

NATURE KINDERGARTEN

Researchers put popular program to the test

Smith. PHOTO: NIK WEST

by Kim Westad

How do kindergarten students learn that a bed of Douglas fir needles can be soft? Or that the tide leaves behind pools with all sorts of interesting creatures in them?

These are just some of the basics taught at a nature kindergarten class that is taking the long-accepted European practice of learning in the outdoors and putting it to use locally.

The idea of nature kindergartens has been part of life in Scandinavia for 50 years and programs have spread across Europe, Australia and New Zealand. But they are just catching on in Canada. BC's first outdoor kindergarten at Sangster Elementary in Sooke started in 2012. It was so popular that parents who wanted their urban children to connect with nature lined up the night before to ensure their child got one of the 22 positions. The school follows the provincially-approved kindergarten curriculum, but students spend 2.5 hours a day outside, rain or shine.

Parents are drawn to the idea of children getting away from electronic devices and back to nature, where they play and learn about birds by seeing them live, not on a screen. Others

say spending a large portion of the day outside creates more active children who will learn to care more about their environment.

Educators suggest benefits ranging from improved health and fitness to improved mental and emotional child development.

Is this accurate? Or is this just the latest education trend, drawing positive anecdotes with little evidence?

That's where the University of Victoria's Centre for Early Childhood Research and Policy comes in. The centre, a consortium of early childhood researchers from six faculties and more than 20 departments, studies how to improve life for children. The centre provides research that impacts policy.

It has joined with Camosun College and Royal Roads University in a two-year study of the Sooke School District nature kindergarten.

The near-at-hand class was an exciting opportunity to assess a new education style from the beginning, said Beverly Smith, associate director at the UVic centre.

"There is a lot of popular press about the program, saying it will be beneficial for students. But there is little systematic research on the short-term benefits, and none on the long-term

benefits," Smith says. "It's a unique opportunity for us to do an in-depth multi-disciplinary collaboration to investigate the impacts and outcomes of this kind of learning."

The research project, "Children in Nature: Evaluation of the Nature Kindergarten Project in Sooke" looks at a variety of developmental areas, including cognitive, physical and emotional impacts, as well as effects on environmental awareness and attitudes. In September, nine graduate and undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines measured everything from the children's knowledge of the environment to motor skills. They did the same with another group of comparable students who are not in the nature kindergarten. Measurements were repeated in January and again in May, with results expected in the fall.

"Our bottom line is always to improve the well-being of children," Smith said. "The research will provide the basis for solid decision-making. Knowing what the benefits are can help improve young children's education."

Researchers are thrilled to have the chance to be in at the ground level, Smith said. They are walking hand-in-hand with the kindergarten children, learning together.

GREAT MOMENTS IN RESEARCH

SCIENCE VENTURE YOUTH PROGRAM: MORE THAN 20 YEARS OF MAKING SCIENCE FUN

A proverbial sketched-on-a-napkin idea started in 1991 by five UVic engineering students who wanted to make science as much fun for kids as it was for them, Science Venture has gone on to become an iconic symbol of summer on the UVic grounds, and has been nationally recognized for its engaging programs. Reaching over 10,000 youth last year alone, this innovative programming is delivered through high-impact, hands-on workshops, after-school clubs, summer camps and special events to stimulate interest and passion for the subjects of science, technology, engineering and math.

"It's not uncommon to meet Science Venture staff who were young campers themselves," explains program director Melisa Yestrau. "I think it's the passion of the student instructors that keeps the kids coming back, because they help show how innovation can come from an idea sketched on a napkin."

Info: scienceventure.ca



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