

COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT



Internship Title:

Organization Worked For:

Student Name:

Internship Dates:

Faculty Advisor Name

Department

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STUDENT SIGNATURE

Bella Walke

DATE: _____

Lichen Early Learning Internship



Bella Walshe

Spring 2024

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1. Summary

For my internship I worked with Lichen Early Learning (LEL), a licensed nature-based preschool for ages 3-5 in Bellingham that is 100% outdoors. LEL has a “purpose... to cultivate an environment where children, families, and community are celebrated and valued through a holistic, nature-based learning experience.” ([LEL Website](#)). They have three stated values that truly captivate their philosophy, and they are: community, equity, and joy. While attending LEL, students learn many skills including empathy and care for others, teamwork, creativity, plant and animal identification, independence, and conflict resolution strategies. Many factors contribute to nurturing these skills, one of them being the teacher to student ratio being 1:4 while part of this is for safety another huge advantage of cultivating deep relationships between teachers and students.

The day-to-day schedule at LEL consists of morning work time, a greeting circle/snack time, explore time, lunch, afternoon work time/teacher led activity, and goodbye circle. Work times consist of child led activities and games where teachers are there to provide safety, participate in play, and help facilitate any moments of conflict between students. The important part of work times is that they are student led with minimal teacher agenda pushed onto them. Activities guided by teachers are times which students are given the opportunity to participate in a more structured learning opportunity based on current events, seasons/weather, or something the teachers have noticed students showing interest in.

My role during my time at LEL was as a bonus teacher, my main tasks included observing how the students interacted with their natural environment and each other, how teachers educate about natural spaces and include so within their curriculum, and to help set up/clean-up/maintain safety for the classroom activities of the day. Due to the purposeful minimal involvement of props such as toys and art materials, the set up mainly consisted of



Figure 1: A teacher and students go on a daily hike for explore time.

preparing the bathroom, our messages to the students, and the teacher-led activity of the day. A benefit of having a basic set up and clean-up system is that teachers can spend more time discussing their education methods and what worked or did not work well with specific students.

I feel like it is important to note that I also volunteered over winter quarter with LEL so I got to experience two key differences, adding to my overall experience working in this environment. The first is that I got to be with a slightly different set of teachers, as well as students. It was super helpful getting to see what adjustments were made to accommodate all students with diverse ways of learning and interacting. The second difference was in the natural climate that we were in, as LEL is a 100% outdoor preschool the difference between the activities during the winter and spring were very stark. I do not know why this was so surprising to me because it would only make sense for them to change some of their rituals at school as their environment changes. For example, as the weather got warmer, they were able to take off their gloves and sign themselves in with markers on their name tags. Students were also encouraged to participate in planting in their classroom garden in the spring, as well as observe the growth occurring on the farm which LEL is located on.

2. Reflection

In terms of feeling prepared for this internship one class from all the CENV classes I took during my time at Western that stands out was ENV5381 – Intro to Education for Eco-social Justice and Sustainability with Gene Myers. Through this course we were introduced to the currents within environmental education and one that immediately grabbed my attention was the anti-bias early childhood education aspect of emerging environmental education. This was my first introduction to LEL because we invited two of the teachers to come speak to our class about their experience within the environmental education field. This not only gave me foundational, background knowledge on early childhood environmental education, but it also is how I got introduced to a local nature-based, anti-bias preschool that led to my internship. Looking back at my learning from this CENV class, I know that there are four main pillars to anti-bias education: identity, diversity, justice, and activism. Upon reflection, I can confidently say that LEL beautifully engages in each of these pillars through many facets.



Figure 2: Teachers and students observing a Bufflehead while hiking during explore time.

Starting with the identity pillar, LEL prioritizes students being in tune with their bodies and emotions. For example, when students show signs of big emotion ranging from anger to pride, teachers encourage the students to share what made them feel that way, rather than assuming and acting based on a guess. Teachers then provide guidance in cases where there was conflict between students or with oneself so that the students can develop those problem-solving skills. Another way students can handle their emotions is by going to an area of the classroom called the “Eagle’s Nest” where there are sensory toys and a mirror with an accompanying booklet of the students creating different emotions on their faces. Having this space for students to return to in events of heightened emotion builds upon their sense of self identity.

