



## 2014-2015 AESN Case Study

**School:** Mary Jane Shannon Elementary    **District:** #36 Surrey

**Area of Focus:** Enhancement Agreement

**Inquiry Team Members:** Jennifer Boudreau, Dajana Erceg, Celine Feazle, Allison Hotti, Kerri Hutchinson, Lois Layton, Shelli Roesler, Tina Sihota, Tammy Stubbings, Julia Thompson

**Question/Focus:** How can we incorporate the First Peoples Principles of Learning using a cross-curricular nature and performance theme? We are specifically looking at incorporating the following four principles:

- 1) "Learning ultimately supports to well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors."
- 2) "Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)."
- 3) "Learning recognizes the role of indigenous knowledge."
- 4) "Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story."

(FNESC, 2014).

Sub-questions:

How can we use our inquiry question to:

- build background knowledge?
- use audience to motivate writing and storytelling?
- to be aware of various ways to communicate our thoughts and learning?
- to connect students to their school community and strengthen belonging (in collaboration with big buddies)?

**Scanning:** We noticed that our students were not connected to the school community as a whole. The teachers at our school also desired to collaborate with other educators outside of their grade group. We also noticed that students were unmotivated, and lacked confidence when participating in most literacy activities.

**Focus:** This year, we would like our focus to be a cross-curricular nature and performance theme that has the First Peoples Principles of Learning embedded within it. In doing so, we hope to encourage and develop holistic learners within our school community who feel connected. We wanted to increase connectivity and community between classrooms using cross-curricular activities to strengthen the sense of belonging for all.

**Hunch:** We noticed that many of our students are not experiencing a connection with the school community and nature. We have noticed that when we do connect lessons to the outdoors and one another, our students are highly motivated and engaged in constructing their own learning. We also noticed that students will take on ownership of projects when they are involved in the planning and designing stages.

**New professional learning:** As an inquiry team we meet regularly to discuss our findings, plan activities related to our focus, and review professional readings related to our question and research. As a team we participated in professional learning workshops, accessed resources through Aboriginal Education, and we learned from the Aboriginal Support worker.

We found that through the process of engaging in our inquiry activities that the lines between 'knowers' and 'learners' became woven together. Teachers were no longer the keepers of knowledge as we relied upon our students and community members to co-construct our new learning.

People from our inquiry team, as well as other educators from Mary Jane Shannon, participated in the STA Professional Development day at the Musqueam Centre. The theme of "Strengthening the Circle" resonated with the work and learning occurring in our own inquiry at Mary Jane Shannon and our focus on building community and belonging. We heard the new vision of Aboriginal education from Buffy Sainte Marie and participated in workshops that focused on traditional ways of preparing food, weaving, and drum making. The day left us inspired and motivated to continue the work we started in the fall.

**Taking action:**

- We began our inquiry with an endeavor that connected the school principal, and all of the 6 classes (5 primary and 1 intermediate) involved in the AESN project. Each teacher chose a spirit animal of Aboriginal significance to share with each of the 6 classes. The teacher prepared a presentation and read a picture book with an Aboriginal focus to go along with the spirit animal. We explained to the students how we personally connected with the animal and at the end of the rotation the students decided which animal they connected to as well. From there, teachers collaborated in smaller groups to explore spirit animals in ways that suited their blended class grouping. The school Principal, Lois Layton, shared a story with each primary class called "*Totem Tale: A Tall Story from Alaska*" by Deb Vanasse. This particular story was significant to our learning because it focuses on several animals working together to create a story. In the story, each animal is needed to cooperate and listen to one another tell a co-authored story. The sharing of stories and connections with classes other than our own set the tone for building community and building relationships of trust.
- Each of the primary classes participated in outdoor education in some form. Two of the primary classes built a community garden. The students had to create a garden plan as to how the plants would be organized into several bins. The next task after planting was to design a plan that would fairly distribute tasks between 44 students to take care of

the garden. In pairs, students wrote a proposal as to how to care for the garden and we all voted on our favourite. It was very important for the care-taking plan to come from the students, and not from the classroom teachers for students to take authentic ownership of the project. Neither of the classroom teachers needs to remind students to water or bring the gardening bins in each day, as the students are excited to complete their tasks on the days they agreed upon. We are growing lettuce, various herbs, strawberries, and tomatoes. The students are looking forward to cooking using the produce from the community garden. They also 'draw like scientists' once a week and record the changes of the plants in detail.

