

Chapter 9. Pathfinders towards thriving relationships

This experience has reaffirmed ethics of care, relationship – it's pedagogical love. When people feel that you really love them, even adults, they will try things that they didn't think they could do.

- Kim Ondrik, Principal of Mill Bay Nature School¹

Mill Bay is located in the Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island, about 50 minutes from British Columbia's provincial capital of Victoria. In 2017, with a growing population of residents, the school district needed to open a new elementary school. The district superintendent, Rod Allen, wanted to use the opportunity to create an environment where children could connect with British Columbia's most evident resource: its natural ecosystems. The natural land of British Columbia is important for both economic reasons – logging, fishing and tourism remain major industries – but also to its people and cultures. The First Nations of B.C. are slowly regaining their strength after decades of suppression. Their respect for the land and understanding of the complex relationships between natural and human ecosystems are gradually seeping through many communities and sectors.

To help create the Nature School, Rod hired Kim Ondrik, founder of a school-within-a-school in B.C.'s Okanagan Valley which had developed a strong culture of connection both within the school and with the wider community. Rod asked if Kim wanted to create a school – and a school community – from scratch. The school opened on the site of a former elementary school that had been closed for years. In the first year, there were just a handful of classrooms and a large, open field behind. Taking over the gymnasium, Kim and the team of founding teachers created a community circle where all students gather.

Mill Bay's new school has 'nature' in its name – and kids do spend a large amount of their time outside, investigating their natural world – but the school is first and foremost about relationships. Both the teachers and the students, who are all early elementary age, are constantly having to push boundaries. They are learning how to do unfamiliar things in unusual spaces. Without the habitual structures of a school they are pushed to think about what will be best, what they should do. They are pushed by guides like Tousilum, their elder-in-residence, to think about the role of education in reconciliation between indigenous and settler communities and between humans and the earth. All of this requires immense trust. Without other touchstones around, they can only lean on each other. This has its benefits pedagogically. As Kim describes, in trying to develop their practice in a new context, they as teachers have to constantly remind themselves to focus on what is in front of them:

It's so conditioned to go to curriculum – 'they're supposed to be here' – but becoming attuned to children has to be there first. It's professional development in situ – how do you become more attuned to children, while you yourself are growing.

Could schools help us all become more attuned to each other, and in being so, grow?

¹ Interview with Kim Ondrik, November 2019