Another way LEL creates an environment conducive to identity is by keeping in tune with their bodies, especially when the seasons start changing. It is important to make sure students are regulating their body temperatures. Asking questions such as “how does your body feel? Do your hands feel hot? Do you want to take off your hat?” help students take a moment to think about themselves and how they are feeling in the current moment. The same principle applies to eating and drinking enough to be kind to yourself.

At LEL they also ask every new community member what their pronouns are, encouraging that self-discovery and identity. When referring to plants, animals, and insects at school the teachers encourage students to use gender neutral pronouns, they/them, by asking questions when students assume gender such as; “I can tell you called them he, what tells you that they are a boy?” This typically leads to the student reassessing their choice of words and correcting to using they/them pronouns. The last thing that LEL does to help build upon students' pride in self-identity is to have them draw self-portraits, there is no right or wrong in this activity, they are drawing how they perceive themselves.



Figure 3: Students drawing stages of plants that they will plant in their garden

Appreciation of diversity is exemplified through LEL in both the social and environmental contexts. All year long there is a book in their library full of pictures of every student and teacher with their families and sometimes even pets in them. Sometime mid-year students are then asked to draw a family portrait and share with the class. Then during the last half of the school year, the students and teachers get an opportunity to do a “family share” where members of their family come into the classroom

during the day and get to share something unique or special that their family does. For example, some families will bring camp gear and talk about camping, others will bring in their dog and talk about going on walks, or even share a game that their family plays often.

When the LEL teachers came into my class, they also shared an example of an activity they held based on some conversations after the students drew their self-portraits. This activity

was to build upon their understanding of shades and hues of colors to help begin the understanding of people with different skin tones. The teachers got paint swatches and cut the center out of them so students could try and find things in nature to match the different shades of the same color. This is just another way in which topics that are crucial for society to understand are being introduced to kids during the most mentally developing part of their lives. It can be easy to simplify our language to make it understandable for children at these ages, but I have experienced kids using the shade when comparing colors, so they are more capable of learning these concepts than often appreciated.

Besides the social idea of diversity, LEL also focus on the diversity of their natural environment, they do so by including plant identification in their curriculum and calling their surroundings their “community” to bring a more humanistic feel to the plants and animals they are sharing their classroom space with. Each student has a nature name that is a native plant or animal that shares the name first letter as their name, also known as their letter link. For example, mine was Bella Blackbird, so this means each student known at least 14 other members of their community from this. They also encourage students to help them in making both cedar and nettle tea to practice reciprocity and enjoy what nature can provide for them. During my internship there were a couple times we would do an activity during our hike of the day where students would name parts of their community they see during the walk and write it on a whiteboard. This really tied together all aspects of appreciating diversity because while they would name plants and animals, they would also name some of the neighbors near the classroom such as the farmers who share their space with the preschool, or another teacher who lives in a yurt in visible range.

Not only are the students at LEL taught how to identify these members of their community, but they are also taught how to treat them with respect as part of the pillar of justice. One way the teachers help remind the students to treat all members of their community equitably and just is by teaching them a prompt called the “three B’s” which is to be kind to yourself, others, and nature. This instills a sense of justice for others and justice for oneself, which I often feel like is forgotten. They are taught to be mindful of how. Their actions might affect others, for example students are highly discouraged from throwing heavy items into the pond to not disturb the creatures living in their homes. A story that LEL shares is called “Salmon Eyes” and it is an indigenous story of what it would be like to be a salmon, building upon their ability to have empathy for all living things. It is also important to note the inclusion of indigenous voices and stories in their curriculum, I remember throughout my elementary, middle, and high school education there was little to no mention of the importance of indigenous peoples and the injustices pushed upon them. Seeing them talked about in an early childhood education setting gives me a lot of hope for our next generation to bring justice to all.



