

## **Finding Movement in Stillness: Storying Our Collective Journey of Advocating for Outdoor Early Childhood Programs in British Columbia During a Global Pandemic**

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*'maggy and milly and molly and may'  
maggy and milly and molly and may  
went down to the beach (to play one day)*

*and maggie discovered a shell that sang  
so sweetly she couldn't remember her troubles, and*

*milly befriended a stranded star  
whose rays five languid fingers were;*

*and molly was chased by a horrible thing  
which raced sideways while blowing bubbles: and*

*may came home with a smooth round stone  
as small as a world and as large as alone.*

*For whatever we lose (like a you or a me)  
it's always ourselves we find in the sea*

*-ee cummings*

### **Introduction**

*"...we wrote knowing that none of the stories we told would change the world.  
But we wrote hoping that they would." (King, 2003, p.92)<sup>1</sup>*

We are a group of educators living and working within the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh and Lekwungen in an area also known as coastal British Columbia (BC). Our group came together, pre-COVID-19, to focus on lobbying the BC government to change its Child Care Licensing Regulations to license outdoor early childhood programs. Despite a growing interest and a significant increase in the number of outdoor early childhood programs in BC (Edgar, 2020; Sharpe, 2019), current regulations only license programs that have an indoor facility (BC Ministry of Attorney General, 2020). In BC, opportunities for outdoor experiences for young children attending a program are framed within the context of a prescribed regulatory

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<sup>1</sup> The paper was written during July 2020 and revised in October 2020.

requirement for time outside, and in relation to the centre's building. Our collaborative work contemplates how the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted our group's journey in unpredictable and surprisingly generative ways, and how we continue towards our goal. We are mindful and appreciative of where we dwell on Earth at this moment, and the BC COVID-19 story plays an important role in the stories we share. During the pandemic, being outdoors has received an unprecedented endorsement in BC, and this has impacted the course of our journey. As we layer our story, interrelated plots about place, movement, and multiplicity offer reflections on learning to live with(in) contradictions, of finding movement in stillness, and of (re)turning to question what is possible in this moment of pause.

## Place



*Photo by I. Berger*

Much like “maggy, milly, molly and may”, our story is inextricably entangled with place – more specifically, about how the pandemic has presented a renewed, and perhaps more intimate, relation with place. Places have their unique ethos, histories and geographies. Washington State, our neighbour to the south, had an early North American COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020. The province of BC watched closely, swiftly imposing strict measures, including physical distancing, the closure of non-essential services, recommendations to stay home, and minimized travel (McIntyre, 2020). The BC response to the pandemic has been led by the (now world-renowned) provincial medical health officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry. Dr. Henry has been addressing the province every day for the past several months. In her calm and caring way (she is known for her message: “Be kind, be calm and be safe”), she has talked about the importance of physical distancing and our collective responsibility to arrest the health crisis (Porter, 2020). At the same time, she encouraged British Columbians to spend as much time as possible outside (CBC News, 2020a). As a result, parks have become the most populated public spaces (often until the late hours) (Ryan, 2020). Families and neighbours are seen sitting on blankets on patches of grass near their homes. Throughout the Lower Mainland, patios are “popping up” on spaces previously used for car parking. Numerous streets are partially or fully blocked for cars, with signs that read “Slow Street”, inviting pedestrians and cyclists to use the roads. A variety of grasses and wild plants grow on the side of roads uninterrupted.



*Photo by I. Berger*

## **Movement**

*“and always  
the air moves in  
to fill the spaces  
where my body’s been”  
M. Strand*

In 2018, Washington State established a pilot project to license outdoor early childhood programs and has been reforming legislation to allow for full-day outdoor childcare (Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families, 2019). They are the first jurisdiction in North America to engage in this process. On March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020, our group was to host a working forum in Victoria, BC, composed of healthcare policy makers, healthcare licensing officers, early childhood educators (from outdoor and non-outdoor programs), and researchers, including a delegation from Washington State, to consider how BC might move towards licensing outdoor early childhood programs.

