

Kindergarten goes outdoors ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

It's just after 9 o'clock on a Wednesday morning and in the grassy field behind Colwood's Sangster Elementary, kindergarten is in full swing.

The children, all in black rain pants with T-shirts or turquoise jackets, sit on the grass, their backpacks piled high in the centre of the circle.

Lisa Lockerbie leads her class in the singing of Look Who Came to School Today, before Erin Van Stone, an early childhood educator, reads from the storybook Thank You Bear.

This leads nicely into the next exercise, which Lockerbie calls the "Cougar Safety Game," in which Van Stone hides pictures of a cougar and bear for the children to find.

Before playing, Lockerbie peppers the four-and five-year-olds with questions about what to do if they find the animals' pictures.

"What do you say?" "Cougar or bear," says one little girl.

"Then after you yell cougar or bear, and you blow your whistle, who can tell me what you do next? Chloe?"

"Run." "No, we don't run. Zoe, do you remember?"

"You back up away from it." "You back up away from it, you're right. Does anybody know what you do while you're backing up away from it?"

"Make yourself big, and sing Jingle Bells," a boy answers.

The children play several rounds of the game, shouting bear or cougar each time they find the photos, then raising their arms in the air and belting out Jingle Bells while backing slowly toward their teacher.

It's part game, part safety drill, because a few minutes later, they all march through the chain-link gate and into the forest that backs onto Sangster Elementary. Each child holds a small round, magnifying glass in his or her hand, all the better to examine bugs, grass, leaves and whatever else they find on the trail.

For most kindergarten students, this would be a rare and exciting field trip. But for 22 kids in B.C.'s first nature kindergarten class, it's routine.

They will hike two kilometres every morning this year, rain or shine, through the Royal Roads University forest that borders their school. They will visit Esquimalt Lagoon, play outdoors, eat their snacks in the woods, and then head back to school for a nap and classroom time in the afternoon.

The two-year pilot project, which began earlier this month, is modelled after forest preschools that started in Scandinavia decades ago and spread across Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

Frances Krusekopf, former district principal of curriculum and programs, got interested in the idea while on sabbatical in Munich in 2010.

She enrolled her four-year-old son, Niko, in one of the German forest preschools, known as Waldkindergärten.

On a given day, he and the rest of the children would be whittling sticks with their knives and cooking sausages over an open fire. On the next, they would be rappelling down a steep hill and scampering back to the top.

"For a child who's four, to be given that amount of responsibility and independence is a wonderful thing," Krusekopf said.

"At some point, my thinking changed from the interest one has as a mother to the interest I had in the concept of a forest preschool as an educator."

B.C. was moving to full-day kindergarten at the time, so Krusekopf pitched the idea of importing the Waldkindergärten model to her district.

Superintendent Jim Cambridge, a triathlete and nature lover himself, had been growing increasingly concerned about the sedentary, electronics-obsessed world of some students, and the overly structured lives of others.

"I'm a dad who drives my daughter around from this event to that event," he said. "A lot of kids' lives now are highly structured. So how do we rebalance some of that to allow them to explore on their own, make connections on their own, and do that in a safe way?"

He gave Krusekopf the go-ahead to explore her idea, and she teamed up with Enid Elliot, an early-childhood educator at the University of Victoria.

Elliot had studied the health and education benefits of forest preschools and knew that people are healthier, less anxious and better able to pay attention the more time they spend in nature.

"So if children are more relaxed outside, they're more ready to learn," she said. "As well, children's play outside is richer and more imaginative. I think those are also skills that we need for the future right now. We need people who are creative."

Elliot and Krusekopf, now principal of Colwood Elementary, gathered advisers, wrote grant proposals and raised more than \$100,000.

The money will cover the cost of an early-childhood educator to work with the kindergarten teacher for the next two years, as well as raingear for the students, buckets, nets, magnifying glasses and honorariums for First Nations elders who will impart their knowledge of the land.

The district decided the class would be divided evenly between boys and girls, with two spots reserved for aboriginal students. The class also includes children with special needs and behavioural challenges.

"We spent days and days and days ensuring that the entrance criteria was going to be reflective of the general population," Cambridge said.

The idea was so well-received that parents camped out overnight at the district office last February to make sure their kids got a spot.

Researchers at the University of Victoria, Camosun College and Royal Roads University also got on board, agreeing to study everything from children's fitness levels and their attitudes to the environment to what they are learning, and how they are learning it, Elliot said.

In addition, Royal Roads will offer a series of professional development courses to show other teachers how to lead a nature kindergarten class.

Lockerbie, who taught in a forest school in England in 2011, and Van Stone will be on hand to provide a first-hand look at how they use nature to deliver the kindergarten curriculum.

-reprinted from the Times Colonist

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