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# Finding Our Way

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One day last term, at the beginning of a class about early childhood program administration, the students expressed that they were feeling tired and stressed. They looked very depleted.

Like many post-secondary ECE students across the province, they were juggling many things in their lives, including part-time jobs, caring for children and other family members, managing health issues, and travelling between home and school communities—not to mention the significant responsibilities of being a student. Add in a pandemic, mental health challenges, the opioid crisis, massive flooding, ECE staff shortages, changes in ECE policy and funding, racism and violence around the globe, lack of affordable housing and inflation—and we get a very strong sense of how challenging these times must be for students.

We shifted gears that day. I asked the students if they wanted to get outside for some fresh air, and they did. We decided to climb the stairs at Vancouver Island University, all the way up to the Tamagawa Gardens that feature a bridge and a large koi pond. Once there, we paused and watched the beautiful orange fish swim calmly through the dark waters. They looked strong and healthy, despite living in a home that seemed rather dreary.

Afterwards, we stopped by the VIU Theatre, where an art exhibit was open to visitors. We walked through the space filled with student projects, observing and reflecting along

the way. Students chatted about their impressions, laughed, and delighted in the interesting and unusual findings in their midst.

There was a large wooden box there with the following invitation: “With these UV light-activated pens, enter the box and write any negative names you have ever been called and be rid of them from your life. Take a look at the other names written and reflect.” Many students did this, as did I. It felt good to write my dreaded nickname “buffoon” and leave it there, along with many other unwelcome names.

On our way back to Building 180, which sits at the bottom of the hill at VIU’s Nanaimo campus, two students spontaneously decided to do handstands and then proceeded to walk on their hands across the grass. The rest of us watched in awe. What a playful thing to do!

We returned to the classroom and began our lesson on the topic of strategic planning. We talked about identifying shared values and beliefs, creating a program vision and mission statement, and developing goals, strategies, and action plans for meeting them. The students had many ideas to share, and they raised many thoughtful questions around what might be possible. At the end, one student exclaimed “I feel much better!”

The next week, students submitted their strategic plan assignment related to an imaginary or planned early care and learning program. When I reviewed the assignments, I was so



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impressed by the ideas conveyed in them: visions of centres where children are welcomed, celebrated, and honoured; places of belonging, curiosity, and inquiry; programs with opportunities for collaboration and innovation. I was reminded of the potential for generative thinking when we have time to pause and become grounded again. Fresh air, nature, art, and play can help!

How might we, as educators and administrators, continue to navigate these challenging times and find ways for fostering joy, creativity, and innovation with others? What experiences and/or resources have supported you in finding your way at this time?

*Ocean Kneeland is grateful to live on the traditional lands of the Snuneymuxw and Cowichan tribes. She currently works as the program chair and professor of Early Childhood Education and Care at Vancouver Island University.*