



2015-2016 AESN Study

School: David Brankin Elementary

District: #36 Surrey

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Our focus for this year: Our focus was on exploring contemporary Aboriginal artistic representations, specifically storytelling and movement. Our aim is to provide all students, access to the self-regulating benefits of many forms of Aboriginal art. Through the pattern, rhythm, and full body movement that drumming and traditional forms of dance offer, students can find strategies for regulating emotions, dealing with stress, and finding enjoyment.

Scanning: We began the scanning process by consulting with some of our identified Aboriginal students. The most helpful question at this point was “Can you name TWO adults in this school who believe you will be a success in life?” because it had been the most revealing and gave us a starting point.

The four key questions acted as a way of assessing and reflecting on the effectiveness of this inquiry project. We asked our students these questions in the beginning and used them as a means of determining our course of action for this project. Following the project, we will be asking the students the same questions to see if there is any change in their responses.

Students really connected to the outdoor education piece of the work that was being facilitated. Throughout the three-day ‘artist in residence’ experience students were constantly asking if they could go back to “the forest” to explore. This was a great learning opportunity for them as our Aboriginal Artist in Residence was able to share traditional indigenous knowledge in an emergent way.

We bookended our ‘artist in residence’ experience with a smudging ceremony. During the first ceremony students found it challenging to stay focused and quiet, but during the ceremony at the end of the three days they were focused and reflective. During the first ceremony, many students refused to take on the smoke or complained about the smell, and then when we did it again every student embraced the ceremony. For us this clearly demonstrates a different openness to indigenous culture.

When planning for this inquiry process, the First Nations Principles of Learning were used to shape the work that we were putting together. Our goal was to make this learning experience as holistic and reflective as possible, and use storytelling to guide the work we were doing with students.

Focus: The goal with this inquiry was to build connections between indigenous storytelling, the environment and community with our learning being shared through movement. Throughout the three-day experience, students had time to be with nature in an unstructured way, our Aboriginal Artist in Residence shared traditional indigenous stories, students had opportunities to write their own stories and we explored elements of movement through an indigenous lens. We will be sharing our movement piece, which ties in elements of traditional storytelling, at our school Aboriginal Day assembly on June 21st.



Hunch: Our hunch has been that the work we do in the fine arts has not been inclusive of Aboriginal ways of knowing and thinking. By bringing positive representations of Aboriginal culture into the artistic work we do with our students we should be able to foster a positive self-image in our Aboriginal students and a positive image of Aboriginal peoples in our entire school community.

New professional learning: The most valuable resource has been the planning, and facilitating process our Aboriginal Artist in Residence, and by spending three days with her, we were able to see the First Nations Principles of Learning in action. This experience opened my eyes to the fact that bringing Indigenous culture into the classroom is more about *how* we teach, rather than *what* we teach.

Taking action: We are still actively working through this project. Over the next few weeks we will be interviewing and guiding reflections with both our Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. We will be using the four key questions as well as other strategies such as “before I thought/now I think” to encourage students to reflect and think through this experience as a whole.

Checking: While we are still working through this process, our final smudging experience provided some insight into the ways this process has affected our students. As mentioned before, initially students were hesitant to participate fully in the smudging experience, however on our final day all students embraced this cultural experience fully. It was noticeable the way students’ feelings towards indigenous culture evolved through this experience.

Reflections/Advice: The main piece of advice, after working through this process and working with our Aboriginal Artist in Residence, is for people to just lean into this process. Over the past few years we have been hesitant in embracing Aboriginal educational experiences out of fear of not knowing what is respectful and what is not. Our Aboriginal Artist in Residence has shown us that there are many resources available and people who are willing to help and support our work as educators. The biggest learning that came out of this was that Aboriginal education is the *learning*, rather than the content. By guiding your practice using the First Peoples Principles of Learning, you will be able to make incorporate these ways of knowing into work already being done.