Practical Ideas Teachers Can Do with Their Class Outdoors

Katie M. Leith-Mills

Vancouver Island University
Abstract

The purpose of my paper was to research practical ideas associated with outdoor learning to inspire and enable all teachers to easily take their classes outside to participate in meaningful outdoor activities. I wanted the resources that I compile to be accessible to all teachers and not for a few. Through my research, I engaged with the recent School District 71 survey on Environmental Outdoor Learning where 210 teachers from our district provided their thoughts on 22 questions regarding Environmental Outdoor Learning. My research was threefold: first, I did synthesized information from the survey and from my own discussions with colleagues to collect ideas about outdoor learning. Second, I completed my own research on philosophical and practical readings from literature on outdoor learning. Third, I explored my own personal experiences as an outdoor environmental teacher in the Comox Valley and try to mine and organize these experiences in practical ways. The product of my work is a resource that will help teachers within Comox Valley SD#71 utilize the outdoors more in their teaching.
Acknowledgements

I’m grateful for my family and friends who have supported and encouraged me during these very busy times. Thanks especially to my husband for his endless love and support, and to my parents who have had a large impact on who I am today. They have raised me to love and appreciate the outdoors. I admire their strength and determination and am so grateful to be living in my childhood home with my parents and family all on one property. Our girls Rowan and Beth are so lucky to grow up on the Plateau.

Thank-you to my mentors who continuously inspire me and stretch my thinking daily. I’m grateful for Jim, Nikki, Leah, Scott, Peter and Sean who have helped us all to believe in ourselves and helped us all connect our learning to our passions. Thank you for the ongoing support, conversations and for your constant desire for bettering education.

I’m forever grateful for my Granny and Papa, who shared their family home on the waterfront in Nanaimo with us. Here is the place where I first fell in love with the natural world and the place that is most close to my heart. I will continue their legacy and pass my love of nature on to my children and students.
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Granny and Papa’s Beach

I spent much of my summers of my youth on the beaches of Nanaimo by my grandparent’s waterfront home. Here my siblings, cousins, and I would spend our days walking on the warm, smooth pebbled beach, swimming in the glorious Pacific Ocean and seeing phosphorescence at night. I still vividly remember how the magical light would appear as we moved around in the water.

During the day we would swim from our Granny and Papa’s beach straight across to Shack Island. There we would collect starfish, bright purple, orange and red ones, for hours. Some days we would jump into Granny’s green and white rowboat and head to climb the spectacular arbutus trees at Pipers Lagoon; here we learned about the powerful tides. You must be cognizant of the tide as it comes in quick and it is hard to row your boat against the tides as it boldly moves into the lagoon.

This love of the outdoors remains true and strong as I continue to seek more experiences with nature as I age. I believe these powerful and rich experiences in my youth laid the foundation for my current focus on outdoor learning today. The topic of outdoor learning is my passion and is at the core of my teaching and beliefs. I believe outdoor learning improves student engagement and well-being and gives students real-life experiences they can connect into their daily lives both today and in their futures.
Chapter One: Introduction

Background

While working or at school, do you ever dream of being taken away to your favorite place? Where is your favorite place?

My favorite place is outside; it is swimming in the river or ocean, gardening, walking in the forest, or going barefoot on the beach. I love to be outside, and I want to pass that love to my students and my two daughters, Rowan and Beth. My love for nature inspires me to share this passion with my students and take them outside to learn. Therefore, I am excited to be doing my master’s in education, while researching environmental and outdoor learning (EOL).

My name is Katherine Michelle Leith-Mills. I am often referred to as Katie, Kate, Mom or Madame. I currently teach—and have for the past 15 years—at Ecole Robb Road Elementary School, a single-track Kindergarten to Grade 7 French Immersion school of about 500 students. I feel honored and blessed to have been a consistent figure at the school my entire teaching career and my knowledge of the students and their families articulates from the primary grades right up to grade 7.

I would describe myself as someone who likes to get things done, who has a social and environmental conscience, and who constantly seeks to nurture the social and emotional well-being of my students. I believe I am kind, caring, outgoing, and energetic. I seek adventure and find joy in the outdoors. Born and raised in the gorgeous Comox Valley, in the foothills of Forbidden Plateau, surrounded by the trees and the powerfully amazing Puntledge River, I have always been drawn to the outdoors and playing sports; they are and have always been a part of
my inner being. As a child, I chose to play outside rather than watch television or movies with my older sister Amy and younger brother David.

The purpose of my research project was to help share the meaningful experiences of my youth and my desire for outdoor learning with others so that we can all feel the amazing benefits and influential powers of being outside. My hope was to create a resource package that will inspire elementary teachers to take their classes outside to connect EOL learning to the curriculum.

**Purpose**

I am enthusiastic about teaching outside and doing hands-on field trips that add relevancy and connections to my students’ lives. I would like to connect into the somewhat untapped potential of our school grounds and surrounding areas in the Comox Valley School District #71 by providing lesson ideas and support for teachers in our district who would like to do the same.

Specifically, two questions ground my work: (a) What steps are needed to ensure all students have a fair, thoughtful, and excellent experience in learning outdoors? and (b) What do teachers need to feel supported and prepared for going outdoors?

Through an exploration of these questions, my research study and project works to improve teacher capacity and awareness of the importance of outdoor learning and provides teachers with resources they need to successfully add outdoor learning to their teaching repertoire. Through collaboration with teachers in our district, I researched to create a resource of ideas and lessons that would support outdoor learning. I used teachers’ qualitative responses
and the results from district-wide surveys that had already been completed to help determine what they had noted as their best outdoor learning experiences and work to make these accessible to everyone. I am a French Immersion, Environmental Outdoor Learning teacher among a group of other knowledgeable teachers: who else would like to join me on this journey?

**Justification of the study**

The book *The Courage to Teach* by Parker Palmer (2007) strongly connects to my interests and beliefs. His work speaks to me in the sense of finding that inner landscape of the teacher and realizing that we all have a story to tell. We need to understand that where we come from strongly affects where we are going and how we will teach. Like myself, he is committed to bridging the gaps between teachers and students; as he stated, “I need your insight and energy to help renew my own life” (p. 50). He also suggested, “We are in a life-giving communion with the young… and when the student from Hell ceases to be relevant to me, my life becomes less relevant to the world” (p. 50). I know that, after going outside to learn, my students are more able to concentrate and share their experiences, after connecting to nature.

My passion is to connect with all my students in active, outdoor learning opportunities because I need to love what I am doing so that it shines through in my teaching. I feel that we need to let that light inside of us guide us to meaningful experiences. My most memorable moments in school were on hikes to Cape Scott or Castle Craig, canoeing to Rainbow Island from Strathcona Park Lodge, playing ultimate frisbee, and learning to play field hockey in grade 7 at Lake Trail. My best memories were not simply sitting in a desk listening. Speaking
with my teachers and peers and doing things that we all enjoy, while being outside, meant the most to me. These memories are still glowing in my heart and soul.

We need to celebrate our stories and make connections to how we are feeling and how our students are feeling. How I am feeling strongly affects how I will teach that day and affects how my students will learn and engage. My love of teaching and my passion for being outdoors needs to be there, and we need to be bonded with our heart.

When the context for learning changes from an indoor, book-centred environment to an outdoor and nature centered environment, students find it to be a more meaningful context for education. Learning easily comes alive, as students can handle, touch, smell and even taste the materials they are learning with and from… it can help to motivate and inspire students who do not learn best in the classroom (Dyment, 2005 p. 30).

I believe that experiential learning is truly valued by my students. It's not only about the skill or the activity they are lucky to experience, but many times it’s where deeper connections happen. It allows me to see them in a different light and for them to see another side of me, too.

*In September, my class and I hiked up to Lake Helen Mackenzie. This outing allowed me to learn so much about their potential as a class and their courage to endure during diversity as I led them the wrong way for about 1km. Throughout the hike I had conversations with students that were very deep, and these experiences help to sustain me during our long winter days inside. It was also a great place to connect with parent volunteers who came along, and the hike helped to build relationships with them as well. One boy who is very athletic was*
able to really shine as he practically ran the hike with me and finished at the front.

It gave him an outlet to succeed as he struggles in the classroom setting but his athletic abilities were evident on this outing.

I am also passionate about sports and learning the skills necessary to play a variety of outdoor sports. I am forever thankful to all my school and community coaches who taught me so many lifelong skills and to my parents who supported me and provided me a multitude of opportunities growing up. The physical literacy that I developed in my youth has helped me continue to excel in sports as an adult as I now enjoy several team sports including ultimate frisbee, field hockey, floorball and soccer. I will include several sports-related fieldtrips that I do as part of my appendix, because I feel fortunate to have been provided so many opportunities in my youth and want others to feel that they can do them too with their students.

I usually go on about 15 field trips a year with my class. Which trips are most beneficial to my student’s learning? I believe the answer is that these trips are usually a combination of community-building, are curriculum-linked, and are sports-oriented. Most are free, and several are walking trips near our school.

Usually the first thing my new class asks is “Will we get to do lots of field trips this year?” Although I am confident my students learn from and enjoy these outdoor learning activities, as part of my regular routine as a teacher I talk with parents about how they perceive these trips and focus my time to researching ideas that parents are happy to see their children doing. Using the information I have gained talking with parents over the years, the main goal of my research project would be to compile a list of possible fieldtrips for School District 71
My Research Question

The research question that guided the building of my research project was: “What practical activities can teachers do to introduce their students to outdoor learning?”

