



2015-2016 AESN Case Study

School: Steveston-London Secondary

District: #38 Richmond

Inquiry Team Members: Stephanie Christie, Andrea Shearer

Contacts: stchristie@sd38.bc.ca, ashearer@sd38.bc.ca

Our focus for this year: We focused on Goal #2 of Richmond's Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement - *All Students in Richmond will demonstrate a deeper understanding and appreciation of the histories, languages, and cultures of Aboriginal communities from an Aboriginal perspective.*

Scanning: In the scanning phase, we conducted interviews with six randomly selected students from the English 10 and Social Studies 10 class within our Spectrum incentive program. We used the following questions/principles to help us shape the interview questions:

- Where are you going with your learning? (Four Key Questions)
- Emotions are integral to learning (OECD Principles of Learning)
- Building horizontal connections (OECD Principles of Learning)
- Learning recognizes the role of indigenous knowledge (First Peoples Principles of Learning)

While the students in the targeted class were generally successful learners with strong metacognitive and self-regulation skills, we identified certain areas with a definite need for improvement:

- Their understanding of the horizontal connections between content areas and disciplines (in this case between English and Social Studies classes)
- Their understanding of how Aboriginal histories and cultures affect modern Aboriginal experiences, from an Aboriginal perspective
- Their ability to empathize with, and draw connections between, their own experiences of culture, history and place, and those of the members of Aboriginal communities

Focus: We selected this area of focus for our inquiry because we wanted to help students develop new understandings about how personal expression and experience on the one hand, and historical events and social policy on the other, are connected. We also wanted to give students opportunities to develop meaningful understandings of Aboriginal experiences, and to connect with those experiences personally. We hoped to shift our students' attitude about Aboriginal experience from one of judgment to one of empathy.

Hunch: Our first hunch was that teaching English and Social Studies entirely separately gave students the false impression that personal experience and history/social policy are somehow disconnected, especially considering the historical underrepresentation of Aboriginal literature in secondary English classrooms, and the lack of resources in our own book rooms written by Aboriginal authors.

New Professional Learning: Primarily, we focused on using the First People's Principles of Learning to both shape our approach to the material, and to design learning experiences for our students.

We found the following resources very useful for ourselves and the students:

- "Borders" – short story by Thomas King
- *Dreaming in Indian: Contemporary Native American Voices* – by Lisa Charleyboy
- *Ends/Begins* from the 7 Generations graphic novel series – depicts a residential school experience
- *The Final Report of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission*
- *First People's Principles of Learning* – First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC)
- "I Lost My Talk" – poem by Rita Joe
- *Indian Horse* – novel by Richard Wagamese
- "The Pass System" – a documentary film screened at the Vancouver International Film Festival
- "On Racism and White Privilege" – book excerpt by Jennifer R. Holladay
- *Project of Heart: Illuminating the Hidden History of Indian Residential Schools in BC* -- BCTF
- "We Were Children" – documentary film
- "White Privilege" – article by Peggy McIntosh

Taking Action: Our first step was to survey all of our students more widely about their perceptions of, and attitudes toward, Aboriginal history and modern communities in Canada. Students were asked (among other questions), how modern, strong and diverse they perceived Aboriginal communities to be, how knowledgeable they felt about issues affecting Aboriginal communities, and how sympathetic they feel about challenges facing Aboriginal communities. While students generally scored themselves low across all measures, we identified the following as areas of particular weakness and targets for change in the unit: knowledge of, and empathy about, Aboriginal issues, and the perception of the strength of Aboriginal communities.

Our next step was to acquire a class set of *Indian Horse* by Richard Wagamese, a novel that follows the life of a young Aboriginal man as he is taken from his parents, attends residential school, becomes involved in the world of hockey, develops substance abuse problems, reveals and acknowledges the abuse he has suffered, reconnects with his heritage, and moves toward healing.

