



by

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# The Power of Place



One of the silver linings that the pandemic has presented is a significant focus on outdoor teaching and learning. To be clear, the focus has not been driven by an instructional or curricular mandate but rather as a means of reducing virus transmission through increased availability of space and fresh air. Now in my 25th year as an outdoor educator, I've never seen the depth and breadth of current media coverage and societal focus on the need to provide greater opportunities for students to learn outdoors. For many in areas of the world experiencing wide-spread and sustained outbreaks, outdoor learning may be the difference between students returning to school or remaining in a remote or distance-learning mode.

Like many responses to COVID-19, calls for outdoor learning present a range of opportunities and challenges. The belief that outdoor spaces should simply be re-purposed to simulate indoor classroom environments is misguided, and misses the mark in terms of the potential for developing a more student-centered and experiential learning approach. An exploration of how teaching and learning can be

connected to place and community while providing for physical and social-emotional health benefits is well-worth consideration. Fortunately, there are a growing number of organizations and resources available to help support and guide schools and districts in further developing outdoor place-based competencies and priorities.

Given the many physical, cognitive and social-emotional benefits associated with outdoor and place-based learning, it's heartening to see attention being directed towards building capacity in this area. Since the release of Richard Louv's seminal "Last Child in the Woods" in 2008, there's been a virtual tidal wave of research and evidence reflecting both the positive impact and critical need to re-connect children with nature. This has helped to re-energize the field of outdoor and environmental education and has served to shift outdoor and place-based approaches further into the mainstream. An obvious example includes our renewed BC Curriculum which is well-represented with references and conceptual frameworks that support place-based learning approaches.



*"I loved how hands-on everything was! The fishing in the river with the nets was amazing! I will take my children on more walks outside, I will make connections to the land, I will include opportunities for Elders to come to my classroom to share their knowledge."*

*Teacher, Renfrew Elementary School, Educator Workshop, September 2019*

## NVSD and Cheakamus Centre: The Natural Place to Learn

The North Vancouver School District (NVSD) has long identified with the power of place and the importance of the natural environment in shaping and informing educational practice and school culture. Stretched out between two watersheds and framed by mountains, rivers and a coastal fjord, NVSD is blessed with an abundance of diverse outdoor learning spaces, a mild climate, and a deeply-rooted outdoor culture. Significantly, the district is located on the traditional and unceded territory of the Skwxwú7mesh and Tsleil-Waututh Nations and the collaboration and partnership with these two strong nations has helped guide our collective understanding of the important role of place in our community and schools.

NVSD's commitment to outdoor and place-based learning is perhaps most evident at Cheakamus Centre. Now in its 51st year of operation, the centre – formerly known as the North Vancouver Outdoor School – is located on a 165 hectare ecological reserve just north of Squamish in the Paradise Valley. Each year, thousands of students from North Vancouver and schools across BC come to Cheakamus Centre for overnight and day-based outdoor and indigenous cultural programs.

The centre's programs are aligned with the BC curriculum, ensuring that time spent outdoors supports learning objectives and core competencies. The Cheakamus instructional team has developed a set of guiding principles providing a framework that informs program design and development. [www.cheakamuscentre.ca](http://www.cheakamuscentre.ca)



## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Connections

Place-based education embraces personalized, student-centered learning, as students inquire about concepts, topics and issues relevant to their lives and local community

A place-based approach provides students with a learning environment that connects the concept-based, competency driven curriculum to the real-world of their daily lives

Place-based learning is embedded in and across the K-12 curriculum and is a core SD44 strategic priority

During this unprecedented time, there is an opportunity for educators to connect classrooms to community, and begin to explore the students' homes, yards and neighborhoods as potential learning environments

*from Place-based Outdoor Learning—  
Supporting Education Continuity in SD44*  
[www.cheakamuscentre.ca](http://www.cheakamuscentre.ca)

## Place-based 'Sticky Learning'

In my role as Education Director at Cheakamus Centre, I often receive feedback from students, staff and parents that offers keen insights as to the impact of outdoor place-based learning. Through these conversations, I've noticed a recurring theme that can best be described as the 'stickiness' of the learning that is typical at Cheakamus Centre.

Several years back, a parent whose daughter was initially very anxious about attending our Gr. 3 Skw'une-was Indigenous education program shared some of the powerful connections that speak to the resonant nature of these experiences for participants.



*My daughter just participated in the Bighouse program. I just wanted to share some feedback with you about her experience. Based on the stories and experiences she shared with our family after she got back from Bighouse, I can confidently say this was an incredible learning opportunity for her and that the learning was very 'sticky' because of the experiential education involved. My daughter was very nervous about going to the Bighouse – she talked about it over Spring Break and was very nervous the morning that they left.*

*When she came back and told us about her experience – learning Squamish, being part of the Cedar working family,*

*sleeping in the Bighouse, eating Bannock, learning about bats and night vision, doing chores (and what the best and the worst chores were!) ...how it rained, but it was kind of sunny and just sprinkled most of Monday – about sleeping on the platform in the Bighouse in the rain, and being at the fire inside... All of that from a quiet girl who was very nervous about this experience.*

*I want to say how much I appreciate this opportunity for really deep learning. This is a kind of learning you don't get in the classroom. It's deep, thoughtful, sticky learning that will resonate with her probably throughout her life. She seemed to come back a little wiser, a little more independent.*

Interestingly, these deep and lasting connections to learning are evident with adult learners as well. Over the past several years, the Cheakamus team has developed a range of environmental, place-based and Indigenous learning workshops for K-12 and post-secondary educators. The design and delivery of these day and multiday workshops has been very rewarding for our staff as they share

instructional practices and traditional knowledge with other educators from across the province. What's been particularly interesting is the extent to which teachers identify many of the exact principles that help to inform student experiences as being the most meaningful for developing their own outdoor and/or Indigenous place-based learning practice.

What is it about these experiences that produce such powerful learning for children and adults? I don't think there's a single answer to be found but rather an appreciation of an approach to learning and educational design that is student-centered, experiential, relational and deeply rooted in place. Not surprisingly, all of these principles are reflected in established Indigenous pedagogy and are considered integral elements of progressive contemporary approaches to education. Recognizing and better understanding the different ways these approaches can be applied across all Indigenous cultural and environmental programs has been an ongoing focus at Cheakamus Centre and one that we're excited to be sharing with our educator colleagues.

### Adapting to a New Environment

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Due to the intensive and mostly residential nature of the site-based programming, Cheakamus Centre has not evaded the pandemic's ubiquitous impact and we've had to temporarily suspend our operations for the Fall. As we look forward to welcoming back students and teachers in the new year, we've continued to develop and share online

resources supporting both school and home-based approaches to outdoor place-based learning. In addition, we've adapted several Cheakamus program elements to support teachers' capacity to get their students outdoors.

NVSD is fortunate to have many teachers and support staff with a depth and breadth of experience in accessing and integrating outdoor learning into their daily routines. Given the current climate, additional supports including virtual and site-based workshops, outdoor learning networks and the identification and provision of teaching resources will go a long way in supporting teachers and schools in implementing successful outdoor learning efforts.

While requiring flexibility, adaptation and resiliency, outdoor learning has also been shown to develop these same dispositions that will be critical in navigating the complexities of teaching and learning now and into the future. Finding new and creative ways to connect and learn in, with and about the natural world may just be a step in the right direction as we look ahead to educating and inspiring our children in a rapidly changing world.

*"I have a better understanding of Indigenous practices and I will be more aware of my actions and how my words about Indigenous topics can inform the opinions and actions of my students."*

*Teacher, West Vancouver Secondary School, Educator Workshop, September 2018*

