

Building Capacity for Place-Based Education in a Rural Elementary School

by

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A Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

In the Department of Curriculum and Instruction

University of Victoria

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## **Abstract**

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This project examines the educational challenges of building capacity for Place-Based Education (PBE) in a rural elementary school on North Vancouver Island. The questions influencing my project were: (1) What is PBE? (2) What are the benefits of engaging teachers in connecting curriculum to their local community? (3) What are the barriers of PBE? and, (4) How can the barriers be mitigated to building capacity for actualizing PBE in a rural elementary school on North Vancouver Island? The project had several stages including determining the definition, benefits and barriers of PBE through the existing literature; and collaboratively developing a document revealing the local assets in our community that can be connected to curriculum. Analysis of the document revealed a desire to connect learning to the natural world, prompting a student-centered initiative to create an outdoor classroom and interpretive trail in a local park.

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## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, thank you to my wife Michelle for your enduring support. You were always willing to discuss educational theory and practice despite not being employed in the profession. Thank you also for keeping the house from falling apart and feeding me all while nurturing our newly born son, Theodore. Words cannot express my appreciation. Thanks!

I am grateful to my school staff for embracing this project with me by sharing their insights into how we can work towards making learning more relevant for our students by connecting to the local resources in our community. Especially, I would like to thank my colleague Michelle Sedola for your patience and trust in collaborating on connecting learning in our school to our local outdoor places. Special thanks also goes out to Jillian Brown and Sarah Soltau-Heller for all of the thought-provoking conversations on how to represent PBE in the context of your learners and our school community. Thank you to my committee, Dr. Robert Anthony and Dr. James Nahachewsky for your guidance and support.

Finally, my sincerest appreciation goes out to all of the students who invested their creative energy into this project. You are the reason why I am so passionate about making learning relevant to the real world and our communities.

**Dedication**

To my son, Theodore Paul Barfoot: May you be inspired by the wonders of the natural world. I apologize for the lack of ‘daddy time’ in the first three months of your endearing life. I promise to make it up to you with an array of future outdoor adventures. Mommy can come along too!

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Sharing Experiences and Building My Learning Community

My brother, sister and I have four years between us. We all went to the same elementary, middle and high schools and were colloquially referred to as one, two and three. We were taught by the same teachers, played on some of the same sport teams and even had some of the same friends. I was mistaken for my older brother throughout all my school years and to this day, I do not understand how I have not developed an identity crisis. Although frustrating at times, our similarity in age allowed us to share time and experiences with each other.

Together we formed a community network by playing outside. We explored creeks, picked cherries, built forts, skateboarded, played street hockey and baseball to name a few. Without a doubt, my favourite game was *manhunter*, which we played in a neighborhood forest on what seemed like a nightly basis. But, if there was one common thread that stitched the fabric of our family canvas together it was sports. This comes as no surprise since both my mother and father were physical education teachers. Although I played on organized sports teams, my parents consciously guided us into what my mom adamantly refers to as ‘activities’ that afforded opportunities for our family to play together. These sports included golf, tennis, skiing and windsurfing to name a few. This created inclusiveness within our family where no one was sitting on the sidelines simply observing; rather, we all were directly engaged participants and actively learning in a family group.

Every season offered a different landscape to experience from tennis courts, golf courses, forests, rivers and mountains. Like many boys, I enjoyed being active and was especially intrigued, mesmerized and humbled by wild places. Perhaps it was all those years exploring the

neighborhood creeks, forests and mountains with my siblings and our childhood friends. Being the youngest of three also created a strong desire for me to find something to identify with, that I could call my own. Fishing was that something.

More than anything else, the experience of pursuing and thrill of coaxing, hooking and fighting fin-flippers had an unwavering influence on my future. Fishing brought me into a state of wakefulness where I began to broaden my perspectives through becoming aware of my place. I gravitated towards people who shared my genuine joy and love for fishing and built strong friendships that have carried forth to this day. I abandoned the incoherence of secondary school and invested in flowing waters.

Throughout my secondary education, I do not recall experiencing any field trips outside of extracurricular activities. Efficiency made learning take place in the isolation of schools. Knowledge was obtained solely through comprehending textbooks, lectures, and videos rather than from directly experiencing the real world and developing personal understandings. I was running from class to class, being told what I needed to know, memorizing not applying. The learning I experienced in school lacked relevance to my personalized learning pursuits outside of school. This juxtaposition created a seemingly disengaging and stagnant relationship with schooling.

Through a good friend, I learned how to fly fish and tied my own flies. At a young age, I developed an understanding that fly-fishing re-conceptualized the purpose of fishing, which is to catch fish. To make the goal of catching supersede the process of catching a fish was like saying memorizing wins over creativity, destination trumps the journey and covering a curriculum outdoes discovering it. My learning curriculum became expanded as fly-fishing fittingly drew me into the fields of entomology, chemistry and hydrology. I was now a regular visitor of the

regional library where I consumed armfuls of aquatic field guides, fly-fishing literature by authors including Isaac Walton and Roderick Haig-Brown. No longer was I a reluctant reader, I now had an insatiable appetite for knowledge applied to my newfound and life-long passion. I rose before the sun.

### **Environmental Ethics**

Through fishing, I was becoming more mindful of how my individual choices affected other living things. Tying flies was my alternative to using live bait. I transitioned from harvesting my catch to releasing. It was these moments in my adolescence where I made profound self-discoveries about how morals and ethics translated into how I choose to behave. This transition was founded on an appreciation for fin-flippers and their river habitats. I recall taking my conservation ethic a step further into using gorilla tactics and convinced a friend to sneak down the riverbanks with me and release fish from people's live stringers. My moral perspective has moderated over the years to where I now harvest most of my catch but it was in these formative years where I developed a burgeoning sense of environmental stewardship.

My connection to rivers and their inhabitants led me to invest my time in completing an honors degree in Environmental Studies. Over the four-year program, my summers were spent planting trees and being a wilderness-fishing guide in the Canadian arctic. My undergrad thesis entitled "Ecological Assessment of a Coldwater Stream with Recommended Management Strategies" directed me to a project manager position with a community-based river rehabilitation organization. In this role, I worked with farmers in developing land management plans to protect river ecosystems. Although this job was a sublime match for my passionate interest in the watery world and made me appreciate the value in collaboration, one experience

inspired me to go into a new direction.

In the role of project manager, I also led environmental education programs for local schools. Connecting with youth through facilitating these experientially based programs was an absolute joy. Further, mainstream concerns within the environmental field were being raised for some time regarding the connection between nature deficit disorder and the deterioration of wild places and biological diversity on planet earth. This was an epiphany for me because as mentioned previously, these places provided me with a plethora of life experiences that served to not only find myself but to love these wild places. It was one of the more difficult decisions in my life but it was the right one. I applied and was successfully accepted into an Outdoor Experiential Education (OEE) program at Queens University.

Many of my colleagues in OEE arranged practicums in alternative education settings such as summer camps, private schools and outdoor education centers which many of them continue to relish. Despite receiving heavy criticism from my professors, I felt that my practicum time was better spent in public school classrooms. My choice stemmed from my interest in connecting the general public with nature through an integrated approach.

### **Environmental Ed for the Commons**

Since graduating from OEE, I have spent the last five years teaching intermediate students in a rural K-7 school in British Columbia. In my first teaching year, The BC Ministry of Education conveniently released a document, which showed their commitment to environmental education. This document, entitled 'The Environmental Learning and Experience Guide' (ELE), provides educators with K-12 cross-curricular connections to teach about the environment and sustainability. The BC Ministry of Education states "we hope these curriculum resources can

further support teachers in their efforts to make the environment and sustainability a core focus for all learners in BC” (2008, p. 2).

The ELE Guide provided me with the required curriculum framework to validate infusing environmental education into my teaching practice. It was now a question of scope and sequence. Fortunately, the school is nested within a series of ‘green’ spaces that provide a multitude of opportunities to take learning outside to connect children with nature through direct experience. To get to know my intermediate students, I asked them about what activities they enjoy doing when outdoors. The ambience of the room went from mundane to electric as the students shared their passion for camping, skateboarding beachcombing, canoeing, biking, kayaking, skiing, snowboarding, hiking, hunting and of course fishing. However, not all students contributed and this prompted me to ask them to write, in their own voice, about whether or not they enjoy playing outside. Three students mentioned that they do not enjoy being cold and wet and therefore prefer being inside. I was shocked by their responses and decided that I needed to investigate whether choice of clothing was a factor. It turned out that these students who disliked outdoor play did not have appropriate clothing and so it had now become my responsibility to ensure they would be comfortable if we were to spend more time learning outdoors.

Afterwards, we compared the indoor and outdoor classrooms in relation to engagement in learning as well as comfort and safety concerns. Interestingly, this discussion led students to developing a deeper understanding of the foreseeable safety concerns associated with the outdoors and that it would be a requirement for participants to demonstrate an increased level of responsibility in a boundless learning environment. Simply put, my students became aware of the concrete purpose in being accountable to themselves and the group in terms of how they

behaved. I felt that students needed to show some form of commitment to learning outdoors so after the discussion I asked them to write about the safety concerns with learning outdoors and how they can reduce those risks through behaving responsibly.

Gradually, we began to venture outside the confines of the classroom by going on walking field trips and connecting their learning to our school green spaces including tide pools, forests and local watersheds. Those students who communicated reluctance to being outdoors were given the option to join us and I provided raincoats and boots from the local thrift store to ensure they were comfortable. I organized field trips and planned lessons connecting the water/sewage treatment plants, fish hatcheries, local landfill and recycling centers and an alpine park to the Grade five and six curriculum outcomes. We even went so far as to experience the open ocean where we boarded vessels to connect with and learn about toothed and baleen whales. We were learning together and building a shared relationship with our entire community, not just in our school.

It is one thing to learn about and gain an appreciation of our natural environments; it is quite another to act on that learning to make these environments healthier and sustainable. Familiar phrases like “talk is cheap” and “actions speak louder than words” come to mind, and provided the impetus for my class to eventually start a school wide composting program. With the support of our staff and students, together we invested. Recently, we became provincially recognized as a leader in sustainability through winning the BC Green Games Contest.

### **Newfound Opportunity: Place-Based Education**

I now have found myself in a new role within our school community as the physical

education teacher. Built into this position is a component dedicated to a school-wide Place-Based Education (PBE) program. I personally feel enthused about this newfound role as it provides me with the opportunity to more comprehensively work with students and staff at our school to embrace the benefits of PBE. According to Gruenewald (2005), PBE is “concerned with the past, present and future of local environments and communities as well as the interrelations with other human and non-human communities” (p.263). Living in a rural, isolated community often leads to students feeling disconnected and unengaged with school curriculum, resulting in a lack of engagement and a need to find personal relevance. I feel that a PBE program can restore responsibility to the learner while providing a meaningful, inclusive and personalized learning experience. Therefore, my masters project’s guiding question is: how to create capacity for PBE in a rural elementary school on North Vancouver Island that makes sound connections to provincial learning outcomes while building relationships with local places. Learning collaboratively about local places through direct experience will provide unique opportunities for students to connect with themselves and with other human and non-human communities.

