

Studying Student Stewards

Young children may not have learned the term “environmental stewardship,” but that doesn’t mean they don’t practice it. In a unique UAF course, “Children as Cultural Change Agents,” six graduate students worked to tease out some of the ways young children engage with and steward their environment through participatory research projects involving preschool, kindergarten, and high school students in the communities of Fairbanks, Kenai and Scammon Bay.

“The project is geared towards equipping educators to engage children in environmental stewardship,” explained Associate Professor of Graduate Education Carie Green, who taught the course and participated in the research. “At each site we facilitated participatory research methods that honor children’s voices and perspectives in order to understand children and youth’s views on environmental stewardship within the context of their place and community.”

Two of the class’ students are schoolteachers in Scammon Bay and Kenai, which led to the involvement of local schools in those areas. A third teaches in Fairbanks, and the other three are non-traditional educators and researchers. They collected data from the students in the forms of spoken-word surveys, drawing exercises, photos and videos, and playacting, and observing the students outside. The activities were all recorded and analyzed through qualitative and quantitative methods such as word counts.

In Kenai, several topics came to the fore among graduate student Sara Boersma’s kindergarteners at the Kaleidoscope School of Arts and Sciences, including animals, picking up trash, imbuing the landscape with imaginary elements, and caring for each other. During a snowy walk outside, graduate student Emma Heslop observed one child protecting a sapling from footfalls, and another pushing snow off stumps so classmates could sit down. “What really surprised me and touched me was stewardship for the environment but also caring for each other, which is part of environmental stewardship, thinking of the needs of other people,” Heslop said.

In Scammon Bay, kindergarten students answered questions, drew, took photos, and acted out scenes of themselves interacting with the environment. While the site was overseen by graduate students Kyle Farris and Holly Williams, the actual research was conducted by five high-school seniors as a project for their capstone class. The students also presented the results via videoconference to an audience in Fairbanks. “It was my first time doing research, but then I was also trying to teach the seniors how to do research,” noted Williams, who is the seniors’ teacher. “It was really cool to see them step up and really take ownership of it.”

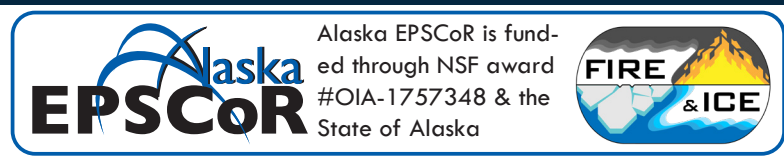
In Fairbanks, graduate students Maggie Blake and Kelly Kealy didn’t have an embedded instructor for their project at UAF’s Bunnell House, so they invented their own. “We did have a co-researcher come in and help us: Mister Tree,” explained Kealy, referring to a coniferous hand puppet. “It just got them interested and excited, a fun thing.” They also observed helpful actions among the young students, such as spontaneously shoveling snow to clear their play area. “They showed a deep sense of agency around stewardship of their local environment and community,” Kealy noted.



Scammon Bay kindergarten students take part in a playacting exercise as part of the “Children as Cultural Change Agents” course project.

photo courtesy Holly Williams

Alaska NSF EPSCoR funding enabled Green, Heslop and Farris to participate in the local research projects firsthand. “It was awesome,” said Heslop of her journey to Kenai. “I got to actually meet her kids so that when I’m looking at the videos, I know the whole story and the whole perspective and what was going on and what we said and what prompted them.” Green and the students plan to meet again for an academic writing workshop, geared toward producing a research article based on the class project.



Alaska EPSCoR is funded through NSF award #OIA-1757348 & the State of Alaska