- Another outdoor exploration looked at plants as natural dyes to create colour. The classroom teacher explains how this took place: "through a variety of student initiated interests in my class, we began a learning journey into inquiring about colours. My students curiosities included: What was the first colour in the world? How many colours are there in the world? How do colours feel to you? And why do colours exist? After investigating in our class, we realized these were deep thinking questions that involved the natural world. Since there was not a 'right answer' to these questions we invited the community (parents, colleagues, students, staff) to be part of the conversation by creating posters of the questions to hang outside our classroom. We also invited Gail, our Aboriginal Support worker, to discuss an Aboriginal perspective to colours. Gail discussed the significance of different colours and their meanings in aboriginal culture. She also shared the different uses for colours in Aboriginal culture such as dying cedar and painting totem poles. Gail spoke about how Aboriginal people would use many types of plants, flowers, and natural materials to create dyes to colour their materials. Further engaging the interest of my students, Gail became an important leader in our classroom while we journeyed out into our local community forest. As we walked through the forest Gail pointed out many types of plants that were used as dye including horse tail, ferns, berries, dandelions, and moss that Aboriginal people would use to make dye. We collected samples of these natural materials and decided to create our own dye with the help from Gail. The process of involving community members, our natural environment, learning Aboriginal context through a knowledgeable leader, and experiencing how Aboriginal context is also naturally a part of my students' interest and inquiry was a reflective process for both the children and myself."
- One primary teacher shares her work which incorporates building background knowledge through nature and observation: "We have changed our morning play to literacy invitations that use materials from nature and allow the students choice in which centre they go to and who they work with. One of these centres is called "I see, I wonder" where student get to look at a specific item (spring flower, pinecone, fruit, moulds of animal tracks) under a microscope and ask questions as well as draw their observations. Another one is called "story invitation" where we provide them with an array of materials (as many collected from outside as possible) and have them act out a story and then share it orally with a friend and a teacher. The materials include tree stumps, nests, and branches. We have found the students engaged and excited to learn

and to share during this time! As the teacher I have shifted my need of store bought materials for the pretty Pinterest centres to using items we already have/ can be found outside/ or re-purposed!”

- Motivating students to participate in literacy-based activities was another area of our inquiry. Aboriginal learning was embedded into the literature and stories we told the students prior to writing. Two primary classes wrote animal poems in small groups using Aboriginal puppets as inspiration. The blended classes created poetry using a step-by-step process that began with writing an autobiographical poem. Next, the students brainstormed information about their animal using a matching puppet as their focus. Then students had to incorporate a noise their animal makes, movements, and appearance. The final step was to choose our best ideas and incorporate them into a poem. We decided to give the students one marker per group so that listening and collaboration were central to the writing process. We are planning to have a poetry reading at the end of May so that the young poets can showcase their work. This project not only blended two primary classes together, but also created collaboration between a new teacher to MJS with staff at our school.
- One primary class and intermediate class decided they wanted to perform a readers’ theatre after listening to the story *Little Bear’s Vision Quest*. The District Aboriginal Teacher, Nadine McSpadden has accessed some readers’ theatre script for an intermediate and a primary class to perform. The intermediate students will be reading the script while the primary class acts it out using tableau.
- Two primary classes tied their learning of animals in Aboriginal culture to technology by creating powerpoint presentations. After each student chooses their animal, the class will be painting their animals and stacking them into a totem pole in their classroom. The students will be in charge of working together to figure out their place in the totem pole and why.
- The same two primary classes mentioned above have regularly visited Hawthorne Park this year as a nature study. The teachers have noticed that the students have become much more aware of their surroundings and notice things such as new plants, flowers, and berries. Their last visit focused on a discussion as to whether or not the berries were ripe enough to pick. The students have also set up a ‘blueprint’ for a house using logs and sticks. The natural resources of the forest continue to enhance the students’ play and observational skills.

**Checking:** To create a baseline of evidence for our hunch we used the following:

- school wide writes
- oral language scoring guides
- informal observations with students
- student self-assessments

- conferencing with students on their understandings of areas of focus through our inquiry questions and teachings.
- watching student engagement and enthusiasm increase (or decrease if the case may be) and look at the reasons behind these changes.

In May, we noticed that our students are inspired after watching performances from other classes such as readers' theatre, poetry sharing, and visual art. This inspiration encouraged the audience to pursue similar activities back in their own classrooms. From observing the motivation of students to participate in literacy based showcases, we believe an entry point has been created for all students to be successful. After viewing a showcase, students felt more comfortable and confident stepping into the risk associated with performance. This ability has helped to increase the sense of belonging and purpose in connection to performance. Students were also engaged in new forms of literacy such as reading scripts, technology, poetry, and recipes, and were very successful with the reading that is involved in these tasks! We have also found that our students now use a common language in connection to Aboriginal learning.

**Reflections/Advice:** Our key areas of learning occurred in the following three areas:

- Learning: knowers and learners are blended, one person is not the 'source' of knowledge'.
- To strengthen our circle, we found that sharing out with other classes was key. Students need to see what goes on in other classrooms and connect to new learners, as do educators.
- Aboriginal learning needs to be given a name to give it significance but also needs to be embedded and not seen as an activity or a separate unit.
- If we are to create school community, we need to be continuously forming relationships of trust with one another.