Collaboration with staff on the scope and sequence of the program will be essential in order to develop a program that is representative of the school culture. Therefore, I think that providing the space for staff to meaningfully contribute their ideas through a focused group structure will be essential to creating a genuine and shared sense of ownership. I cannot understate the importance of this collaboration piece because I know a number of place-based educators in the public school system that feel isolated from their staff because they work outside of the traditional boxed curriculum. This isolation translates to a lack of support from other teachers in the school.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Connecting schools back to their communities

Humans are immensely complex beings. Our large brain has enabled us to be tremendously creative. Although decreasing daily, there are thousands of different human languages that have been developed in order to communicate with one another. We are able to develop, craft and apply a profundity of useful tools, cultural practices and games through reasoning and problem solving. Furthermore, humans are social and creative beings who have found many ways of being together through various social structures, rituals, beliefs, and technologies. We perceive the world around us through our senses, which leads to personalized subjective experiences bringing consciousness and self-awareness. Being socially advanced the relationships we develop between ourselves and our environments (living and non-living) play an instrumental role in how we are able to construct meaning.

Despite our complexity, Smith (2002) argues that mainstream education especially after the early elementary grades, directs children's attention away from their own circumstances and ways of knowing and towards knowledge from other places that has been developed by strangers, most likely, never will meet. Learning becomes something gained from reading texts, listening to lectures, or viewing videos rather than experiencing full-bodied encounters with the world (p. 586). Smith (2002) grounds his arguments in evidence from a myriad of elementary, middle and secondary schools throughout the United States that have shown significant improvement in standardized test scores by connecting student learning to their communities activities. This progressive form of education known as *place-based* education is not a new phenomenon and is rooted in Dewey's (1929) theories. In 1929, Dewey wrote that, "the school

must represent present life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground” (p. 36). Dewey states that:

...education fails because it neglects this fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life. It conceives the school as a place where certain information is to be given, where certain lessons are to be learned, or where certain habits are to be formed. The value of these is conceived as lying largely in the remote future; the child must do these things for the sake of something else he is to do; they are mere preparations. As a result they do not become a part of the life experience of the child and so are not truly educative (p. 36).

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, education was predominantly place-based in that local needs provided the context for learning and living within a particular location. Gruenewald (2005) argues that “industrialization and the common school redirected learning away from place and the lived experience of place and towards a standard set of knowledge and literacies that aimed at ideological management and nation building”(p. 263). The proliferation of the efficiency movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century continued as a response to the Soviets successfully launching a series of Sputnik satellites into space. A concerted focus on discipline and concept-based education came out of the Woods Hole Conference in 1959. This movement towards specialization was given further traction by being rooted in the publication Bruner’s ‘The Process of Education’ in 1960. A strong culture of standardization and accountability came out of the 1960’s, which continues to influence and permeate 21<sup>st</sup> century schooling discourses through provincial high stakes exams and recent programs like ‘No Child Left Behind’ in the

United States.

A concerted focus on curricular outcomes has created learning environments that have been structured around a content focus. Learning has been located within the context and isolation of classrooms thus limiting student and teacher interaction with unique local environments and communities (Gruenewald et al., 2007). Thoughtfully integrating community life into school curriculum creates a personalized experience for learners that is not only engaging but has also proven to be effective at increasing intellectual development. (Emekauwa, 2004; Jennings et al., 2005; Lieberman & Hoody, 1998; Powers, 2004; Smith, 2002).

### **Place-Based Education: Definitions in Context**

Despite there being substantive academic literature on Place-Based Education (PBE), the term lacks a universal definition. According to Smith (2002), PBE is the grounding of learning in local phenomena and students' lived experience. Smith's (2002) article titled "Place-based education: Learning to be where we are" is a useful resource regarding the merits of making curricular connections between student learning and the communities where schools are situated. In his reference to making learning connected to real life experience, Smith (2002) states, "in many other places, people experience the world directly; in school, that experience is mediated, and the job of students-despite all the well intentioned attempts to engage them as participants in the construction of meaning-is to internalize and master knowledge created by others" (p. 586).

An example of PBE provided by Smith includes the development of a program called Providing Resolutions with Integrity for a Sustainable Moloka'i (PRISM). PRISM was being co-developed by students, staff and community members at an elementary school in Moloka'i Hawaii. According to Smith (2007), the program involved bringing students together with

resource managers to look a number of issues critical to community health with the issues identified by the students themselves. These issues included fish-pond restoration, ecotourism impacts, native wildlife habitat loss, and recycling and water rights. Students received considerable support from organizations outside of the school in order to develop project action plans, which were presented annually at a two-day symposium. Smith (2007) includes a remark from one community member, which follows:

The program has brought the kids into contact with all kinds of issues in the community and they have been able to hone very preliminary skills as researchers and interviewers. So, I think for them it is an opportunity that would not otherwise be provided by anybody. None of the other schools do it and I think it has been a wonderful learning experience for the kids and valuable for the community. They have been able to figure out the real story behind the community debate and I think it is preparing them to be better students and better citizens, as they grow older. (p. 196)

Gruenewald (2003, 2005) prefers the term Place-Conscious Education (PCE) as opposed to Place-Based Education (PBE). For the sake of providing clarity, Gruenewald (2005) detaches the phrases and first defines ‘place’ as being “the local cultural and ecological environments of human communities” (p. 263). He suggests that ‘conscious’ “refers to a philosophical orientation that embraces place as a construct fundamental to the purpose, process and structure of schooling” (Gruenewald, 2005, p.263). PCE implies a globalized perspective in terms of the interrelationships between specific places. For example, PCE encompasses a broader understanding by making connections between a local department store and distant factories in

foreign countries. However, Gruenewald (2005) states that he in fact uses the terms PBE and PCE interchangeably.

PBE or PCE is recognized as having strong ties to the perspective of critical pedagogy (Smith, 2007). This association is demonstrated by Gruenewald's (2005) definition of PBE as "education that is explicitly concerned with the past, present and future of these local environments and communities (as well as the interrelationship with other communities, human and non-human)" (p. 263). Although there are many examples of PBE in action that reflect critical pedagogy, one particular example is quite striking and involves a multiage class in Oregon. This class was concerned about community and government efforts, during the early 2000's, to cull wolves that were migrating into the state of Oregon from Idaho. Students wanted to learn about why this was happening. They learned through an inquiry project that wolves had been eliminated from the state years before due to concerns around the health of sheep, cattle herds, and viability of the agricultural sector. After researching the topic in detail, they were asked to write an opinion paper on how the state should resolve the issue. Students were given the opportunity to contribute to the democratic process by expressing their opinions at a series of public hearings focused on population suppression of wolves.

As seen in the example above and others, PBE may be viewed not only as critical pedagogy but it is also closely associated with environmental education (Gruenewald, 2005; Bowers, 2001; Smith, 2002; Smith, 2007, Powers, 2004; Jennings et al., 2005; Knapp, 2007). Gruenewald (2005) asserts that place conscious education is a response to the failure of environmental education (EE) in making transformative change because EE has been marginalized as a sub field of both science and politics (p. 263). This marginalization has allowed environmental education to become stigmatized as promoting 'environmental activism'

and has therefore been vulnerable to political funding cuts (Gruenewald, 2005). In response, Gruenewald (2005) and others such as Bowers (2001) believe that place conscious education appeals to all citizens who care about and appreciate their communities. Greenwood (2009) asserts “many people from diverse backgrounds love their places whether or not they identify them as green” (p. 263). Despite the apparent differences they have in their definitions and naming of place based education, it appears these authors share an understanding that PBE focuses on curriculum development that connects to local cultural, environmental, economic and political concerns. In the context of learning, PBE relates pedagogy to local life and students’ lived experiences (Smith, 2002).

### **Place-Based in Rural Education**

In many cases, PBE can be often thought of as being not exclusive but rather synonymous with education in rural communities (Jennings et al., 2005; Gruenewald, 2009; Jennings et al., 2005; Smith, 2002; Powers, 2004; Howley et al., 2011. Jennings et al. (2005) characterizes PBE as being locally responsive education. This model for education, which frames learning in the context of making curriculum connections to local resource “has always been, a feature of rural schools, in part out of necessity and in part out of desire” (Jennings et al, 2005, p. 44). Being remote, rural schools put an emphasis on making the most of the local resources available for learning. Connecting student learning to the community resources also serves to engage students in their community while at the same time celebrating their places (Jennings et al, 2005, p. 44). This portrayal is the foundation of PBE.

The reasons for the strong relationship between PBE and rural communities are diverse and includes making real-world connections to an otherwise isolating ‘state’ or ‘provincial’

curriculum and developing an appreciation for the unique communities in which rural learners belong. The Rural School and Community Trust (2004) defines PBE as:

Learning that is rooted in what is local—the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art of a particular place. The community provides the context for learning, student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning (p. 2).

Interestingly, PBE is not explicitly framed within a rural context but it is definitely embraced by rural schools. Starting in the 1950's there has been a movement of people and resources towards urban centres, which has left rural communities questioning their future vitality. The trend of reduced enrollment has challenged rural communities through school closures. As Jennings et al. (2005) states “a closed school is often the first step in a communities demise” (p. 50). It is therefore understandable why creating curriculum connected to local schools, and its place, is important for sustaining rural communities and rural ways of life. For these reasons, PBE has been well supported by rural schools (Jennings et al, 2005, p. 50).

### **PBE Pedagogy: Strengths and Challenges**

The following section of this paper provides an overview of literature deliberating the strengths and challenges associated with planning, supporting and maintaining PBE programs in schools. This discussion will revolve around evidence from scholars who have investigated PBE programs in practice throughout the United States. Conclusions will eventually be drawn when the articles share a particular theme or perspective as it relates to the context of strengths and

challenges of PBE.

Smith (2002) explains that PBE programs come in a variety of forms and are as diverse as the places they represent. Smith (2002) further cautions that PBE is unique to particular communities and therefore applying generic curricular models to other communities is counterproductive. Strength in such programs is found through making authentic and community specific curriculum connections to places. This uniqueness requires teachers to invest in creating specific curriculum connections to locales and appropriately gives these programs strength in providing relevant and meaningful learning experiences for students. As Smith (2002) states, “the line between the school and the community becomes more permeable and is crossed with frequency” (p. 593). This phenomenon of making connections to community works against the isolation of schooling and creates a more authentic learning experience for students and teachers alike. Practicing PBE provides real as opposed to hypothetical or abstract opportunities to motivate students’ to learn by contributing something purposeful to their community. One of the key findings in Smith’s (2002) research is that PBE provides students with opportunities to be “creators of knowledge rather than consumers of knowledge created by others. This is what good graduate school education encourages and there is no reason to deny younger students similar opportunities” (p. 593).

In her study, Powers (2004) conducted over 200 interviews with teachers, administrators, students and community members to determine the strengths and challenges of PBE programs in Eastern United States. Her study also focused on analyzing trends in teacher practice with these programs. Powers’ (2004) key findings included teachers providing relevant opportunities for their students to connect with their community by working on projects that were of real-value. Further, teachers responsible for planning PBE programs demonstrated strong skills in “process

facilitation, teaching, child development, curriculum planning and meeting management” (Powers, 2004, p. 22).

