



## **Networks of Inquiry and Innovation** **Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network**

### **2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study**

**School Name: Albert McMahon Elementary**

**School District: SD#75 Mission**

**Inquiry Team Members: Cyndie Anderson, Reena Hooge, Bonnie Peters, Shelby Lund, Harji Bhogal, Hardeep Grewal, Brittany O'Rourke, Peter Lindley**

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**Type of inquiry: AESN**

**Grade levels: Intermediate (4 - 7)**

**Curricular area(s): Applied Design, Skills & Technology, Arts Education, Career Education, Language Arts - Literacy, Language Arts - Oral Language, Physical & Health Education, Science, Social Studies, Halqemeylem language**

**Focus area(s): Aboriginal understandings (for example, Traditional Knowledge, oral history, reconciliation), Community-based learning, Core competencies (for example, critical thinking, communication, problem solving), First Peoples Principles of Learning, Growth mindset, Indigenous pedagogy, Social and emotional learning**

**In one sentence, what was your focus for the year?**

**Our focus was to increase the knowledge and understanding of the Sto:lo culture for our students in grades 5-6 using holistic, reflective, experiential and relational learning.**

**Scanning: Briefly summarize your scanning process. How did you use the four key questions as part of the scanning process? What did you notice about the experiences of your learners that were most important to your team?**

**We used the First Peoples Principles of Learning in an experiential and reflective way. We asked students to journal as they experienced different activities throughout the year to learn about the local Sto:lo First People. This involved interactive and hands on learning activities with our aboriginal department, local elders and community members and a trip off site to a longhouse in Chehalis. By using an experiential learning approach, we hoped the students would connect with the learning at a deeper level. We wanted the students to learn the history of the local first nations and understand the generational roles and**



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responsibilities we have as a community to be inclusive, supportive and caring to one another; to respect and protect each other's culture.

**Focus:** In a few sentences, explain why you selected this area. What changes were you hoping to obtain for your learners?

We had a journal write of what the students knew or have learned about aboriginal people. We learned from the writing that students had little to no understanding of the local Stolo First nation. The understanding was that this was something that happened in history and the aboriginal people live on the West coast and on the prairies. There understanding was limited. We hoped to broaden and enlighten the students understanding of local first nations culture and of the aboriginal first peoples who live in our communities.

**Hunch:** Describe your hunches about the ways in which practices at the school may have been contributing to the experiences of your learners that were of concern to you.

Our hunch was that much of the learning was done from a text book with little current resources. Many of our students knew some things about aboriginal people but couldn't describe past and present culture with much detail. We wanted to teach truth and reconciliation with care and respect. We have a lovely park that is situated on the original St. Mary's residential school site and only 2 % of our students were aware of this fact. Some of our staff were unaware of the history as well.

**New professional learning:** What new areas of professional learning did you explore? What resources were most helpful? What specific designs did you use to support the learning of your colleagues?

As a professional learning community, we looked at the new resources available to us online and from our aboriginal department, Siwalsiwes. Our staff explored the residential school experience attending a presentation by Three Crows. This company has two survivors from St. Mary's and also has a lead actor who discovered his own aboriginal heritage as a young man. We have many resources available to us on line from our Mission connect website. Siwalsiwes has worked with our local elders to provide information about the local culture as well. One of our classes had weekly Halq'emeylem lessons from a school district elder. We worked cooperatively with our district aboriginal department staff to provide resources and experiences for our students. We incorporated some of the Me to We lesson plans for a couple of our activities.



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**Taking action: Describe strategies you and your team decided on and how your actions worked out.**

**As a team, we wanted experiential learning for our youth. We attended a day at the Charlie longhouse in Chehalis. 98 students, parents and staff rotated throughout the day making bannock, playing slahal, learning about cedar, salmon and local medicine. One of the stations was story telling where the former Chehalis Chief Charlie told stories and local legends. The students were honoured with drumming and singing and had a private mask dance by a Sasquatch dancer. This post write journal entry showed students had a better understanding of the local first nations culture of the Sto: lo people and were interested in learning more. We had Johnny Williams, district staff, come speak to the children about his experience as a council member for the Skowlitz First Nation and aboriginal government. We used story telling with books for read aloud in our classes and had sessions taught by Brittany O Rourke, our aboriginal liaison about family structures before and after contact with Europeans. The students took part in a "we are silent", "we stand together" and a "our dreams matter" walk around our track at the school. Our whole school took part in this act of solidarity and inclusiveness. The students surrounded Brittany who spoke about Shannen's dream and how our dreams matter. The teachers stood in a circle around the children. As a group, we modeled how communities support and work together. Each of our students in grades 4-6 painted tiles for the project of heart. The tiles were placed in a circle symbol of the medicine wheel. this is proudly displayed in our peace garden in a kiosk built and carved by local artist Peter Gong. We had an honouring of surviving elders at the opening of the kiosk where some of our aboriginal students spoke about what they have learned and what it means to them to have cultural pride as an aboriginal person. Following protocol, guests drummed, sang and spoke of their experiences. This celebration was followed by a thank you tea for our parent volunteers and the elders who came for the unveiling of the kiosk.**

**Checking: Summarize the differences you made. Were they enough? Were you satisfied?**

**We had the students journal their journey of learning this year. We finished with a post question survey asking our students what their understanding and knowledge of the various activities were at the beginning of the year compared to the end. Many reported progress and an increase in learning in all areas asked. Many of our students knew about bannock but had never made it first hand like they did at the longhouse. Many had never been to the longhouse and found this outing to be very worthwhile. We were impressed by the maturity and respectful behaviour shown by our students at the kiosk celebration with the elders. It was evident they understood this to be a special and**



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unique experience. A particular response by a student when answering a question about how residential schooling changed the culture of the Sto:lo family system sends chills. He states, "as the children slowly started going off to those repulsive schools, the circle would figuratively start to crack, and cause major depression because the people were not used to this cruel way of life. The children are the heart of the circle and without them there is no future."

**Reflections/Advice:** Finish by sharing what you learned from this inquiry, where you plan to go next, and what advice you would offer other schools with a similar interest.

We will continue this pursuit of understanding continuing our teachings with a focus on community, truth and reconciliation. We hope to take our intermediate students for a day of gathering and team building at Fraser River Heritage Park along with a tour of the residential school. The building foundations are still there. As a team, we plan to have our students research and present their learning and understanding of First Nations culture to each other. We have learned to have more frequent reflection writing from the students to be able to have discussion along the way. We have learned we have barely touched the surface and there is much to learn and explore.