Figure 4: Teacher helping students make planters out of newspaper

Once students are feeling confident in themselves, pride in their differences, and acknowledgement of the different community members, they now have the prior knowledge needed to participate in the fourth and final pillar, activism. The students are active participants in deciding how their classroom is set up. They help plan and plant things in the garden, have the freedom to move large objects to build obstacle courses, shelters, or anything else their creativity leads. Having this freedom and space to experiment with their environment this way nurtures kids to grow up continuing to believe in themselves and the power they have to change parts of their community they are dissatisfied with. There are also many books on how to be an active member of society and a climate activist, as well as books on all the other pillars.

Being able to connect what I have learned through the College of the Environment to

my internship at Lichen Early Learning is truly an inspiring experience for me to continue applying and reflecting upon my knowledge gained at Western with future careers. While my one environmental education class along with a few aspects I learned in other classes prepared me for parts of this internship, overall, I feel like there is a discrepancy between what Western promotes as the Environmental Studies major and what you do in practice. When I pictured my time at WWU studying environmental studies I pictured myself outdoors speaking with many community members from varying backgrounds regarding sustainability and climate activism. Most of my time was spent in classrooms and behind a screen doing readings and writing essays. While those skills are valuable it did not align with my expectations, unlike my time spent interning with LEL.

Within this reflection I only expanded on what I have learned through LEL regarding the four pillars of early childhood anti-bias education. My takeaways from my internship go far beyond what I have previously described. There is so much about what makes a community, how to build a community, how to be more in-tune with myself and my surroundings, and much

more. When the teachers from LEL came into my class they said something that I still remember about why nature school is so unique compared to the modern traditional education setting. They said that nature acts as a third teacher and helps build a more holistic education. Now I can confidently say that this statement reigns true due to my highly positive educational experience at LEL. My question now is that if nature is such an inviting, thought-provoking, and holistic educational setting, why does the College of the Environment not utilize our privileged access to a variety of natural spaces in our environmental education? While the educational gap from preschool to undergraduate level is immense, nature continues to offer irreplaceable opportunities for learning.

At the beginning of this process, I answered a question regarding what I intended to learn during this internship, and I wrote: “I intend to learn what it means to be an educator in a natural space. There are many nature-related teaching skills used at Lichen so I would be able to observe the goals and implementation of these methods on young kids, as they are in their most developmental stage. I would also learn how to deal with conflict among children in a conscious way, as well as get experience with supervising children in outdoor spaces.” I feel satisfied in the fulfillment of these intentions during the time at my internship. I also gained many more skills including increased knowledge of native plants and animals, how to lesson plan according to student needs, and how to be sustainable in an educator/classroom setting. It was very beneficial to have time with just the teachers during set-up and clean-up time to also get an insider look at things such as enrollment, tuition, and future planning as these are all things that could apply to a future career for me.

I also answered a second question about how this internship with LEL will contribute to my future educational or career goals. To this I wrote: “In the environmental field the two main paths I am looking to join are environmental education, and sustainable consulting. Seeing as this position is education in an environmental setting, it is perfect for me! I also have a lot of prior experience working at this age and see myself continuing to do so in the future. This is a



Figure 5: Students learning about Nettle identification and harvesting

great opportunity for me to combine my love of working with kids with all the environmental work I have been completing at Western.” Not only did this internship build upon my confidence to do everything I stated in my future career, but it also gave me inspiration to continue working with nature preschools and I am going to investigate becoming a substitute teacher for other schools in the greater Seattle area. This also motivated me to work outdoors for the city of Seattle by becoming a Seattle Urban Nature Guide ([SUNGuide](#)) during the next school year. In terms of continuing my education, I am graduating this quarter and currently do not see myself returning to an institution to work as a graduate student. What this internship did teach me is that educational journeys are not limited by the need for a grade, GPA, class, teacher, or degree, but education is always occurring. I am driven to continue my education through non-traditional, meaningful ways by continuing my involvement in nature preschools as well as volunteer position with the city of Seattle.

