

The Animals, the Plants, and the Dirt that Soiled the Underpants

How an Agriculture Immersion Environment Shapes K-6 Students' Relationship with Schooling

Research Question:

How does an agricultural learning environment shape K-6 students' relationship with schooling?

Data sources:

- Interviews with:
 - K-6 students
 - parents
 - teachers
 - school staff
 - community and agri-sector members
- Observations of learning
- Web-based parent survey

Methodology:

- Intrinsic case study
- Community-based research

Further information:

<https://www.schoolbasedag.com/>

Principal Investigator:

Dr. Bonnie Stelmach
Studies in Educational Leadership
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Canada

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And They Learned Happily Ever After...

One day an educational researcher tagged along with Grade 4-6 students on a planting project at a local lake. Crouching down by a student planting a seedling, the researcher asked,

"So, what do you think about planting trees?"

"It's fun" said the student, "it's so much better than school!"

The students continued planting until all the seedlings were in the ground, and they learned happily ever after.

On another day... Grade 3 students were digging up cotton underwear they had buried months ago on the school property. One location - the pile of straw and manure from the animal pens - proved challenging. They dug and dug but could not find the underwear! Every day for a week following that lesson, the students went out to the pile during recess and dug until they finally found the raggedy underpants. They, too, learned happily ever after knowing what makes soil healthy, and feeling rewarded for persisting.



What's important about these stories?

Children's language and actions are powerful for conveying:

- How hands-on agriculture and nature-based activities feel distinct from conventional schooling
- How learning without the boundaries of classroom walls/desks leads to practical engagement, curiosity, and joy
- How lessons that create wonder can keep students in discovery mode long after the lesson is over
- How not liking school does not mean not liking learning

Through agriculture school becomes a place where students...

- see the **world as a co-teacher** (Blenkinsop & Beeman, 2010) and learning everywhere
- develop **attentive receptivity** (Beeman, 2006)
- learn in an interdisciplinary fashion across various contexts, building abstract models for **problem solving** (Epstein, 2019)
- engage in **desirable difficulties** (Kornell & Metcalf, 2007)
- **respect nature** through intimate relationships with animals and other life forms (Louv, 2019)
- experience **awe and wonder**, which is key for motivation and engagement (Kelly, 2007)
- witness life and death, building **resilience**
- practice **nurturing and compassion** through animal interactions, developing prosocial skills (Melson, 2003)
- take on high-stakes, adult-like responsibilities, learning **work ethic, accountability, and pride**
- find **resonance** between their learning at school and their learning at home
- **appreciate** the amount of labor required to raise **food**
- forge **community connections** (Gruenewald & Smith, 2008)

"If this school wasn't here, I don't know what I would do."

(Grade 6 student)

What if *school* felt more like *learning* for all students?