I believe this research is valuable because, through research and collaboration with School District 71 teachers, I can compile a wide-ranging list of practical and useful resources that could inspire and motivate more teachers to take their classes outside and to help those who already do.

I have come to believe that learning outside increases student and teacher well-being. Now I need to find ways to support teachers by compiling resources and encouraging collaboration so that they can find success and incorporate more outdoor learning experiences for their students. I agree with Karl Hostetler's view about answering research questions because "the 'answers' to research questions do not end things but offer new circumstances for exploring the persistent question of what is good for people" (p. 21). I believe that outdoor learning is good for people and through my research will attempt to prove this.

Definitions of terms

1) Outdoor Learning, for me as a teacher, is experiential education that involves purposefully taking students into the outdoors for recreation or education; to learn problem-solving; to ensure group/individual safety; to increase their judgment-making; and, to facilitate their philosophical, ethical, and esthetic growth (Hayashi & Ewert, 2006). Outdoor learning is
often also called as experiential education, environmental education, forest or green schools and wilderness education.

2) Experimental Learning. Beard (2006) defined experiential learning as “the sense-making process of active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment” (as cited in Moffett, 2011, p. 279). Moffet reminded us, “experience may be fundamental to all forms of learning” (p. 279), but she stressed that experience is insufficient in itself: “the individual must engage with and reflect upon the experience if learning is to take place” (p. 279). Students need real-world problems and experiences; otherwise, they have difficulty applying their knowledge to real-world situations.

3) Physical Literacy. Physical literacy can be described as the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life (Whitehead, 2013, as cited in Stevens-Smith, 2016). “Physical literacy is the mastering of fundamental movement skills that allow children to move confidently and with control in a wide range of activity settings. It supports long-term participation and performance to the best of one’s ability” (Stevens-Smith, 2016, p. 3).

Anticipated Problems to solve

Based on my early reading of research on outdoor learning, I believe several obstacles prevent outdoor learning from happening in our schools. Dyment’s (2005) study identified a principal’s lack of support as a barrier. A participant in that study specifically noted the necessity of “a strong leader to encourage the teachers to go out and use it… if your principal doesn’t support you, you’ll never use it” (p. 40). Fortunately, I am pleased to have my principal’s support. My school is also fortunate to have an outdoor classroom space, which is
often another barrier in many schools. Too common are “poorly designed school grounds, with nowhere for students to sit and for teachers to teach” (Dyment, 2005, p. 40).

The Canadian climate can be another barrier during some seasons; but, with proper clothing, climate can be overcome. Another obstacle I have discussed with my principal and other teachers throughout the years is that teachers need ideas about how to integrate outdoor learning into our new British Columbia curriculum. Hence, an important part of my resource for teachers is that I will use my ideas and expertise to help others find curriculum-supported success taking their classes outside. Another barrier that often comes up is time to collaborate during the school day. Truthfully, collaboration must be organized and planned; and, through determination, I will try to find some ways to make collaboration about outdoor learning possible throughout my district. In an effort to make my project easily accessible to teachers across our district, I will be adding my resources to our District’s site on Learn 71 under Environmental and Outdoor Learning.

Possibilities

I feel fortunate to be have been born and raised in the Comox Valley and feel I have many connections and resources at my fingertips, which I would like to share and promote so that more teachers can feel comfortable going outside on their school grounds or on a multitude of fieldtrips. For my project, I would like to compile resources for teachers and create multiple outdoor learning appendixes which can be added to our school website under the appropriate EOL headings.

Sections in my project resource will include my passions: field trips, school gardening, how to use the outdoors in conjunction with big buddies, environmental education, science,
physical literacy/sports education, math, art and indigenous education. Within my appendixes, I integrate these subjects into my findings. When this research project has been completed, I look forward to learning from other experts in our district and will be doing a narrative inquiry through purposeful sampling. Together we will have user-friendly strategies that anyone can use to feel confident taking their class outdoors to learn and grow.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

A Personal Note about My Own Process

To stay in the theme of outdoor education, I won’t say that doing a literature review was a walk in the park. Throughout this process, I had to continuously remind myself that this project was achievable, that this project was my passion, and my desire was to do this for the children. As a teacher who cares about outdoor education, it was inspiring to see how much has been studied and researched regarding outdoor learning. At times, I found that some articles initially didn’t have what I was looking for; but, as I have worked through this process, I have realized that all those attempts helped me to shape all the pieces together and see a bigger picture about the importance of teaching and learning outside with our students. Reading a variety of articles has helped guide my research and has enabled me to see the gaps in outdoor learning research and what I can do to help further the field. I am empowered to know that one day my action research could become a part of this important topic.

First, I believe it is vital to know where we have come from and where we are going with outdoor education; hence, I will begin my paper by exploring the barriers teachers experience and what encouragements exist to overcome these barriers. Following that, I will analyze the reasons we need to get our children connected back to nature, which will be my second area of focus. In the last part of Chapter Two, I will focus on how we can learn by examples of quality outdoor education programming, the necessity of collaboration in finding success, environmental influences of outdoor learning and conclude with the health and social benefits. Because my research question is: “What practical activities can teachers do to
introduce their students to outdoor learning?” I need to demonstrate and show teachers why they should go outside with their students.

**Background and history of outdoor education**

“Outdoor education has been around for centuries, with the first recorded adventures dating back to the Egyptians in 2500 B.C.” (Neil, 2005, as cited in Field, Lauzon, & Meldrum, 2016, p. 32). Dewey stated, in 1938, “the goal of educators should be to improve the lives of the students they educate” (as cited in Taniguchi, Freeman & Richards, 2005 p. 132). Dewey felt that the way to make such improvement was to offer students an education that was relevant to them by focussing on experiences that mimicked real-life situations. This relevancy makes the effort worthwhile and stirs the desire to learn more.

I believe that outdoor learning in meaningful learning. Taniguchi, Freeman and Richards (2005) defined meaningful learning “as a realization of person’s weaknesses, strengths and potentials” and have a great model to show it (p. 141). Experiences that are relevant to individuals provide insight to their inner-self (Palmer, 2004). Within her article *Moving Math Outdoors*, Bezanson shares a plethora of ideas relating to math outside: “We might teach fractions and percentages using pizzas or dollars, but these concepts can be extended by having students come up with ways to estimate the fraction of the sky covered by clouds or determine the percentage of their schoolyard that consists of asphalt or of lawn” (Benzanson, 2001 p. 31).

By doing activities like those she described, we are helping students make a direct connection to the real world and helping them re-connect with nature. I have realized that, while doing this literature review, you can easily get carried in different directions and it is hard to stay focused. Many articles I read talk about adventure programming and weeklong camps;
however, my focus is on outdoor activities that are more manageable and local and activities that can take place in and around any school yard.

“All children need and want to take risks to explore their limits, gain new experiences, and develop their competence from a very young age. Risk taking is an essential aspect of play; for this reason, play provision should aim at balancing between the need to offer positive risks and the need to keep children relatively safe from harm and injury” (Staempfli, 2009 p. 276). I feel this quote ties this section and the following section on barriers together because play is essential to children; however, there needs to be a balance between fun and safety. Staempfli further affirms how unstructured play loses out against fast-paced, easily accessible and highly interactive electronic video games and media. Based on the examples above, one can easily see that steps need to be taken to reconnect our students to nature so they can find meaning in their learning and studying real life situations.

Barriers

Safety was a crucial barrier mentioned by multiple authors (Coe, 2016, Dyment, 2005, & Munroe and Mansell, 2013) within my research of the literature. Other barriers associated with outdoor play consisted of broken or a lack of equipment, weather, accidents and falls, air pollution, animals, insect bites, garbage, allergies, loss of control of the group due to insufficient staff, funding, and extra time for fieldtrip planning. In addition, pressure from parents to focus on academics was also noted (Munroe and MacLellan-Mansell, 2013). Teacher confidence was another barrier discussed in the Hampshire Trailblazer project, which consisted of four focus groups that all participated in the structured program of activities (Nundy, Dillon and Dowd, 2009). Hannah (1992) cites limited training as the biggest barrier to teacher
confidence. However, if teachers are committed, organized and persistent, quality outdoor education is possible.

Within her extensive study of 45 school grounds in Southern Ontario, Canada, Dyment (2005) used a mixed-method approach to study green school grounds as sites for outdoor learning. Often school grounds are used to teach physical education and science and others subjects like art and drama. Several interesting points were brought forward in this study including teacher confidence, because most teachers were not taught outdoors but spent most of their time as students in traditional classrooms. Dyment described how hard it is to break out of patterns such as the fear of losing control, a stress over the lack of teacher training, curricular constraints, and the lack of obvious curricular links because “mandated curriculum does not explicitly endorse or support the use of school grounds for curriculum delivery” (Dyment 2005, p. 38).

Dyment (2005) underscores why I am doing what I am for our teachers when she notes, “study participants stressed the need for curriculum packages to help teach and to help justify teaching in the outdoor classroom across the curriculum” (p. 39). She further noted that outdoor learning must be simple and streamlined. As described above, there are barriers involved in getting children outdoors, but even after reading the research literature on outdoor learning I feel these barriers can be overcome. And, once outside, everyone will feel better, learn important curriculum, and teachers will find passion and love for teaching outdoors.

