



2013-2014 AESN Case Study

School: Green Timbers Elementary **District:** SD36 Surrey

Area of focus: Enhancement Agreement

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Question / focus area: “How will we impact our Aboriginal students’ participation and sense of belonging when we increase school--- wide the use of resources and activities that celebrate Aboriginal cultures and highlight Aboriginal ways of knowing?”

Scanning: We observed that while some of our Aboriginal students showed enthusiasm for activities that celebrated or explored Aboriginal cultures, there were also many individual Aboriginal students who did not show any increase in interest or participation when Aboriginal content was part of the learning. We began to realize together that expecting change to come quickly for these students was an oversimplification of the complex reasons why they did not feel connected in the first place. However, we observed that whole classes of students from various cultural backgrounds did respond positively and did exhibit increased curiosity about and connections to Aboriginal culture, experience and history.

Focus: Our focus shifted to: What can we do to help all learners (and teachers) “*gain an understanding of, and respect for, Aboriginal knowledge and culture.*” While we continue to seek connection and validation for our Aboriginal students and families, we also experienced the DI principle – what is good and powerful for a small portion of the student population is good and powerful for the whole population. We observed that wherever there was increased attention to Aboriginal content and Aboriginal presentations there were also increased and more meaningful discussions about identity, inclusion, culture and traditions for all of our students, particularly our intermediate students.

Hunch: As alluded to above, one hunch is that we need to change the practice of confining Aboriginal culture, traditions and history only to a special place in the curriculum (e.g., “This month we will study how the Coast Salish people lived”). Rather we need to “weave in” or incorporate these things into our daily teaching (e.g., “This

alphabet book uses Coast Salish designs – let’s read it together”). Our other hunch is that we need to address the long-established practice of silence for any negative aspects of Canada’s history with Aboriginal people (residential schools in particular). This year a key area of learning for our members was in the discovery of how much information and support there is for non-Aboriginal educators to become educated about Aboriginal history, experience and ways of knowing. We need to use the tools provided by our district, governments and other organizations to tell the whole story. While “we cannot teach what we do not know,” we also can’t use our own lack of knowledge as an excuse to stay silent. This change takes time and courage, and we have begun to make it, slowly but surely.

New professional learning: We read a book together and shared at each Inquiry Group meeting what we were learning from the text about inquiry, our aboriginal learners and about Aboriginal principles of learning. One of our group members attended a workshop about Residential Schools and was profoundly impacted. She shared her learning, wonderings, and new resources with all team members. Two of our team members have since signed up to use the new grade 5 curriculum about Residential schools. We shared various resources from personal online research. We thoroughly explored resources in our school, and made connections between Aboriginal culture, traditions and Principles of learning and the new Big Ideas, Learning Standards and Core Competencies within the new curriculum (primarily in Language Arts and Social Studies, grades 2-7).

Taking action:

Planned Actions/Strategies:

How it worked out:

<p>Intentional and increasing participation for all classes in Aboriginal Cultural presentations and workshops offered through SD36’s Aboriginal Education Department. (Baseline survey, encouragement throughout the year via dialogue, summative survey and notation in student Aboriginal files.)</p>	<p>Staff perceived an increase in the number of presentations school-wide, in the enthusiasm of learners within the presentations, and in the connections some teachers made between workshops and their curriculum.</p>
<p>Collaborative development of curriculum / teaching strategies / ideas to increase team members’ (and ALL teachers’) use of the excellent Aboriginal resources in our school and particularly to incorporate these resources into the new provincial curricula. Sharing resources school-wide and offering teachers opportunities to co-teach or observe classes using these resources and teaching strategies.</p>	<p>Team members collaboratively explored new curricula and school resources. Created language arts and social studies resources using these materials. Discussed/recorded ways to weave Aboriginal literature and “ways of knowing” into science, language arts and social studies in both primary and intermediate grades. Developed materials and shared with some staff. Plans for shared teaching/observing on hold due to job action.</p>

Aboriginal focus in every staff meeting starting after Spring break – quick but consistent sharing of ideas & experiences using Aboriginal resources, cultural workshops or indigenous principles of learning in everyday teaching activities.	There were no staff meetings. This idea is on hold until October 2014.
Tiles Project for whole school in May and June, as described in proposal. Materials & lesson plans ready. Richard Pierre/ Barb Kolbus ready to start May 5th.	We decided to set this aside until it can be completed with whole-school communication, whole-school impact and whole-school “buy-in”. Planned for September 2014.
School-wide all-day Aboriginal Day assembly and events planned for June 18th, with participation of five SD36 Cultural Facilitators and our ACYCW	Did not proceed due to strike action. Will implement the plan in June 2014.

Checking: We need more collaborative analysis and reflection – but we can agree that the differences we saw were in the area of *“ALL learners gaining an understanding of, and respect for, Aboriginal knowledge and culture.”* Our evidence of growth in these areas is anecdotal, gleaned from dialogue and notes from our formal and informal inquiry group meetings and from reflective conversations with teachers.

What we observed:

- Firstly, the teachers in our inquiry group all describe an increase in their understanding of and respect for Aboriginal ways of knowing, Aboriginal history and particularly the impact of Residential Schools within Aboriginal communities and cultures. We are all increasingly aware of all that we do not know. We have more connections to authentic and reliable information resources and we have increasingly complicated ongoing questions.
- Secondly, participating teachers describe a shift in their students’ understandings. Particularly our intermediate teachers saw that as they began to ask “What would Aboriginal peoples perspective be on this issue or this concept?” in discussions of current events, science investigations or social studies inquiries, students showed increasing awareness, respect and enthusiasm for learning about Aboriginal history, traditions, cultural activities, and current role in protecting natural resources. Of course, this is just a beginning. We plan to reflect on the full impact of our inquiry on the school as a whole community, and analyze what we could be doing more effectively. We look forward to next year!

Reflections/Advice: We learned to make small but significant shifts in the way we approach Aboriginal cultures, history and ways of knowing within our teaching. We learned that changing a school (or any) culture comes slowly, and starts with individuals choosing to change. We are learning to take risks, to be ready to acknowledge errors or ignorance, and to be committed to building understanding through respectful dialogue.

Where we plan to go next: We plan to continue our person-to-person conversations, continue sharing the curriculum we created this year and our ideas and experiences in integrating Aboriginal issues, traditions and ways of knowing into daily learning activities. We plan to complete the school-wide Tiles Project, after some collaborative dialogue with the whole staff about what we hope to achieve and the bigger picture for our school inquiry. We also plan to put in place the Aboriginal Day celebration we planned for this year but could not do. We hope that by June of 2015 we will have much to celebrate.

What we would advise other groups: Our most important advice is that learning involves patience and time. We may have a timeline, but neither hurrying nor rigid adherence to the original plan will improve or support deep learning. Also, "*Learning is holistic, ...reflective, experiential, and relational...*" We've learned to start with person-to-person conversations and individual shifts in thinking. Without individual buy-in, school-wide actions can become grand well-meaning gestures with little impact on real change. Doing things differently is important and necessary, but we must also relate differently to one another and our students, and we must be reflective and holistic in our thinking and doing.