Then, COVID-19 struck and the event was cancelled. We did not know what to do, except we felt that we needed to continue the conversation. Almost daily, reports were coming from diverse sources indicating the importance of being outdoors to lessen transmission of the virus (Children & Nature Network, 2020; Lannoy et al., 2020; Shaw, 2020). While COVID-19 continued to have significant impacts on many communities, research about limiting transmission through being outdoors persisted (Ratnesar-Shumate et al., 2020; Qian et al., 2020). As our group continued to meet, we began to ponder the unexpected generative emergence of this moment.

As a collective, we relied on each other’s energy and nourishing support. Our regular meetings have turned into lively conversations and exchanges of stories, poems, jokes, and ideas. Through sharing, we noted how the pandemic intensified and transformed our relations with place and how the outdoors has gained a new favourable meaning in the political landscape of BC. We share some of our stories below.

## Multiplicity

*“And forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet  
and the winds long to play with your hair” - Khalil Gibran (1923/2018, p. 21)*

Thomas King (2003) has suggested that all we are is stories. As we share our stories, we wish to highlight their multiplicity and not their unity. Even though we tell a story of collaboration, each narrative is a unique and situated response. Concepts such as “outdoors,” “nature”, and “education” are highly political and contested and our reflections on these concepts are more of an invitation to continue the dialogue about the possibilities that unfold when we think collectively about what happens when children join with the world that lies beyond the walls of the building.

## Enid’s story

To begin a province-wide discussion of outdoor early childhood programs in BC, a small group of educators who were interested in reducing regulatory barriers for these programs planned a symposium for the end of March 2020. The planning went smoothly. All the right players were lined up—an advisory committee of strong thinkers willing to collaborate, Vancouver Island Health Authority (known as Island Health) taking the lead to support the symposium, the Washington State Outdoor Nature-Based Early Learning and Child Care Pilot Project willing to share ideas and guidance from their similar experience and all the right participants invited. Key players were Dr. Richard Stanwick, Chief Medical Health Officer for Island Health, and Shelley McClure, Regional Manager Community Care Facilities Licensing for Island Health, both believed in the value of children immersed in natural spaces and were willing to support policy changes. Having been engaged for more than a decade with outdoor education programs for young children, six and under (Elliot & Krusekopf, 2018; Elliot, 2019; Harwood et al., 2020), I have been concerned by the obstacles faced by early childhood programs which spend all or most of the day outside. I was recently part of a task force examining issues of child care for the City of Victoria with Dr. Stanwick. Knowing that he was a fierce advocate for children’s well-being, I suggested we meet to discuss some of the barriers to outdoor programs. In December of 2019, we met and discussed possible ways forward. He encouraged me to meet with Dr. Shelley McClure to plan a meeting with practitioners and relevant government people, as well as to invite the lead experts in Washington State.

Shelley and I communicated regularly for two months leading up to the symposium. It was a good partnership, full of discussion, engagement and commitment to creating opportunities for outdoor programs for young children in BC. Along with our committee the symposium was organized, the participants invited and the speakers lined up. What could go wrong?

Our efforts came to a stop mid-March in order to curtail the spread of COVID-19. Overnight, Shelley’s attention was gone from the project and so to the conversations, as she was focused

on protecting not only the child care facilities on Vancouver Island, but also the long-term care homes.

The disappointment I felt at the cancellation of the symposium seemed trivial in the face of the pandemic, but I missed my dynamic planning conversations with Shelley and worried that our project would be dropped. On many levels it was an anxious time, but somehow, we continued to think together and decided to stay connected, keeping in touch with the participants of the symposium and providing them with resources about outdoor possibilities for young children. Continuing to collaborate on this project, the advisory committee was not sure where it would go, but we let it meander while we found our focus. Our meetings were nourishing, especially in a time of uncertainty and worry. Our group met virtually and shared on-going thoughts. As trust and familiarity grew, we shared poetry and jokes in our meetings and our discussions grew deeper. I thought about the nature of collaboration and the power of working within community.