**Getting children back in nature**

After reviewing over forty articles and journals, a few thesis papers, and several books relating to outdoor learning, I discovered several emerging themes. Theme one, and most
importantly, we need to act now to move children away from technology and video games and back into nature to connect to a place in their local environment. “Globally the norm for today’s children is a daily routine of viewing animated images depicting dehumanized characters and constructed environments, which constantly distorts the reality of everyday life or displaces them for these built worlds are mass commodities rarely worlds of possibility” (Wason-Ellam, 2010, p. 279).

By moving lessons outdoors, students’ interests, motivation, and learning increase, which makes this investment of time worthwhile (Bezanson, 2001 p. 32). Teachers need to make time to go outside and move away from excuses and towards encouragement. “Within a model of encouragement, outdoor learning becomes a pedagogical and problem-solving exercise for educators—a challenge to be embraced and not avoided” (Coe, 2016 p. 12). Coe (2016) offers three encouragements for outdoor education: (a) experience what you have right at your fingertips, (b) engage with our natural world and with each other, and (c) take children outdoors to learn curriculum. Coe (2016) stated,

> to move forward, as the new nature movement builds momentum and the dialogue surrounding child-nature connections continues to grow, the need for contemporary Canadian schools to provide children with the opportunity to learn from and in the natural world becomes ever more important. If children are to access the benefits of nature, they must be provided with meaningful experiences to interact with the natural world. (p. 12)

Similarly, if Canadian schools are to provide a holistic education, outdoor experiences should be embraced as an important part of everyday teaching and learning (Coe, 2016 p. 10).
Clearly, everyone’s idea of a holistic education is different and changes continuously. The focus on math, reading, and writing might be key to one teacher, while another teacher strongly emphasises social emotional learning and physical fitness. I feel that EOL learning is a key ingredient in a holistic education.

Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods* is an inspirational book that further documents where we have come from and where we need to go regarding getting children back in nature.

“Ecstatic memories require space, freedom, discovery and an extravagant display for all five senses. When these requirements are met, even in cities nature nurtures us” (Louv, 2008, p. 96). I know, as a teacher, that I feel nurtured after being outside with my class. Whether we plant daffodil bulbs, plant a tree together, play a game of camouflage, or go on a nature walk to find signs of spring, we all feel ready to go and refreshed once we return to the classroom. “Internet has replaced the woods in terms of inventive space, but no electronic environment stimulates all the senses. So far, Microsoft sells no match for nature’s code” (Louv, 2008, p.97).

As a teacher, I fully support technology within our schools; nonetheless, I don’t want technology taking over all my time with my students. I believe in a balanced approach. I believe that iPads have a place in education, especially to search plant names or to use the camera app to take a picture of environmental art students have just finished or for making an iMovie for Earth Day. However, I don’t want technology taking away from my students’ time with nature. Within his book, Louv (2008) constantly shows us why students need nature in their lives.

Nature presents the young with something so much greater than they are; it offers an environment where they can easily contemplate infinity and eternity. Immersion in the natural environment cuts to the chase by exposing the young directly and immediately to the very
elements from which humans evolved: earth, water, air, and other living kin, large and small (Louv, 2008, p. 98).

If children do not develop an attachment with the land, they will not feel committed to the environment or understand the multiple benefits they can glean from being in nature. The following quote from Louv’s book (2008) illustrates the connection between attachment for places and the commitment to environment that results: “Passion is personal. Passion is lifted from the earth itself by the muddy hands of the young; it travels along grass-stained sleeves to the heart. If we are going to save environmentalism and the environment, we must also save an endangered indicator species: the child in nature” (Louv, 2008, p. 159).

“We don’t want to live in a world where there are no recreational fishermen, where we’ve lost touch with the seasons, the tides, the things that connects us – to ten thousand generations of human beings that were here before there were laptops, and ultimately connect us to God” (Louv, 2008, p. 200). While on the ocean, I have made connections and ties with my family that remain a part of me and these experiences continue to shape who I am and who I want to be. I love the quote presented by Conrad at a conference for experiential education in 1988.

We'd be better off with less time spent with books and more time spent with nature, less time in our boxes and more time in the wilderness, with things that are real, not images, not sound bytes; to relate to and commune with flowers and streams and animals, as equals, as part of the same dimensions of being... What we need is to be free to dream and imagine and create - to create our own knowledge and discover our own wisdom and forge our own truth, not because
nothing can be learned from books or from television, but because too much can be learned from them: the reductive truths of others that serve to define us and control us and ultimately diminish us. (Conrad, 1988. as cited in Hannah, 1992)

This quote exemplifies exactly why I believe in the powers of nature. When in nature, I often see joy on my students’ faces that is not easily replicated when inside working. Also, I often find all the knowledge available to students is sometimes overwhelming. However, rarely have I seen a child overwhelmed in nature: they seem at home.

I believe learning outdoors makes learning more engaging, memorable, and purposeful. Many educators are now beginning to challenge and rethink long-held assumptions about the value of factory-style and predominantly indoor curriculum, and how this type of schooling can “leave students disconnected from the living world” (Gray, 2015, p. 330). In many places, people experience the world differently. In schools, often that experience is mediated, and the job of students is to internalize, and master knowledge created by others. Learning becomes something gained through “reading texts, listening to lectures, or viewing videos rather than through experiencing full-bodied encounters with the world” (Smith, 2002, p. 586).

Studies suggest that learning is more effective when experienced in nature and connected to the local community and environment, rather than a second-hand account of someone else imparting their knowledge on the student. I really connect to this idea and realize how often it has come up in my readings that we, as humans, connect so vividly to outdoor experiences in our youth and these experiences stay with us and guide us into adulthood. Therefore, by engaging in this research study, I am following my passion to connect my students with nature.
Beard (2006) defined experiential learning as “the sense-making process of active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment” (as cited in Moffett, 2011, p. 279). Moffet reminded us, “experience may be fundamental to all forms of learning” (p. 279), but she stressed that experience is insufficient in itself: “the individual must engage with and reflect upon the experience if learning is to take place” (p. 279). This point demonstrates the importance of self-reflection after going outside. Students need real-world problems and experiences and time to reflect; otherwise, they have difficulty applying their knowledge to real-world situations.

We all know that life is busy, parents work long hours, children are over-scheduled, and increases in anxiety and stress are more prevalent in today’s classrooms. Research suggests that nature lowers stress levels and improves concentration; for example, Bird (2004) reviewed the widely-reported health benefits of outdoor learning and positive relationships between physical activity and cognitive functioning that include concentration, memory, and language (as cited in Forsey, 2004, p. 9). Others, including Katherine Forsey, lead outdoor learning courses (whole school) that help teachers use outside spaces effectively. I will work to learn from her example. By working together and reconnecting our children to nature they will be more focused, more connected and more ready to learn.

Learning by Example

We need to study and learn from successful teachers and from quality programs on outdoor education and incorporate these methods into our daily practices. Instead of re-inventing the wheel, we can all benefit from quality programming that has proven successful.
As a teacher, I believe we need to support and encourage each other to share ideas and accomplishments.

Mwebi, Foran, and Stanec (2009) summarized a program called Active Outdoor Living (AOL) and described their program and framework, which took place in Nova Scotia during the winter months. They focused on students who did not do traditional school sports: “AOL was designed to get youth outside and active at either moderate or vigorous intensity levels using the greatest resource available---the outdoors” (p. 8) They published their work so that others could develop their own programs and find success having children learn outside in nature. Their study was done with middle school students and involved a mentoring model with grade 10 and 11 students and pre-service teachers. The findings of this study demonstrated the endless possibilities and potential benefits of partnering universities with high schools and junior high schools.

Linda Wason-Ellam’s article *Children’s literature as a springboard to place based embodied learning* cleverly discusses the “abundance of high-quality Canadian children’s picture storybooks featuring the natural environment as a purposeful setting and its potential as a springboard to exploring childhood identity and meanings about environment” (2010, p. 80). Her autoethnographic study sites several children’s books used to portray Canadian landscapes. She notes how incredibly lucky Canadians are to live in this amazing country and consequently should be utilizing this space and celebrating its astonishing beauty.

Moffett’s (2011) article *Outdoor Mathematics Trails* states, “Outdoor learning is real learning and can therefore help to bring school subjects to life” (p. 278). Her study describes math trials where students apply the math they learn in class to real-life situations outside.
These math trials allow students to appreciate the importance of math as an everyday life skill and brings it to life.

An article that I refer to in my Chapter Four will be *Using Nature as a Resource: Effectively Planning an Outdoor Fieldtrip*, because it outlines the steps involved in planning a fieldtrip. It summarizes why we need to be well-planned and prepared, how to successfully access prior knowledge, and the steps needed during and after a fieldtrip. “It is amazing to see the connections that students are able to make when they are actively engaged in an activity” (Pasquier & Narguizian, 2006, p. 32). I really loved how this article helped teachers see how students could be scientists when they were given the skills to do real fieldwork and by tapping into their natural curiosity. As teachers, we are responsible for providing students with fieldtrips that are engaging, meaningful, and fit current mandated programs of study.

One Australian study discussed an outreach program where teachers worked with children who have disengaged with the traditional schooling system. The program was place-based where students worked on a wetlands project. Students were contributing positively to their community, felt immediate success, and were engaged in learning (Wilson and Stemp, 2010).

