



## 2015-2016 AESN Case Study

**School:** Edwin S Richards Arts-Based Curriculum School      **District:** #75 Mission

**Inquiry Team Members:** Taylor Crowdis, Donna Giroux, Jan Minty, Carolynn Schmor, Chris Stevens (student leaders), Sharon Widdows

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**Our focus for this year:** To inspire our Aboriginal students to participate in service-learning projects by creating arts-infused service-learning opportunities.

**Scanning:** We initially interviewed our Aboriginal students and discovered that most could identify adults in the building who cared about them; in addition, they felt confident of their own future success. Most also felt nurtured in the school environment and believed that Aboriginal culture is being taught in school.

With the help of our Aboriginal Liaison Worker, we interviewed our First Nations students individually.

We felt that while our First Nations students feel valued in our school, the low percentage of students stepping up to leadership positions indicates a passive approach to school – in other words, they receive knowledge and occasionally accept help from various adults in the building, but when volunteers are called for it is seldom our Aboriginal students who come forth. We felt that providing service to others is a very empowering act, and we wanted these students to feel empowered and develop intercultural relationships rooted in non-biased, artistic collaboration.

While we felt that our school is a positive, nurturing environment for our Aboriginal students based on their responses to the first question, we would like to see more of our First Nations students becoming involved in leadership opportunities. The First Peoples Principles of Learning states that learning “ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors”. Service-learning is a growing practice in education which supports the local and global community and requires strong leadership which we believe would serve our Aboriginal students well in their futures. It is also reflective and experiential, and when planned accordingly is also reciprocal; this aligns well with the Principles. In addition it requires the awareness of the consequences of one’s own actions, also integral to the First Peoples Principles of Learning. Also, intercultural relationships are enhanced when people explore their own and others’ identities (again, a component of effective service-learning). According to the OECD’s principles of learning, activities should centre on students’ cognition and growth because they (the learners) are the central players in the environment. In addition, the experiential nature of service-learning and the arts can create a very effective opportunity for student engagement in leading service projects. Because arts activities and service-learning projects cannot occur without social interaction, they align well with the second principle of learning (OECD). Service projects, when planned carefully, can be emotional experiences. Our project was designed so they (our student volunteers) would have the opportunity to engage with the recipients, allowing for the development of intercultural relationships; by ‘meeting’ the people they were helping; we hoped to observe an Un-othering of the ‘Other’, so to speak. Students would learn to recognize individual differences in people of other cultures before biases took root. Helping our students move out of their comfort zones by

taking on these leadership roles would also help balance the power inequity – take the ‘charity’ out of charity projects – that exists in service-learning. This type of authentic learning is key to building intercultural connections that are based on equality.

**Focus:** We selected the arts and service-learning for several reasons. Firstly, we are an arts-based curriculum school so we integrate the arts as an additional lens through which students can learn and apply new concepts to regular curricular requirements. Secondly, service-learning is a growing practice in education and, when planned carefully, can increase awareness of social and cultural disparity and reduce the power inequity inherent in typical service-learning projects. Since we have noticed a lower participation rate among our Aboriginal learners to take on leadership positions in service-learning activities, we wanted to make those kinds of projects more appealing to our Aboriginal learners. Infusing the philosophy of arts integration into service-learning provided us with a platform from which to make leadership more attractive.

**Hunch:** We were feeling satisfied that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students felt Aboriginal culture is an important part of their learning; however, we were noticing that our Aboriginal students were not active participants in areas of curriculum that included Aboriginal content; specifically, that they appeared to be passive learners in their own cultural heritage. We wanted to create leadership opportunities that would be attractive for them so they would become more active participants in their own cultural teaching/learning and learn how to make intercultural connections with people from all cultures.

**New professional learning:** We asked one of our Aboriginal helping teachers to come and speak at a staff meeting about resources available that would help infuse more Aboriginal content into the new curriculum. We also had an Aboriginal artist-in-residence from our local community do a project where our new school logo was infused with Aboriginal symbols. This was created in collaboration with our Aboriginal students who then worked with our non-Aboriginal students to extend the project to our entire student body. The project was dedicated at a school assembly on National Aboriginal Day when we also honoured the artist. The students at our school participated in Halq’emeylem language lessons taught by an elder in our community. Our grade four class learned a story, ‘Te Ex’wil Peska’, (the Little Hummingbird) and while dressed in regalia (capas and masks), told the story in Halq’emeylem and English at our assembly. This powerful story is a lesson in no matter how small or insignificant you may think you are you can make a difference. We felt this fit in well with our theme of arts-infused service-learning.

We had planned to meet our Brazilian peers via Skype throughout the year and collaborate with them and also with some recent Syrian refugee families new to our province. Unfortunately our Brazil partners were unavailable and the timeline for working with the refugee families could not be accommodated within the school calendar.

**Taking action:** We decided to introduce our students to our Brazilian friend via Skype who was going to give us a cultural presentation. We would then let our students decide how they would like to proceed with their own presentation. We had also planned to have our students participate in some music activities with some recent refugee families. Collaborations between the refugee children, our own students, and their Brazilian peers would result in an inter-cultural performance via Skype. As explained, our plans fell short due to the unavailability of our Brazilian friends and the short timeline for our immigrant families. Fortunately we were able to ‘piggyback’ onto another visual arts project planned for our school that included an artist in residence from our local community who was commissioned to create

a mosaic quilt which fused our school logo with Aboriginal symbols. The leadership roles for our students evolved into a teacher/mentor position of helping our Aboriginal Liaison worker extend the project to the rest of the student body.

In retrospect, we would like to attempt this project in the future and modify it to include more than one group to meet via Skype and meet our refugee families sooner in the school year.

**Checking:** The most rewarding thing we noticed was that of the three students who took the leadership roles at year end, two were in our most vulnerable group of students. They do not always make the best choices and do not typically volunteer for leadership positions. They were excited and proud of their responsibilities in taking our art project to the entire student body and knew they had done an excellent job. They also played a prominent role in the dedication assembly as the individuals who displayed the art mosaic to all in attendance. They indicated in de-briefing conversations that they were proud to take an active role in teaching others about their Aboriginal heritage. We hope and expect that these students who are now off to middle school will continue to be active teachers/learners of Aboriginal culture in their school and community.

**Reflections/Advice:** Due to the unexpected unavailability of our service-learning partners, we were unable to complete the project as planned. However, we were able to complete some activities and have realized that a few adaptations and backup plans would be prudent. Based on the smaller leadership opportunities that were created and observing the Aboriginal students who took those roles on, we remain committed to this project and plan to continue in the future.

We were able to use another project (previously planned) with an Aboriginal artist-in-residence to observe how our older First Nations students 'taught' the other students about the art and helped our Aboriginal Liaison Worker in classrooms. They helped her not only with our younger Aboriginal students, but with the entire student body. Their pride was evident and informal interviews with the volunteers afterwards revealed enthusiasm and a desire to take on these roles again.

We would like to attempt this project again in the future with alternate plans in place. For example, we were to have worked with some students at a school for vulnerable children in Brazil, as well as with some new Syrian refugee families in a neighboring district. We were unable to connect with our Brazilian partners, so a second partnership will be included in our plan. Our immigrant families have been introduced to our community slowly so as to be sensitive to their new surroundings; therefore, our proposed timeline between the arrival of the families and the end of the school year became too short to accomplish the arts activities we had planned. As stated earlier, planning with more than one global partner would be advisable, as would connecting with our local immigrant families as early as possible.