To start, students participated in a unit on residential schools in Social Studies class that was focused on the following First People's Principles of Learning:

- Learning is holistic, reflexive, **reflective**, experiential and relational (focused on **connectedness**, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)
- Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions.
- Learning recognizes the role of indigenous knowledge
- Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story

Students explored the following questions:

- What happened?

- How did we get here? (examining Government policies, official reports and the Indian Act)
- What is the legacy of Government policies?
- What is reconciliation (national and individual)?

Particular emphasis was placed on asking students to draw connections between the institutional racism experienced by First Peoples in Canada, and that experienced by other communities, and to critically question their perception of what Canada is.

Once a certain historical knowledge foundation had been laid, work started in the English 10 class. Students were asked to reflect on the concept of “privilege” and on what particular social privileges they enjoy and may not have noticed before. Then students started participation in literature circles. Groups of four students got together four times to discuss sections of *Indian Horse*. Discussion tasks and individual written reflections required students to draw connections between their own experiences and those of the main character in the novel. They were also asked to reflect on the importance of various aspects of the main character’s experience, each aspect derived from one of the First Peoples Principles of Learning:

- Meeting #1: Learning involves generational roles and responsibilities
- Meeting #2: Learning recognizes the role of indigenous knowledge; learning involves patience and time.
- Meeting #3: Learning is embedded in memory, history and story; learning involves recognizing the consequences of one’s actions
- Meeting #4: Learning is focused on connectedness and a sense of place; learning requires exploration of one’s identity

Finally, students were given a follow-up survey asking the same questions as the pre-unit survey, and were given an additional opportunity to comment on how their experiences in Social Studies and English had affected them.

Checking: Our goals for the inquiry were to improve our students’:

- Knowledge about issues affecting Aboriginal communities
- Empathy regarding the challenges facing Aboriginal communities
- Perception of the strength and value of Aboriginal cultures and communities

From the reflections that students wrote in both English and Social Studies, and from their responses to the post-unit survey, we are confident that the units were successful in reaching these goals. On the post-unit survey, the students’ responses indicated significant positive change, especially with regard to the first two goals.

Examples of student reflections include:

“After reading this novel, an understanding and respect for Aboriginal people’s history, cultures and lifestyles is definitely developed. Culture, the one central role that defines each and everyone of us who we are, is tied to language, identity, history and experience. ... This made me realize how important family is to one individual. It is the most essential part of one’s identity and culture. I cannot imagine being separated from my family. I don’t know what I would do without them.” K.H.

“The novel provided a powerful insight into a part of Canada’s history that still affect[s] us as a Nation today. As a Canadian, I feel ashamed of this part of our history as well as confused as to

why the government did what they did. The residential school is a sad chapter of our Canadian history and I cannot help but feel frustrated that this topic isn't more openly discussed. Knowing our past is a big part of the healing process, and I am thankful that this novel is able to shed light on this delicate yet important subject matter.... This novel had a profound impact on me and my view of the world." C.T.

"What I liked about the novel was that Saul is a total person. He's not just "First Nations" or a residential school "victim". He's a hockey player and he has interests in life that I could relate to. He also tells the story straight to you, so you feel like you can really understand what he's going through. And you understand totally why he ends up in the situation he's in." M.C.

"This story really made me feel something.... This book made me feel sad, scared, surprised, angry and confused. I may or may not have actually cried while reading it. I really felt invested in the story. The residential school system was a terrible time in Canada's past, and we are only now realizing that and attempting to correct it. I think learning about it is extremely important to our understanding of the history of our country and the unnecessary hardships of First Nations in the past. This story definitely enhanced my understanding and feelings towards this time in our past." C.S.

Reflections/Advice:

When we first began the unit(s), we were a bit nervous that some of the material we planned to present to students might be too disturbing for some of our more sheltered students. We were pleasantly surprised that they handled the material thoughtfully and maturely.

We plan to build on the unit(s) next year, and will look into possibly of adding a guest speaker and/or expressive assignment around the idea of personal reconciliation.

When we repeat the units next year, we are considering making changes to more strongly convey the strength of First Peoples' communities, and the resistance that took place toward residential schools.