

# BUILDING A WELCOMING & JOYFUL COMMUNITY TO ENHANCE SCIENCE-LEARNING



## WHAT IS A WELCOMING & JOYFUL COMMUNITY?

A welcoming and joyful community (JuST Core) is being defined here more complexly than simply “having fun.” JuST Core in this context is defined as a reciprocal feeling of emotional and physical safety that allows learners to participate and engage to their fullest and most authentic abilities. Welcoming and joyful communities seek to nurture students in their varying nature-culture relations and help to shape more equitable science-learning experiences. Some questions that guide me through this work include:

- How can we (as educators) assess students' **nature-culture relationships** to build a JuST Core?
- Where does **power** come into play when building a welcoming and joyful community?
- How can we begin to understand **how our students feel** in nature when we are not there to walk alongside them?
- Whose voices are **represented** when assessing these relationships, and whose voices are **left out**?

## HOW DO YOU BUILD A JOYFUL & WELCOMING COMMUNITY?

There are many ways to build a JuST Core. Students come into a learning environment with perceptions of *who they are as learners*. We must work to build a learning environment that welcomes and celebrates all students. This can happen in the form of:

- **Incorporating SEL into Science-Learning:** From the guiding questions above, I facilitated a 5-minute body scan and journaling session before students went on a “Solo Walk”. This project allowed me to assess how students were feeling before and after our activity.
- **Sharing the Stories of our Names:** This is an activity I would facilitate with my students when we all first met at IslandWood. By sharing details of our identities (if we wish) we can establish a sense of connectedness.
- **Take the Time to Play:** Whether through play, or experiential learning, we should make time for students to fully immerse themselves in and embody science-learning concepts. This enables them to fully digest concepts *and* associate “fun” with “learning.” By creating a space where students feel joy, you increase capacity for genuine science-learning connections.

## WHY SHOULD YOU BUILD A WELCOMING AND JOYFUL COMMUNITY?

- **Informs Practice:** Knowing who your students are, and understanding our unique relationships with and to the more-than-human-world helps educators see our students as scientists. It may also illuminate to students the science-concepts they are engaging with in their everyday lives.
- **Attention to Equity:** Students do not navigate the world equally. In the context of outdoor environmental education, there have been several violent histories that affect how marginalized groups interact with the outdoors.
- **Increased Sense of Belonging:** Research on belonging is few and far between, however, I like to rely on Dr. Kuttner’s framework that states belonging is shaped by a complex tapestry of various cultural phenomena. Belonging must be reconceptualized as a crucial aspect of justice.

## EXAMPLE

### SOLO WALKS TO BUILD A JUST O



SCAN ME TO SEE STUDENT WORK & THE WRITE-UP!

## CONNECTIONS

**STEM Teaching Tool 57:** How place-based science education strategies can support equity for students, teachers, and communities  
**STEM Teaching Tool 95:** How can STEM education leaders move with community towards culturally affirming and sustaining practices?