

Engaging the Aboriginal Learner



“The education system, in Canada is beginning to take steps to becoming more culturally proficient and inclusive. There needs to be more culturally relevant and accurate content woven through the curriculum, educational institutions need to foster welcoming environments where aboriginal people can see themselves reflected in resources and human personnel, and by engaging with Aboriginal organizations and people to create partnerships that include their voice and perspective in how education is delivered, and supports meeting the needs of the Aboriginal learner.” (Mishenene, 2011)



Rationale

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Poor attendance and high failure rates among rural and urban Aboriginal students is an increasing problem in LDSB's student population. As stated in the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Policy Framework, "It is essential that First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students are engaged and feel welcome in school, and that they see themselves and their cultures in the curriculum and the school community." This project provided Aboriginal students an opportunity to share their recommendations for engaging them in the learning process. Furthermore, the project enabled LDSB teachers the opportunity to share research-based best practices with colleagues and help develop a toolkit for engaging aboriginal students.

The following goals from the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Policy Framework are relevant to this project:

STRATEGY 1.1 Build capacity for effective teaching, assessment, and evaluation practices. a. develop awareness among teachers of the learning styles of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students; b. employ instructional methods designed to enhance the learning of all First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students; and c. incorporate meaningful First Nation, Métis, and Inuit cultural perspectives and activities when planning instruction.

STRATEGY 2.2 Provide additional support in a variety of areas to reduce gaps in student outcomes; and b. provide a supportive and safe environment for all First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students in provincially funded elementary and secondary schools.

STRATEGY 3.1 Build educational leadership capacity and coordination: a. implement best practices relating to First Nation, Métis, and Inuit student success.



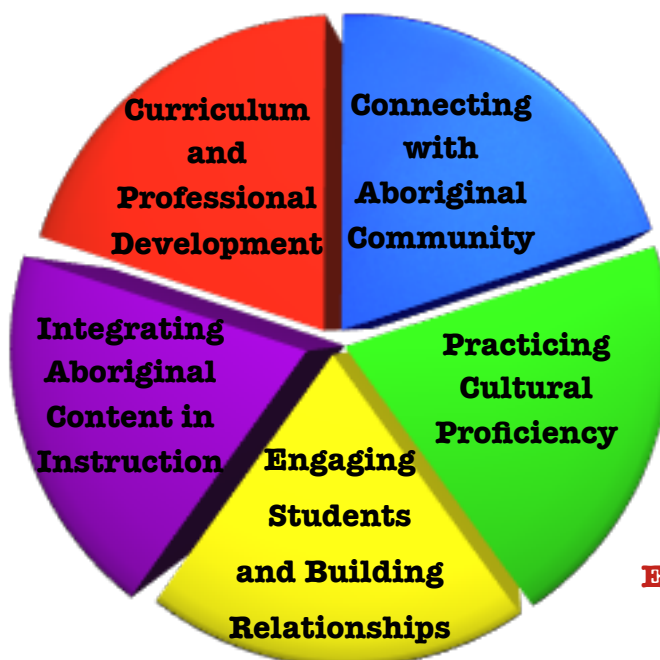
What is a Welcoming Environment?

A “welcoming environment” is one in which a student feels safe to learn, to “come as they are”, and feels like a valued member of the school and classroom community.

According to Groome and Hamilton (49), “Teachers have found Aboriginal students may be acutely self-conscious and fearful of failure, to a degree which is not found among other students. ‘Shame’ is a word which these students commonly use to describe situations of embarrassment and failure. These students need high levels of affirmation and many experiences of success to develop the confidence, self-esteem, and self-reliance needed to stay on at school.” The legacy of the residential schools has created a deep-seated distrust in the current education system for many aboriginal families. In the research that has been done with Aboriginal students, one of the main recommendations that participants have shared is that they want an educational system “that respects for them who they are, that is relevant to their view of the world, that offers reciprocity in their relationships with others, and that helps them exercise responsibility over their own lives.” (Kirkness et al, 24)

School climate was one area in our research that beyond all others garnered the most significance. Students want to see themselves reflected culturally in all areas of the school: pictures, books, other students and staff. The idea that the physical and emotional environment be safe, encouraging and WELCOMING is crucial. There are a number of ways that this can be accomplished: Student Councils with multicultural representation, Sharing or Lunch Circles, a Breakfast Program, an Aboriginal Students Lounge or Classroom, Parent-Guardian Events or Socials, and community group partnerships during and after school hours.

Beyond a school being physically and visually welcoming for Aboriginal families, this Welcoming Environment figure visually demonstrates the balance as to what is needed in our schools to help in create a holistic approach to meeting the needs of our Aboriginal students and families. Each of these topics will be explained in further detail in the following pages.