According to Powers (2004), the challenges of PBE programs can be separated into two categories: internal and external. First, internal challenges include teachers developing the curriculum planning skills to effectively integrate participation in community life with the daily learning of their students. Powers (2004) states, “in three of the four (PBE) programs, teachers expressed the need for more clear guidelines on how to develop curriculum that actually integrated place-specific features into existing curricula” (p. 24). In the study, one participant noted, “it takes more time to craft a solid, useful project than to crack open a textbook and pull out its corresponding worksheet” (Powers, 2004, p. 24). Conversely, external challenges noted by teachers included time to make connections with community members and create opportunities for them to invest their time and energy with school programs. Interestingly, connecting with community and gaining community support is challenging and is perceived as being outside the role of the job description of the teacher (Gruenewald, 2006).

It is important to note that the challenge identified in Powers (2004) study of effectively connecting curriculum to local places may also be viewed as a primary strength of the program. The time required of teachers to learn the curriculum planning skills becomes a substantial benefit to the professional development of the teachers involved. Moreover, Powers found that teachers had to invest a significant amount of time in developing and sustaining supportive relationships with community members in order to create successful PBE programs. Educators who practice PBE believe that connecting student learning to the communities is responsive and embraces experiential learning, inquiry and project based learning principles. According to Gruenewald (2005), PBE becomes educative for teachers involved and worth the extra effort

they require to develop and sustain such a program.

A more recent qualitative case study offers an in-depth review of a PBE program in a small K – 12 rural school in Eastern United States. The article co-authored by Howley et al (2013) serves to “respond to two research questions: a) Which school and community dynamics support and sustain place-based education? and b) Which school and community dynamics threaten or constrain place-based education” (p.217).

Findings from this study reveal that administrative support played an instrumental role in adopting a progressive approach to learning through PBE (Howley, 2011, p. 230). Other scholars contend that without supportive leadership, efforts to develop and sustain a PBE program will be significantly compromised (Wither, 2001; Emekauwa, 2004; Smith, 2006). The importance of supportive leadership within the school cannot be underestimated as it allows for the development and strengthening of collaborative relationships (Howley et al, 2011). In the case of island community school, these relationships were built around a culture of acceptance and appreciation of a diversity of teaching methods from progressive to traditional (Howley et al, 2011, p. 230). Lastly, funding to enhance field trip budgets was also another obstacle to actualize PBE in this K-12 school. The success of this component was a situational benefit afforded by the school because they received a considerable amount of funds from summer residents of the community. These funds were used to support the PBE program through covering costs of transportation for field trips. Not all places would be so fortunate to have this assistance but other places may find ways to be creative in developing partnerships, fundraising initiatives and designing a PBE program that aligns well with school budgets.

## **Accountability of PBE through Standards Based Reforms**

Accountability is an integral theme in the current standards-based reform era of education. The BC Ministry of Education (2013) expresses a continued emphasis on rigorous province-wide assessment (p. 1). Hence, the issue of standards-based accountability will remain prevalent. In light of this, it would be a clear oversight to not address the issue of accountability in education as it relates to PBE.

Focusing learning on developing and tailoring curriculum towards the assets of the local community inherently challenges the prevalent contemporary practice of being accountable to an externally derived curriculum (Jennings, 2005). Smith (2007) states in reference to PBE “teachers do not concentrate on drilling students for high stakes tests, relying instead on forms of understanding and knowledge that arise more organically through real-life investigations and problem solving (p. 204). Standardized curriculum and accountability testing restricts educators from practicing ‘best practices’ including responsive place-based approaches to learning (Gruenewald, 2003). In light of this, administrators need to support PBE proponents to use pedagogical practices that are perhaps not yet viewed as being legitimate by members of the public (Smith, 2007). Hence, alternative assessments are required that align with the goals of PBE. There are currently a couple examples of alternative assessment strategies in the literature including the ‘Place Based Education Portfolio Rubric’ and ‘Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools’ (Gruenewald, 2005). These assessment strategies are qualitative and focus on reflective thinking and self-assessment. Such assessment practices challenge the contemporary quantitative approach to assessment (Gruenewald, 2005). The rubrics were developed through the support of the world’s largest educational measurement association, The Educational Testing Service. This connection provides a sense of credibility and optimism in the value and

acceptance of these alternative assessments to the wider educational community (Gruenewald, 2005).

Locally derived curriculum or PBE is thus culturally responsive to the interests of the students and therefore fosters engaging, relevant, purposeful and meaningful learning experiences. Contrarily, Gibbs and Howley (2000) state that “standards and extensive curriculum being taught draws practitioners attention away from local needs which engage learners and leaves unexamined the impact that educating students towards externally derived standards has on local communities, standards based reforms become incompatible with educating children to understand and sustain their own communities” (p.3). This brings into question the notion of accountability. Who are teachers and students accountable to? It is assumed that covering a provincial curriculum means that accountability is directed towards the province. Gruenewald (2005) makes the argument that PBE, which places a strong emphasis on “school-community collaboration is directly linked to, or at least must appear accountable to, the communities that they serve” (p. 269).

Alternatively, the literature provides a number of case studies that show evidence of PBE fostering growth in student achievement through contemporary standards testing. This literature will be presented in the following section, commencing with a qualitative study by Lieberman and Hoody (1998) on the merits of using a school’s surroundings and community as a framework within which students can construct their learning. In this study with the environment as an integrating context for learning (EIC), evidence came from forty schools throughout the United States at the elementary, middle and secondary levels. The results of the study were derived from interviews from over four hundred students and two hundred and fifty teachers and administrators along with comparative analysis of standardized test scores and attitudinal

measures. Liebermann and Hoody (1998) state “because EIC programs are located in diverse natural and community settings, each program requires a unique design” (p. 1). However, each program shared some commonalities, including interdisciplinary studies, project based learning, collaborative teaching, culturally responsive and fosters an appreciation of local environments and communities (p. 1). Results from the Lieberman and Hoody (1998) study indicate that using place-based pedagogies increased academic achievement as measured from standardized test scores in reading, writing, math, science and social studies. Additionally, students were more engaged and enthusiastic about their daily learning and developed a genuine sense of ownership with their learning and accomplishments.

Smith (2002) in his previously discussed article ‘Place-based education: learning to be where we are’ states that students who participated in PBE programs “consistently perform at high levels in comparison to their peer in other schools, despite the fact that their teachers do not focus on test preparation” (p. 589). Unlike Liebermann and Hoody (1998), Smith does not specify exactly what students perform well on. For example, do they perform well on a unit test, state test or a project?

Indeed, Smith (2002) lacks the specificity and quantitative evidence that Emekauwa (2004) provides in his article entitled ‘They remember what they touch: The impact of place-based learning in East Feliciana Parish’. Emekauwa’s research (2004) examined student achievement as it related to a PBE program created by a school district in Louisiana. This school district served a low socio-economic community with high poverty and low high school graduation rates. In response to low achievement on state-wide tests, the school district initiated an integrated place-based program for all five elementary schools. This program was known as Project Connect. Inclusive within this initiative were three consecutive summer teacher training

programs known as Project Connect I, II and III. Project Connect I focused on standards-based science assessment and local resources. A broader perspective was provided in Project Connect II with an emphasis on integrating math, science and technology with local resources. Finally, Project Connect III was similar to Project Connect II but aligned towards local geography and history. This was a district wide program that required the support from a multitude of partners, particularly the teachers involved.

Results from teachers integrating local resources into the curriculum have been significant. According to Emekauwa (2004), state-wide tests indicate students made “great gains, most often far exceeding those of the state” from the place-based focus. More importantly, the model of place-based education has allowed for the building of strong relationships between schools and the broader community. These relationships bring strength not only to the students learning but to the community itself. As Emekauwa (2004) writes, the place-based education program in East Feliciana “provides for a more informed citizenry and greater community capacity to support and maintain quality education in the district’s public schools by collaborating with educators, parents, community members, clergy, businesses and nonprofits” (p. 8).

The concern of PBE being incompatible or compatible with mandated standards based assessments is warranted. Gruenewald (2005) argues that “place based educators take the initiative to do the unexpected because they hold themselves accountable to standards beyond those mandated by federal, state and local policy” (p. 272). The BC Ed Plan has a renewed focus on personalized learning and learning how to learn (BC Ministry of Education, 2013). Pedagogy will undoubtedly respond and adapt to how the students want to learn such as using technology to connect with people outside the classroom, school or community. Students may want to

experience the world more directly through a focus on outdoor education and demonstrate their understanding through developing digital stories. It remains to be seen if the means of assessment provide opportunities for learners to contextualize understanding through their PBE experiences or does it place a disproportional emphasis on content? Further, how will the formative and summative methods of assessment be adapted to reflect the learner-centered goals of the BC Ed Plan?

### **Building Capacity for PBE Through a Focus on Collaboration**

Humans are social beings and over time we have been reliant on working together to achieve common goals. Whether building a shelter, gathering food, caring for others or creating art and/or music, many hands makes work light and more enjoyable. The process of “working jointly with others or together” is otherwise known as collaboration (Merriam-Webster online dictionary, 2013). Many scholars have expressed that collaboration is one of the highlighted challenges associated with creating and implementing a PBE focus at the school and/or district level (Powers, 2004; Howley et al, 2011; Emekauwa, 2004; Smith, 2002; Gruenewald, 2009). Developing and sustaining supporting relationships with people within and outside the institution of school is central to the success of PBE. In light of this, determining effective ways to maintain dialog through collaboration is key to any proposal for PBE (Gruenewald, 2005). It is therefore meaningful to explore the literature to determine what constitutes effective collaboration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Hastings (2009) and Chung (2011) report that collaboration requires only a couple of people and a plan to work on something of value. Therefore, the process of collaborating does not require anything more than people and an idea. In her article, Hastings (2009) provides

recommendations on effective strategies for Web 2.0 collaboration, but cautions that “introducing new ways to collaborate by using technology will not do any good if the team you are collaborating with is not prepared to share information and work together” (p. 7). As a result, the first and foremost priority is to develop a culture of collaboration within an organization. Hastings (2009) argues that a culture of collaboration challenges the traditional framework of organizations that reward the individual. True collaboration requires organizations to transition from rewarding the individual to rewarding the team (Hastings, 2009). This change will allow for individuals within the organizations to give up personal credit for shared credit.

Hastings is not the only one challenging the neoliberal discourse of individuality over cooperation and competition over collaboration. Sanford et al. (2012) propose decolonizing education by infusing indigenous principles into teacher education. According to Sanford et al. (2012), applying indigenous principles works towards creating respectful, inclusive and community-based learning environments, which also provides an authentic framework for collaboration. They offer a narrative reflection of their experiences with this program. In particular, the indigenous principle of Kamucwkalha, which means, “acknowledging the felt energy indicating group attunement and the emergence of a common group purpose” (Sanford et al., 2012, p. 24), embodies the essence of collaboration. The principle of Kamucwkalha creates an environment where everyone in the group is able to work, listen and speak without fear. Sanford et al. (2012) suggest that “recognizing social community as a vital component of learning, articulating the responsibility that each person has for helping the learning community to accomplish a task” (p. 24) further exemplifies the shared perspective with authentic collaboration.