The above examples are only a few of many studies I have read about outdoor learning; the ideas in this section seem endless. I have only listed a small sample of a multitude of options available. It is important to remember that teachers must share and collaborate with each other, so we can all find success by going outside. We must remember that it is a great idea to learn from each other and to share our struggles and our successes. It is how we will all grow as educators.
Collaboration

*Envisioning A Collaborative Response Model* by Kurtis Hewson, Lorna Hewson, and Jim Parsons (2015) spoke to me about the importance of finding time to collaborate in meaningful ways throughout the year. We need to think of all students as “our students” and work together to make good things happen within our schools. I believe the more connected we are to each other; the better things will be. If teachers are given time to collaborate, they are more likely to get their students outside and connecting to nature.

I know it is easy to put off outdoor learning and stay inside: there is much work to do; however, I know that when you have someone else counting on you, you push each other to go outside. Last year my grade four class and this year my grade 5 class have been outdoor learning buddies with a kindergarten class, and we haven’t missed one week of learning outside together.

I love the idea of collaborating with other teachers. We share ideas and have created a community of learners where younger children are learning new language skills from their older peers, and my students are developing leadership skills. In her article *Mixed-age grouping in early childhood-creating the outdoor learning environment*, Elizabeth Rouse (2015) concluded that children in mixed-aged groupings are seen as learners, viewed as having funds of knowledge. In fact, these children become knowledgeable experts who can both support the learning of others and be agents of their own learning (p. 750).

Rouse (2015) added that mixed-aged groupings allow students to learn about empathy, engage in risk-taking, and develop resilience. I agree with her and am constantly in awe as I see my students mentoring and teaching their kindergarten peers. For the remainder of the year we
will be extending our time outdoors and walking to a nearby park or forest together. Just today as I am writing this chapter, in the muddy swamp, some students are insistent that they saw an alligator.

Nagel’s article *Lend them an ear: the significance of listening to children’s experiences of environmental education* suggested a gap and a need for future research utilizing student voice as a mechanism for reflecting on and informing Environmental Education. He also stated how important the teacher was in fostering students’ interest in environmental education (Nagel, 2004). Not only can much be gained from listening to our students; but, because our students look up to us, we need to be strong mentors in environmental stewardship.

Glenda Hanna also supports the notion of collaboration and team teaching. “What is typically required is collaborative, synergistic effort… Teachers need to take advantage of team teaching… to increase confidence and experience” (Hannah, 1992, p. 2). Trust came up as an important attribute in outdoor learning, and I feel this trust connects to collaboration. Shooter, Paisley and Sibthorp’s (2010) study discusses the importance of trust development in outdoor leadership. These studies focused more on how to develop trust in leaders at outdoor education camps, and although these are camps and not schools, if all outdoor educators work together, share ideas, and develop trust in each other, all our children and teachers will benefit from this time outside.

**Environmental Connections**

“Outdoor educators need to encourage outdoor experiences through which young people can learn experientially… not adrenaline filled experiences… but where participants are living and being in the outdoors and have the freedom to explore” (Prince, 2017, p. 165). Prince
concludes, “outdoor educators are in key positions to be role models and mentors for others and can frame a positive behavioural change in the people they work with” (2017, p. 168). These outdoor experiences can be inspirational for learning; and, when these lived experiences are shared, they help students adopt sustainable practices and pro-environmental behaviour.

Some examples of pro-environmental behaviours are using eco-friendly cleaning products, reducing our footprint by carpooling or biking, reducing energy consumption by putting on slippers, composting and recycling, using reusable water bottles, and reducing the amount of plastic we buy. Within her presentation, Glenda (1992) mentioned planning walking fieldtrips if under 1 km and biking 1-5 km and carpooling if over 5 km. Her speech “Jumping Deadfall: Overcoming barriers to implementing outdoor and environmental education” shows how teachers can support green transportation and be positive role models when possible.

Blenkinsop, Telford, and Morse discuss five pedagogical skills outdoor and experiential educators might offer more mainstream educators in this time of change through their Maple Ridge Environmental School Project. This article provoked me to question our current educational system and asked why we rely so heavily on our four walls, bells, and desk arrangements to determine the structure of our day. “The normalized culture of schools uses walls to create boundaries, bells to trigger response behaviours, and desk arrangements to indicate relationships of power (p. 349). The teachers in the study were “able to create a shape and rhythm for learning that works with the needs of their students, maximises the affordances of the place where the class is being conducted and were flexible enough to respond to unknown variables such as weather and serendipitous learning moments” (p. 350).
The outdoor teachers mentioned in this Maple Ridge Environmental School Project also possessed lateral thinking, which is unconstrained curiosity and a flexibility of mind. They were able to make connections that were not always apparent and allowed students to take their learning beyond textbooks. They did risky learning, focused on safety, and were able to do eco-reflection and evaluation. “Eco-reflection involves being able to actually hear from the non-human and includes questions such as have we been successful in integrating the natural world” (Blenkinsop, Telford & Morse, 2016, p. 355). White (2004) agrees that, when children spend time outdoors, they are likely to develop an environmental ethic or a sense of stewardship for the earth. Like the teachers in this study, children too can become more environmentally aware if they are connected to the land and participate in EOL learning.

Outdoor educators are in key positions to be role models and mentors for others and can frame positive behavioural change in the people they work with. Outdoor experiences can be inspirational for learning and, as lived and shared experiences, they precipitate the adoption of sustainable practice and pro-environmental behaviour (Prince, 2017, p. 168). Outdoor experiences may also promote appreciation and care for the environment. “Living and being in the outdoors is important in raising awareness of environmental sustainability” (Prince, 2017, p. 166). I believe teachers need to be positive examples when teaching about sustainability and the environment.

**Improved health and social benefits**

“During the crucial period of greatest physical growth between the ages of 3 and 12, children’s muscles, heart, lungs, brains and other organs are strengthened greatly through energetic activities associated with outdoor play (Clements, 2004, as cited in Munroe &
MacLellan-Mansell, 2013, p. 26) Students and teachers will both benefit from time outdoors; as they are, everyone’s social and emotional well-being will be improved. “Participation in outdoor activities improves emotional well-being, because natural environments often moderate the impacts of stress resulting in decreased anxiety and depression” (Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness, 2006 as cited in Field, 2016 p. 31).

Eick, Tatarchuk, and Anderson (2013) described a class cabbage contest as well as many other connections and teaching ideas relating to the curriculum. I see my own possibilities with a book that I read to my class called *Katie’s Cabbage*, which is a story about a girl who grew a 40-pound cabbage and donated it to a soup kitchen to help feed the poor. By connecting with nature, we also develop a desire to make a difference and help less-fortunate people. Growing our own food is one technique that enables us to help others.

In her article *The Desire to Learn as a Kind of Love: Gardening, Cooking and Passion in Outdoor Education*, Karen Wistoft (2013) suggested that dedicated teaching in outdoor learning environments promotes a desire to learn in pupils and “that school gardens create a feeling of ownership, improved social ownership, improved social interaction within the class group, an increased level of physical activity and an increased level of parent involvement” (p. 126). I too have found that, when doing activities relating to gardening and cooking, parents want to help and volunteer as it helps to put the school as the center of the community.

Waite and Rea (2007) endorsed that “outdoor learning experiences provide opportunities for exercise and this increases children’s physical fitness, coordination and general well being” (as cited in Moffett, 2011, p. 279). I know first-hand that students are getting exercise and feel better once they have had some fresh air and activity. It is
recommended by the world health organization (WHO) that children get 60 minutes of physical activity a day. Learning outdoors can contribute to this requirement significantly. This physical activity leads to healthier, more active students.

“Children may not learn the letters of the alphabet while they are outside, but they do develop social and physical skills, as well as vocabulary and language skills that are important for school success. They may also develop a deeper understanding of their culture, which is vital for educational success amongst Aboriginal youth” (Nguyen, 2011, p. 239) Munroe and MacLellan-Mansell used outdoor education to share their collaborative school improvement initiatives to support Nova Scotia’s aboriginal students.

I read a fascinating paper recently that looked at teaching empathy and critical thinking to primary students, so they could solve environmental problems. It discussed these environmental skills as key attributes to future success in improving the disposition towards sustainable behaviours in young citizens (Ampuero, Miranda, Delgado, Goyen & Weaver, 2015). As a society we need to become more aware of our footprint on earth and find ways to minimize our carbon footprint.

The article Complementing classroom learning through outdoor adventure education: Out of school-time experiences that make a difference outlines the importance of outdoor learning on social connectedness (Richmond, Sibthorp, Gookin, Annarella, & Ferri, 2017). Within the study, which used a grounded theory approach to see how outdoor adventure education experiences affect students, information was gathered from semi-structured interviews with participants. One grade 8 respondent noted, “I realized how much closer you can get with someone when you are not worrying about all the social media stuff…being apart
from that and being present. Being present really helped me” (Richmond, Sibthorp, Gookin, Annarella, & Ferri, 2017, p. 7).

This quote summarizes how important it is to help our students connect with nature and, from time to time, be distanced from technology. Technology and social media can cause stress and addictions, which may have lasting consequences on youth. Recently, while on an overnight trip with my class, a few students thanked me for not allowing cell phones. One said, “I am so much happier without it and I wish we could stay here for two weeks!”