“Aboriginal students, regardless of whether they are gifted, bright average or struggling, come to the classroom with histories and worldviews that are unique. Understanding the history and the cultures of the subject areas.” (Our Words, Our Ways, 1-2)

Curriculum and Professional Development

The Students Say:

- I would like it A LOT more if there were more aboriginal classes available.
- I think all classes should have [aboriginal content].
- Teach traditional cooking and food preparation; “cook Moose meat in different culinary perspectives.”
- More outdoor cultural learning programs. Traditional sports in gym.
- More aboriginal involved events like pow wows, workshops and things so that more native students would love to come to schools [and] stay out of trouble.
- I think they should have singing lessons like for a pow wow and hoop dancing, and regalia dancing and making and drumming.

The Teachers' Say:

- I have encouraged them to bring in and play their own music, either contemporary, traditional or a mix of both. I learn from them—and teach them to open their minds to each other's tastes and music, and link this process to one of the 7 grandfather teachings –respect (also a value/character trait supported by the public board.) It's amazing how many relevant lessons can come from listening to music.



- [I] Changed [my] curriculum to include relevant issues, appointed a peer tutor to assist with final exam preps, motivated them through their peers to enjoy, have fun, feel safe, happy and comfortable, and the attendance improved .

- Teacher training has to revolve around the student and making the student feel comfortable in the learning environment. Many students, not only, Aboriginal students, do not have the same lives as teachers do and recognizing this is crucial for all students to have success in the classroom. Students may not have a computer, food or peace at home and we, as educators, need to take the whole student into account when giving them an education and lifelong learning skills. The results are amazing and very satisfying for teachers and students alike.

Elders in the classroom are a crucial community building event.

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- More testing/assessment for students who do not appear to have the needed educational background for success in secondary school. Such intervention is critical so that adequate next steps can be decided and implemented - more transitional programs for students whose educational backgrounds leave them unprepared for the Grade 9 curriculum
- Flexibility in Credit accumulation: Alt Ed Models outside of standard day; partial or flexible credit generation

The Research Says:

- Significant changes to the English, Social Studies, Humanities, Canadian and World Studies, and Science curricula so that Aboriginal content be fully integrated.
- That the use of Aboriginal content be mandatory for teachers rather than optional as is now the case.
- Teachers should have pedagogical content knowledge in the subjects being taught.
- The addition of more courses with specifically Aboriginal content: Aboriginal History, Aboriginal Culture, Aboriginal Literature, Aboriginal Art and Aboriginal People and the Colonial Experience.
- The development of anti-racist courses.
- Share with Aboriginal people the responsibility for planning and implementation of policies on Aboriginal education.
- Implement a sustained program of planned Aboriginal professional development for each new teacher that lasts over a period of several years.
- Build in a time for staff to collaborate on Aboriginal practices within the school structure.
- Staff participating in Aboriginal-related professional development activities.
- Develop Aboriginal artists-in-the-schools and Elders programs in those schools with significant numbers of Aboriginal students.
- Develop effective bridging and transition programs as well as comprehensive admissions/registration processes.



Aboriginal role models from the community, such as artist and broadcaster Elliot Doxtater-Wynn, to provide occasional specialized programs

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Integrating Aboriginal Content with Instruction

The Students Say:

- I think every subject should include Aboriginal heritage.
- All subjects need more cultural resources.

The Teachers Say:

- Create a traditional garden in an Environmental Science class based on the Grandmother and Grandfather teachings.
- More coaching and fewer performance tasks in differentiated instruction – customized for individuals and culture
- Relevant curriculum: place based education, experiential delivery, skills vs. knowledge, strength-based, improved teacher training and PD, look at and discuss our students gifts (grade level PLC's?), closer connections/ties with post-secondary institutions and work-place opportunities.



Special event evenings for the community, such as this one with Metis author and Order of Canada Recipient David Bouchard, can be held at a school. Standing with David Bouchard is elder Gerry Martin.



Elders can be included in all aspects of a classroom. LDSB has created an Elder-Senator Protocol to help staff understand how to engage an elder for school activities.

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The Research Says:

- Build learning activities around meaningful content that relates to students' experiences and engages them in tasks based on their learning interests.
- Allow opportunities for visual symbolic thinking and holistic approaches to education.
- Look for opportunities to make connections among subject areas, for example, social studies, literature and art.
- Explore the ways in which learning can happen as a result of flexible scheduling. For example, can scheduling changes on a field trip accommodate opportunities for holistic learning?



