiles were unique to each individual student. Once finished, students hung these mobiles from the covered food area at our campground. Other campers who were passing by asked if the mobiles were for sale. I thought we could have started our own little market selling these beautiful creations.

After a busy day we wanted to gather around the campfire to make hotdogs. Some students were on duty collecting wood, while others were finding roasting sticks. Some students were helping put the condiments and plates out, while others were putting the chairs out around the fire pit. While achieving these tasks, students were again referring to our time with Smokey the Bear and our guest forester. "You have to use kindling first and make it into a pyramid," one student told his father as his father was getting the campfire started. Students who were putting the chairs around the fire were using their feet to come up with the accurate distance from the fire pit. Students were focused on their designated responsibilities and before long we were all gathered around the campfire eating hotdogs. A camping trip would not be complete without roasting marshmallows. However, I think due to the students being part of the meal planning process we ended up having Smores and banana boats as well. Around the campfire we sang songs, told stories, and commented on our experiences from the day. One father brought his guitar and played songs as we sang along. Things got a little silly and students ended up staying awake later than anticipated, which could have also been attributed to the large amount sugar eaten before bed.

The next day we organized a scavenger hunt at the beach, coordinated some group games, such as volleyball, and tried our skills at fishing again. A member from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans was unfortunately unable to stop by, although students still had a large number of activities to do around the campground. Parents and students seemed to be enjoying themselves. The parents played a game of volleyball as their children cheered them on. The second day seemed even more relaxed than the first. Students shouted in excitement as they came back from fishing while holding a fish. It was too small to keep, but they wanted to show the rest of the group before releasing it. Everyone ran to the ocean to say their farewells. We ended the day with packing up camp and heading home. The camping trip was a fun filled adventure.

## Reflection

Reflecting back on the camping trip still brings positive memories to mind. It was more than just a typical year-end field trip, it was more than exploring the outdoors and learning about nature, it became a lived experience, a bonding opportunity, and a positive memory. Not only did the students, staff and I feel this way, but the parents also responded very positively to the event. Some had commented that we needed to do these trips regularly as they appreciated being able to have this experience with their child and the class. One parent acknowledged that it was a little vacation for her to interact with her son and a break from work. Another family had never been camping before and was nervous to take their child tenting due to wild life. However, they were able to participate with the class and create a new experience together. Despite living in such a small community not all parents previously interacted with each other. Nevertheless,

connections seem to build throughout our camping trip. Following the trip parents stayed in contact and had even suggested a summertime camping trip.

Parent support was high from the beginning planning stages of the camping trip. Being an overnight camping trip and with the high cost of bus transport for a rural community, parents had to be chaperones and drive, which required a large number of documents to be completed. Actually a number of people in the community assisted to ensure all these documents were filled out. One of our local police officers even drove out to the mill, to get one last document signed by a parent who was at work at the time. In preparation for food all parents contributed twenty dollars, one family donated pancake mix and syrup, and the local grocery store provided discounts on the food. We of course ended up having more food than necessary to feed students and family members, but the students had fun. For one snack they made ants on a log with celery sticks, peanut butter or cheese whiz and raisins. Parents also ensured that they and their children had fishing licenses, camping gear, and appropriate clothing. We were fortunate to have two sunny days for our trip, but when living in the North Island one must plan for rain. Despite all the preparations parents were glad to have the camping trip occur.

Parent involvement went beyond being a chaperone and they became integral contributors to student learning. Two parents were group leaders for our camping stations. Another parent brought a book about living things that can be found on the seashore and was sharing it with the group on our beach walk and scavenger hunt. As students found things of interest or of question, she became a primary resource for students. One student found a creature he was unsure of, so he called the rest of the students over to look. The student asked his mom for the book and together they looked

up the creature, “Yes, it is a chiton.” They proceeded to read the description from the book. Some sea life that was described in the book was not visible but also discussed, which led to conversations about the various tides and the different plants and animals associated with each.

