



Beyond Earth Day

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Students and educators of the Laboratory School at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study have decided to shun Earth Day this year. Three generations of learners housed under one roof, the ever-expanding historic mansion bustles with 200 children from Nursery to Grade 6, teachers, teacher candidates, researchers and staff, united around a shared commitment to exploring what is possible in education. Since 1925, the Laboratory School has spearheaded a child-centered and inquiry-based approach to learning, which ripple into the public education system that they are mandated to serve.

How an institute at the forefront of exemplary education has decided to move beyond Earth Day has little to

do with apathy; rather, it is intimately tied to the direction taken by the environmental education initiative housed at the Lab School, *Natural Curiosity*. In their ninth year, *Natural Curiosity* launched their second resource for educators, *Natural Curiosity 2nd Edition: The Importance of Indigenous Perspectives in Children's Inquiry*. Following the widespread popularity of the first edition launched in 2011 (Building Children's Understanding of the World through Environmental Inquiry), the 2nd Edition reflects the school's commitment to lifelong learning by elevating the conversation about

"This book was created to challenge us"

environmental education to include Indigenous perspectives that in turn support learning on and from the land, while also renewing the pedagogical framework proposed in the first edition with updated research and perspectives that have since evolved.

Written in extensive collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge-keepers and scholars, *Natural Curiosity 2nd Edition* celebrates learning in Mother Earth as an entry point for Truth and Reconciliation.*

For many years, the children at the JICS Lab School celebrated Earth Day with activities such as planting pansies along the front garden with their "special friends," a schoolwide program that connects the older and younger students around shared learning experiences. No one thought to challenge what seemed to be an agreeable and picturesque yard beautification and community building project. Deeper implications around what it means to celebrate the Earth began to unravel over the last three years; mirroring the depth of reflection and dialogue it took to develop the second edition of *Natural Curiosity*.

"Selfishly," says Richard Messina, the Principal of the JICS Laboratory School, "this book was created to challenge us."





"The driving motivation for a second edition was the burning need, in the wake of strong and unequivocal recommendations by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to bring Indigenous perspectives into the heart of Canadian educational settings and curricula, most notably in connection with environmental issues. Momentum gathered as points of convergence (as well as discontinuities) between *Natural Curiosity's* approach and certain Indigenous perspectives were identified.

Doug Anderson, who has thought long and deeply about such matters, agreed to articulate these perspectives in this edition; other experts offered their insights, and a project was launched. Looking back at the first edition, Lab School educators realized that it was not enough to simply layer an Indigenous perspective on our own fixed way of doing things. We began to see our values and practices through other eyes, and this triggered a process of rethinking or refining what was most important about our philosophy and practice.

We had never intended to freeze our approach; our beliefs and practices remain living, breathing, dynamic processes that are inevitably and repeatedly revised, as our school, like all schools builds relationships with changing communities in changing times."

— *Natural Curiosity 2nd Edition: The Importance of Indigenous Perspectives in Children's Environmental Inquiry*

This April, the Lab School invited Doug Anderson, the author of the Indigenous lens in *Natural Curiosity*, and Paul Richard of Feastfire Gardens, an Indigenous gardener, to spark a conversation with the staff about meaningful ways to reclaim the outdoor spaces around the school. Regular summer landscaping was foregone, and the project to rejuvenate the school's local land slowed down significantly to include diverse cultural and ecological perspectives, as well as to reflect the collective vision of our children, educators, and parents. There was talk about what animals the children would like to see and hear at the school. There was wonder around what kind of stories and whose stories come from this place. The 2nd Edition challenged the community to ask: How do we help children reclaim the local world as their own family?

The kindergarteners were first to roll up their sleeves. The final week of school buzzed with their questions and laughter as they yanked out the ornamental hostas in the front garden, which were then

taken home by various community members. The soil beds were cleared for new plants the community decided to invite - plants that are native to the land, are ecologically distinct or significant, have medicinal properties, convey important cultural stories, songs and teachings, or simply, delicious.

Sumer staff and parents who live in the neighbourhood volunteered to water the seedlings over the summer. "Place-based Education" themed the summer professional development, and educators were asked to re-read the second branch of *Natural Curiosity 2nd Edition* (Experiential Learning) in preparation to build group knowledge around the following questions: What does place-based education mean to us? What more do we need to know and what relationships should we further develop? How can we as a community research and design, and deepen our connection with our outdoor spaces? How will we celebrate the Earth differently this year?



The start of the new school year converged with many new beginnings. If you are in a rush, you might walk right past the smell of sweetgrass that carry the Indigenous histories of this land, bearberries that can help relieve a tough winter cold, kale that

meaningful relationships that led us to this point in our learning. Most importantly, it is a celebration we must share and cherish with our children, every day beyond Earth Day, as we move towards Reconciliation in a good way. This is our inquiry.

End Notes

* Saskatchewan Cree and Dene Elders believe the common expression "on Mother Earth" continues the subtle colonization - they experience from Anglophones. The expression "in Mother Earth" is closer to their Indigenous meaning. Similarly, the phrase "on the land" becomes "in the land." (Natural Curiosity 2nd Edition, p.6)

Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a component of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. Its mandate is to inform all Canadians about what happened in Indian Residential Schools. The Commission documented the truth of survivors, families, communities and anyone personally affected by the residential school experience. Reconciliation is an overall objective of the Commission, hoped to be achieved through activities such as public education and engagement, commemoration and recommendations to the parties. (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2018)

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can save an evening trip to the grocery store, and new pollinators chit-chatting in the blossoms. If you walk slowly enough, you will surely notice a small metal sign beside every single plant, on it their English name, scientific name, and a blank space. This blank space is a testament of our community to acknowledge what we yet do not know. It is an invitation for difficult and truthful conversations about this land with each other and our children. It is a promise to continue the

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