Chung (2011) explains the importance of using language appropriately when bringing

different groups of people together to achieve a goal. Chung (2011) writes the term ‘negotiate’ sets the tone in which:

Stakeholders are approaching a problem from a point of difference and need to resolve these differences to reach a middle ground. The word collaborate focuses on the commonalities. When parties collaborate, they work together by recognizing how each person’s passions and interests can be collectively applied to create a net cumulative impact. Reframing the tone and intention of dialog that enables each group to communicate with each other and build on each other’s ideas and visions (p. 10).

The choice of language therefore either discourages (in the case of negotiate or encourages in the case of collaborate) effective dialog. Mindfulness of individual professional roles and responsibilities within the organization is important. Accountability is likely to be a primary concern for administrators, and it is important to provide some form of evidence to measure learning success within any program that attempts to reform education.

Accomplishing a task is an important component of the purpose of collaborating (Hastings, 2009; Chung, 2011; Ludlow, 2011). The new direction expressed by the Ministry of Education in the BC Ed Plan outlines fewer prescribed learning outcomes coupled with increased flexibility and choice in the content, process and product of learning. There is a marked shift from a content/product driven curriculum to a focus on the process of learning and learning how to learn. Educators including teachers and administrators are currently trying to identify how the BC Ed Plan will reform learning within the context of their schools.

Context is a key word in the field of collaboration and reform. Scholars assert that all schools are unique in terms of their culture and therefore any change requires leaders to be mindful of how to best tailor interventions to their contexts (Jappinen, 2012; Riveros 2012).

Gruenewald (2005) argues that “when collaboration is contrived and when it simply serves to strengthen and legitimize the unexamined discourses-practices around educational accountability, calls for collaboration may become instruments of control that further limit the possibilities for place-based education” (p. 269).

Harris (2011) argues that despite educational reform being necessary for student learning, educational reform requires educational organizations to have a reasonable timeframe to reform, a sustained effort to continually build capacity, and a focus on providing supports rather than punish for change to be implemented. Harris’s idea that leaders must focus on supports rather than deficits is echoed in the literature surrounding an asset-based response to reform.

Kretzmann and McNight (1996) have written at length about the importance of tailoring community reform through building capacity from a concerted focus on the strengths of organization. These two authors focus their research primarily on communities in the United States challenged by widespread unemployment, crime and poverty. An asset-based approach, Kretzmann and McNight (1996) argues “starts with what is present in the community, the capacities of its residents and workers, the associational and institutional base of the area - not with what is absent, or with what is problematic, or with what the community needs” (p. 23).

Although their research is focused on community development, it has strong practical application to the process of reform in an education organization. Alternatively, much of the educational literature related to professional learning communities (PLC’s), collaboration and capacity building has been found to focus on student needs, relating more to an approach rooted in identifying deficits (Jappinen, 2012; Riveros 2012). According to Kretzmann and McNight (1996), focusing on needs overshadows the strengths of an organization and assumes that outside experts are required to fix the problem, initiating a cycle of dependence.

Having to extrapolate the implications of asset-based research from different fields makes it more difficult to determine how this approach directly applies to education. Randall (2010) is one of the few scholars who have applied asset-based development to education. Randall's (2010) connection is apparent as she relates to teaching students from impoverished communities with the goals of developing capacity for these students to learn at high levels. Focus is centered on relational and reflective learning where the learner develops personal understandings of themselves in relation to their learning community. Specifically, Kretzmann and McNight (1996) explain that if a reform

process is to be asset-based and internally focused, then it will be in very important ways 'relationship driven'. Thus, one of the central challenges for asset-based community developers is to constantly build and rebuild the relationships between and among local residents, local associations, and local institutions (p. 27).

Coincidentally, developing and maintaining authentic and supportive relationships with diverse community stakeholders is a challenge also shared with PBE programs (Emekauwa, 2004; Gruenewald, 2009; Jennings et al., 2005; Powers, 2004; Smith, 2007). This parallelism is encouraging as the asset-based model expressed by Kretzmann and McNight (1996), and Randall (2010) may provide an applicable framework to develop capacity for developing and sustaining a school or district PBE program.

PBE is a diverse and progressive form of education that originated from environmental education and incorporates the perspective of critical pedagogy in connecting student learning to local phenomena through direct experience and participation in citizenry that shapes places. This inherently creates challenges when juxtaposed to public education that presently places a heavy

emphasis on state and provincially mandated content-based curriculum and assessment. It is clear that alternative methods of assessment are required to provide authentic and credible PBE programs. These assessment methods are available but, in the current culture of accountability, they are restricted from being widely employed. Despite this shortcoming, PBE has validation from conventional methods of measuring student achievement including standardized testing.

The BC Ministry of Education's plan to create a flexible and responsive framework for 21st learning in the province has potential for being compatible with Place-Based Education. However, building a successful Place-Based Education program will require developing authentic relationships that are mutually beneficial and trusting. The ultimate purpose of such a program will be to create healthy local and global communities, which is a goal that is shared by all citizens who respect future generations. As Gruenewald (2005) writes, "If education is not about people working together for the well-being of places, then what is education for? (p. 281).

### **Chapter 3: Building Capacity for PBE in a Rural Elementary School**

Over the course of this past year, I have had the opportunity to offer students at my rural elementary school PBE as a small portion of my full-time teaching position. While I have found this opportunity immensely rewarding in many ways, it has become evident to me that the PBE program that I have been developing at my school could be eliminated. Consequently, I have sought out ways to develop capacity for sustaining PBE within my school. Here, I will show how I have helped develop capacity for PBE by focusing on building relationships and collaborating with others in my teaching community. To begin, I will describe my meeting with my school principal. Following this, I will summarize my collaborative brainstorm activity with my teaching colleagues in which I sought ways to help shape PBE around each teacher's curriculum. Afterwards, my Bear and Cougar Aware program will be described, demonstrating how I was able to help promote wildlife safety and thus build further capacity for PBE. Finally, I will discuss my efforts towards creating an outdoor classroom close to our school grounds and how that will help sustain PBE in the future.

#### **Meeting with my Principal**

In June 2013, I was given a half-day PBE position as part of my full time physical education assignment in a rural elementary school on North Vancouver Island. Inclusive with this position was the task of developing a PBE program for the school since our school had never had a PBE position in the past. The position was the brainchild of the former school principal who had been suddenly transferred to another school in the district at the end of the last school year. Therefore, the principal who developed the idea and created the position was no longer part

of our school leadership.

On the second day of the new school year, I scheduled an informal meeting with my current administrator. I felt that it was important to schedule a meeting with my administrator for a number of reasons. Meeting with my new principal provided an opportunity to open up lines of communication between us. It offered me the chance to get to know him and gain some insight into his educational philosophy and how this could connect to a PBE program at our school. Moreover, accountability of learning is likely to be a primary concern for an administrator with any new program. With this in mind, I believe it was important for each of us to understand each other roles and responsibilities and how we could visualize the program's development.

The tone of the meeting with my new principal was more serious and professional than our everyday interactions together, although we had just recently met at the time. I explained that I have a degree in Outdoor Experiential Education and that I value creating opportunities for making learning relevant for my students by directly connecting their classroom studies with our local outdoor spaces and community. I spoke about how PBE is a broad field that focuses on connecting curriculum to local life and resources and therefore has an appeal to those who appreciate their communities. My principal mentioned that he is a big proponent of bringing the community into the school as much as possible and that PBE coincides with the school goal of connecting with the larger community.

In our meeting, I also discussed with my principal how the field of PBE has a broad scope, providing the flexibility to design a program around the specific interests of the school community. I mentioned that I felt the purpose of the program was to connect learning in the classroom with direct experiences in our community. Teaching physical education four and a half days per week provided half a day for me to work with other teachers in developing a new

PBE program at our school. We discussed my intention to hold a brainstorming meeting with the other teachers in the second week of school to provide classroom teachers with the opportunity to contribute to the process of developing the scope and sequence of the PBE program. My principal gave his permission to hold the meeting throughout our conversation. During our conversation, he communicated the funding limitations on possible activities because there was no operating budget for the program. Furthermore, I learned that the school must pay for any learning activity that is connected to school curriculum. Therefore, the school must provide all the funds for the students to participate in any PBE activity. He also mentioned that funding for the PBE position is subject to budget restraints and that he felt the position might not exist next year.

In retrospect, I felt the meeting with my principal was extremely valuable because it allowed me to explain the principles of PBE and its many benefits for our learning community. He was receptive to the benefits of this progressive approach to learning as he values building social community within the school and beyond. This was a crucial outcome as administrative support plays an instrumental role in developing and sustaining progressive approaches to learning (Howley, 2011; Wither, 2001; Emekauwa, 2004; Smith, 2006). Additionally, I was able to gain insight from his perspective on the funding barriers, specifically on not having an operating budget to purchase required equipment and the possibility of the elimination of my PBE half day position in future years due to budget cutbacks. Having no operating budget and no guarantee of the continuation of the half-day position was stark news indeed.

However, receiving this information early in the year has allowed me to purposefully plan to address these barriers in two ways. Firstly, I have worked towards collaboratively creating a network of support within my school for PBE. Such a network will help my teaching

colleagues and wider school community move together towards developing capacity to create a sustaining PBE program within our school. In this way, the PBE program is not centered on me and therefore will hopefully be more sustainable into the future. And secondly, since the PBE program has had no operating budget, I have worked towards connecting learning in our school with resources located within a reasonable walking distance to eliminate the financial cost of bussing.

After reflecting on this meeting with my principal, I can see a number of things I would have done differently. I believe that being immersed in an outdoor setting for our meeting would have been appropriate to discuss our new PBE program. This is especially true when considering our school has a wide array of green spaces available to it within short walking distance. Taking it one step further, it would be worthwhile to have our next meeting in a community green space. This could have brought greater meaning to the value of having a PBE program at our school. In addition, I believe that I could have also formally set up a series of meetings with my principal, for example once a month, to discuss the PBE program on an on-going basis. I could have also opened it up to my other teaching colleagues to offer their input and suggestions to help evolve the program as a whole. While I have met with my principal over the course of the year in an informal way, I believe that by creating dedicated opportunities to discuss PBE I could have better developed my relationships amongst my learning community and school leadership simultaneously, contributing to the overall collaboration within my school.

### **A Shared Working Document**

In addition to meeting with my principal at the beginning of the year, I also orchestrated a meeting with my entire teaching staff to gather their input and encourage their collaboration in

planning the scope and sequence of this PBE program. An explanation of the meeting can be found in the next section titled ‘The Collaborative Brainstorm in Action’. However, I felt that it was important to develop a document to compile our shared ideas at the meeting. Such a document would list local resources that have the potential to directly connect with the teachers’ grade specific curriculum.