An intriguing systematic review analyzed thirteen different outdoor education-based studies that were curriculum-based to categorize and evaluate reported outcomes for students. Their search of online databases to find peer-reviewed journal articles concluded that this number of 13 is relatively low. “However, tendencies were found which indicate that regular compulsory school and curriculum based outdoor education programmes can advance students in the physical, psychological, learning and social dimensions” (Becker, Lauterbach, Spengler, Dettweiler, & Mess, 2017, p. 17). Based on the studies mentioned above, I have strengthened my belief that teaching and allowing students to learn outside provides them with opportunities and skill sets that will help them become caring and successful citizens.

**Concluding remarks**

As stated in *The Global 4th Way*, “It is more productive to strive for excellence than it is to pursue perfection” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012, p. 202). I will continue to do what I believe is right for my students; we can always continue to improve, but I love taking my students outside to learn and I feel that what I am doing is moving in the right direction and is making a
difference in my students’ lives. Just as my teachers inspired me, I hope the cycle continues. I also hope that my teachings continue to inspire others to make a difference.

“Education should not be reduced to point and click activities…it should be about developing personal meaning and engaging with the purposes of life” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012 p. 189). By going outside with my class, I feel I am making meaningful memories together with my students and we are taking steps to make our world and planet a better place. We need to remember to share our ideas and successes, to collaborate, to encourage each other, and to trust that what we are doing is having an impact on our students.

In Chapter Three, I will share my methods to engage my research into ideas for helping teachers take their classes outside to learn. In Chapter Four, as part of my collection of ideas, I will analyse the data from an already-completed district survey on Environmental and Outdoor Learning that compiled an amazing outdoor resource with fieldtrips, gardening ideas, active living and websites etc. so we can all get outside and enjoy this fascinating world. “Love is not just a feeling, a passion within a particular person, and it is not just expressed in words; rather, love is expressed as people act in ways that get the other to experience the passion as well” (Wistoft, 2013, p. 136-137). “The beauty of experiential education, like the beauty of the forest, lies in its diversity” (Hannah, 1992, p. 81).
Chapter Three: Methodology

Overview of Study

After completing my literary review, I could easily see further needs to re-engage children with nature and to better understand how teachers might be supported in connecting their classes with nature. The literature review became one source of “data” or insight about why, how, and what outdoor learning activities might be used by teachers in our district. A second source of ideas and insight was my own practice: I have for many years been engaging my own classes in a wide variety of outdoor learning activities. Finally, a third source of insight and ideas was a large extant district survey that was used prior to my starting my masters work. Fortunately, I was allowed access to this survey as part of my studies by our Superintendent Dr. Dean Lindquist. As a note about this survey, the data from this survey is freely accessible to anyone who asks permission of SD#71.

The Use of the District Survey About Outdoor Learning

As part of my work in Chapter Four, I have analyzed this district survey data that asked 210 teacher/participants from our School District 71 to answer 22 questions relating to environmental outdoor education. My hope was that data from this representative sample of our district’s teachers offered more views and ideas about local on outdoor learning. This survey, as readers will see in Chapter Four, was helpful. It sampled all grades from Kindergarten to grade 12, and responses from each grade were equally represented with at least 36 and up to 50 respondents. My goal was to study these 22 questions to see what conclusions I could draw that would further support teachers in pursuing outdoor and environmental learning. As noted, that analysis can be found in Chapter Four.
I was planning to do either a survey or questionnaire but realized that the questions I was hoping to answer were already answered within the survey done in the fall of 2017. I feel fortunate to have access to this data which “is broad in scope and content, reaching large groups and gathering large quantities of statistical data with relative speed and ease (Parsons, Hewson, Adrian & Day, 2013 p. 57). The survey showed that 91 respondents strongly agree and 50 agree that outdoor education should be taught in our K-12 schools. Other questions within the survey sought information about district teacher’s ideas about what was currently being done around the district, how teachers have been supported or motivated to work in this area, whether teachers felt adequately funded, and if teachers coordinated/collaborated with other teachers when planning EOL.

As a teacher, I appreciate that there is a district plan for Environmental Outdoor Learning, and I hope it can be successfully implemented using a collaborative response model. I have used the data collected from the 210 surveys completed in our district to better identify and to help overcome barriers so that more teachers will take their classes outside for learning.

Building the Product of My Research Project

The goal of my research project is to use the information I have gathered from the three sources outlined above to compile practical activities that would help all teachers to take their students outside to learn. To that end, I have re-analyzed the findings from the survey and pulled key lessons and activities from my literary review by organizing them into easy to access lists within an elementary school curriculum. I have coded the information I have gathered into themes and summarized these themes so that they are easily accessible to teachers. For
example, my themes include fieldtrips, gardening, outdoor nature buddies, websites, useful resources, and speakers.

As I have shared in Chapter Two, for this project I also re-read and pulled ideas from Louv’s book *The Last Child in the Woods*, and I also re-read my personal “library” of literary articles as a way to extract any practical ideas these articles contained. I also collected outdoor teaching ideas by correspondingly using various web resources including Sierra Club, David Suzuki Foundation, and The Children and Nature Network. Finally, I will continue to discuss my ideas informally with many other individuals and organizations to find both their ideas and inspiration. From all these quests, I have pulled information from multiple sources and shaped these into the Resource that is attached to the Appendix of this work. I believe this research triangulation has made my research project stronger.

As a result of my research, I have created interpretations and conclusions and shaped these into teachable ideas for myself and for other teachers. The final product has become a creative synthesis of my own work and the work of others in an area that I care about. By doing document analysis, I did not study humans directly; however, I conserved and recycled the best ideas they had written to help make my resource guide more fulfilling (Parsons, Hewson, Adrian & Day, 2013 p. 60-61). This research methodology fit perfectly my goals as a teacher and as a human who is responsible for our planet.

To make my resource product more useful for teachers, I created possible themes using the British Columbia’s Program of Studies. The resulting curriculum topics were based on math, science, social studies, and physical education. Activities also related to the core competencies, gardening, and art.
As a note about the time I spent on the creation of this resource, to complete my work, I reduced my teaching assignment by one day a week so that I would have a consistent time each week to work on my research project. I worked closely with the new BC curriculum and core competencies to find explicit ways to integrate outdoor learning. “We assume that documents exist for some purpose and knowing these purposes can help us understand and interpret the research situation in a deeper way” (Parsons, Hewson, Adrian & Day, 2013 p. 61). I knew that this process would be time consuming, and so I tried to do it slowly but consistently.

**Design Process**

My work had four main objectives. First, my design project worked to create a resource that would help inspire teachers in the Comox Valley take their classes outside. Second, my design project connected these outdoor student-learning opportunities to the curriculum policy and practice of British Columbia. Third, I worked to shape my research into a product that provided local organizations additional resources that could help both teachers and parents better understand why it was important to reconnect students to nature.

Finally, as I worked on my research project, I kept in mind how other teachers’ and parents’ experiences might mirror my own. That is, I believed the work I completed might also help teachers in two ways: first, there would be positive effects of going outside on teacher’s well-being; and, second, if I compiled all these teaching ideas into one resource, that resource would help alleviate the stress teachers often faced when they felt overwhelmed. I trusted my work would give teachers practical ideas that helped them find success in learning outdoors with their students.
Resource Creation

Following the data analysis and compilation of resources, I will start to upload my resources onto Learn 71 under EOL on our district website in 2019 so that everyone can access my resource. I will seek support for web design from our district’s current 0.5 EOL teacher Serina Allison. She started the position in September 2018, as a result of the district survey administered in 2017. I hope that her website could be the new link on our district website to Environmental Outdoor Learning opportunities. Currently, the link on Outdoor Leadership Education takes you to the website for the Tribune Bay Outdoor Ed Center on Hornby Island. I felt this website was lacking because there are many more opportunities available that could be more useful and practical for all teachers and learners not just an elite few.

Adding my work to her website seemed to be the most appropriate platform for my resource because it is easy to keep up-to-date, and it is accessible to teachers anytime and anywhere that suit them. My goal was that it would become more user-friendly, simpler, and more concise. I also hoped the information would become easily accessible and visited consistently by School District #71 educators. This website’s possibility matched my desire to help teachers better engage the resources available relating to outdoor environmental education.

Research Methodology

As noted earlier, my research methodology was a small meta-review that combined my own ideas with a review of other educators’ work. My research was practical and was informed and based on my hands-on knowledge. My epistemology was based on a constructionism theory and the justification for my research project was based on both qualitative and
interpretivist theoretical perspectives that consisted of uplifting knowledge that concentrated on meaning and had room for human interest and feelings.

Not everything I had envisioned has been completed yet. When I began to plan the organization of my work, I envisioned that the product of my work would include a considerable number of personal anecdotes and stories. I pictured some discussions with parents about their perceptions on field trips. I knew that my students loved the stories I shared and that I enjoyed seeing their faces light up when I discussed my own experiences through stories.

As noted, some of these aspects have not yet been included because they would have included seeking data from human subjects, which I did not engage because of the ethics aspects of the work. Those will likely come at a later date, as the project resource expands. I believe it should become a living and a corporate resource, where other teachers also add their own ideas and interests.