3. Appendices
3A: Internship Time Log

| Date | Full or Half Day | Hours |
|---|--------------------|-------|
| January 12 th – March 15 th | Half and Full days | 26 |
| April 9 th | Full day 8-2 | 6 |
| April 11 th | Full day 8-2 | 6 |
| April 16 th | Half day 8-10 | 2 |
| April 18 th | Half day 8-10 | 2 |
| April 23 rd | Half day 8-10 | 2 |
| April 25 th | Half day 8-10 | 2 |
| April 30 th | Half day 8-10 | 2 |
| May 2 nd | Half day 8-10 | 2 |
| May 7 th | Full day 8-2 | 6 |
| May 9 th | Full day 8-2 | 6 |
| May 14 th | Half day 8-10 | 2 |
| May 21 st | Full day 8-2 | 6 |
| May 23 rd | Full day 8-2 | 6 |
| May 30 th | Full day 8-2 | 6 |
| June 4 th | Full day 8-2 | 6 |
| June 6 th | Full day 8-2 | 6 |
| June 13 th | Full day 8-2 | 6 |
| Total: | | 100 |

3B. LEL Schedule and Curriculum

This section is mainly for me, it is to look back and have a place to remind myself of all the activities and strategies used at Lichen Early Learning:

Schedule of the day: set-up, morning work time, greeting time and snack, explore time, lunch, afternoon work time, clean up, goodbye circle, and classroom reset.

Set up: This consisted of setting up the library spot with books and a blanket (location dependent on the weather), getting the hand wash station ready (warm water, bin of clean rags, laundry bucket), putting sensory toys in the Eagles Nest, taking out the calendar and sign-up sheets, pulling out name tags, and writing our messages of the day on the message board.

Morning work time: free time for students to converse and play with each other and teachers until teachers give students a 10-minute, 5-minute, 2-minute, and 10-second countdown to wrap up their games and projects before going to greeting circle.

Greeting time: There are three main things that happen during greeting time 1) counting the students attending class today and naming who is having a stay home day, 2) singing our good morning song¹, and 3) revealing our message board. The message board consists of the day of the week, month, and day of the month, what type of class day it is, and two messages from the teachers to the students. To reveal these messages, students choose a paper that is covering the white board that either has a color, shape, letter, or two things that rhyme on them. While doing all three greeting time activities students have a snack, afterwards they pack up and get ready for explore time.

Explore time: As a group we either hike to one of three locations or hike throughout the allotted time. The three main spots for explore time are a pond, a cleared-out forest spot, and a clay mountain. Each spot has a unique chance for students to have more work time in a new setting that offers a different set of safety agreements. There are few times where we hike throughout the forest for the duration of explore time.

Lunch: After hiking back students are prompted to go to the bathroom if needed then get out food while reading a story, as soon as the story is done, and they have eaten a good amount they can excuse themselves to go to afternoon work time.

Afternoon work time: Students can continue free time or join the teachers in a planned activity. Some of these activities have included drawing stages of plant growth, a May pole activity, making cottonwood crowns, making newspaper planters, and creating a group mosaic.

Clean up: All students help pick up and return all tools and materials to their place of origin, even if they themselves did not play with them, this is because we all must work as a collective to care for our environment.

Goodbye circle: Sometimes goodbye circle is a time for students to wind down and listen to some lullabies, or to discuss the exciting events of the day. It always ends with a goodbye song² and then waiting for loved ones to come pick up the students.

Classroom reset: Teacher's redo all their set up tasks while debriefing what activities went well, what did not, and how we can improve our methods.

3C. LEL Songs

Songs:

1 – Good morning song (with accompanying arm gestures)

Good morning dear earth (wave at the ground)

Good morning dear sun (wave at the sun)

Good morning dear stones (sprinkle hands on ground)

And flowers everyone (one arm like table for other arm waving)

Good morning dear beasts, roar (claw hands)

And birds in the trees, chick-a-dee-dee-dee (chicken wings)

Good morning to you (gesture out)

Good morning to me (hands to heart)

2 – Goodbye song (call and response, teacher one line, students the next)

Goodbye little lichens

Goodbye little lichens

Goodbye nature hiking

Goodbye nature hiking

(Insert three things the students enjoyed doing that day to call and respond to)

Goodbye sky (high pitched voice)

Goodbye sky

Goodbye ground (low voice)

Goodbye ground

Goodbye friends all around

Goodbye friends all around

3D. Additional Photos



