

Nature-based Pedagogy of Becoming and Autism

I have taught high school students for the past 34 years. Changes in society, technology, mental health issues, and the earth's environment have changed exponentially and along with them students' social and academic needs. Yet, educational responses are often reactive—pedagogical strategies and curriculum updates are obsolete before they are implemented. One of the fastest-growing demographics in many Canadian schools is students with autism. The challenge for teachers is to teach students whose needs and abilities are spread across a broad spectrum. An approach that works for one student may not be effective or practical for another. In my experience, no one pedagogical approach works for all students, especially students with autism, except for the Nature-based Pedagogy of Becoming.

This pedagogical model is inspired by nature and thrives in outdoor settings. It is holistic and immersive. Holistic learning emphasizes the integration of intellectual, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual growth, considering the whole person. Immersive learning involves deep engagement with the environment through hands-on activities, allowing learners to absorb concepts fully through sensory experiences. Nature-based pedagogy connects mind and body, fostering lasting relationships with the subject matter and a deep, personal connection to nature. It emphasizes curiosity and wonder, encouraging learners to explore the world around them. This approach also flattens traditional hierarchies in the classroom, adopting a rhizomatic model where students and teachers learn from one another. This pedagogy anticipates change, much like a caterpillar metamorphosing into a butterfly, using natural, sequential processes that encourage adaptation. In this framework, learning is not a fixed transfer of knowledge, but a mutual, ongoing exchange between individuals and their environment.



Imagine a class of students in a forest or a park exploring the theme of power. After reading books like *Animal Farm* or *Charlotte's Web*, students could approach the theme in unique



ways. One might photograph organisms in a food web to illustrate energy flow. Another could measure tree heights, observing how taller trees "compete" for sunlight. Others might create art or write stories about power structures. Ideas evolve and interconnect as they share their work, encouraging collective growth.

For students with autism, this pedagogy provides liberation, allowing them to engage with topics comfortably and observe others' approaches. The outdoor environment, less rigid than a traditional classroom, reduces social pressures and encourages meaningful connections. It allows them to join a community without the overwhelming demands of classroom norms. Success on outings depends on preparation, including structured choices and gradual transitions. One advantage of this approach is its accessibility—it requires no new technology or significant funds, making it feasible for budget-limited schools.

Although the Nature-based Pedagogy of Becoming is best experienced outside of the school because nature assumes the role of teacher, a framework for this philosophical approach can be created in classrooms and home environments. Stations or nodes can be set up in different areas — such as storybooks, plants, a hamster cage, art materials, and scientific experiments on forces or energy— and students can choose their approach based on the common theme of power. Students should produce a self-assessment based on an agreed matrix, whether the activity happens indoors or outdoors. My students use our 7 C's - what did you learn about, Community, Cooperation, Communication, Courage, Compassion, Critical Thinking, and Consequences?

This pedagogy is not merely a method; it is a philosophy that supports every student's personal and academic development, including those on the autism spectrum. As we continue to respond to the changing needs of our students, this approach offers hope for creating learning environments that are not just reactive, but proactive in anticipating and nurturing the diverse ways in which students engage with the world — constantly evolving, always becoming.