To create the document, I consulted a colleague of mine who has a wealth of experience teaching an integrated curriculum. Together, we developed a chart to document the ideas from the collaborative brainstorm. The chart shown in Figure 1 has four columns, each with a specific heading. The heading for the first column reflected the recommended time of year the PBE learning activity could take place. The second column was appropriately named seasonal theme and contained four seasonal themes to connect learning to our place. These seasonal themes included Salmon Forest for fall, Land Lovers for winter, Local Food for spring and Ocean’s Alive for summer.

<b>Season</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>People Experts</b>	<b>Curriculum Connections</b>
Fall	Salmon Forest			
Winter	Land Lovers			
Spring	Local Food			
Summer	Ocean's Alive			

Figure 1. Chart for PBE Collaborative Brainstorm

Many factors went into the decision to create a theme-based program. Firstly, the teacher who collaborated with me on this process has a wealth of experience teaching primary grade levels. She along with many other primary teachers purposefully plan curriculum around themes

in order to teach an integrated curriculum. Theme-based programs are synonymous with PBE because they bridge several disciplines of subject areas and content (Blinkinsop et al., 2012). Furthermore, the integrated nature of theme-based programs can also span several different grade levels and competencies, which ultimately provides the flexibility for deep learning (BC Ministry of Education, 2013). In these ways, a theme-based program was seen as being most appropriate for bringing our entire K-7 learning community together through the context of our place.

It was also valuable to have my colleague's input when selecting the theme name for each season. First, we felt that it was important to choose a theme name for each season that was representative of the culture of the North Island. Given that my colleague has lived on the North Island for most of her life, she provided a local perspective for determining an authentic theme name for each season.

The third column provided a space for participants to freely write down activities that appropriately connected to each of the four seasonal themes. These may include activities such as clam digging, geocaching, smoking salmon, and dragon boating. The fourth column was allocated for participants to offer the names of people in our community who could serve as a resource for each specific activity. Contact information was also written alongside the person's name. Lastly, the fifth column was reserved for teachers to make connections between the activity and their grade specific curriculum including subject areas and units. For example, a stream studies program could be connected to a grade 2-science unit on water, grade 4-science unit on habitat or grade 6/7-science unit on diversity of life/chemistry.

It is also important to point out that we felt the association of the seasons, themes and learning activities was only a suggestion. It was agreed upon that teachers should feel free to

engage in any activity in a season of their preference. The chart served only as a way to thoughtfully organize the PBE program in such a way that reflected our shared perspective of the North Island community and culture.

After reflecting on the creation of this document and with the added benefit of hindsight, I can see that collaborating with my primary colleague was valuable for a number of reasons. Firstly, working together on designing the chart opened the doors to hearing diverse perspectives. My colleague's adept knowledge in planning for an integrated curriculum was the guiding factor in designing a document that was centered on seasonal themes. Framing the document around seasonal themes created a broad focus that in turn developed inclusive opportunities for all teachers in our K – 7 school to meaningfully contribute to the process of developing the PBE program. This was apparent because when I handed out the document to the teachers in the collaborative brainstorm they readily shared their ideas. This made me think about asset-based planning where leaders focus on building on the capacities within an organization rather than what the community needs (Kretzmann and McNight, 1996). I feel that by applying my colleagues curriculum planning expertise, we were able to thoughtfully structure the program around seasonal themes. Thus, collaborating with my colleague in the infancy planning stages of the PBE program created a valuable document that would ultimately lead to the success of the collaborative brainstorm.

Secondly, the process of working with my colleague in developing the shared working document opened the lines of communication between us and has made me become aware of alternative perspectives in relation to PBE. For example, some teachers feel extremely uncomfortable having people from outside of our school community in their classrooms but are more than willing to engage in community life outside of the school. This insight has made me

more mindful of providing the flexibility for teachers to choose which PBE activities are best suited to their contexts (Jappinen, 2012; Riveros 2012). In this way, teachers are more willing to be intrinsically motivated to invest in connecting their learners and curriculum to local resources. It is my hope that I will continue to work towards being mindful of providing the flexibility to teachers in planning a successful PBE program in our school.

### **The Collaborative Brainstorm in Action**

The beginning of the school year is an onerous time for teachers. The tasks of teachers setting up their classroom, developing unit and year plans, timetabling and staff meetings leaves little extra time. With this in mind, I planned a meeting to be held in the Learning Commons in the second week of school. Twelve teachers and one administrator attended the meeting, which calculated to about 75% of our teaching staff being in attendance.

As chair of the meeting, I began by explaining that the part-time PBE position came from the shared interest of our staff in connecting learning to our local places. I explained that I highly valued connecting learning to local resources thus providing an opportunity for us to make learning more relevant, purposeful and enjoyable for our students while strengthening relationships with our community. Afterwards, I provided a handout containing a list of literature evidence documenting the value of PBE to learning and community. This handout is shown in Appendix A. On the top of the handout was the following definition of PBE:

Place-based education is grounded in the resources, issues and values of the local community and focuses on using the local community as an integrating context for learning at all levels. By fostering the growth of partnerships between schools and the

communities they occupy, place-based education works simultaneously to boost student achievement and improve a community's environmental quality and social and economic vitality (Powers, 2004, p.24).

I explained that the position is only half of one day per week spread across fourteen class divisions from K – 7. With the limited time designated to the program, I explained that I felt my role would be to support teachers in connecting their curriculum to resources in our community. In this way, my position would assist our school in collaboratively developing and sustaining PBE in our school that was not solely dependent on myself but would rather have legs. I felt that this was a good time to explain there is no operating budget for the program nor is their likely going to be a PBE position next year due to expected budget cutbacks. I explained that I felt collaboration was critical because in order for this program to have longevity, it must resonate with our school community as something that has value and we are willing to invest our energy into.

I acknowledged that many teachers are currently practicing elements of PBE with their learners and that their contributions will be very helpful today. Next, I explained that my first goal for this meeting is to determine if the teachers in this school think that PBE would be valuable for their learners. People nodded their heads with sureness. This was obviously a sign of support for the idea.

I went further and mentioned that I feel that one of the goals of my part time position could be to create opportunities for this to happen. I asked if teachers felt that building relationships with our community was valuable. People started to nod their heads, again indicating a resounding yes! I asked if any teachers could explain either why they felt this was

important or how they worked towards building learning relationships with our community. I stopped talking to provide an opportunity for others to speak. One teacher mentioned that she tries to connect student learning to the First Nations culture in our community by engaging them in projects related to self-government, ceremonies and traditional foods. I commended her for practicing PBE approaches to learning that connecting student learning to the community is responsive and embraces experiential learning, inquiry and project based learning principles (Powers, 2004). Afterwards, one teacher explained that she felt there was value in spending time connecting with the community outside of the school but felt that Kindergarten is the only place where the curriculum connects directly with community life.

### **Goals for the Meeting**

After this initial discussion, I explained that one of the goals of this meeting is to collaboratively develop a shared working document, which compiles a list of learning activities and local community resources that teachers feel are relevant to connect to their grade-specific curriculum. I went over the PBE shared working document with seasonal themes in Figure 1 and explained that this chart was developed with the support of a colleague. Again, I explained that due to limited funding please try and concentrate on resources within a reasonable walking distance of the school.

At each of the four tables in the Learning Commons sat two-four teachers in a group. I explained that the purpose of this document is to provide an opportunity for our staff to shape the program by meaningfully contributing local resources and learning activities that have the potential to connect to curriculum. I explained that local resources include both places and people in our community. The participants were then given pens and asked to collaboratively

make any contributions they feel have relevance to our community, our learners and curriculum.

Providing an opportunity for my colleagues to collaboratively contribute their ideas to the place-based program was seen as being valuable for a number of reasons. I recognized that many members of our staff have lived in this community for the better part of their lives and therefore serve as a valuable source of information. Furthermore, my context as a male and teaching an intermediate curriculum is only one perspective. I felt it was important to gain an understanding of what local resources other teachers felt were relevant to connect to our school community and curriculum. Offering this opportunity for all teachers to meaningfully contribute their ideas would create an authentic product was representative of our school culture.

It is my belief that collaboratively developing a program around the very citizens that are leading learning in our school will create a shared sense of ownership. This shared sense of ownership will translate into teachers investing into the program. I explained that I foresee the limited time that I have to allocate to this program requires me to build capacity by encouraging teachers to invest energy into practicing PBE. I again referred them to Appendix A in the handout, which cites the research evidence documenting the benefits PBE to learning.

The people present at the meeting ranged from first year teachers to ones with over thirty years of experience. It was wonderful observing my colleagues sincerely engaged in sharing stories and contributing their ideas to the chart of the people and places in our community that, if utilized, have the potential to make learning more relevant, purposeful and enjoyable for our students while strengthening relationships between the school and the community. This made me think about what Greenwood (2009) said about PBE being “a broad field that focuses on connecting curriculum to local life and resources and therefore appeals to all citizens who care about and appreciate their communities” (p. 2). I recall one teacher explaining that comparing

the circumference of the trees in a nearby forested area would connect to a Grade 5 graphing unit. The teacher also mentioned that she could bring in one of her student's parents who was a forester.

### **Shaping the Program**

After a half an hour of collaboration, all groups had finished contributing their ideas. I asked the groups to submit their charts documenting their ideas. I explained that my task that evening was to compile the information from all four groups and provide them with a cleaned up copy the following day. That evening, I amassed the inputs into one document, which represented our shared perspectives of PBE in our school and community. This document is shown in Figure 2.

The product included a plethora of people and places on the North Island that resonated with my staff as being relevant to learning in our school. I was pleasantly surprised by the multitude of relevant contributions made to the charts by my colleagues. These contributions included activities such as spelunking, aquatic and terrestrial ecology, ethno botany, clamming, fire making, dragon boating and studying petroglyphs. In fact, after living on the North Island for the past six years, I had no knowledge of many of the people and places included in the charts.

The thoughtful energy that my professional community directed into this brainstorming process made me think of what Sanford et al. (2012) said about authentic collaboration “recognizes social community as a vital component of learning, articulating the responsibility that each person has for helping the learning community to accomplish a task” (p. 24). Without the support of my fellow teachers, I would not be able to develop a document that was representative of our school in order to build capacity in our school for connecting learning to

local resources. I felt honored that my professional community respected my role in this collaborative process.

Season	Theme	Activities	People Experts	Curriculum Connections
Fall	Salmon Forest	Hatchery Trips, Bear and Cougar Aware , Culturally Modified Trees, Aquatic Ecology, Forest Ecology, Hiking Trips		
Winter	Land Lovers	Smoking Salmon Orienteering, Geocaching, Animal Tracking, Gold Panning, Spleunking, First Aid, Clam Digging, Storm Drain/Yellow Fish, Water Treatment Plant Tour, Waste Water Treatment Plant Tour Landfill and Recycling Centre Tour		
Spring	Local Food	Ethnobotany, Cedar Stripping, Oolican Grease, Middens, Pit Cooking, Deer Island, Solos, Tides		
Summer	Ocean's Alive	Water Safety War Canoes, Dragon Boating, Intertidal studies, Petroglyphs, Ocean Safety, Surf/tides		

Figure 2. Collaborative Brainstorm PBE Shared Document

This document was then put into the mailboxes of each of the participants with a note asking them to indicate which, if any, specific theme or activities they feel would be of value to their learners and grade specific curriculum. They were instructed to write their name beside one specific theme and/or activity and submit them into my mailbox. I explained in the note that I would support teachers by collaboratively developing learning experiences and lessons with them that connected with the specific activity they identified. To my surprise, I received all of the charts back from my colleagues and each teacher had selected a specific learning activity from the chart that connected with their curriculum.

