

Blue Flag Beaches

Elementary School Students help keep their beaches clean

International School SEK Atlántico
Pontevedra, Spain

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“Here!!! I am organic!” shouts Marta shaking a yellow garbage bag. The classmates who, at that moment, have organic materials in their hands, which they have found in the sand on the beach, rush to deposit them in her bag.

Seeing that the strategy works Carolina shouts “I am plastic!”, raising her yellow bag.

“Wood goes here” is heard from the walkway overlooking the beach. The organization to efficiently sort the types of materials is working very well.

Two boys, one with a bottle in his hand, and the other with a piece of wood with rusty nails approach the teacher. “Where does this go?” they ask,

“To organic,” their teacher Susana answers. “The feathers also go to organic,” she adds as she looks to see what another student brings.



These forty fifth grade students attend the SEK International School Atlántico, a private pre k-12th grade school of 680 students in the northern coastal town of Pontevedra, Spain. The teachers there have been experimenting with creating “learning paths” – sequences of out-of-school learning experiences in which students interact with local people and places. Today they are exploring and caring for one of the many “Blue Flag beaches” in their community. Blue Flag is the highest honor the Spanish government assigns to beaches based on standards of water quality, safety and environmental sustainability.

“After learning about the high standards needed to be a blue flag, the kids will go to pick up trash at a blue flag beach, the one in Montalvo,” explains their teacher,

Susana. “They will have to classify the type of materials collected and then we will recycle them.” Recycling includes finding uses for the materials they find, such as making toys for children from wood, Christmas ornaments from plastics, and other innovative ideas the students come up with. “I am thinking that we can also make posters to share with the community,” she adds, “because in Language class they are teaching the subject of graphic communication.”

On the Learning Path

On a cool and misty autumn morning, the forty fifth grade students excitedly file out of their school and board a bus in their school parking lot. Several students playfully pull from their pockets the colorful gardening gloves Susana gave them for picking up the discarded materials and garbage that they may find on the beach.

“We carry gloves to pick up trash,” a student named Laura explains. “Some of us have two pairs, just in case someone loses theirs.” She and her friends proudly show how the gloves fit as they get ready for their short bus ride. The journey is an adventure. To drive to the beach by bus, Susana had to contact the police to assist them. Many streets in this old port town are too narrow for the bus and the only way to get there is by driving down the opposite way of a larger one-way street. A police car with lights ablaze meets them at an intersection and escorts the bus against traffic down the road. Many neighbors on the street look on in surprise, some stop to understand what is going on and who is on the bus

“Hey! Why do we have a police car attached to us?” asks one student named Alejandro. “Because we have to go a stretch of street by forbidden direction and they have to escort us,” answers Susana. After a few minutes they turn onto a main road and the policeman waves them goodbye. The bus continues on, leaving Pontevedra and entering the seaside landscape dotted with small towns and rolling fields.

Along the way, the bus stops at the Concello de Sanxenxo, a public beach information center in the town of Sanxenxo. With smiles they are received by two councilors and Claudia, the Tourism Technician who will explain the conditions that a



beach must meet to be assigned the blue flag. “I know Martita...,” Claudia announces as she scans the students stepping off the bus for familiar faces. “Let’s see, hi Guille [a friend of her son], there’s Valeria... oh, and Nico! I know him too.” She leads the group inside to a small room lined with posters of town’s seaside and rows of chairs that students quickly fill.

“How many beaches are there in Sanxenxo?” Claudia probes the students. They shout out several numbers and she points and nods when a student says seventeen. “And do you know what the blue flag means?”

After a few seconds of silence and doubt, a child raises his hand. “That the beach is clean and suitable for bathing?”

“Very good!” Claudia smiles and nods her head. “And it also means that the beach has lifeguards, toilets and the water quality is excellent. It’s not enough that it’s very good, it has to be excellent!” Surprised faces flood the room. To conclude, she conveys a sense of responsibility to the children: “The blue flag has one more meaning: a meaning of effort –ours and yours –to keep our beaches clean.”

After some questions and answers, the children leave the room with Claudia, some chatting with her and others commenting how surprised they had been with what they had heard.

“I didn’t know we had so many blue flag beaches, 17!” exclaimed Marta with a wide grin as they walk back to the bus.

“Yes, I didn’t know anything about this,” Carolina responds. “Now when I go to a beach and I don’t see a blue flag, I’ll say, hmmm,” she furrows her brow, “why doesn’t it have one?” They load onto the bus and continue on to Montalvo, one of the blue flag beaches. There they will collect and separate materials from garbage and take them to school for recycling.