My goal was to compile a list of fieldtrips that were most beneficial for the students and that were easily accessible to all teachers and schools within School District 71. The list was compiled from my knowledge of what other teachers from the district were doing and what I had done and from my own personal experiences. As a teacher, before this research project began, I currently did between 15 and 20 outings a year. Further engagements would include gathering contact numbers or email contacts for the various possibilities that existed in our community. I would also like to work more with our local First Nations’ teachers to compile indigenous resources that could be accessible through our local Komox Peoples.
From Plan to Action

My research steps I engaged to help me fulfill my goal for my master’s thesis project included:

1) a synthesis of extant data from the completed survey;

2) building resources based upon personal resources and experiences;

3) build a compendium of ideas from other sources and synthesizing these into practical ideas;

4) recalling and organizing the conversations I had with teachers and leaders in the field of outdoor learning;

5) working to create the infrastructure for a discussion group at a future professional development day to find more ideas to add to my on-going research project after my current research project is completed;

6) presenting my ideas district-wide and at other venues upon completion of this research project. I am excited by the possibilities this project could build. Outdoor learning is my passion and this desire helped drive me to complete my project.

In Chapter Four, I will analyze the district survey on Environmental Outdoor Learning from 2018.
Chapter Four: Organization of Findings

In Chapter One, I outlined why I am doing my research project on EOL. I am passionate about reconnecting our teachers and our students to the outdoors to deliver curriculum and by going on fieldtrips. In Chapter Two, I reviewed literature to support outdoor learning and became more convinced that the time is now to re-engage with nature. In Chapter Three, I outlined the steps I had took to complete my research project. In this Chapter Four, I have synthesized what I learned from the district survey on EOL to attempt to influence teachers to integrate EOL learning into the curriculum. The other sources of ideas and insights have been either listed in Chapter Two or will be outlined in the resource (in the case of my own ideas I have used over the years).

The product of my research project can be found in the Appendices which include:

Appendix 1: List of activities that support Environmental and Outdoor Learning;

Appendix 2: Field trips ideas that I have done with my K-5 class Curricular fieldtrips followed by active fieldtrips for physical literacy;

Appendix 3: Outdoor Learning Big and little buddies;

Appendix 4: Gardening ideas: useful gardening websites, books, composting ideas and more gardening opportunities;

Appendix 5: Websites and resources for teachers teaching Environmental Outdoor Learning: Organizations available to help support schools in going outside and connecting to nature; and,
Appendix 6: Curriculum connections and opportunities.

In the first part of Chapter Four, I will share my analysis of the district’s survey results from the Fall of 2017 and pull out from this survey what I found helpful for our teachers in School District 71. To review, this survey was sent to all teachers in our district asking for their responses in the Fall of 2017. To provide readers with a sense of what this survey asked, here is a list of the 22 questions from the survey.

1) What grade do you teach?

2) What zone do you currently teach in? (check more than one if an itinerant)

3) Do you believe EOL should be taught in each grade K-12?

4) How have you been supported and/or motivated to work in this area?

5) Did you receive funds?

6) Do you feel adequately funded for EOL?

7) What venues for EOL do you provide for your students?

8) Please list the specific EOL opportunities you provide at present.

9) How often does your class engage in the opportunities you listed?

10) When you plan EOL opportunities/lessons do you coordinate/collaborate with other teachers in your school?

11) Do you feel that Environmental and Outdoor Learning is suitable for subject integration and should be integrated?

12) With what parts of the curriculum does your own EOL program align?
13) Which themes do you feel are most important in setting up the SD71 EOL Program district wide?

14) Which specific district-wide EOL opportunities do you feel students MUST experience at some point before graduation?

15) Given the above, do you think there should be targeted grade levels for every student to have a specific District EOL field study/opportunity(s)?

16) If yes, which grades should be targeted?

17) List the opportunities you consider as most relevant / high priority for targeting?

18) What support does SD71 need to enhance or put in place to ensure that every student has optimal EOL learning opportunities?

19) Which of the following Community Networks would support EOL learning in your classroom?

20) How should EOL leadership be structured in your school?

21) How should EOL leadership be structured at the district level?

22) Every perspective is important and real and all closing comments will provide further context to the responses you have made in the survey.

A total of 210 teachers responded to the survey making it statistically significant. Approximately 40 people from each grade level kindergarten to 12 responded. The highest number of teachers responding was from grade 6 (50 teachers), and the lowest number of teachers responding was from grade 8 (36 teachers). Of these teachers, 91 strongly agreed that EOL (Environmental and outdoor learning) should be taught in grade K-12, 50 agreed, and nine teachers were neutral; only two teachers disagreed.
When asked what motivated teachers to work in the area of EOL, personal passion (91 teachers), personal education (75 teachers), collegial support (68 teachers), and school administration (41 teachers) were named as motivators for teachers to work in this area. Most funds for extending EOL teaching were reported to come from parents, school budget, and fundraising.

Of the teachers responding to the survey, 131 teachers did not feel adequately funded for EOL. Only 18 replied “Yes” to the question of whether they were adequately funded. Most EOL learning was reported to happen on school grounds (103 teachers), on day fieldtrips (98 teachers), and in the classroom (85 teachers). Only 25 teachers reported engaging students on multi-day trips.

In my appendices, I will list specific EOL opportunities currently happening in SD#71 that were noted by participants on the open-ended question from the survey. These EOL opportunities were listed in the order presented in the survey. Although, many of these EOL opportunities were listed multiple times, they are only listed once on the list once in Appendix 1.

Participants were asked how often their class engages in the opportunities listed. Of the participants who answered, 12 participants reported daily, 44 reported they engaged these opportunities weekly: 40 reported once a month, and 15 reported they engaged these opportunities 1-2 times per year. Participants were also asked, if they planned EOL opportunities, did they coordinate/collaborate with other teachers in their schools? Of the participants who answered, 73 participants reported sometimes, 28 reported that they frequently collaborated with teachers at their schools, and 13 reported that they never collaborated.
Participants were offered an opportunity to give comments about their EOL experiences. And, 32 participants took time to add more commentary. Below is a summary of those comments. Teachers were excited that the district was taking an initiative in outdoor education and were hopeful that it was something offered to all children and less of a speciality program that you had to sign up for. Teachers wanted to see the support going to the teachers so that more could feel comfortable going outside with their classes and so more students could be reached.

Participants noted that EOL should become part of the school culture and easily accessible to all children. Participants noted the District needed to use the garden infrastructure that was sitting there, waiting to be used to its full potential. Participants also noted the need to have a person who was responsible for the garden at each school or believed it would continue to be underused. Participants noted that more EOL needed to take place at every grade level and that teachers needed better funding, more training to do more outdoor learning, and more support to build well-established programs in this area.

Participants reported that they believed all students deserved EOL education and the ability for families to pay for it should not factor into how students could access their education. They believed the District needed more Outdoor Ed resources, activities and lessons and needed to build a culture of environmental awareness that included encouragement to all “do our parts” to recycle, compost, etc. Participants also reported the belief that teachers needed time to collaborate in meaningful ways.

Participants also believed that outdoor learning builds healthy group dynamics and personal confidence. They noted that transportation could be tricky, because it was hard to rely on
parent drivers, bussing was too expensive, and the paperwork was time-consuming and unrealistic.

Of those who participated in the survey, 134 respondents believed that EOL was a suitable subject for integration. Participants reported that EOL aligned well with science (80 participants reported), physical and health (77 participants), social studies (63 participants), English (57 participants), mathematics (54 participants), and the arts and applied skills and design (both scored the same at 43 participants). Participants also mentioned that EOL integrated well with indigenous education, core competencies, personal wellness, team building, and special education. The themes that respondents felt were the most important in setting up EOL in SD#71 were environmental stewardship (121 participants), outdoor learning (113 participants) and indigenous practices (102 participants), followed by outdoor adventure (96 participants) and bio-diversification (56 participants).

One survey question asked which specific district-wide EOL opportunities students should experience at some point before graduation. Answers included environmental studies (108 participants), wildlife conservation (97 participants), First Aid training (88 participants), gardening that was school-based (87 participants), safety protocols for water, forest, snow, and road (87 participants), farm visits for agricultural and animals (85 participants), flora and fauna identification (74 participants), outdoor survival and travel (70 participants), Tribune Bay Outdoor Center (68 participants), swimming (64 participants), water sports (49 participants), cross country skiing and snowshoeing (48 participants), and cycling (44 participants).

Of those who participated in the survey, 93 respondents reported that they believed the listed activities above should have targeted grade levels where these opportunities happen and
31 reported “No” to that question. One survey question asked which grade levels should be targeted, and 48 participants reported grades 4, 7, and 10, and 35 participants reported grades 6, 8, and 10. One person commented that decisions about when EOL learning should be school-based decisions and strategically decided based on teacher interest or passion. Participants reported their belief that students would respond best to someone who had a passion in the area. Personally, I recommend starting young and having students engage in yearly opportunities. If organized well, each year could build on the previous year’s EOL experiences.

One question asked participants to suggest what support they believed SD71 teachers would need to enhance or put into place to ensure that every student has optimal EOL learning opportunities. They were asked to select all options that apply to them from a given list. Participants answered trip and travel funding (104 participants reported), in-service/Pro-D (103 participants), supplies funding (97 participants), creation of EOL curriculum framework with learning resource packages (91 participants), equipment funding (88 participants), outdoor certificate programs for teachers and EA’s (76 participants), curriculum lead teacher support (63 participants), and risk management as lead support, with expedited protocols for field study (49 participants). One teacher specifically suggested supervision support to ensure a safe adult to student ratio, and one added mentorship options and the final point was more funding for presenters to classes.