Collaboration is easily spoken of and aspired to, but when it happens it is a gift. In our story, working together, sharing thoughts and listening to other perspectives provides the dynamic energy needed to create new visions and pathways for outdoor learning for young children. During this time of unknowing and uncertainty, I have personally gained strength from our collaboration. Despite the connection being digital, I have been moved by the commitment and passion of the members of the committee. Our meetings have been productive, but not necessarily predictable.

These past few months have been discouraging with the spread of the virus, the situation in long-term care homes and prominent incidents of police violence. In the face of injustices, lack of caring and worries about the outcomes of the pandemic, the experience of working and caring together gave me hope. Education can be a collaboration with each person teaching and learning, adding their gifts to the process. How might we imagine education with young children outdoors?

Shelley rejoined our group in June 2020, and found a welcoming community. As the lockdown has begun to ease, British Columbians have been urged to spend time outdoors. Current understanding is that transmission of COVID-19 is lessened outdoors, and outdoor preschools have come into focus again. Bringing her public health understanding from the past three months, along with her knowledge of the system of licensing, Shelley contributed her ideas of how we might move forward with our aims. She sees where we might be able to make a difference for children by encouraging all early childhood educators to move outdoors to engage with the living, breathing world. We are working together. Our thinking is richer for the wandering and we are ready to look at the possibilities of a post-COVID era.

### **Kailee's story**

Amidst COVID-19 work-from-home measures, I am inescapably tied to my computer. I moved homes early in 2020 and, after seven years delivering farm and forest-based programs for children, I started part-time jobs in child care and research. I was gradually shifting my babysitting

activities outdoors when families abruptly began staying home with their children. I decided to accept additional responsibilities online.

I welcomed the changes with little hesitation. Access to a safe and meaningful position during the pandemic was a rare opportunity. I was the newest member of a passionate team dedicated to identifying and reducing barriers to outdoor early childhood education in BC. Our Zoom meetings became a social staple and the distances between us, across the city or the Salish Sea, lost distinction as I connected with everyone. In the evenings, I manifested long desired self-care routines, faithfully treading a path beside the river every other day and growing incrementally familiar with one small part of the beautiful, unceded, ancestral lands of the Musqueam and Tsleil-Waututh. I experienced spring through these journeys, running by roses that bloomed and multiplied with intense colour and fragrance, before beginning to wilt and fall away. I was and am grateful.



*Photo by K. Hirsche*

Lately, though, I am feeling the effects of days spent alone, indoors, at a screen. After just three months, the physical impact of “office” work has surprised me. My back, habituated to the movement of keeping up with energetic children, seems to have tightened in protest of hours upon hours of sitting. Bewildered and squinting uncomfortably one morning, I found myself unaccustomed to light brighter than the evening sun I meet on my jogs. Through this time, I have not only read literature on the benefits of being outside; I have felt the absence in my body. Though amazed many (including teachers) sustain full-time work inside, at a desk, I feel renewed urgency to transition education outdoors for the benefit of students and their educators.

With recent easing of restrictions, babysitting is thankfully on my horizon again. As I begin to reconnect with parents, one mom reports daily neighbourhood walks are part of their family routine and requests that I spend my time with her child outdoors, too. What previously required planning and persuasion has become a shared expectation. I think many of us sense we can best keep each other safe out in the fresh air, but perhaps there’s more to it. Perhaps I’m not the only one stirred by the dizziness of unrelenting screen time and unsettling settling of my bones.

### **Belva’s story**

Outdoor education has existed for as long as we can recall. For many, happy childhood memories happened in the bosom of Mother Nature as she guided us through the simple lessons of life. It could be reasonable to say that outdoor education has been deeply rooted in our society, quietly offering us an unnoticed lifeline.