It was wonderful to see connections amongst peers, families, school staff, as well as students interacting with other children’s families. There were two students who did not have family members join our trip, although they connected closely with some of the other families. One boy appreciated the guidance from the parent volunteer during the fishing station. For the rest of the trip, he continued to be by his side asking him fishing, hunting, and camping questions. This child does not have much interaction with his father and it was great to see him interact with a positive male role model. When the boy’s mom picked him up, the families talked about the father taking both boys on a fishing trip in the summer. I am not sure if this occurred or not, but I was happy to see these positive interactions develop.

I also noticed an improvement in attitudes and behaviors of the students. Cramp (2008) acknowledges the value of learning outdoors for young people (p. 171). He states, “Behaviour modification, self-esteem, teamwork development, challenge and self-knowledge have all been linked to learning outdoors, but one of the most benefits... is personal development.” (p. 171). For one particular student, I noticed a complete shift in his attitude and actions. Throughout the school year he was quite active and restless in the class. It was hard for him to remain focused on his tasks. He was struggling with his academic subjects, but tried to deflect the situation with humor. He had reverted to some quite goofy and baby like behaviors for attention. However on this trip, I witnessed quite

the opposite. He had become a leader. He helped assemble a number of the tents, blow up mattresses and put out sleeping bags, and set up the rest of camp. What impressed me most was watching him at the fishing station. After guiding other students through a step-by-step process on how to fish, he stood along the river as calm and relaxed as could be fishing for the whole hour. As I reflect on this experience I feel it would have been beneficial to have such a trip earlier in the year. It would have allowed me to witness students' other attributes, which I had not seen in class. I believe it would have dramatically changed the course of my teaching, my responses and interactions with the students, and support offered to these students.

Cramp's study (2008) looks at a number of outdoor learning challenges. For one of them it was reported, "the vast majority of students maintained or built new positive relationships with each other [and] with [the] teacher" and attributed these positive interactions to the "relaxed, informal atmosphere" (p. 174). Cramp acknowledges that this is not a "new discovery", as Charles Mand in 1967 "commented that teachers become more human 'at camp' and there is a chance for pupil and teacher to view each other under new conditions and a chance for teachers to take another look at children, their goals and motivation, without the restriction of the classroom" (p. 174). I agree with these findings as I felt that our camping environment was more relaxed than the classroom for both the students and me, which I am sure contributed to building stronger connections with the students.

Throughout the preparation and experience of this two-day adventure, students were utilizing critical thinking skills, problem solving, and collaborating of their own

volition. These relevant skills are not only necessary for education, but also necessary for real world experiences.

To better prepare students for the future there will be more emphasis on key competencies like self-reliance, critical thinking, inquiry, creativity, problem solving, innovation, teamwork and collaboration, cross-cultural understanding, and technological literacy. [Education] can also connect students more directly with the world outside of school, with increased focus on learning these skills across topic areas. (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 4)

Students were coordinating where and how to set up our camp, the location for the best fishing spot, and when to start our beach scavenger hunt to maximize the beach items based on tide levels. Cramp (2008) agrees, “outdoor adventure programs can impact positively on young people’s interpersonal and social skills” (p. 172). Students not only displayed team like behaviors, but also genuine care and concern for others. When making a mobile, one student was having difficulty stringing her shells and kept breaking them. Seeing her frustration, another student offered assistance and handed her some of his shells. Students were also looking out for each other’s safety. While walking through the nature trail at the point of the river, one student stood by the edge to ensure the younger students passed by safely. Students also warned others if they got too close to the fire, demonstrated how to safely roast wieners and marshmallows, and explained how to stay clear of the black smoke from the fire. Students took ownership and responsibility of our trip, and successfully showed the benefits of working together and caring for others.