A list of community networks that would support EOL learning in classrooms was provided by participants of the survey. This practical list for teachers referred to where they might look for support from their community. The following resources were named: Project Watershed, Canadian Wildlife federation, Mountainare Avian Rescue Society, Ocean Wise (Vancouver Aquarium), Cumberland Wilderness Society, Courtenay Fish and Game, Comox

One question asked participants how EOL leadership should be structured in your schools. The list generated is included here, from largest to smallest: teacher collaboration/committee (97 respondents), individual teacher discretion (59 respondents), targeted teacher mentor (45 respondents), and PVP portfolio of support and liaison (28 respondents). Other responses included EOL curriculum-support teachers, working to create a culture of importance, and a designated district OE teacher who could float between schools and provide opportunities to students. Because this EOL initiative is new, participants thought it was unfair to ask teachers to add this to their plates. One participant felt that someone who was dedicated to delivery or mentoring was essential. Another participant noted the need to be consistency regarding delivery throughout the district.

Next, participants were asked how EOL leadership should be structured at the district level. The top answer was the creation of district specialists (64 respondents), ongoing EOL leadership committee (63 respondents), creation of a lead teacher position (47 respondents), director of instruction oversight (32 respondents), creation of a district PVP position (15 respondents), and an assistant superintendent oversight (5 respondents). Other ideas brought forward by participants were the creation of activities that have relevance for all grade levels not just focused on the older students, the creation of resource lists of local specialists complete with funding to bring them in and go on fieldtrips, the need to avoid heavy costs associated with
administrative roles, hiring a teacher or two to actually work with students, develop full-time positions within the District, and the final idea presented was to support Pro-D opportunities to share knowledge.

**Summary of Closing Final Comments from the Survey**

In the space offered to participants who filled out the District survey, a review of the final comments suggests that teaching EOL is most effective when collaboration occurs between teachers because the experience is richer for both students and teachers. Some disagreed with the direction of the survey because it seemed biased towards the proposed EOL Program and stated that learning must come first. Others agreed that certain grade levels should be targeted.

However, participants noted that all core competencies could be covered through EOL and believed that “we” are all fundamentally a part of the larger natural environment. Learning more about it, having opportunities to feel small in the midst of it, and to experience the healing power of that environment was what one participant believed was an essential part of a full education. Another noted that we needed to make sure that teachers had the proper support and resources, so they do not feel overloaded.

Other participants noted that “we” needed to create more opportunities at an earlier stage, so that students could be immersed in these areas before moving onto high school. If students were not given opportunities while they were more accepting, participants believed they would be less likely to try outdoor activities when they were older. If they did not know what an activity entails, students would be less likely to sign up for that course in high school. If they were expected to start thinking about their career choice in high school, we would not be
helping them by exposing them to our rich environmental community and the opportunities it holds. For example, participants noted that some people did not go skiing because of money, fear, and lack of opportunity. Participants also noted it was the same for our riding and hiking trails. Participants reported the need for supports to be put in place for teachers who did not have EOL as their passion area. As participants noted, resources, funding, and training opportunities would allow many more teachers to invest time with students in EOL.

Participants reported that EOL needed to be made accessible to many more teachers before it would become a reality for many more students. We needed to better support teacher learning, which would then take care of student learning. Paperwork, including a map of your route for walking field trips and high-risk permission forms, were reported by participants as a lot of extra work and, as teachers, they were busy. Participants noted that a love for nature and all the benefits to learning could not be overestimated and students would move increasingly into a screen-based electronic, technology-driven society. Participants also noted that they believed the brains of our young learners were changing due to technology and we must resensitize our students to the experience of nature.

If EOL were to have success, participants believed time and money would be needed to invest in both the program/framework being created and in the district specialists that needed to exist before anything was rolled out into our classrooms. Then, time and funding needed to be given so that teachers at the school level could work together. Participants noted that coordination was needed across the district so that all areas of study or activities were introduced in a timely manner. Participants reported that release time or designated resource people would be beneficial to any proposed EOL initiative in the District.
Participants believed the District should place an emphasis on ecosystems and how everything is interconnected. They believed EOL aligned closely with the First Peoples’ principles of learning and believed ISW District Principal and elders should be involved. Finally, participants reported the need to have a K-12 Vision for EOL and partner with non-profit organizations to apply for grants and funding. Finally, participants noted that, if someone could go through the resources we had in our community and put together a comprehensive list of activities and contact information about how these groups and services could be used within grade-level curriculum, the result would be a fantastic and excellent resource.

I was pleased that such a resource was mentioned in this District survey, because this is what I am trying to do in my current research project. Certainly, I have been unable in this project to complete all the needs reported by those who participated in filling out this survey. That would be but overwhelming. However, in this research project, I can forward the important work of organizing and synthesizing activities that touch many of these needs. These activities, geared for teachers, would then provide students with meaningful experiences that helped them care about their natural world. Through adventure, conservation, and environmental studies students would learn to care about the things like climate change, extinction of animals, preservation of green spaces. All these will become future issues in their generation.

In reviewing the District survey, over and over participants mentioned that “we” needed to invest in our teachers and not demand the world from them. Teachers needed to be trained during work hours. Teachers need to honor their own family time and needed to create appropriate work/life balance.
After outlining the information gained from analyzing the survey responses, I was able to add insight to my already felt need for helping teachers get outdoors with their students and seeing the many possibilities that exist in our Comox Valley.

Please note that Appendices 1-6 follow my Chapter Five and will provide ideas that are designed to help teachers get outdoors with their students. In my final Chapter Five, I summarize my findings, discuss my study limitations, and outline possible next steps about where I want to take my work. I will also summarize notes from our first district EOL meeting that was a natural response that grew out of my work on this research project.
Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusion

In Chapter One, I set the stage for my project by sharing a vignette of when I first fell in love with nature at my Granny and Papa’s beach, followed by sharing my background of who I am and why I did my project on Environmental and Outdoor learning. Following that, I provided justification for my work through anecdotal evidence of my experiences and the work of Palmer (2007) and Dyment (2005). My research question, stated in Chapter One, was what practical activities can teachers do to introduce their students to outdoor learning? In that chapter, I shared my definitions of outdoor learning, experimental learning and physical literacy. Chapter One ended with anticipated problems to solve and possibilities going forward.

In Chapter Two, I shared my literature review by starting with the background and history of outdoor learning, they by discussing barriers to outdoor learning, suggestions to help get children back into nature, and how teachers might learn by examples of quality programming, collaboration, and by making environmental connections to the land. I completed Chapter Two with improved health and social benefits and quotes that I personally found inspirational for my own work success.

In Chapter Three I shared my research project methodology, and stated that I had analyzed the district survey on EOL so as to pull out practical ideas that teachers might use and to synthesize ideas from my literary review and my own personal repertoire to create six appendixes that I believed contained practical ideas for elementary teachers in our district to take their classes outside to learn. Chapter Four consisted of my analysis of the district survey with useful opportunities available to all teachers in School District 71.
In Chapter Five, I have abridged the process, discussed the work I plan to engage in as a next and plans for further development, and talked about some successes I have had since joining out District’s EOL Liaison committee with our first meeting summarized within.

**The Products of My Research Project**

As noted earlier, the following are the products of my work:

Appendix 1: A list of activities that support Environmental and Outdoor Learning, and ideas currently happening in our district;

Appendix 2: Field trips ideas that I have done with my K-5 class starting with curricular fieldtrips followed by active fieldtrips for physical literacy;

Appendix 3: Outdoor Learning Big and Little Buddies;

Appendix 4: Gardening ideas with useful gardening websites and links, books, composting ideas;

Appendix 5: Websites and resources for teachers of Environmental Outdoor Learning with organizations available to help support schools in going outside and connecting to nature; and,

Appendix 6: Curriculum connections and more opportunities available.

**Suggestions for Further Development**

My plan is to use the resources I have built as a beginning to help all teachers feel more comfortable taking their classes outside to learn. Based on research findings in Chapter Two, I see a push to reconnect our students to nature and feel the resources I have provided in the
appendixes will help teachers get started on environmental and outdoor learning. I am excited and ready to start sharing my ideas, resources and projects, first to my current school staff of 23 teachers and then at Professional Development Days in SD71 and beyond.

As a person who believes in outdoor learning, helping other teachers learn more about how to utilize the outdoors to a fuller extent is something I am passionate about sharing. Since my very first discussions with my Professor Jim Parsons in the Fall of 2017, I was inspired and hopeful that one day I could share my passion and project with others.

Recently, I did my first presentation about my research project on Environmental Outdoor Learning. I talked about my journey and how initially I was going to do a survey, but then I was given access to our district survey. I enjoyed presenting at our VIU Educational Conference in March of 2019 and was happy with the feedback I received afterwards. It may have only been 30 people, but that presentation helped me learn more about how to better share my work.

I made my presentation practical and offered pictures and ideas and tips on my handout so someone could leave the presentation and perhaps be inspired to try something the next day. Observers said I made a strong argument for outdoor education. Other feedback I received supported the power of stories within my project, reinforcing, re-minding the importance of place and context, people liked the idea of equality in EOL, and loved the sharing of resources.

In February of 2019, as part of my research project, I met with Natasha Taylor who is an advocate for EOL learning. Taylor was also the parent volunteer who did garden club with me for years and was the one who ran seed-to-plate at our school and other Environmental
Programs for our district. She has a wealth of knowledge, and I was pleased she was willing to share her resources with me and I have included her lesson plans in my appendix.