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When news of COVID-19 first began to bubble up in China, I'm a bit ashamed to admit that I didn't pay too much attention. I recalled the SARS outbreak and how it didn't reach my part of the world—I thought we were going to be okay over here. On a Monday in early March, fellow outdoor educators were emailing back and forth about it with worry and wondering how it could affect our programming. By Friday of that same week, local news began to shift—COVID-19 had found its way into our backyard. Societal panic began to rise, as did mine.

As the Director of three outdoor early learning programs for children aged 2.5-6 years, I realized that I needed to address COVID-19 with the families in my programs. I had a responsibility to let them know the efforts we'd been taking regularly, the continued steps we would be taking after Spring Break and a gentle reminder of how much safer we were outdoors. I spent two agonizing days drafting an email. Why was this so hard?! I am quite skilled at addressing difficult issues through email—but this. This was hard. Around me, I watched as my fellow outdoor educators were closing their programs 'indefinitely'. Indefinitely. That is such a big word, with long-lasting connotations. I wasn't ready to use that word in relation to my programs just yet. Inwardly, I was melting down with indecision over what to do.

Impulsive isn't a word I would use to describe myself. Despite my gregarious personality, I am most often found lurking in a corner, observing my surroundings. In this moment of indecision, I felt the need to listen to the news and learn more. I felt the need to listen to parents and hear what they had to say. Big changes were afoot and I didn't want to rush into anything. I created a poll for families inquiring about their home situations and to seek their opinions about what to do. Should we close until June, close indefinitely, or take it one month at a time? 97% of the families that took the poll said "one month at a time". Slow and steady wins the race, as information about the pandemic was changing daily, making our future unknown. Our programs were headed into two weeks of Spring Break, so it was clear the best choice was to watch, wait, listen and utilize the gift of time to make an informed decision.

The last two weeks of March was a good year, they say. Each day felt like a month. COVID-19 was on fire, decimating our societal way of living and taking lives along with it. My job, that was once thriving and secure, now hung in the balance, as my inbox went dark at a time when it should have been teeming with inquiry. By the end of March, I made the pragmatic choice to suspend programming, one month at a time, as this seemed the best way to continue observing, listening and taking it all in. By the end of April, I made the decision to close until the end of June, with the hope of running summer camps in July. Many parents replied that they cried when they read the news of our permanent closure. I cried too. I wasn't committing to 'indefinitely', but July felt like an 'eternity' away.

During the lockdown, our advisory group, that was working towards getting outdoor education licensed in BC, continued to meet virtually. Even though we were temporarily stalled in our efforts to move forward, we continued to discuss ideas and check in with each other. There was so much uncertainty in those conversations due to our unknown future, but our meetings were assuring and could be counted on. Through our commitment to outdoor education, we became

dedicated to our meetings and, by proxy, to each other. We needed some inspiration, something to look ahead to, and this group was giving us just that. Hope sat on the horizon that outdoor education would indeed gain the attention it deserved. Slow 'n steady wins the race, and we were both of those things. In response to the lockdown, we agreed that a Facebook page for our newly formed association, *Outdoor Early Learning Association of BC* (Stone-Cole, 2020), should be created. We would share stories from practitioners and offer interesting articles on benefits of outdoor education for followers to read. It's been quite successful thus far, and it continues to offer us hope for the future of outdoor education.

Throughout this whole pandemic, there has been one thru-line that has been spoken again and again by our health officials: Get outside, as much as possible (Province of BC, 2020, 48:15). Take education outside – life is better outside. As time has slowly progressed throughout the summer, the lights in my inbox have once again been turned on. Daily emails are being received with renewed interest. My waitlists have doubled in a few short weeks and five more weeks of summer camps have been successfully launched, thanks to my team of amazing educators. I'm feeling a sense of hope in our new way of life and that of my chosen profession.

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Outdoor education has existed for as long as we can recall. For many, happy childhood memories happened in the bosom of Mother Nature as she guided us through the simple lessons of life. May the lights be turned onto the star of the show, Mother Nature, as we begin to collectively accept the gifts she has been offering us all this time.