This camping trip offered an integrated experience to many areas of the BC curriculum. Students were addressing Science outcomes beyond the three grades as they

were exploring the woods to identify trees and plant species, observing and collecting items on the beach, and comparing bodies of water. While being submersed in nature, students were also acquiring an appreciation for their natural surroundings. Language Arts outcomes were highlighted as students developed their communicative skills throughout the trip. Students were taking on responsibilities and carrying them out, sharing their experiences with others, and successfully working with others, touching on the Social Studies curriculum. Students were working with a number of materials to create their mobiles; meeting outcomes in the Arts Education curriculum. Realistically, similar to our nature walks, the entire curriculum could be addressed from such a camping trip in the natural surroundings. Our camping trip included both teacher directed and student driven activities. I had an outline scheduling the activities for each day, although there could have been more opportunity for student led activities drawing more from their interests.

Overall, the benefits of a field trip go beyond meeting the curriculum, and provide the space and time needed for building relationships. It also provides an opportunity to create positive memories together in an authentic experience. For instance this camping trip allowed me to see the true nature of the students, which is one of the greatest benefits from our learning excursion. I must realize that at school I witness only a small piece of who the student is. By connecting the school with all other avenues of the community and providing opportunities for such learning excursions, I hope to appreciate the whole child and foster learning according to whom he or she really is.

## Conclusion

By reflecting on each of these learning excursions, I was able to relive the experience and feel the energy and excitement that emanates from the students, community members, and myself during these trips. It is these responses and emotions that have always inspired me to provide these opportunities for my students. However going through the process of analyzing each of these learning adventures more thoroughly, I was able to recognize the infinite learning opportunities and benefits that occurred. These learning excursions, from our neighbor's garden to camping adventure, all revealed rich learning experiences for the students, most of which went beyond my intended goals and curricular outcomes. Students demonstrated they were meeting many areas of the curriculum, improved social skills and attitudes, and leadership skills and collaboration. Strong relationships were developed amongst the students, staff, community members and myself, which further expanded our learning opportunities. It is lived experiences, such as these learning excursions that make education not only enjoyable, but also effective.

## Recommendations

I believe any community offers endless opportunities for student learning. For this project I reported on three of the many learning excursions our class ventured on around our local environment and town. Our class also did a trip to the Fire Hall, which became a whole afternoon adventure. Students were able to climb about the fire truck while learning the technical names of the truck and shown the instrumental gear used at a fire sight, such as a thermal imaging camera. Our day ended with an obstacle course, where

students wore a fireman's suit, climbed through a tunnel, and sprayed a fire extinguisher at pop cans. Our trip to the Post Office allowed students to go behind the counter and stamp their own letters, sort them, and put them in the correct slot. On another occasion our class went to the local Chinese restaurant to celebrate Chinese New Year. Students tasted new foods, learned phrases of a new language, and experienced new cultural traditions. A tour of the police station expanded to a safety demonstration and discussion. The people working within these community services strongly support education, the school, and the students, as our interactions went well beyond a basic school tour. The connections developed with community members extended beyond these trips. For example, following our visit to the police station one of our local police officers regularly visited our class and school. He continued to address safety concerns and animal awareness, although one day he joined the students for over an hour helping them with their science stations. These examples demonstrate there are no boundaries for school trips and community connections.

A recommendation for educators to build a relationship and rapport with members in your community is to start exploring the neighborhood around the school. Approach local services and businesses, connect with parents, and share your learning outcomes and intentions with everyone. See if someone exhibits any related knowledge or expertise and volunteers their services to enhance the learning experience. The involvement with the community should be initiated at the beginning of the school year and be continuous throughout. Personal connections will develop and grow over time, producing yet new and unexpected opportunities for student learning. Each community is unique offering its

own benefits, which are right outside the front door of the school at no cost incurred to the education system. The community is willing; they just need to be asked.

Along with developing these community relationships and support systems, a predominant focus should be on building student relationships. It is necessary to understand who the child is beyond his or her academic abilities, and to know the child's interests, strengths, and needs. Allowing students to explore and pursue their interests, especially beyond the walls of the school, can result in increased motivation, improved attitudes, behaviors, and social skills, as well as enriched areas of study. Educators should be flexible in designing their year plans, as time should be allotted for students' contributions. These student driven topics, especially within the community, are more meaningful and relevant to the student. The whole child becomes acknowledged.

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