



2014-2015 AESN Case Study

School: Dewdney Elementary **District:** #75 Mission

Area of Focus: Enhancement Agreement

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Our focus for this year: Learning is Social

Scanning: We noticed that the students were very engaged in learning, especially about the medicinal properties of indigenous plants. We had one student exclaim “I have to write down this recipe!” after tasting nettle soup and learning about the use of nettles for joint issues and arthritis. Students were willing to explore the healing properties of plants after being introduced to indigenous plants and the knowledge that the Aboriginal people passed along. In the Grade 4 class, it was part of a larger unit on “first touch” and our Aboriginal department was able to share traditional knowledge that was shared when Europeans first arrived in Canada. We also noticed that students value Aboriginal knowledge of plants and their medicinal uses through activities that we did. We believe that learning about indigenous plants and the people and elders who taught us, continued to develop a sense of community and belonging in our school

Although our focus was “learning is social” and the students learned a lot about Aboriginal culture, indigenous plants and their properties through planting, speakers, activities and listening, we feel we also built horizontal connections. Students learned about the importance of being good stewards of nature as we can rely on nature to keep us healthy and help us with our aches and pains. The students had a deeper understanding of how important caring for our habitat is and that nature has a healing power.

Focus: We chose this area as we are an outdoor focused school and wished the students to have a deeper understanding of gardens beyond healthy food choices. We hoped we could build community in our school, a heightened sense of belonging and a respect of Aboriginal culture in the broader community.

Hunch: In the past it appeared that Aboriginal content was an “add-on” and something that was prescribed rather than an integral part of education. We felt if we focused on an activity that students enjoyed and got them outside, we could begin the process of bringing understanding that Aboriginal culture and knowledge could be interwoven as part of the fabric of learning, rather than an addendum to learning. We thought bringing in some knowledgeable

people for Métis day and utilizing the wisdom of our Aboriginal department; we could plant herbs, vegetables, and shrubs and learn about their benefits beyond: they are good for you". We felt that including Aboriginal teachings within the whole gardening encounter authenticated the experience and deepened understanding for the learner.

New professional learning: We explored inquiry and experiential learning. We began learning about inquiry circles and knowledge building circles.

Taking action: We began a book study together (Natural Curiosity and Connecting the Dots) and performed lesson study with circles. In this way we could do some analysis around inquiry learning. First, we did some learning together on inquiry approach to teaching at staff meetings using video resources and discussed what worked well with inquiry, different types of inquiry learning and how to use it to move the students to better understanding. Then, we tried the process out. I videotaped myself with my class going through the inquiry process of ASK-INVESTIGATE-CREATE-FEEDBACK-EVALUATE AND REFLECT in an inquiry circle. I chose a task, we had already done some learning about the topic and the students would create a piece that reflected their understanding. We used Feedback for learning to build criteria and the ethic of critique in learning to improve student work.

Checking: The whole gardening experience developed social relationships, but the discussion around plants, healing, contributions of Aboriginal people showed a broader understanding. We found learning circles very inclusive for all students and gave students another way to demonstrate their learning. In one class, the evidence of deeper understanding and improved writing was apparent between two mini-projects. The "aha" moment for the students were that it was no longer good enough to throw something down on a poster board, but they needed to talk about it, give and receive effective feedback and improve it through several drafts. They noticed the difference in their work and were able to articulate the reasons why (i.e. they had powerful words). Many students in this class went from a "2" in writing performance standards to a "3" – especially in conventions, organization and content. We also noticed several questions about the healing properties of plants when we began to study plants.

Reflections/Advice: We learned that there is great value in inquiry and knowledge building circles, but we also need direct teaching, modeling and all the other components of good practice in order to continue moving our students forward. We also learned that weaving Aboriginal teachings throughout the experiential gardening unit gave a deeper and broader understanding of nature, habitat, medicines and stewardship. We would like to continue this study next year as we just touched on the learning circles in the spring. We have dipped our toe in the water so to speak, but would like to explore using the inquiry model and integration of Aboriginal teachings as we plant in the fall. We were not able to plant everything we would have liked to in the spring. We have just started our learning as a staff and are looking forward to the upcoming year of completing our book study. We feel we could be more systematic in our approach and less rushed if we begin in September. We look forward to developing a reflective practice around inquiry as a school team.