After the brainstorming session, I carefully examined the charts and recognized that

many of the activities my colleagues suggested, such as ethno-botany, forest and stream ecology, and survival skills required an outdoor setting. Due to the close proximity of a local green space, it was deemed possible to meet the expectations of many of my colleagues without bussing. There were some activities including clam digging, spelunking, and observing petroglyphs that required a location distant from the school. However, this list was not exhausting which made me think that it would be feasible to use the school field trip budget to cover the costs of bussing for these activities. I spoke with my principal afterwards and he agreed.

After reflecting on the process of creating the PBE shared document, I can see that collaborating with my colleagues was effective for a number of reasons. Living in our rural community often produces a sense of disadvantage or shortcoming amongst its citizens because we do not have citified infrastructure such as movie theatres, well to do restaurants and other specialized businesses. The collaborative brainstorm provided a purposeful opportunity for members of our staff to focus on sharing the assets in our local community that have relevance to learning in our school. Connecting student learning to the community resources serves to engage students in their community while at the same time celebrating their places (Jennings et al, 2005, p. 44). Focusing on the assets and possibilities in our community was found to be a very effective way to open the lines of communication between our staff at the beginning of the school year. This was shown by the engagement my staff demonstrated in the process of contributing ideas to the brainstorming session, which inherently created a valuable product, which can be used for years to come. In addition, many of the participants expressed positive feedback on the activity.

Secondly, providing an opportunity for our staff to contribute to the process of shaping the program created diverse ways for teachers to integrate PBE activities into their curriculum

planning for the year. Indeed, the collaborative brainstorm did lead to investment from teachers in the program as all classes signed up and participated in activities. I felt that providing opportunities for students to participate in PBE activities was a start but I wanted all teachers to invest in connecting these activities to the daily learning of their students. In this way, there would be evidence of the programs' value to learning in our school. I discovered that experienced teachers were successful in providing evidence of learning from the PBE activities while less experienced teachers used the PBE as a stand-alone exercise. This evidence included reflective journal writes and creating videos documenting what they learned from the experience. In the future, I could communicate more clearly about the value of using the PBE activity to engage their students in learning. In addition, I could also provide extra support for teachers on how to purposefully integrate the PBE activities into their curriculum.

Lastly, it is evident how I could have done a few things differently with respect to the creation of this working document. To stimulate ongoing evaluation of the PBE program, I could have sought out ways in which my teaching colleagues could offer their input to adapt the document over the course of the year. For example, I could have had a drop box in the staff room for people to contribute ideas of local resources that they feel would be valuable to connect to student learning. In addition, it would have been beneficial for students to plan and deliver a presentation at a weekly assembly to share their experience with the rest of the school. In this way, the profile of the program would be raised which would encourage teachers to incorporate PBE principles into their daily pedagogy rather than the program being centered around me.

### **Bear and Cougar Aware**

As the PBE facilitator, I felt that it was my role to provide the capacity for teachers to be

able to integrate the PBE activities outlined in Figure 2 into their curriculum planning for the year. It was evident that many of the activities in Figure 2 required a natural outdoor setting. These activities included ethno botany, hiking, ecological studies, orienteering, clam digging, animal tracking and survival skills and many others. Being situated on the North Island presents its own sets of barriers for outdoor education including this region having the highest black bear and cougar population in the world (Institute for Coastal and Oceans Research, 2014). Ensuring the safety of students is an educator's primary responsibility. Consequently, I began my PBE program this year with Bear and Cougar Aware activities to address concerns relating to wildlife safety that could impede the promotion of a PBE culture at our school.

Bear and Cougar Aware is a provincial program that is directed by the Ministry of Environment through the service of a local Conservation Officer (CO). The goal of the program is to educate the public that being responsible and prepared is the best defense against a bear or cougar attack. In my six years as an intermediate classroom teacher, I invited the local CO into my class to train my students with the Bear and Cougar Aware program. Therefore, there had already been a relationship between the school and the local CO. Offering the Bear and Cougar Aware program as a part of our PBE activities this year would serve to strengthen this relationship.

Being in the new role of place-based educator provided me with the opportunity to extend the Bear and Cougar Aware program to a larger percentage of our school community. This year, I arranged for the CO to provide this program to the Grade 5 and 6 classes. The program consists of first ascertaining the students' knowledge level of bears and cougars and then investigating with them how best to respect bears and cougars. Ways to behave around them, such as staying in a group, make noise, look into its eyes were then discussed and the CO then shared a few

stories of his personal encounters with bears and cougars. The moral of the CO's stories was to respect that these animals need their space because the ecosystem of the North Island is their habitat. A week after attending the Bear and Cougar Aware program with the CO, twelve Grade 5 students were then selected to serve as mentors to primary students at our school to further disseminate the content of the Bear and Cougar Aware program to the students of our school using the learning outcomes shown in Figure 3. In preparing for teaching the primary students, the mentors revealed their confusion when asked to demonstrate what strategies they use in a bear and cougar encounter. Through taking the time to write each action down in the Venn Diagram (Figure 4), we discovered that actions such as staying in a group, looking big, making noise, walking away slowly and fight back if attacked would help keep people safe in an

<b>Bear and Cougar Aware Mentorship - Learning Outcomes</b>	
Mentor - Intermediate	Learner - Primary
Communicates Understanding (Writing, Oral Speaking, Drama)	
Habitat includes food, water, shelter, space	Habitat includes food, water, shelter, space
Respect bears by keeping garbage secure	Respect bears by keeping garbage secure
Importance of respecting bears and cougars - make noise, stay in group, look BIG, walk away slowly facing animal, fight if attacked	Importance of respecting bears and cougars - make noise, stay in group, look BIG, walk away slowly facing animal, fight if attacked
Demonstrates leadership through contributing to the learning of others by: - Asking learner to make predictions - Being respectful and cooperative when providing feedback	

Figure 3. Learning Outcomes from Bear and Cougar Aware Mentorship Program

encounter with both a bear and a cougar. The mentors asked if we could call up the CO and ask if he would support their idea of teaching the primary students strategies that were similar to both the bear and cougar in order to reduce confusion. I thought that was a great idea because it would

value the expert while also work towards strengthening the relationships between the CO, the school and the students themselves. Further, such an action embodies the essence of accountability in PBE as Gruenewald (2005) states “school-community collaboration is directly linked to, or at least must appear accountable to, the communities that the schools serve” (p. 269). This meaning the mentors felt responsibility to the CO to make sure that the information they were going to teach was accurate. This was very valuable for me to see and understand first hand how accountability in PBE is relevant and meaningful to the learner. He supported their idea and thanked them for recognizing the seriousness of ensuring the information they convey is accurate.

Oral feedback from the teachers on the learning value of the Bear and Cougar Aware mentorship program was very positive. Indeed, my teaching colleagues responded with such

We stay safe around bears and cougars by....

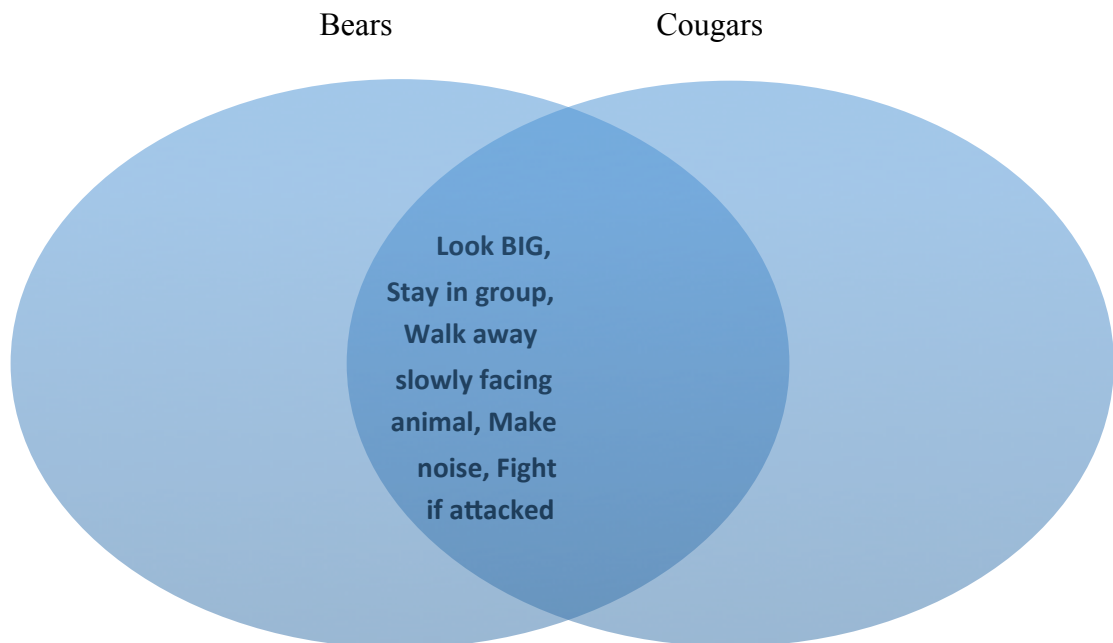


Figure 4. Venn Diagram for Bear and Cougar Aware Mentorship Program

enthusiasm that student mentors ended up teaching seven more primary classes Bear and Cougar Aware content. The mentors' feedback was also positive as they eagerly communicated to me they were looking forward to Friday each week so that they could participate in the program. I also received positive feedback from the principal of our school since wildlife safety had become a special concern of our school district office. Likewise, not long before the Bear and Cougar Aware program, a member in the upper management at our school district office had been stalked by a cougar within the town limits.

Upon reflection on my provision of the Bear and Cougar Aware program, it is clear to me it has helped promote PBE in our school. Most importantly, I believe that in order to honour the activities presented from the collaborative brainstorm it was valuable to focus the PBE program on activities directly related to being outdoors. With this in mind, it was imperative from communicating with my principal and teaching colleagues that I needed to address barriers like concerns around students' possible interactions with wildlife. I believe that by being quick to answer the concerns of my principal and teaching colleagues has helped to create positive, supportive relationships within my school, helping me work towards my goal of creating capacity for PBE. Indeed, it is widely known that developing a supportive relationship with school and district leadership allows for the development of progressive approaches to learning including PBE (Howley et al., 2011; Wither, 2001; Emekauwa, 2004; Gruenewald, 2005; Smith, 2006).

