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From Malaysia to New Zealand: Embracing Nature's Lessons Across Continents

Written by: Haziah Sa'ari

Choosing to enroll my daughter in Te Aro School, nestled in the heart of Wellington, New Zealand, marked a departure from everything familiar within the Malaysian educational framework. Faced with various concerns — from cultural adaptation to the shift in academic focus — I found solace and inspiration in Ms. Anna Morgan, a dedicated teacher guiding "Ruma Nikau, Year 3/4." Her classroom, a melting pot of cultures including Māori, Kiwi, Pacific, Asian, European/Pākehā, and students from MELAA (Middle Eastern/Latin American or African) backgrounds, served as a vibrant testament to New Zealand's inclusive and adaptive educational ethos.

One particularly memorable lesson, set against the backdrop of an unexpected rainstorm, perfectly encapsulated the essence of New Zealand's educational philosophy. Ms. Morgan's recounting of her students' adaptation to this sudden downpour demonstrated the practical application of resilience and adaptability and underscored the rich diversity of the classroom community. This microcosm of global cultures, learning to navigate and embrace the challenges of nature together highlighted the school's commitment to

fostering an environment where diversity is accepted and celebrated.



Picture 1: A Glimpse of Students in Ruma Nikau Classroom

A Welcoming Tradition: The Pōwhiri

Our formal introduction to this unique learning community began with the traditional pōwhiri, a deeply symbolic Māori welcome ceremony. This powerful initiation marked more than our physical entry into the school; it signified our integration into a societal microcosm grounded in mutual respect, deep connections, and a unified sense of purpose.



Picture 2: New Students and Parents Experiencing the Traditional Pōwhiri Ceremony

Redefining the Classroom: A Gateway to Exploration

In New Zealand, the classroom concept is redefined. Under Ms. Morgan's guidance, my daughter and her peers embarked on explorations that included drawing sessions amidst the botanical splendors of Wellington and hands-on marine studies at the Island Bay Marine Education Centre. These experiences deepened their connection to the natural world, fostering a sense of environmental responsibility and curiosity.



Picture 3: Students Capturing the Natural Landscape Through Art

Artistic Encounters with Nature

Armed with sketchbooks, students embarked on artistic explorations within Wellington's botanical haven. These sessions transcended traditional art instruction, inviting learners to engage directly with their

environment. Through detailed observation and artistic representation, students developed a nuanced appreciation of nature's diversity, fostering an intimate relationship with the flora and fauna that define New Zealand's landscape.

Exploring Marine Biodiversity

The journey into marine biology at the Island Bay Marine Education Centre unveiled the intricate ecosystems beneath New Zealand's waves. Students immersed themselves in the study of marine habitats, learning about the pivotal role of water quality in sustaining life. This hands-on experience highlighted the delicate balance of marine ecosystems and the critical importance of conservation efforts to mitigate the impact of human activities on these vital resources.



Picture 4: Students Exploring Marine Biodiversity

Gardening: A Sustainable Practice

The school's garden, a living laboratory of sustainability, became a focal point for

lessons in **kaitiakitanga**. Here, cultivating the land went hand in hand with learning about biodiversity, the significance of native species, and the principles of sustainable living. This immersive gardening experience connected students to the earth and imparted valuable life skills centered around environmental stewardship.



Picture 5: Students Engaged in Sustainable Gardening Practices

Cultural Celebrations and Stewardship

The annual Matariki festival brought the educational community together, weaving cultural celebrations with themes of environmental consciousness. Participation in Matariki activities allowed students to explore the interconnectedness of cultural heritage and ecological responsibility, underscoring the collective duty to nurture and protect the earth.



Catalyzing a Global Educational Movement

Our journey at Te Aro School showcases the transformative power of outdoor education and underscores the urgent need for a worldwide shift in educational paradigms. Inspired by New Zealand's model, which weaves the natural world seamlessly into the fabric of learning, Malaysia and other nations are invited to reconsider their approaches to education. Embracing nature-based learning could ignite a global dedication to environmental stewardship, equipping a generation to safeguard and cherish our planet.

As we look to the future, the lessons from New Zealand illuminate the path toward an educational model deeply rooted in our connection to the environment. This transformative approach transcends traditional academic boundaries, cultivating resilience, empathy, and a profound bond with the Earth.

At this critical juncture, we are called to adopt a pathway marked by **kaitiakitanga**, the Māori principle of guardianship, and integrate it with Malaysia's rich cultural and environmental ethos. This principle serves as a reminder that education under the open sky, by the water's edge, or within the embrace of the forest not only deepens our relationship with nature but fosters a legacy of sustainability, respect, and interconnectedness. Inspired by New Zealand's innovative spirit and mindful of Malaysia's diverse heritage and natural beauty, we face the challenge of redefining learning to secure a balanced and thriving future for our planet and its inheritors.