



2014 - 2015 AESN Case Study

School: Archibald Blair Elementary **District:** #38 Richmond

Area of Focus: Enhancement Agreement

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Our focus for this year: Our focus was to have students explore the role of stories and storytelling in relation to community well-being, while learning about Aboriginal culture and history. This includes learning the history and legacy of the Indian Residential Schools System in Canada.

This supports the second goal from our local Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement:
All students in Richmond will demonstrate a deeper understanding and appreciation of the histories, languages, and cultures of Aboriginal communities from an Aboriginal perspective.

Scanning: At the start of the school year, we asked grade 4/5 students the broad question: “Why are stories important?” Most students were focused on the idea that stories and storytelling are only for the purposes of enjoyment and entertainment. They did not identify that stories allow people to learn knowledge as well as about the perspectives and experiences of others.

We also asked students what they knew of Aboriginal history and culture. Many had some knowledge of Aboriginal traditions, and a very limited knowledge of Aboriginal ways and perspectives. A few students knew of the term “residential school” and very little beyond that.

It became apparent that there was an emergent need to provide these students with opportunities to learn about Aboriginal culture and history through lessons and activities that integrate the First Peoples Principles of Learning.

Focus: We wanted students to have a deeper and more meaningful understanding of Aboriginal culture as well as the history, impacts and legacies of Indian Residential Schools in Canada. We also wanted to transform their understanding of the broader concepts of human rights and discrimination to promote global citizenship and systemic change. We hoped to approach this focus by integrating some of the First Peoples Principles of Learning in our lessons and activities.

Hunch: We think our focus emerged for a number of reasons. To begin with, Aboriginal knowledge, content and perspectives were not as explicit or heavily emphasized in the previous curriculum, especially in comparison to the emerging redesigned curriculum drafts. Also, we feel that only recently there have been more opportunities for teachers to participate in professional development that would allow for them to feel more confident in their teaching of Aboriginal content and perspectives in a knowledgeable and respectful way. This includes learning about the First Peoples Principles of Learning. Lastly, only within the last few years has our school acquired more age-appropriate and student friendly resources that are rich in Aboriginal content. The district resource centre has been increasing their resources in this area as well.

Our hunch is also that students need to explore and experience concepts and ideas on a personal level before they can see the bigger world connections. We felt that students need to participate in storytelling and reflect upon their experience with it as well as their personal understandings, experiences, and connections to abstract concepts before learning about them in relation to Aboriginal histories.

New professional learning: Collaboration and co-teaching with our district's Aboriginal Support Teacher, Lynn Wainwright played a significant role in our professional learning. Her experience, expertise and Aboriginal perspective were important aspects of our teaching and learning throughout the year. We met with her on a regular basis to reflect, discuss and plan. Documenting the lessons, activities, students' work and quotes, and our teacher reflections in the form of photos and text in a shared google document was effective for communication.

One of our team members also participated in an after-school district study group focused on embedding Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum, as well as attended the AEA Professional Specialist Association Conference on indigenous education and Indian Residential Schools.

Taking action: In line with the First Peoples Principle of Learning that states "*Learning requires exploration of one's identity*", we felt that in order for students to understand abstract concepts within the context of Aboriginal culture and history, they needed to explore and experience these ideas on a personal level first before they were introduced to the bigger world connections.

We had students participate in sharing their personal "stories" and reflect upon how the sharing of these stories promoted understanding, personal connections and, ultimately, community wellness within our classroom. We also had students explore their personal experiences and understanding of concepts such as connection, identity, disconnection, power, authority, powerlessness, a sense of place, and apologies. This helped to set the foundation for a deeper and more meaningful learning of the histories and legacies of colonization, including those concerning Indian Residential Schools. Towards the end of the school year,

some students understood the significant role that the collective stories of residential school survivors had in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In keeping with the tradition of Aboriginal storytelling and our exploration of the role of storytelling, traditional Aboriginal stories, stories rich in Aboriginal content and non-indigenous stories were told or read in circle to help introduce or explore concepts and content. Lessons and activities also included critical thinking, reading, writing, drama and art activities.

Checking: Throughout the school year, students reflected on their learning in journal entries that were framed with open-ended questions relating to storytelling or concepts and content introduced that week. Many students showed an understanding of the role of storytelling in supporting the well-being of our classroom community, while only some were able to explain how storytelling could promote community well-being on a larger scale, as demonstrated by the significant role that stories of residential school survivors have had in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Many students also showed increased knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture and history. Most students were able to connect to abstract concepts personally and applied those concepts to their understanding of colonialism and Indian Residential Schools. Overall, we feel satisfied with the learning of our students as some of the journal entries showed insightful and deep critical thinking.

Reflections/Advice: From this inquiry, our advice is that as teachers, we need to give students time to explore and make meaning of abstract concepts on a personal level before introducing these ideas in relation to the outside world. We've learned that this sets the foundation and allows for the learning of complex content in a deeper and more meaningful way. Next time, we would like to spend more time exploring the idea of reconciliation and everybody's role in this process. We also plan to continue with collaborative work and documentation of students' learning as well as a continued exploration of how to embed and integrate the First Peoples Principles of Learning in our teaching.