

Another Perspective

Third graders explore and make connections to their environment

International School SEK Atlántico
Pontevedra, Spain

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“Look! You can see our school!” exclaims José to fellow students.” They crouch on the wooden deck and open their sketch pads. Below them they see their school, a large white building with a blue roof. A light autumn breeze carries the faint sound of city cars below.

“Do you see how the landscape looks much better every time we went higher up?” notes Rosa after the short walk up the mountain to this neighborhood viewing area. They scan the landscape for inspirational things to draw.

“Look, next to the school there is a streetlight,” announces Katrina. “I’m going to draw our school.”

“I’m doing the estuary and how it connects to the river and now the school,” Ilse shares. “This bridge here and the other one here,” she adds while pointing. “Ah, another perspective!”

This class of fifty 3rd graders attend the International School SEK Atlántico, a private pre k-12th grade school of 720 students on the Northern coast of Spain. Many of the teachers at this school are creating learning experiences that invite students to learn outside of their classrooms in places that offer opportunities to connect with their local community and environment of their city, Pontevedra. “Overall, we want our students to learn how their environments can be sources of inspiration to express their creativity,” explains Beatriz, their teacher. The other third grade teacher is sick today, so Sara, the primary school French and English teacher, is helping Beatriz.

“We designed this to help them develop their observation skills,” Sara shares, “and see connections to their lives. Specifically, we want them to think critically, look for similarities and differences, and find different shapes and forms that spark their emotions.” The school sits in the lush, green hills surrounding the working port town.



Nearby the school are several public playgrounds, gardens, trails and overlook areas all within a short walk. Today the class will walk the steep streets of their neighborhood to two green spaces with views of the urban and natural landscape.

On the Learning Path

It's a cool autumn morning as the students leave the school, each with drawing pads and pencils. "Okay everyone," Sara welcomes the group as they assemble in the small parking lot, "today we'll be exploring how our natural environment helps us creatively express ourselves." They exit the parking lot and walk down a steep road that soon merges with another that leads up into the hilly neighborhood. An occasional modern house interrupts the many older stone houses perched along the steep streets. Students walk the concrete sidewalk lined parked cars on one side and a large granite retaining wall on their other. Many students touch the rough granite and lush plants that flow down the stone wall. Several students recognize and point to houses they know – a friend's house, their grandmother's house, etc. A light rain begins and, unfazed, students pull up their jacket hoods.

After just a few minutes, they arrive at their first stop: a public green space between two houses that offers a view of their city, Pontevedra. "Okay, what landscapes do you see?" Sarah invites the students to look around at the urban view far below at the houses and forest next to and behind them.

"I see perennials here and annuals there," says a girl.

"There is the Aurosa estuary and I see Córcoles," shouts another boy pointing." Other students chime in with what they see. Sara and Beatriz ask for examples or more explanation from many of the students. One student remembers that they learned about fossils in this same lookout area, which indeed has several rocks with fossils and other indigenous carvings.

The group continues along the sidewalk and road which soon comes to an abrupt end. A dirt path takes them to a wooden walkway that zig-zags up the steep mountain. Instead of houses and cars, they are surrounded by trees, verdant grasses, and moss-covered boulders. The rain has stopped and the students step carefully on the slick wooden planks and stairs in the public Caeira Archeological Park.

The path winds back and forth, through the fields that are dotted with dark boulders. Sara encourages students to



pause and look around as they climb up and up. “Oh yes,” says a girl as they come to a flat section, “I can see much more already.”

A boy sees the next staircase, “What? How can we possibly go higher!”.

Another boy recounts to his friend and points at the boulders, “We came to see the petroglyphs last year when we learned about the history.” Several students know this place very well, either from living nearby or from previous explorations in other classes.

At the top, the path expands onto a large wooden observation platform. Sara and Beatriz remind students that they are here to notice their environment and practice their drawing skills. She asks students to take out their drawing pads and begin to look for things in the landscape that catch their attention. Once they find an interesting subject, they should practice sketching it.

“You can sit on the wooden platform, stand, or move wherever you would like to,” she encourages the students. Groups form, some in pairs on boulders. Others cluster, standing with their sketch pads on the wooden banister surrounding the platform. Some groups move further away to get a better view of the forest, their choice for a subject. After a few minutes of looking, pointing and discussing, students begin to settle into their drawings. Several groups, including José, Rosa, Isa and Katrina, discover they can hang their sketch pads from the top of the banister, creating a makeshift easel. The students look back and forth from their subjects to their sketch pads.

“I’m drawing the mountains and the water, I really like the shapes.” a boy says to the boy sitting next to him.

“I like the trees,” his friend answers. Sarah and Beatriz circulate, asking questions about their drawings and offering encouraging words to the students.

Once the sketches have taken form, students begin sharing them with one another, explaining what they were representing and why. “Okay everyone, let’s continue observing our surroundings by heading down a different route. Notice how you might see different things along the way,” encourages Sara. The students continue forward on a path from the other side of the overlook deck. The greenery slowly gives way to homes and the students soon find themselves back on a neighborhood sidewalk. The road



winds around, slowly working its way down the steep hill. Along the way, several students make connections to their surroundings.

“Oh, there’s my grandmother’s home!” a girl points to a cluster of houses nearby.

“Richard isn’t this your house?” asks a boy.

“Hey, isn’t this where we collected trash last year?” asks a boy pointing to a thickly wooded area ahead. A concrete staircase offers students a quick way down through a small green field.

“Look around, as we go lower down what do you notice? What don’t we see anymore?” Sara asks. The students talk with one another about how the details are different and how they see less and less on the horizon. Soon they are back on the neighborhood street that takes them back to school.

Reflections

Sara and Beatriz are excited with the students’ energy and focus. The students were scanning the landscapes they explored – the neighborhood, the natural park, and the urban views of Pontevedra. “So many were reflecting on the emotions these places stirred in them,” noted Sara. Beatriz noticed how the students were experiencing perspective taking, not just talking about it in class. For both teachers, they were intrigued with the students’ questions: revealing what they didn’t know or what seemed new in their surroundings.

“It was great that they felt they could ask their friends. I also saw a lot of great social skills, like helping one another, asking questions and sharing ideas. It was important that they weren’t just drawing, they were observing and thinking about what they see from different perspectives.” For next time, Beatriz and Sara are hoping they can involve older students who can serve as guides and mentors for these sixth graders, offering feedback but also giving the older students a leadership opportunity.

The students seemed equally pleased with this 90-minute expedition. “Breathing outdoors is super important,” José shares afterwards. “Plus, things look much better because seeing it in books is not feeling it.” Many other students feel similarly and note that learning outside is something they do a lot at their school.

