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Breaking Out of the Textbox - Increasing Outdoor Learning

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Breaking Out of the Textbox - Increasing Outdoor Learning

The driving question for my research project was: How can we best support teachers to incorporate more outdoor learning into their practice? I have experienced both very traditional classroom settings and outdoor learning programs, and to me there is no comparison – outdoor learning has so many rich learning affordances and holistic growth opportunities. There is also ample research that supports these statements, the benefits of outdoor learning have been well documented for decades. Yet, I have witnessed minimal engagement in outdoor learning in my school division. So I wanted to know how we could get more classes engaged in these practices.

While there are many outdoor learning ways of teaching, I connect most strongly with land-based education. This was the guiding educational philosophy throughout my project. Although I am non-Indigenous, as a treaty person, I believe that our education system needs to make space for Indigenous ways of knowing and acknowledge the colonial history of this province. Moreover, I find land-based learning to be the least anthropocentric of all the pedagogies and I appreciate its emphasis on all life being interconnected. I believe that land-based learning provides a tool for reconciliation and a road map for sustainability.

To kick-start my project, I sent out a division-wide survey asking my colleagues five simple questions about outdoor learning. It went out in May 2019 and there were 69 respondents. The survey helped me to recruit for the main part of my research which was the action research project. I ended up with seven participants ranging from PreK to Grade 8 and we met three times to work collaboratively. The first two meetings took place in the spring of 2019 and we focused on brainstorming solutions and supports that would help them engage in outdoor learning. Over the summer and into the fall, I worked on providing them with the materials, resources, and professional development opportunities that they thought would be helpful. In January 2020, we met one last time to review highlights and challenges and to consider other supports that they thought they were missing. We were supposed to meet again in the spring of 2020 but alas COVID, so I wrapped up my research with a final questionnaire.

At our first meeting, the participants shared all the benefits that they saw with outdoor learning. They mirrored many of the same benefits found in the literature. They pointed out the different aspects of student holistic growth, as well as broader community benefits.

Throughout the project, barriers came up for discussion and we worked proactively to address them. Factors that stood out included lack of support, student and class challenges, weather, and time.

The main focus of our meetings though was to brainstorm supports and solutions that would help the group to engage more fully in outdoor learning. The ideas fell into three main categories: materials, resources, and professional development. For example, binoculars, cheat sheets for in the field, and teacher site tours. Thanks to a grant through the McDowell Foundation, I was able to provide many of these supports.

Getting into the findings, the biggest take-away from the survey was the fact that there was considerable interest in outdoor learning, but there was a surprisingly low level of engagement. It seemed as though many of the teachers would need support to actualize the integration of this teaching practice.

Undoubtedly, there are barriers to incorporating a new teaching practice, but at times it seemed as though the survey respondents were a bit defeatist, with their barriers becoming excuses, whereas the action research group was highly motivated and so they often came up with creative solutions to solve their problems. For example, taking advantage of the free city transit for school groups to avoid transportation costs. That being said, I also came to better appreciate how even the most motivated teachers can be limited by systemic barriers. Teaching is a challenging profession, and teachers are increasingly asked to do more with less. Many deal with large classes with diverse needs and limited support. I think that this trend makes teachers hesitant to take on anything new and to default to what they know best. Ideally, the larger education power structure would be more supportive of teachers and best teaching practices. There are many changes that could take place at the Ministry, division, and school-based level that would support outdoor learning engagement.

From my research, I found that a holistic perspective would be the most effective in supporting teachers with outdoor learning. Elements that need to be considered include supportive relationships, content knowledge, action competency, and worldview and motivation.

Having a like-minded community ended up being one of the most valued supports for the group. They appreciated having the time and opportunity to meet up with other educators who shared similar values and goals. The meetings provided a great opportunity for the teachers to connect, to share ideas, highlights, challenges, and solutions.