As the bus pulls into the parking lot at Montalvo, Susana announces, “When we go outside, organize yourselves into groups according to the type of material you are going to collect on the beach. I’ll give you bags, take one garbage bag per group”. Once off the bus, the students self organize into groups that will collect organics, plastics, and garbage. Susana gives each student a yellow bag.



As they open the bags the steady wind swells them into interesting shapes that spark the children's curiosity and imagination. "Look, I have a yellow flag!!!" shouts Pablo, raising the bag and waving it in the wind. The idea proves contagious. Classmates with bags begin to experiment with different strategies in the wind, and others come up to test how hard they are inflated or how they sling in the wind.



It's time to get down to work. They walk down the sandy wooden-planked ramp to the vast beach. There is a lot of ground to cover. When they reach the beach, the children spread out and start hunting for materials. The class naturally splits into two large clusters, almost half a kilometer apart from each other. Susana and another teacher, Clara, split up to work alongside each.



Suddenly there are shouts of excitement from a student, Rodrigo. "I found this Susana!" he exclaims. Many children turn around expectantly.

"Pull!" they shout.

"It's a buoy!, Rodrigo declares, "I have a buoy!"

Everyone runs to see and touch the large yellow cone he has unearthed. Ideas fly about what to do with it – is it garbage? recycling? should we leave it? The students agree with Rodrigo that we should bring it up to the top of the beach ramp. "This we're taking to school," he comments, "I bet we can use it somehow at school, maybe we can make something from it."



During the half-hour the students collect a lot of wood, wrappers, dead grasses, plastic bottles and other discarded garbage. Some children slowly climb the dunes, careful not to step on the grasses as Susana has instructed them. "Hey, there is garbage here too!" they call out to their classmates. "Guys, over here!" Several students run to join them to cautiously remove the garbage.



"A radish!!! I have a radish!" Pedro runs down one of the dunes. "They are there," he points back to the dunes, "and there are more!"

"That is going to the organic bag," says Peter his friend. "Let's go!"

Pedro, Peter and several others head for the radish dune. When they come back with several other plants, Peter can't get over his astonishment, "This is *radish* beach, I'm going to call it that!"

The fine misty rain has turned into heavier drops that begin to whip the students' faces. "Okay," Susana shouts across the beach, "We're leaving, guys, let's pack up and get on the bus and out of the rain," says Susana. The boys start heading towards the wooden ramp, picking up any last materials along the way. Though drops of water are running off many students, many continue picking up around the wooden ramp.

"Susana, I want to keep going!" exclaims a student, Maria.

Susana smiled at their determination. Once all the students had gathered at the top of the ramp, she gave instructions. "Leave all the bags here. We'll load them onto the bus to take them back to school." The children followed her directions, placing the bags in the designated area. They stood proudly for a moment, surveying the results of their hard work before heading to the bus to escape the rain.

As the rain began to subside, the students returned to the bags, separating them by material type and carefully loading them into the storage compartment beneath the bus. Nearby, under a cluster of pine trees by the parking lot, there was a picnic area with wooden tables. The teachers led the children there to rest and eat.

The teachers had brought sandwiches, apples, and bottles of water, and everyone gathered around the tables to recharge after their efforts on the beach. At one table, a group of children engaged in an animated conversation:

"I like this so much more than being in class," one child said. "It's more fun, and I think it's great because it makes us think about what's right and wrong. When we're outside, we're learning, helping the beaches, and preparing for the future."

Another student chimed in, "But there's a downside. You're more exposed to dangers. You could trip or hurt yourself without meaning to. Still, being outside is better because you learn about real life in a way you can't in the classroom."



“They’re so wrong about class!” another student exclaimed. “Out here, we can explore and imagine. For example, Dani found a stick and pretended it was Thor’s hammer. You can’t do that inside! And don’t forget, the materials we collected today are going to be reused—we’ll make props for our Ghostbusters play at Christmas.”

A quieter voice added, “It’s not the same to just read about this stuff as it is to live it. I was frustrated because of the weather, but I still feel happy. I worked with my recycling group, and we were really organized and respectful of the environment and each other.”

“Yeah, great teamwork helping the planet!” Dani agreed enthusiastically.

“I felt really good, too,” another child said with a smile. “Picking up trash and doing something good makes me feel great.”

The students carried the materials back to school and continued to explore how items can be recycled and repurposed. The collected buoy was transformed into a creative Christmas tree, which the students enthusiastically decorated. In addition, the collected plastics were donated to the company Panadería Design, founded by a former student, who is dedicated to creating swimsuits with recycled plastic and who shared her experience with them. As part of this project, the students also launched a newspaper called “Rugido Informativo”. With the sale of this newspaper, they were able to raise funds that were destined to the victims of the Dana in Valencia. This learning path not only fostered environmental awareness among the students, but also demonstrated the power of collaboration and creativity in the search for sustainable solutions.

