

Working Together as a Learning Community

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I'm using the research surrounding my book, **Relationships Make the Difference, Chapter 7, 2016 Pembroke Publishers**, to elaborate on how we used our school's Learning Commons; it was the virtual learning hub of our school. Learning happened through cross-curricular partnerships that ensured increased critical thinking, problem solving, decision making and communication abilities; it united our community together. (Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada, 2014)

Our Library Commons "*facilitated collaborative engagement to cultivate and empower a community of learners.*" This collaboration helped our school community develop a plan to include the Aboriginal Perspective in our daily teaching.

The theme for our plan was *Student and Community Partnerships*. We had spent the preceding three years working on developing moral intelligences tied into our school community goals. The moral intelligences guided students, staff and parents in developing a supportive learning community. There were constant discussions about what it looked and sounded like to be respectful, empathetic, fair, tolerant, how to display self-control and use our conscience. These intelligences wove perfectly into our school community beliefs and the words were proudly displayed around our library and throughout the school; these values were the impetus behind many important school projects.

We used the document, ***Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives into Curricula, 2003, Indigenous Education/Manitoba Education***, to form the basis of new plan. Moving forward with our community's shared knowledge and practice of demonstrating respect, kindness, empathy, self-control, fairness, tolerance, and conscience, we developed a two year plan to integrate the Aboriginal Perspective into our curricula.

Our school received a divisional Aboriginal Academic Achievement Grant, along with support from our Parent Advisory Council and the Manitoba Arts Council This gave us funds to hire skilled artists to work with staff and students to learn Aboriginal traditional dancing, singing, cooking, storytelling, and writing.

To support our diverse school population, we chose to include African and Vietnamese traditions along with Aboriginal cultures for the first year of our project. Our students and their families came from more than 40 different countries. We wanted to establish a culturally responsive education for our students and develop a learning environment that promoted success for all students. We continued to work on tolerance and empathy and celebrating our diversity.

Establishing a *Linking Home and School Committee*, with the help of our Parent Advisory Council was our first order of business; our library teacher along with staff and parents were active members of this committee and kept staff, students, and the community updated on our project. Staff and students made resource packages for each classroom from kindergarten to grade six; organized resource people to visit classrooms and planned the spring Making Connections assemblies. The first year of the plan looked at exploring students' cultural roots through dance, song, music, and drama. Our music and physical education specialists met with the grade one and two students in the area of movement, dance, and song. Our artists from the Manitoba Arts Council met with our grades three to six students for their first residency in October and second residency in April. A group of grade six students became Student Ambassadors to welcome visitors to our school, build three cultural walls in our library and help everyone feel comfortable at our April assemblies.

The cultural walls represented Aboriginal, African, and Vietnamese cultures. Families sent pictures, family photos, and stories to be displayed and shared on the cultural walls. Classrooms would view and enjoy the walls as they were finished; our Student Ambassadors would take classrooms on a tour and talk about the meaning behind the cultural wall. A world map hanging in the office collected pins representing the cultural roots of our students.

Kindergarten and grade one students studied cultural celebrations. Grade two students had their community helper books translated and read in Vietnamese by two grade six students. Students in grades three to six worked with artists to learn Aboriginal, Vietnamese, and African songs and dances. An Aboriginal storyteller worked with grade 4 students to develop their own stories. All students, with the help of staff and parent volunteers made cultural breads that they later shared at their April assemblies.

Teachers worked on strategies to develop positive attitudes toward diversity through their social studies curriculum. Students became more tolerant and appreciative of their peers' uniqueness. Parents were informed of their children's learning and were encouraged to be part of the conversation with their children. Literacy and writing opportunities were planned for students before their assemblies; they wrote about their experiences of learning new songs, dance and stories. Their writing was shared within classrooms and the library and taken home to read with their families. Our librarian purchased books to support student learning around diversity and were available for students to bring home and share with their families.

I remember with fondness the special assembly planned for our kindergarten, grade one and two students. Our divisional Aboriginal Community Networker brought jiggers (students and adults) with two special fiddlers to school. After the jiggers finished their performance all the students were invited to the middle of the gym to join the dancers. It was fun to see our students joining in and trying to lift their legs up high like the dancers. We were all merrily bouncing up and down together.