The participants often talked about how they didn't feel knowledgeable enough to lead learning-rich outdoor experiences. While some resources provided helped them to feel more confident, I also think it would be valuable for teachers to have more exposure to different science and social studies topics. Additionally, Indigenous ways of knowing and critical analysis should also be incorporated.

Connected to the importance of having a strong knowledge base, the teachers also wanted to have experience and guidance in the field. They wanted to have guided tours of different outdoor spaces and mentorship support on field trips. Action competency provides learners with the confidence to attempt things on their own.

As discussed before, intrinsic motivation is crucial for ensuring that teachers stay committed to their goals. Throughout any outdoor learning professional development, the values and benefits of outdoor learning should be highlighted. Similarly, the participants talked about having visual reminders in their classroom that would help them stay focused on their goals.

There were also a couple general considerations that came out of the research. A recurring theme that the participants kept emphasizing was to keep things simple and organized. They expressed frustration with not knowing about the resources that are available and how difficult they can be to find in our division database. They thought that it would be very helpful to have all the great outdoor learning supports organized in one spot. They also emphasized that resources should be kept simple, as bulky, text-heavy resources are overwhelming and time-consuming.

In an attempt to address this point of frustration, I developed an *Outdoor Learning Resource Hub*, as well as a condensed *Guide Book to Outdoor Learning*, which provide centralized and organized points to access advice, resources, forms, gear, location suggestions, activities, etc. In theory, the *Outdoor Learning Resource Hub* would provide a “One Stop Shop” for those interested in outdoor learning, and the guide book would provide a “User Manual” for those just getting started. These resources were made possible due to funding provided by the McDowell Foundation and can be accessed at the end of this document.

It was apparent from the research that every teacher had different needs and strengths, and so personalized support tailored to their situations made the most sense. Moreover, professional development has more impact when there is continuity over time, giving participants a chance to try and incorporate what they learned, and then receive support as challenges arise. Longer term professional development also helps to keep participants accountable and engaged.

Throughout our meetings, the group engaged in valuable dialogue which led to some key conclusions. One point in particular that kept coming up was the importance of communication. Make it known far and wide, right from the beginning of the school year, that your class will be often learning outside. Make it part of the classroom culture. Make sure that your goals are clear, as well as your motivations for doing so.

If teachers are to have a successful year of outdoor learning, then students need to be on board. They won't intuitively be masters of outdoor learning and so there needs to be scaffolding built into the programming. Similarly, expectations will likely be different outside the classroom and these need to be made clear if teachers want to avoid behavioural issues. Additionally, differentiation needs to be addressed up front, if students with needs are to be successful when learning outdoors. Finally, you want to initiate a spark of excitement for outdoor learning early on, so that students are engaged and invested.

Materials were another component that the group felt contributed to their successful outdoor learning experiences. In particular, the idea of a grab and go bag was well-received. As well, the participants found that the field guides and learning tools greatly enhanced the outdoor learning experiences for their students.

Planning was also identified as a key variable for success. Make sure that you have ample time available for outdoor experiences by blocking off certain days free of prep time and supervision. Also, a well-received mantra by some of the participants was to “think outside first.” When you are planning, think about how you can cover different learning outcomes outside. What is more, nearby nature offers many learning opportunities and so teachers should keep their schoolyard and community in mind when planning for the year.

Perhaps the biggest personal growth piece for me throughout this project was developing a better understanding of what is needed for facilitating land-based learning as a non-Indigenous person. First off, it is important to acknowledge your positionality and how that plays out in your teaching practice. Whenever visiting a space, it is important to be critically reflective and think about the history, the power, the accessibility, etc. It is vital that the indigeneity of land-based learning is emphasized and to involve Elders and Knowledge Keepers as much as possible. Finally, the land is tied to a colonial history and that needs to be addressed.

[OUTDOOR LEARNING RESOURCE HUB](#)

[GUIDE BOOK TO OUTDOOR LEARNING](#)

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