Also, as part of my work, I became a member of the District Environmental and Outdoor Learning Liaison Committee and attended my first meeting on January 10th, 2019 (approximately 20 people were in attendance). By accepting this new position, I will be able to extend my graduate research project by getting to share resources with my staff as they become available. Fortunately, there are many like-minded people in SD71, and it was good to share ideas with them. During our first meeting on January 10th, 2019, our agenda included: EOL Mission & guiding principles, year-one goals, our district’s current strengths and obstacles, EOL overcoming obstacles approach, Current community outreach - Courtenay Fish & Game / Archery Program, current SD71 EOL programs for 2018/2019 year and EOL Website reveal.

We were also able to work together in groups of four or five people to brainstorm and collaborate about strengths, obstacles, further communication, our capacity, and our dreams and ideas. Below is a summary of these discussions.

**Strengths**

In our on-going work to forward EOL in SD71, we are beginning to work collaboratively. To summarize our work on strengths, we discovered that we had assets in several of our current programs in our district. These included nature buddies; Puntledge Park EOL prep coverage; Cumberland Schools Nature class; EXPLORE at Vanier; Arden Kindergarten walks; Active Life Styles at Isfeld; Clubs at many schools for environmental and outdoor learning; Salad Bars at Huband, Lake Trail, Robb Road, Brooklyn and Isfeld; and
school gardens including Brooklyn, Aspen, Queneesh, Valley View, NIDES, Lake Trail, Highland, Arden, Courtenay Elementary and Robb Road.

In addition, each School has outdoor learning “champions,” which include teachers, administrators, and parent volunteers who help to make these programs run. Within the Comox Valley we are incredibly fortunate to have great weather and climate and access to incredible places many within walking distance from schools to forests, parks, and beaches. We are close to Mount Washington as well as Strathcona Park hiking trails, a 40-minute drive to Horne Lake Caves, or a 40-minute drive north to Strathcona Park Lodge. We also have access to climbing walls in Cumberland Comox and Campbell River, and two ferry rides away from Hornby Island Outdoor Education Center.

We also have universal access points where all children of all abilities can participate, and we have partnerships with Community organizations including Stream Keepers, Comox Valley Regional District Waste Management, Fish and Game, Search and Rescue, and Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation. In addition, we have gained a district commitment to EOL by the creation of an EOL teacher position, and we are fortunate to have amazingly supportive Parent Advisory Committees.

**Obstacles and Suggestions**

During our initial meeting, we created a summary of the obstacles we came up against and worked to provide some solutions or suggestions. Questions arose: How do we embed EOL in our day-to-day? How can we tie our EOL work to the curriculum? Why are we doing this work and what is our focus? We did note that the British Columbia Core competencies give adequate justification for EOL.
Some practical problems emerged and were discussed. For example, often students aren’t dressed for the task, and we suggested a solution might be free store of lost and found clothing that children might borrow if it could be re-cycled found between schools. We noted that there might be GO grants to help children get boots. Another obstacle was teacher comfort, outdoor (classroom) management, and preparedness. Some suggestions occurred for buddy classes to work together for extra support, modeled by EOL teacher, and Pro-D sessions.

A third obstacle was that, if EOL were to provide prep-coverage, we needed to consider prep being every second week but twice as long. A fourth huge obstacle to EOL is transportation, and we suggested the needs to have transportation funding prioritized, not grouped with other budgets. We discussed the need for an EOL specific bus (24 high school passengers), limit class size to 24 to fit bus space. We also discussed the need for a district-wide policy to have industry-standard certificates for higher risk activities, such as canoes, kayak, climbing, hiking, biking. We noted that one solution could be to have certified teachers become district specialists. Other obstacles included time tables in high schools especially, noting that forms are time consuming and hard to find; the need for clarification on all year-long walking forms, and the possibility of an online program to send digitally to parents for payments. So far, the District has not figured out how to mediate the huge costs associated with EOL programming.

**Capacity**

One goal of SD71 is to develop the capacity of the entire district as it expands its work into EOL. The question remains as to how, as a district, we build a self-sustaining EOL program in the district for both students and for teachers. As we spoke in our first EOL meeting, we
discussed the need for students so start small and just go outside, use the school grounds, then the forested areas that already surround most schools. We believe that the teachers and students should then try field trips. We also need to assess EOL at the elementary level and evaluate the district’s successes and challenges, exploratory and elective outdoor choices, challenge days, unplug days, bike-to-school week, No Garbage Day, Locally-Made Day, Earth Day, and Celebrate the Solstice.

Helping district teachers increase internal their capacity is also needed. For example, we need district teacher canoe instructors, First Aid Training, Flex Pro-D opportunities, education in how to use our Indigenous Education Support team to help enhance nature and place-based learning for more powerful learning opportunities. The district also needs to ensure that EOL becomes part of School Growth Plans and we become committed to building a culture of EOL in the District. To do so, we discussed the need to create more flexibility in high school time tables to allow more time with students. We need to bring specialists to the schools, and work with what we already have, to better use our school gardens, outdoor classrooms, and to connect to community educators more regularly. In general, we discussed that big ideas must start small, gain exposure, and increase teacher confidence and ensure they continue.

**Future Actions**

In short, at this first meeting, the committee discussed a number of other hopes for our district’s future and the communication and dreams need to ensure the possibility of turning those into reality. Following this meeting, Serina Allison (who was hired by the District for the .5 EOL position) and I have met to discuss how we could continue to work together. Fortunately, we were both excited to collaborate and add my masters’ work to the district site.
Unfortunately, we are both busy and at times overwhelmed. Because I am a full-time teacher and her district position is only .5, there is much to do and not enough person-power to do it. As a next step, I would like to encourage SD71 to put more funding into this position. The lack of human capacity is a limitation because we find it hard to get together because her work demands more than a .5 job description.

However, that fact that Serina Allison’s work is demanding is a good thing in one sense. Obviously, teachers are interested in this area because her time is being fully utilized by many different teachers. I believe our district should and will expand this position to become larger than just one person and to create more opportunities for people interested in outdoor education to work together and collaborate on building resources and opportunities. I also believe the completion of my research project will add to the strong momentum already nascent within SD71 that will continue to be supported. I, too, hope that I can become part of this change.

**Limitations**

I understand that this resource is not yet complete and perhaps will never be. In fact, I created it to become a working document that could constantly be added to and changed by teachers both within and beyond SD71. As the world continues to change, more opportunities will become possible for teachers and children to engage the outdoors as part of their educational activities.

Although I took a teaching reduction (an additional day off each week from my teaching job) to focus on and complete my project, I must note that time was a limitation. I would have loved to work even longer on this project; however, I believe what I have started here could become an important starting resource that might help teachers in our district and beyond get
underway on Environmental and Outdoor Learning. I also feel that, if teachers start to engage the resources and go outside with their classes, my work will have been worthwhile.

I am certain that my work might have been enhanced had I collected data through observation of my students. Other than considering and systematically organizing my own experiences, all my research was based on the research of other EOL specialists. Although this focus allowed me to really engage in the literature and read many more articles than I would have otherwise, I do understand that it is a limitation. In the future, I would be interested in using data that I might collect from my students and apply it to my own teaching so that I might discover what factors have the most impact on improving student learning.

Final Thoughts

I trust that this momentum for environmental and outdoor learning continues, because our students need the help teachers might offer them as support for their reconnecting with nature. I especially hope that my project will become useful resources for elementary teachers hoping to take their classes outside to learn. In my experience as a teacher who engages the outdoors, I never really can know when I might significantly impact a student in a special way by providing a variety of environmental and outdoor learning opportunities. I also believe that engaging the outdoors will make a difference in their lives and futures.

I would encourage teachers who share my love of nature and my belief that teaching should not be necessarily constrained by classroom walls to be brave and be bold. I believe your students will thank you. Seek support, bring in speakers to inspire you and your classes and help you to reconnect with nature.
My graduate research project has helped me become more aware that EOL learning is an area that is hugely missing in our schools. I have come to believe that the time is now for teachers to accept our responsibility to reach out to our learners and help as many students as possible find their way in this world. Using the outdoors is an especially effective strategy to engage learners. I find that the outdoors helps me build meaningful relationships with my students and helps them build relationships with each other. It exposes them to a variety of experiences, allows them to see the real world and find meaning in their lives by contributing to helping the environment and to take initiative to make a difference. As stated in Eick, Tatarchuk and Anderson (2013), “providing community based professional development for our teachers on outdoor activities that link to the school’s curriculum has been critical for success of the outdoor learning project and their continued support and use of our outdoor classroom” (p. 76). I am excited to support teachers and our students in making this EOL learning a priority in our district.

“Kaleidoscopes and young people have a great deal in common. The beauty of a kaleidoscope is how it transforms simple fragments of colored glass into wonderful complex designs. It is not one isolated fragment that brings the kaleidoscope to life, but how all the fragments come together.... Ultimately the challenge is how to work with these different factors in a manner that gives the young person a chance to succeed and grow” (Burck, 2008 p. 1, as cited in Wilson and Stemp, 2010). I feel this quote exemplifies how we need to work together, help each other find successes in outdoor learning to further help our students find meaning in their learning and lives. When they are engaged, they are developing their self-concept, self-esteem, figuring out what they enjoy and giving them relevance to their lives and learning.
References