On the day of the grade three to six assembly it was fun watching students, teachers, and parents putting the final touches on their cultural clothing. A handful of parents were busy in the staffroom unpacking frozen breads they had helped students make several weeks before. Everyone had an important job to carry out to prepare for our *Making Connections Assembly*. Students performed Native Alphabet, Ninestoin, Caribou Song, Indian Lullabye (Aboriginal), Kumbaya, Mangwani M'Poolele, Siyahamba (African) and Say It in Vietnamese, Handkerchief Song, Hat Dance, Dragon Dance, Stick Jumping Dance (Vietnamese). Our community enjoyed curricular and life lessons students had learned in their Social Studies program. At the end of the performance everyone celebrated with delicious bannock, masa, and buncu breads together.

Throughout this learning process teachers worked through their Social Studies programs to develop positive attitudes toward diversity. Students showed empathy and tolerance and learned to appreciate everyone's uniqueness. Parents were part of these discussions and had further conversations with their children at home. Literacy and writing opportunities were planned for all students the week after the two school assemblies; special writing activities were designed for kindergarten to grade four classes. Again these were displayed in our Learning Commons and individual classrooms; students could bring their writing home to share with their families too.

A questionnaire was designed for grade five and six students, another for parents and staff and performing artists to look at how students benefited from the interactive cultural learning. The artists felt our students were cooperative and very interested in participating in their workshops and gave a special recognition to the students' respect towards our school's diversity. Parents appreciated being part of the "Linking Home and School Committee." They enjoyed being helpful and involved with their children's learning. Parents who were part of sharing their life story with classrooms, felt valued and more comfortable in the school. Our Cultural Ambassadors shared their life stories and felt more confident within themselves and were openly proud of their heritage. Teachers were pleased at how the Student Ambassadors took their responsibilities seriously and worked hard at welcoming people and creating the three cultural walls.

For the second year of our Aboriginal Academic Achievement Grant, we felt that staff was ready to look further into how to integrate the Aboriginal perspective into their daily programs. Each subject area needed to address the perspectives and accomplishments of Aboriginal people. Teachers arranged a half-day planning meeting with their grade-level partners to look at the following topics:

- Historical Timeline: a list of events significant to the Aboriginal People of Manitoba
- Aboriginal People in Manitoba: a look at the First Nations people living in our province
- Cultural and World View: including The Land, Generosity, Oral Tradition, Spirituality, Medicine Wheel, Powwows, Elders
- Education: traditional Aboriginal education

Teachers gathered further information and fit it into their early and middle years learning outcomes; this information was put into our school plan. It was available to new staff and for teachers to review on a yearly basis. Our music and physical education specialists met to review how the Aboriginal Perspective would fit into their programs. Teachers were able to organize cross-curricular plans involving language arts, mathematics, music, social studies and physical education.

Teachers asked for grade level meetings to plan again next year. Staff wanted more resource help in including the Aboriginal Perspective in their class programs; they would benefit from a resource person coming in to review their lesson plans, offer feedback and a deeper understanding of the Aboriginal Culture. Teachers would work with our library teacher to order more resources to reflect their new learning and design further collaborative projects together.

Right up to the end of year one of our project, many teachers continued developing new lessons and moving forward in their connections with the Aboriginal Culture.

- A grade two classroom sent letters to a grade two class on a northern reserve; the students developed friendships and wrote back and forth and continued the next year.

- All grade two classes visited our museum and created an Aboriginal anthology of retellings and artwork based on 6 + 1 Traits of writing.

- Grade three teachers developed a special assembly with their students so they could sing "O Canada" in Cree. In class they looked at how the moral intelligences tied into the Seven Teachings.

- The grade four students studied the Inuit people for their resource based learning. They first went to the museum to view displays on Inuit and other Aboriginal cultures and attended a special museum class to learn more about the Inuit.

- All teachers collaborated with our physical education teacher to organize an "Aboriginal Games" for the students. Our music specialist introduced her students to music and songs of the Plains Indian Nations (Blackfoot, Cree, Anishinabe, Dakota, and Lakota).

Our two year plan motivated teachers to begin organizing their programs around the Aboriginal Perspective. Teachers, students and their families were able to teach and share with our community. Our school was an exciting place to be!

Resources

Publications

Borba, Michele (2001) *Building Moral Intelligences: The Seven Essential Virtues that Teach Kids to Do the Right Thing*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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Websites

Integrating Aboriginal Perspectives into Curricula, 2003, A Resource for Curriculum Developers, Teachers, and Administrators, Indigenous Education/Manitoba Education at www.edu.gov.mb.ca

Relationships That Open Doors
youtu.be/H-6EsK2PNVU via @YouTube by Pat Trottier