

Introduction:

This NEF funded project teaches second grade elementary students about the life and philosophy of Henry David Thoreau and gives them experience cultivating mindful practices by spending quiet time outdoors. Taking a short walk by the Mill River, children engage in focusing activities which require using their senses while they build observational and self-regulation skills. They become better able to identify and deepen feelings of stillness and calm, which helps to promote increased readiness for academic and social learning when they return to the busier classroom setting. Finding serenity in nature, just as Thoreau did, is what we hope children experience as they learn important strategies for self-regulation and mindfulness in the tranquil environment by the Mill River.

This project starts with an introduction to Thoreau and his unique lifestyle, using picture books read aloud as a catalyst for discussion of his important ideas as author, poet, naturalist and philosopher, followed by a walking field trip to the Mill River with half the class. Each session introduces children to a different focusing task that connects with what they learned about Thoreau and gives them techniques to quietly focus their attention and practice mindfulness in a beautiful setting by the river. During various sessions, children utilize nature journals and engage in activities such as sound mapping, sketching observational drawings of plant life, sunprint making, creating feeling stones, and mindful meditative walking. Activities encompass many different disciplines including reading, writing, math, art, science, and social emotional learning.

Students fill out a quick feelings survey before and after each session by the river, indicating whether they feel calm, excited, anxious, worried, happy, etc. They also have the opportunity to measure their pulse with an oximeter before and after to note any changes. This self-monitoring can help demonstrate for children the effectiveness of the mindfulness strategies they use.

Rationale:

Data from social and emotional universal screenings suggest that a high percentage of students in our elementary schools demonstrate signs of stress. As the teaching of social and emotional skills becomes increasingly embedded within our elementary school curricula, the goal of this program is for elementary students to learn a variety of simple yet effective strategies for managing emotions and impulse control and increasing focus and attention. At the elementary level, larger class sizes mean there are typically a significant number of students within the classroom who display impulse control and self-regulation difficulties, making classroom management more challenging and impacting learning for all. It is also clear that many students we serve do not have a connection to the natural world and spend much of their free time overusing technology. As educators of young children, we seek to promote a stronger child-nature bond and see environmental literacy as a fundamental element of children's cognitive, as well as psychological and physical health.

Learning Activities:

- Creating a sound map in nature journals while spending fifteen minutes quietly hearing the sounds around them and recording what direction they are coming from; making a recording of nature sounds to be saved and played on MP3 players as calming tools in classroom
- Observing and sketching plants and animals seen within an outlined area while sitting still for fifteen or more minutes (using their nature journals for recording and the field guides to inventory); making sun prints of specimens to remember their beauty; taking pictures with disposable cameras to record things in nature children find captivating
- Listening to and observing the river and finding two special words to describe the personal feelings the river evokes on smooth stones to be carried back to the classroom and used in a class poetry writing exercise
- Measuring and creating a footprint of the 10 X 15 foot dimensions of Thoreau's Walden cabin and writing about or sketching what possessions/furniture students would want in their cabins if there wasn't electricity or technology
- Practicing mindful meditative walking and breathing by creating a simple labyrinth out of rope laid on the ground and asking children to walk it slowly and silently; making their own finger labyrinths using sandpaper for use indoors

Classroom teachers will be given additional strategies to support students and help them integrate what was learned by the Mill River to the Leeds School setting. This includes continued use of sound maps and journaling in their nature journals outdoors, listening to their personalized nature sound recordings in the classroom to help soothe and calm dysregulated students, utilizing smooth stones with peaceful river words to carry as a focusing tool during academic instruction, having each child make their own hand labyrinth card, which by tracing the maze with a finger, can simulate the calming walking experience we had in the woods, utilizing the heart monitors before and after doing calming activities.

The collection of Thoreau books will be added to the school and class libraries so they are available for continued use by faculty and students. Additionally, second grade students may be able to share what was learned by inviting classes of younger buddies within the school to join them on a walk outdoors. The nature sound recordings may also be shared with a larger audience for use at home.

Materials and Resources:

Henry David Thoreau for Kids (Corinne Hosfeld Smith)

Henry David's House (Shnur and Fiore)

Henry Hikes to Fitchburg (D.B. Johnson)

The Trouble With Henry: A Tale of Walden Pond (O.Neal)

Thoreau at Walden (J. Porcellino)

Henry Builds a Cabin (D.B. Johnson)

The Listening Walk (P. Showers)

Walking with Henry: The Life and Works of Henry David Thoreau (T. Locker)

MP3 Players/Recorders

Sunprint paper

Sandpaper

Nature Journals

Vinyl tablecloths and duct tape for sit-upons

Laminated field guides (birds, insects, trees, plants)

Portable labyrinth rope

Finger pulse monitors

Feelings surveys

happy

irritated

SCARED

upset

CALM


anxious

EXCITED

CONFIDENT

RELAXED

FRUSTRATED



1. How am I feeling?
2. Heart rate _____