In retrospect, providing the Bear and Cougar Aware training has allowed me to be more mindful of the risks associated with taking groups of students out into natural environments on the North Island. I know that I have armed the students with the knowledge they need to help prevent a violent encounter with wildlife. Importantly, I believe the Bear and Cougar Aware

program has given teachers in my school greater confidence in their students' safety with wildlife and that this confidence will work towards continuing to integrate outdoor PBE activities into their everyday curriculum.

It is evident to me that bringing the CO into the school worked towards purposefully connecting our students to the citizens in our community while simultaneously developing the capacity to augment safety barriers to outdoor learning. Thoughtfully integrating community into school curriculum creates a personalized experience for learners and also increases intellectual development (Emekauwa, 2004; Jennings et al., 2005; Lieberman & Hoody, 1998; Powers, 2004; Smith, 2002). Further, a CO is a government employee. The students' gain respect for and an understanding of the role government plays in managing our natural resources through building a relationship with the CO. This therefore connected to our PBE goal of strengthening relationships with our community.

Lastly, I believe that I could have used the Bear and Cougar Aware program as an opportunity to engage our local aboriginal community and offer aboriginal content relating specifically with how we should engage with the natural world in general and local wildlife specifically. Embedding aboriginal content would have provided an opportunity to engage and collaborate with the First Nations community, thus further promoting PBE pedagogy in our school. This would have been an excellent way to embrace not only aboriginal content, but also indigenous principles of learning identified by Halbert and Kaser (2013). This last point is especially important since over half of our student population is of aboriginal ancestry. Indeed, including aboriginal content honours our local places and would have also fostered the continued development of a culture of collaboration within of school.

## **Outdoor Learning Space**

The Bear and Cougar Aware mentorship program worked towards building capacity for PBE within our school community by empowering students with the knowledge and skills to be safe when outdoors. The next step in building capacity for PBE in our school was to develop an outdoor area for our school community to connect many of the activities and themes outlined in the collaborative brainstorm. There was a green space adjacent to the school that I thought had lots of potential for connecting to the themes and activities outline in the collaborative brainstorm. Connecting learning to green spaces is not a new idea. The Environmental School Project in BC School District 42, the Outdoor and Ecological Learning Department in BC School District 47, and the Outdoor Kindergarten Program in School District 62 are just a few of the programs in the province working towards connecting student learning to the context of an outdoor setting. In addition, the close proximity of the green space to the school will reduce the barriers to PBE posed by bussing costs and logistical complications associated with taking students to more distant locales.

The idea of having a green space for students to connect the learning began to evolve early in the school year when a colleague of mine described how she would appreciate having an outdoor classroom for her students to connect to nature. I explained to her that I too was looking for a green space to connect the PBE activities from the collaborative brainstorm. I mentioned that a natural area adjacent to the school might serve us both well in meeting our goals. Through working collaboratively, we could create a plan to meet our shared objectives. This made me think about what Hastings (2009) and Chung (2011) said about collaboration requiring only a couple of people and a plan to work on something of value. My colleague expressed a sincere interest in my proposal and we determined that we needed to first find out who owned the land

so that we could ask their permission to use it. After reviewing some local maps, we discovered the land was a municipal park. We called the municipality and explained our idea of an outdoor learning space for our school on their lands. The municipality then stated that we would have to submit a detailed proposal outlining our intentions to council.

The following week my primary colleague and I met afterschool to begin brainstorming how we would work together on this initiative. We were both very excited about the idea of collaborating on this shared interest which made me think about the indigenous principle of *Kamucwkalha*, which means, “acknowledging the felt energy indicating group attunement and the emergence of a common group purpose” (Sanford et al., 2012, p. 24). My colleague voiced an interest in drafting a proposal for a seating area within the green space so that her students would have a place to go to, learn from and connect with. I expressed my interest in building an interpretive trail complete with signage that would provide an opportunity for students to showcase their learning from the PBE activities (Figure 2). If a class were using the park to learn about habitat for juvenile salmon, they would design a sign that would communicate their learning to others about the habitat requirements for salmon. Given this area was located on public lands, the interpretive trail would not only contribute to the learning of other students but also the general public. Therefore, the goal of this project was similar to what Gruenewald (2003) stated about PBE, that PBE “works against the isolation of schooling by providing students with opportunities to be active in their community and participating in process of shaping or reshaping their places” (p. 620).

My colleague communicated that she wanted to submit a proposal to council in the following week. Conversely, I mentioned that I would like to engage the students from the beginning stage of developing the proposal for two reasons. Firstly, it was a valuable opportunity

for students to experience the essence of PBE as described by Gruenewald (2005) as “education that is explicitly concerned with the past, present and future of local environments and communities” (p. 263). In this way, the students would not only learn about the integrated curriculum connected to the PBE activities but would also learn about the political process that shapes peoples day to day lives. Secondly, given that this outdoor learning space was located on public lands, there was potential for people to vandalize the parts of the outdoor classroom and interpretive trail. However, there was less chance of vandalism if the project was student centered (Zohouri, 2014). I felt that involving the students in the planning stages would shape the project around their interests and creating an authentic product and sense of ownership, thus reducing future vandalism. Together, my colleague and I came up with a plan for us to write a proposal (Appendix B) and I would work with the intermediate students on creating and delivering a presentation to council. We decided to meet again in a couple weeks time.

### **Learning in Context**

The following day, I decided to invite intermediate students to a meeting at lunch to discuss the idea of an outdoor classroom and interpretive trail. Twelve students showed up at the meeting. We met in my office and proceeded to connect the students to the park by going for a walk through it. I went over bear and cougar aware strategies before entering a forest area in the park. Once in the forest, I explained the proposal for an outdoor classroom and interpretive trail and how there was an opportunity for them to be involved if they wanted too. All of the kids expressed an interest in being involved in the project. One student asked about what I wanted them to do. I explained that there was an opportunity for them to make a presentation that focuses on why learning outdoors in this park is personally relevant to them.

We went for an exploratory walk in the park through the forest and down to the river. Beside the river, I randomly paired the students up and began to explain an inquiry activity. The activity involves one student choosing a plant that intrigues them. After selecting a plant, they are instructed to ask the plant as many questions as they can for one minute. After, they switched roles. The students were so engaged and focused on personally developing and asking questions that it made me think about the benefits of learning in context through activities that engage the mind, body, and heart (School District 42, 2014). Further, providing an opportunity for the students to directly connect to the park and develop personally relevant questions encourages experiencing what Smith (2002) terms “full bodied encounters with the world” (p. 586).

At the end of the activity, I instructed both partners to take the most relevant questions and write them down on a share piece of paper that went around the circle. I collected the paper and explained to them that many of the questions were very thoughtful and I was not sure of the answers. We carried on with our walk through the forest and back to the school. Once back at the school, we met in my office. I asked the students if they felt that the questions they wrote down were good. All of the students nodded their head in agreement. I explained that asking good questions is one of the most important aspects about learning. They have already provided evidence of why they feel an outdoor classroom in this park would be valuable to their learning. I proceeded to type their questions up on the classroom Smartboard. While typing, I asked them to think about what other things they may want to learn from this park. I included their responses in the document.

Over a two-week period, we planned several more outings in the park at lunch. We all ate our lunch and then I engaged them in some experiential ‘hide and seek’ type games as well as more focused learning experiences such as trust walks through the forest. The idea was to get

them connected to this place so they would just enjoy being outdoors in this park together. Such shared experiences work towards building personal understandings and effective learning and social relationships (Randall, 2010).

### **Active Citizens**

Over the course of the next week, we met everyday at lunch. Together, the ten students and I collaboratively planned a presentation for town council in order to gain their support to approve our proposal for an outdoor classroom and interpretive trail. Since the land in question lies in the traditional territory of the Kwak'waka speaking peoples, I also took the liberty to engage representatives from the Kwagwiltz Band in the project by inviting them to the evening presentation. Parents of the students involved were also invited.

All ten students were given an opportunity to speak to the council about why they feel having an outdoor classroom and interpretive trail would be valuable to their learning. Other students were given a choice to take more of a leadership role in the presentation. Two girls gladly accepted the role to introduce everyone and lead the presentation. This is similar to what the BC Ed Plan (2013) states about 21<sup>st</sup> century learning providing “more flexibility and choice regarding how, when and where learning takes place, and there will be more flexibility about how students are organized for learning” (p. 4). Although my colleague and I developed a written proposal, we left the entire presentation to the students.

We entered the council chambers and waited for the meeting to be called to order. Soon after, we were called to speak. Two female student representatives sat down at the table with the mayor and six councilors. The students introduced themselves and thanked the council for providing the opportunity to present their proposal. They also introduced the other students, my

colleague, and myself before providing an explanation for why they felt like an outdoor classroom and interpretive trail would be valuable to their learning. The ten students enlightened the audience by giving two personal reasons for what they wanted to learn from this park. Interest in learning the Kwak'wala names for plants was expressed by a student, which made me think about how this clearly connected to some of the teacher's interests in ethno botany from the collaborative brainstorm. All of the responses were thoughtful and directly connected to resources available in the park. After the two leaders thanked the mayor and council for their time. The audience, which included all ten of their parents and other community members, gave a big round of applause. A few weeks later, the municipality called and granted their approval of the project, although they would not put it in writing due to liability concerns. Therefore, we were not given a letter from the Municipality to show the kids.

### **Looking Back Now**

Looking back over the process of developing the capacity for an outdoor classroom and interpretive trail, it is clear to me that this process has tied together much of my learning on how to promote a culture of PBE at our school. Firstly, I have learnt much about collaboration from my interaction with my students, my primary teaching colleague, parents, fellow teaching community, and community groups. From collaborating with my primary teaching colleague, I could see that we were both invested in the process, creating a shared sense of ownership that I believe signified authentic collaboration. In this sense, I can connect with Chung's (2011) statement that "when parties collaborate, they work together by recognizing how each person's passions and interests can be collectively applied to create a net cumulative impact" (p.10). In addition, it is apparent to me that my teaching colleague and I both needed to give up personal

credit for shared credit, which Hastings (2009) asserts is necessary for individuals within organizations to collaborate.

The process of collaborating with my primary colleague was personally valuable for a number of reasons. First, we both shared an interest in building the capacity for PBE within our school community. Therefore, it was valuable to have her as an ally that would champion the practice of PBE in our school. This will undoubtedly translate to other teachers taking their students' out of the school because she is literally using her reading buddies for extra support when at the outdoor classroom. Further, other teachers in the school have requested permission to use the outdoor classroom and a schedule for the outdoor classroom has also been suggested. It is my hope that this new interest amongst our staff will be sustained in order to connect learning in our school to the park.

Additionally, this project took place during extracurricular time. It was quite practical having a partner to share the workload in developing and presenting the proposal. However, there were many challenges in working together on this shared project. After receiving approval from the municipality she was very keen to build her outdoor classroom. Alternatively, I wanted to allow for the project to maintain the flavor of being student led. However, creating the time for students to develop a plan and implement the construction the trail and outdoor classroom was very challenging. Fairly, she grew impatient and took it upon herself to clear the trail and build the outdoor classroom over a weekend.