*"The land knows you, even when you are lost."*  
— Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013, p. 36)

### **Hart's story**

My kids are now grown and I do not spend much time with young children, apart from the perpetually childish dog that lives with us, and my own silly self. I signed up to be part of a collective urban farm in Vancouver for summer 2020. Weekly, we (I invite/require the teenagers to join me) have been excitedly cycling to fill up our panniers with locally grown produce from my community. We stroll through the garden as we collect our vegetables, talk with the gardeners, and observe changes in the plants. The other week, as we were cycling up a small rise (just enough of a slope to slow me down so that I might notice a bit more carefully) adjacent to a local high school, my attention was caught by the grass around the school. I know the school ground, having lived in Vancouver for years, but I had never noticed the grass before. The closure of the school had spin offs, of course, and in this instance the grass was remarkably tall. I stopped and watched as the tall grass swayed in the breeze, as a wave, almost singular in nature. COVID-19 has resulted in changes for everyone, mostly disruptions to life prior; though some changes have offered inklings of possibilities that otherwise have gone un(der)-noticed, like the grass.



Photo by H. Banack



The tall grass around the school, for me, was an illustration of “educational possibility” that I noticed through the pandemic. Where I live, in British Columbia, Canada, on the ancient and mostly unceded territories of many un(der)-noticed Indigenous Peoples, land, nature, and outdoors are branded and marketed fiercely for tourism revenue (Banack and Berger, 2019). However, educationally, from preschool through K-12 and into post-secondary, land, nature, and outdoors have not been a priority. This is why I have been collaborating with our group, to shift practices. And then, COVID-19 hit. Almost daily now, I am coming across news stories recommending increasing time spent outdoors as a way to stay healthy and socially connected, and as a good virus transmission risk reducer (Guardian, 2020; Levenson, Parker-Pope, & Gorman, 2020). Now, more than I have ever observed before in my 30-plus year career in outdoor learning and guiding, being outdoors has become a necessity

– an urgency. None of us in our group expected the pandemic to turn a spotlight on being outdoors, but it has. The shift to practicing outdoor learning does require particular attention; however, approached locally it can be engaged in wherever you are. In BC, we are particularly fortunate with outdoor access.

I have read of various COVID-19 pivots by teachers, learners, families and educational administrators over the past months, including a shift to local outdoor learning (CBC NEWS, 2020b). As a new and different pedagogy, outdoor teaching and learning may produce feelings of anxiety or confusion (*aporia*) for those unfamiliar. A first shift must involve *will* (*enkratēs*), the will of the teacher, learner, family, and administration to take learning outdoors and stick with it, even though it may not feel comfortable, initially. Most educators I teach report how they enjoy the fresh air that comes with learning outdoors. Other considerations for shifting learning outdoors include seeking support and building confidence through practice with others – *coaction* – so, meet some educators who teach outdoors. Consider joining a network of established outdoor educators (such as a group like ours), seeking resources online that support outdoor learning suitable to your particular context, and/or providing outdoor learning workshops provided by locals with experience. There are various ways to begin building confidence for, and supporting, outdoor learning right where you practice locally. Okay, so back to the story of the farm, grass and the school. Remember, as with urban farming, changing practices requires time to adjust your balance to the shifts of change *Photo by H. Banack* and to notice the fruits of your labour, so be patient and forgiving, yet persistent. In *Auguries of Innocence*, William Blake (1950) urged us “to see a world in a grain of sand”, or in this story, to see learning in the swaying high grass of the school-yard. Nature is

everywhere (Marris, 2016), so too is learning. In BC, one does not need to go far abroad outdoors to create meaningful outdoor learning opportunities, but you do need to open your door.

