

Sharing Stories: A Tour of Terra Nova Nature School

KATE DAWSON AND EMILY VERA

Eagles were resting in the nearby treetops, and honeybees were collecting nectar from the red clover. A slight breeze came in from the water off the Fraser River, and the sun peaked through dusky clouds. It was a perfect May evening to share this land and our stories with 45 committed and interested early childhood educators from across British Columbia.

In thinking about and designing our evening tour that was going to be part of the ECEBC pre-conference, we knew what we wanted to include: a walkabout of the 63-acre (25-hectare) park located in a corner of Richmond, a tour of the heritage building that houses our indoor classroom space, a slideshow of children at Terra Nova Nature School exploring and learning, and a discussion of pedagogy. While we had a lot of information and experiences to squeeze into a two-hour tour, we felt it was important to stay true to our philosophy of allowing curriculum to emerge naturally and authentically. Most especially, we wanted to share a sense of wonder, and allow for ample time to engage with each other and the land in fluid and meaningful ways.

As we meandered the gravel pathways that led us past fields of tall grasses and blackberry bushes, we discussed several aspects of operating outdoors risk management: place-based education, the development of a nature-based and respon-



Children exploring and drawing at Terra Nova Nature School.

sive curriculum, and mindfulness around our impact on the land.

Working primarily outdoors is exhilarating in so many ways, but it does also pose some unique challenges. At Terra Nova Nature School, we implement many “systems” to ensure the physical safety of all the children. For example, we teach children to stop at pathway intersections and other landmarks such as benches, bridges, or particular trees. As well, we expect children to keep within the sightlines of a teacher. (We tell them, “If you can’t see me, I can’t see you.”) And we do frequent head counts. There are many edible wilds to be found in the park, but our rule is no touching, picking, or eating until you have checked with an adult. (Dock

leaves do look a lot like the sorrel we grow in the garden.) Another rule is mushrooms are never ever okay to touch or even kick with your feet, although it is so tempting!

Figuring out what outdoor gear to wear can be difficult, as there are so many variables. Days may start out cool and windy, but as the sun emerges, or as our bodies warm up from running, we begin to shed layers, which the children tie around their waists. We all help one another to stuff mittens and hats into pockets and hoods. We encourage children to decide for themselves about their well-being and comfort. For example, jumping over a drainage ditch is lots of fun, but if you miss and the water goes over your boots, the group does not

immediately return to school for the sake of one person to change clothing. One unforeseen challenge of working outdoors that we had not foreseen was the fatigue to our own voices: windy days mock our ability to call out to one another necessitating a number of hand signals to communicate with other staff and the children. Also we simply could not function without our walkie-talkies! When planes or flocks of snow geese fly overhead, everyone understands why we have paused in our conversation or storytelling.

At Terra Nova Nature School, we support risky play with the understanding and belief that children instinctively recognize their own limits and abilities. We do not hoist children onto playground equipment or fences or up into trees. Children are not carried or pulled in the wagons that, piled with handwashing supplies and other gear, we haul with us daily. However, if someone says they are tired, we pause and offer an encouraging word or hand to hold. We take frequent breaks for water and allow for quiet moments to observe a slug or a dragonfly while we catch our breath.

Moving outside the classroom walls requires every staff member to be hyperaware of their surroundings. We are constantly scanning our environment and assessing risks: that buzzing sound we hear is municipal park staff working around the corner with heavy equipment; the children have discovered a dead seagull in a field; a cyclist pauses to tell us they just glimpsed a coyote slipping into the hedges; the Sharing Farm's tractor needs to pass by the spot we have just settled for snack time. All of it is manageable, and worthy

of our deeper attention together as part of our curriculum, but working outdoors in a municipal park does require one to be extremely "on."

Working outdoors also offers a wealth of possibilities for employing an emergent curriculum. Inspired by the educational practices of schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, and overlaid with the principles of place-based education and Indigenous ways of knowing, our curriculum begins with what we observe the children noticing on our walks together. Our role as educators is to then wonder why particular subjects or activities have called the children's attention, returning the "ball toss" with further provocations, questions, literature, images, and materials that scaffold inquiry and project development.

The park is large enough to offer us many mini-sites: a bushwhacking path; tree tunnel; muddy hill; buttercup field; and Land of Sand, which the children have come to know and name from their repeated visits. As a group, we often discuss our impact on the park and its inhabitants, trying to maintain a balance between connecting with Terra Nova Rural Park and all its offerings and not destroying all that we have come to care about. Collectively, we learn to take responsibility for our actions: a broken tree branch on a favourite climbing tree led to extensive inquiry and a collaboration with a local "tree doctor." The ethos of care that we develop from deep familiarity with this place can quickly shift to a sense of entitlement and ownership. Once we returned to school after a weekend only to discover that all the apples had been picked from a tree adjacent to the school. We were hurt, even outraged, at



Terra Nova Rural Park is in Richmond.

this intrusion upon "our place." Our broader, often unknown, community has also learned to share this place with Terra Nova Nature School, including the occasionally raucous sounds of our preschoolers playing or our gifts of piled twigs or stones that are sometimes left in our wake. This sharing of place and our mindfulness of all its inhabitants often pose difficult questions without easy answers.

We truly value the unique opportunity to work in Terra Nova Rural Park and appreciate its multitude of gifts. The stories that have emerged in the past two years are now making our own history. We look forward to creating new experiences together with our children and families. We are so honoured and grateful that ECEBC invited us to participate in the 2016 conference.

Terra Nova Nature School is situated on a unique parkland in Richmond, a place rich with social history and fertile farmland. Several years ago, Kate Dawson and Emily Vera met one day while frolicking in their own gardens and dreamed of opening an outdoor school together. The school is a joint partnership between the City of Richmond, Thompson Community Association, and the Richmond Schoolyard Society. For more information, please visit www.terranovanatureschool.com.