



2015-2016 AESN Case Study

School: Westwind Elementary

District: #38 Richmond

Inquiry Team Members:

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Our focus for this year: Using Aboriginal ways of knowing as a tool for students to connect to their own personal identities.

Scanning: We asked the students what they knew about First Nations and they claimed to already know “everything.” Looking at their responses, we discovered that most of their knowledge was based on historical perspectives and not connected to values or the First Nations Principles of Learning.

It became apparent that there was an emergent need to provide these students with opportunities to learn about Aboriginal culture and history through lessons and activities that integrate the First Peoples Principles of Learning.

Focus: We began with applying to our district’s Innovation Grant, which led us to thinking about the Aboriginal perspective in the renewed curriculum and how to incorporate this perspective on a more holistic level. In meeting as a group, we felt we needed to focus as well on how the students view themselves in the world and their values. Our students come from a variety of backgrounds and are fortunate enough to have many opportunities, but we don’t have any students that identify as First Nations, and we feel that it is important to our community to learn more about another perspective.

Hunch: We think our focus emerged for a number of reasons. To begin with, Aboriginal knowledge, content and perspectives were not as explicit or heavily emphasized in the previous curriculum, especially in comparison to the emerging redesigned curriculum drafts. Also, we feel that only recently there have been more opportunities for teachers to participate in professional development that would allow for them to feel more confident in their teaching of Aboriginal content and perspectives in a knowledgeable and respectful way. This includes learning about the First Peoples Principles of Learning. Lastly, only within the last few years has our district acquired more age-appropriate and student friendly resources that are rich in Aboriginal content. Our hunch is also that students need to explore and experience concepts and ideas on a personal level before they can see the bigger world connections. We felt that students need to participate in exploring their own identities and stories, before learning about them in relation to Aboriginal histories. We recognize that our school has no students who identify as First Nations, so the challenge will be to make the learning meaningful and relevant for our students in a non-Aboriginal setting

New professional learning: We began collaboration and planning with our district’s Aboriginal Support Teachers and a teacher consultant in curriculum. With the use of funds from our district’s Innovation Grant, we were able to get release time for the collaboration. Our team

members also participated in Braiding Histories, which is a series of district workshops around the renewed curriculum and the Aboriginal perspective. We learned how to respectfully and meaningfully explore the First Peoples Principles. It was also important for us to be able to collaborate as a team to share the experience. We also shared our learning with the rest of our staff.

Taking action: Teacher/classroom based: Using funds from our Innovation Grant, the three teachers involved collaborated with our Aboriginal Education Teacher Consultant to plan the year and what the emphasis would be in terms of learning. An Aboriginal Support Teacher and a teacher consultant from our district's Learning Services came into the three classrooms once and sometimes twice a week throughout the year to work with the students. These were very powerful teaching sessions that at the beginning of the year focused on students understanding their own culture and story and then moved onto looking at residential schools and the concepts of connection, disconnection, and colonization. There was always literature used and through the year, the school also acquired a number of resources that will be helpful for other teachers. The groups of educators would also meet after each teaching session to reflect on the lesson and plan for next time.

Teacher professional learning: As a team of educators, the group attended a series of workshops in our district called Braiding Histories which presented a number of ways to incorporate the Aboriginal Ways of Knowing. It was very meaningful to attend this as a group so that we could reflect on the experience and also share our learning with the students. The group also attended the NOII Symposium in May, which presented some very powerful learning opportunities for our educators.

Culminating Activity: As a final activity with all three classes, we invited George Littlechild to come to our school and have the students create art work based on their learning about residential schools. Because the students had been working with George's book, they were very focused and engaged throughout the entire day. It was an incredibly positive and rewarding day and the children had an opportunity to show their learning, which they can then pass on to their family members.

Checking: After each lesson, the students were asked to respond to, "I used to think, but now I think..." as a way to assess their shift in thinking. The responses were very profound and clearly demonstrated a much deeper understanding of themselves and of First Nations people. When the students were asked the question, "What are you learning?" they immediately answered that they had been learning about First Nations people and about what had happened to them. These responses came unsolicited and questions were not asked specifically about a certain subject area. It was very clear that the teaching had had a big impact on the students. Also, from a teacher perspective, the gift of collaborative time had a significant impact on the teachers' practices.

Reflections/Advice: I think the biggest piece of advice when looking at incorporating the First People's Principles is to not be scared, but to start small and try something that feels comfortable. I think also using the teacher consultants as support is essential; try not to go it alone.

We are very proud of the work that the team did and the tremendous amount of learning that happened for both students and teachers.