### Iris's story

I have not quite found the words to express the process our group has been through over the past few months, yet it occurred to me that we have lived (within) the paradoxical conditions of stasis and movement. For me, the work of this group symbolizes a response to the question: What can be kept in motion in these restrictive times? After the March 30th event was cancelled, it would have been so “logical” to put everything on hold and to give in to stasis. I cannot even remember how it came about, but somehow we found (or cultivated) the energy to keep going. There is something magical that happens when a goal becomes unattainable (at least temporarily), but the energy that brought people together continues to vibrate. In reflection, this is a sentiment that I like to carry with me into pedagogical spaces, because an education that knows its goals too precisely leaves no room for the unexpected - the potentialities for creative forces and novelty to emerge. Our weekly Zoom meeting became a welcoming space: a gathering with its own rhythms and rituals through which we learned about each other's lives, homes (as those were the backgrounds of our faces), pets, daily routines, neighborhood walks and bike rides.



My interest in joining this group was born out of an ongoing interest to revolutionize the field of early childhood education and to shake it out from regulatory gaze and a reductionist historical tradition, often imposed by (ironically) a health and safety discourse. The conventional story about outdoor and young children rests too often on either a Romantic idealization of this connection and/or an extractivist logic, where the “outdoors” or “nature” become a resource, endlessly mined for its benefits for children's healthy development (Berger & van Groll, 2020). As the notion of outdoors unfolds newly in our current lives, I am overwhelmed with questions about how this moment opens up new ways to think about early childhood education and the outdoors; how might sedimented understanding of children's (and adults') relations with place change, and how might we think about the connection between health and being outside in less instrumental, regulated ways.

### Concluding Remarks

*“We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
Through the unknown, unremembered gate  
When the last of earth left to discover  
Is that which was the beginning;*

*At the source of the longest river  
The voice of the hidden waterfall  
And the children in the apple-tree”  
T.S. Elliot - Little Gidding*

*At the edge of a park (a story from one of our meetings)*

*With time on my hands, I (Enid) recently spent time with a two-year-old at the edge of a park. We had breezed by the playground with swings, slide and ‘ship’, to end up in the tiniest of corners at the park among the rosemary, currant bushes, nodding onion and mint. How lucky to have this park available! Together we discovered ladybugs, wood bugs and water and wandered the little paths contentedly. We spent forty-five minutes together while he went between the bushes, hiding underneath the rosemary, talking to himself, to me and to the pathway. To know a place, we must spend time among the bushes, looking at the ladybugs closely and wondering where the water goes. But, to also know that place is to know that parts of the park are home to people without a home. Tents have sprung up among the rocks and bushes, and I wondered how I would explain to a two-year-old why the tents are there. On this trip, we didn’t see the tents, but people moving into the park have made me aware of the complexity of “being outdoors”.*

And so, we have not moved (but something did) as we find ourselves at a new place which is really the old place. This story has always been about wandering with children outside, joining with the movements of place and community. This pause/disruption, due to the virus, has perhaps brought us closer to ways children wander in place, zooming in and becoming intimate, finding worlds in “small places,” looking at bugs, hiding in plants, and following water: submerged in earthy experiences. David Abrams (Personal Communication, 2018) suggests we are within the world because air is part of the world and we are within that air and thus within the world.

As we continue our journey to challenge the BC regulations for outdoor early childhood programs, what has become vivid to us during the pandemic is how cemented and rigid ways of thinking and doing can crumble quickly, to reveal that what seemed impossible yesterday may become our new reality today. The stakes are high and the ending of the story is far from being clear (In October 2020, we are concluding a series of virtual roundtables called ECE Outdoors Now, which have been well-attended- <https://eceanow.pwias.ubc.ca>). We cannot uncritically assume that the outdoors is a “cure” to the pandemic, nor the potential trauma and devastation it will leave as it storms through the world, especially with young children (Hyslop, 2020). In sharing our ‘stories so far’ (Banack et al., 2018), we offer a modest contribution, our act of responsibility to an educational narrative that learns to be response-able.

*For a fungi to grow, you must give it as mushroom as possible. (Washington Nature, 2019)*

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