



2015-2016 AESN Case Study

School: Enver Creek Secondary

District: #36 Surrey

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Our focus for this year: To increase positive self-identity for Aboriginal learners through their humanities teachers raising their comfort level with using authentic First Peoples texts in the classroom.

Scanning: Three students were interviewed by the Aboriginal Youth Care Worker and responded to the four key questions. Each of the students readily named two adults in the school who believed in their success. Each student also felt she was successful in her learning, had clear goals, and understood the importance of what she was learning. None of the students recalled having an authentic First Peoples text used in their English language arts classroom, but one student recalled feeling a sense of pride when her culture was represented through a cultural presentation in a social studies class. That presentation included someone speaking Halquelelum. All of the students welcomed the inclusion of authentic First Peoples texts in their classrooms and connected that with making them feel “happy” and “proud.”

Focus: A main focus of the professional development for the teaching staff at Enver Creek this year has been around the new curriculum. Including authentic First People’s texts and worldviews is a key element of the proposed changes.

Having two writers with dramatically different text formats helped introduce teachers and students alike to authentic First Nations texts. Students who attended these two events have gained new insights into spoken word poetry as well as Canada’s relationship with its First Peoples.

Hunch: Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students will both benefit from the inclusion of authentic First Peoples texts in their classrooms. There are some teachers within the humanities department who are very comfortable using the work of Aboriginal authors, such as Sherman Alexie’s novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*.

New professional learning: The English department head purchased copies of Richard Wagamese’s non-fiction collection *One Story, One Song*, which has generated discussion among the English teachers. Richard Wagamese was also a featured speaker at the Surrey Teachers’ Association Convention in early May, and department members had the opportunity to extend their learning through attending his session. New resources, such as the iLit series *Strength and Struggle: Perspectives From First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples in Canada*, are also being utilized for the first time.

Our school used the funds from the AESN grant to host two Aboriginal authors. The first was spoken word poet Winona Linn, the second was poet/author/activist Lee Maracle. Each of the writers spoke to an audience of 200+ students of mixed grades (10 -12) in the school theatre. Primarily classes from the English department were in the audience for Winona Linn’s performance. As well, classes from drama, applied skills, and one social studies class attended.

For Lee Maracle's performance, social studies classes made up the majority, with two senior English classes.

Anecdotal comments from teachers and students alike have been extremely positive regarding the two author visits. One Aboriginal learner who attended Lee Maracle's presentation commented, "I really enjoyed Lee Maracle's presentation because she spoke a lot about not stereotyping, having respect for everybody, but most importantly staying true to who you are and where your roots come from. Her words really spoke to me, as a young Aboriginal woman, about not losing connection."

Taking action: The inquiry team initially involved three humanities teachers and our school leader, but one of these teachers was on a long-term TOC contract and our school leader was moved to a new school mid-year. As a result, it was important to involve additional teachers and this was done through the drama and social studies department heads. They coordinated the invitation of classes to the two author presentations. As well, the Aboriginal Teacher Advocate and Aboriginal Youth Care Worker were involved in inviting the school's identified Aboriginal learners.

Each of the teachers who brought their classes to hear the authors was able to continue the conversation in their classrooms with their students. The teachers used a variety of prompts, such as, "What did you learn about Canada's relationship with its First Nations? What did you learn about authentic First Peoples' texts? What's an important message you took away from the presenter?"

Checking: As the second of the two author visits only recently concluded, we have not had time to survey a representative sampling of the school's Aboriginal learners. Comments from students and staff who attended one or both of the two author visits have been overwhelmingly positive. A number of students commented that the authors raised their awareness of contemporary issues facing Canada's First Peoples. One example: "I learned that Aboriginals to this day are still fighting for their rights."

Reflections/Advice: Having poets and authors come to our school made the concept of authentic First Peoples texts real and immediate. Based on the immediate and enthusiastic feedback of Aboriginal learners, creating more opportunities for visits by Aboriginal authors and including more authentic First Peoples texts in the humanities classrooms will contribute to positive self-identity for Aboriginal learners.

A number of International students were in attendance and one of them was able to make some global connections, such as "From Lee's presentation I learned a common issue in the world is discrimination." Another student said, "This made me connect to a time in Taiwan's history that the government ... treated the Taiwanese Aboriginal people differently."

In hindsight, it would have been useful to provide an additional opportunity for interested students to continue this discussion, perhaps being facilitated by the Aboriginal Teacher Advocate and the Aboriginal Youth Care Worker. This focus group could have provided useful information for the humanities teachers and their goal of including more authentic First Peoples texts.