Therefore, I have learned the importance of understanding and respecting other peoples' context when it comes to collaboration. If people are going to choose to work together on a particular project than it is important to outline not only each other's goals but also their timelines. I feel that clear and consistent communication on the progress of those goals is key to

collaborating effectively on any joint initiative. By honouring transparent communication, the relationship between the partners is strengthened which leads to future collaboration between the parties.

Witnessing my students demonstrating their citizenship by making a formal presentation at a municipal council meeting was absolutely inspiring. Obviously, the BC Ed plan (2013) supports such endeavors as it states “we can also connect students more directly with the world outside of school” (p. 4). Many of these students have learned about the role of government in social studies and, in previous years, may have even taken a trip to the municipal hall to meet the mayor. However, the relevance of proposing an outdoor classroom and interpretive trail created the capacity for the students to engage in citizenship. Such an experience exemplifies PBE and learning in the context of places.

The local newspaper displayed a photo of the students with the mayor and wrote an article about the presentation to the municipality. This article generated a phone call from a community business owner interested in becoming a partner of the school. They wanted to know if we needed any equipment like rain gear and waders for the initiative. This local business has since purchased class sets of these items for our school. The proposal for an outdoor classroom and interpretive trail in a local park has increased engagement in our PBE program from other community groups as well. Local First Nations have committed to work with our school in learning about plants that hold significant ethno-botanical value. Such an initiative makes a strong connection to the people of this place because they will be able to share their learning about plants with the rest of the community through the use of interpretive signage. In this way, PBE provides students with opportunities to be, as Smith (2002) states, “creators of knowledge rather than consumers of knowledge created by others. This is what good graduate school

education encourages and there is no reason to deny younger students similar opportunities” (p. 593). I believe that the outdoor classroom and the plans for an interpretive trail are an excellent opportunity for me to help build capacity for PBE within our school because the process has shown my school community the best that PBE has to offer.

The engagement from the outdoor classroom and interpretive trail proposal has translated into raising the profile of the PBE initiative along with providing opportunities to expand the program. With all the generated interest, the PBE program has become more valued by our school PAC, shown by their support in covering bussing costs, safety gear and other outdoor educational equipment that can be incorporated into the program. Over and above that, our local Rotary Club has come on board and donated fifteen life jackets so that we have the capacity to be able to actualize another activity deemed as being representative of our community, dragon boating. Since this donation, many other schools in our community have expressed interest in dragon boating. This prompted me to collaborate with a secondary school in the district and another non-profit organization in writing a dragon boating program proposal for the School District (Appendix C).

Connecting student learning to the community resources serves to engage students in their community while at the same time celebrating their places (Jennings et al, 2005, p. 44). I can see that working with the many collaborators on creating an outdoor classroom and plans for an interpretive trail has demonstrated an integration of our school into our wider community life. It is widely accepted that thoughtfully integrating community life into school curriculum creates a personalized experience for learners that is not only engaging but has also proven to be effective at increasing intellectual development (Emekauwa, 2004; Jennings et al., 2005; Lieberman & Hoody, 1998; Powers, 2004; Smith, 2002).

## **Conclusion**

My opportunity this past year to develop capacity for PBE as a part of my full-time teaching position at my rural elementary school has been incredibly rewarding. Through my efforts in collaborating with others in my school community, I have helped to begin the process of connecting learning to our local places and ensuring PBE is a sustaining theme in our school. Initially, I described my meeting with my school administrator. Afterwards, I summarized my collaborative brainstorm activity with my teaching colleagues in which I helped to find ways to help shape the PBE program around each teacher's curriculum. Following this, my Bear and Cougar Aware program was discussed, showing how wildlife safety was promoted and thus building further capacity for outdoor PBE. Lastly, my efforts towards creating an outdoor classroom and plans for an interpretive trail close to our school grounds were described with a focus on collaborating with others in my community to develop PBE. These initiatives have also translated to engaging local businesses and community groups through providing in-kind and financial support for the program. This support has generated further interest in PBE from other schools specifically including collaboratively developing a dragon boat proposal for our school district.

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## Appendix A.

### What is Place Based Education?

Place Based Education is “learning that is rooted in what is local-the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art of a particular place. The community provides the context for learning, student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning (The Rural School and Community Trust, 2004. p. 2).

### Some benefits of the program to learning

- Create engaging and relevant cross curricular learning opportunities for our students by allowing them to directly interact with a multitude of local environments/ecosystems on the beautiful North Island.
- Creates a relevant opportunity for intermediate students to take on a leadership/mentorship role in our school community.
- Provides opportunities for our school to develop partnerships with members outside of our traditional school community (role models, mentors, citizens, businesses, NGO’s, GO’s, community groups, other public, private and band schools).
- Celebrate the riches of the North Island community
- Provide opportunities for students to get to know their community through sharing fun, engaging and challenging outdoor education experiences (food gathering, hiking, orienteering, stream studies, cooperative games, canoeing, snowshoeing, tide pools study etc.). The relevance of these opportunities will hopefully motivate students to invest into the process of learning.
- Outdoor experiences provide opportunities for students to be physical active.

### Examples and evidence of PBE in action

Resource site that highlights the many place-based initiatives in Metro Vancouver area including the Maple Ridge Environmental School. <http://freshairlearning.org/resources/>

Bowen Island Community School Blog (SD 45)

<http://go45.sd45.bc.ca/blogs/schoolblogs/biblog/Lists/Posts/Post.aspx?ID=9>

Saturna Ecological Education Centre (SD 64)

<http://seec64.ca/index.php?/home/index>

Outdoor and Ecological Learning (SD 47)

<http://www.outdoors.sd47.bc.ca/>

Place-Based Education – The Sustainability of Place Dr. Sean Blenkinsop, Greg Scutt

<http://www.sfu-see.ca/images/SEE-Theme5.pdf>

## Appendix B.

Michelle Sedola and Sean Barfoot  
Port Hardy, BC  
January 28, 2014

District of Port Hardy Town Council  
7360 Columbia St.  
Box 68, Port Hardy, BC V0N 2P0

Dear Council,

We are seeking approval to develop an interpretive trail on the west side of the Little Tsulquate River adjacent to Eagle View Elementary School. The land is owned by the District of Port Hardy and currently has several unofficial paths through the greenspace. The proposed area is within the newly paved Huddleston Loop trails and essentially is reactivating an existing path.

The trail can be brought up to a useable state with simply raking and pruning. There are a couple of smaller trees that have been felled by vandals over the years that would need to be bucked up and cleared. In the initial stage of the trail construction there is the need for a small bridge to span a drainage at the Eastern end of the trail near the cul-de-sac at the end of Seaview Drive.

To mitigate liability, the trail will be kept a safe distance from creek banks and any other hazards. There may be a need for danger tree assessments which we would be seeking for an in-kind donation to do such an assessment. The bridge will be kept at a height and width as to not require handrails to both mitigate liability and construction cost. Construction materials such as lumbar and gravel will be sourced via in-kind donations from parents of elementary students and the community.

This trail is part of our Masters of Education project. We would like to develop an outdoor learning space as part of the curriculum that would be used all year long. Outdoor nature play allows children to move and explore their environment that fosters healthy growth and development for their body and mind.

This area would only be used during school hours by classes participating in this outdoor curriculum. These woods are not permitted to be used during recess or lunch hours because it is located outside of the school boundaries.

Thanks kindly,

Michelle Sedola

Sean Barfoot

## Appendix C Dragon Boating Program Proposal

### Proposal Description

As part of the Place Based Education Program, we are proposing a multi-grade Dragon Boat Program that is structured around an integrated curriculum that includes both Physical Education with Social Studies. Specifically, it will tie directly into the cultural program. The proposed Dragon Boat Program will also work towards developing a sense of teamwork and build relationships amongst our own learning community. The Grade 7 program will be closely tied to the transitions program through focusing on building relationships between the Grade 7 at the elementary school and Grade 8 students at the secondary school.

The Dragon Boat Program is a partnership between the Tri Port Dragon Boat Society, Canadian Coast Guard, Port Hardy Secondary School, Eagle View Elementary School. Further, the Connections Program will be a key partner in this initiative. The Connections Program works towards bringing staff, students and community together through a holistic approach.

A series of dry land lessons will be given that focus on developing the proper technique and sequencing of paddle strokes. After being given a water safety orientation by the coast guard, students will have the opportunity to demonstrate their practical understanding through the use of the Millennium Dragon Boat. We plan on having up to 6 trips out on the Millennium Dragon Boat between May 12th – June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Another six trips are planned for the fall between September 8 – October 17, 2013. The reason for the broad time span is to have flexibility to ensure weather conditions are favourable.

The Millennium Dragon Boat is 50 feet long and seats 22 students plus a helms and coach. The helms and coach will both be adults. The helms will have participated in April 6<sup>th</sup> Helms Clinic put on by the Coast Guard in partnership with the Tri Port Dragon Boat Society. Student groups will receive a dragon boat orientation, including a safety seminar, which will include emergency procedures prior to any dragon boat activities. Paddle stroke, appropriate life vest fitting, conduct and protocol, as well as setting up a two student ‘buddy system’ will also occur prior to engaging in the canoe on the water. All students and participants will wear CSA approved life jackets. Students participating must also be able to swim as per the policy.

Sean Barfoot is providing his vessel as a safety boat to accompany the dragon boat along its shoreline excursions, as we do not plan any open ocean crossings. We will remain in Hardy Bay. The safety boat is a 14’ aluminum boat with 15HP outboard. While we are paddling, we will also have a radio that is set to the coast guard channel. The canoe activity will also be weather permitting; if winds are forecasted to exceed 15 knots we will resume the activity on an alternative date. All will complete the high-risk waiver forms, and parent meetings will be facilitated at the school level prior to the event dates.

## Dragon Boat Program - Curriculum Connections

Social Studies

Grade	PLO
8	Describe how societies preserve identity, transmit culture and adapt to change.
7	Assess ways technological innovations enabled ancient peoples to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) adapt to and modify their environments</li> <li>2) increase exploration and trade.</li> <li>3) develop their cultures</li> </ol>
6	Assess the relationship between cultures and their environments Evaluate effects of technology on lifestyles and environments
5	Identify the distinct governance structures of First Nations in Canada

Physical Activity

Grade	PLO
8	Describe skill-related components of fitness (e.g., agility, speed, reaction time, coordination, balance)  Relate activity-based movement skills to movement concepts, including qualities of movement (e.g., speed, force, flow)
7	Apply learned movement skills in new and unfamiliar physical activities.  Perform sequences using learned non-locomotor, locomotor, and manipulative movement skills, demonstrating effective use of qualities of movement (e.g., speed, force, flow)
6	Relate personal physical and emotional health benefits to regular participation in physical activity (e.g., energy, endurance, stress management, fresh air and sunshine when activities are done outside)  Demonstrate safe procedures for specific physical activities (e.g., wearing safe attire for the activity, safe use of equipment and facilities, participating in warm-up and cool-down appropriate to the activity)
5	Create structured, repeatable sequences of non-locomotor, locomotor, and manipulative movement.  Demonstrate safe use of equipment and facilities to avoid putting self and others at risk