- Recognize and celebrate the seasons and the changes that they bring. Use nature as a classroom. Mark occasions. This tends to be more challenging at the senior high school level where bigger, less personal surroundings and the pressures of curriculum content mean that rather than celebrating the seasons, for example, the academic year is marked by mid-terms and finals.
- Create opportunities for experiential learning. For example, when teaching students about traditional Aboriginal food such as blueberries, plan the learning activity so that the class can go out to the land and actually have the experience of picking berries.
- Build on Aboriginal cultural heritage and world view.
- Access to mainstream educational curricula, complemented by opportunities to engage with Aboriginal languages and culture.
- Use assessment for learning approaches.
- Differentiate instruction.
- Understand Aboriginal content, learning processes, and/or teaching methods. Incorporate these into the classroom.
- Show the importance of other cultures by incorporating their knowledge, languages, and traditions into classroom lessons.
- Cross-cultural training for institutional staff, faculty and students.



The pride in being part of this drumming circle at school is evident.



Outdoor experiential learning is always better with a traditionally cooked meal of bannock and moose stew.

Connecting with Aboriginal Community

The Students Say:

- Open up school facilities to community groups: “more community groups in the school.”
- [More] leadership opportunities.

The Teachers Say:

- Regardless of their own experience with education, Aboriginal parents want their children to succeed, but they also want the learning environment and curriculum that includes and supports cultural identity, and where children can learn their cultural heritage.
- Understanding who the learner is and where they come from can inform the teachers what supports are necessary to provide the learner, and identify what the learning environment must look like to create an equitable and inclusive community that includes all children, especially those living in poverty. Setting high expectations and providing ongoing encouragement to the learner, demonstrates to them that they are an equal in their learning environment, regardless of their socio-economic background.
- Consistent contact with Parent/Guardian, Boarding Parents and Aboriginal Education Counsellors. Counsellors supported students on effects of poor attendance, used creative timetabling, provided EA support whenever possible and encouraged students to attend the Aboriginal initiatives at the school e.g. Friendship Lunch program.
- Local aboriginal agencies should make themselves known to the students: lunch hour displays, presentations, after school presentations. The school should make closer connections with the communities. Are their bands checking up on them by contacting the students themselves? Have the bands provided their boarding students with computers and money to connect to the internet? These are all questions teachers want answered.

The Research Says:

- When appropriate, ask a member of the Aboriginal community to assist with the learning and to provide an Aboriginal perspective. This will enhance the credibility of the learning activity, and build a connection between the school and the community.
- Explore ways to create a sense of home in the classroom and school for Aboriginal students and families. Think about how to draw people into the classroom and make them feel welcome.



- Communicating with parents and families about students' successes.
- Encourage parents to be involved in the learning process.
- Students and parents participating in Aboriginal cultural events.
- Aboriginal students using services of Aboriginal Liaison workers (where applicable).
- Strong institutional relationships to ensure Aboriginal voice at all levels of decision-making.
- Stronger partnerships and formal agreements between communities and institutions, including community outreach. Provide interaction with Aboriginal role models such as Elders.
- Know the importance of mentoring and role models for Aboriginal students.
- "Develop strategies with parents, not for parents. Invite parents to actively participate in discussions concerning their child. Do not underestimate parents and families. Set high standards for their involvement. Recognize when differences in world-views and issues such as economic and other stressors create barriers to involvement. Be flexible." (Our Words, Our Ways, 64)



Extra-curricular art and outdoor learning programs engage and build leadership skills.

Practicing Cultural Proficiency

The Students Say:

- I would definitely like to see more traditional activities like [the Student Voice project] and have traditional cookouts and activities.
- There should be more Native books in the library, more Native paintings, [and] events like Pow Wows and Potlucks.
- Grandfather teachings posted up around the school.
- Cultural Programs at lunch for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.
- Outdoor cultural learning.

Student dancer in her regalia at a school Pow Wow



The Teachers Say:

- Increased and regular school-wide professional development and further teacher training is a must!
- Learn the basics of an aboriginal language spoken in your school. Saying “Boozhoo” (hello), or “Miigwetch” (thank you) shows respect and that you care enough to try.

The Research Says:

- Becoming more familiar with students’ cultural backgrounds will help teachers: understand how cultural differences may affect students’ learning; understand students’ motivations and values; adapt materials and approaches appropriately; build mutual respect. Use culturally relevant materials whenever possible.
- Consider the following strategies for learning and teaching about Aboriginal cultures: Students may have a wealth of information. Approach them discreetly, as many Aboriginal students do not want to be singled out as being different in front of their classmates. Ask them what they know about language and culture; Get to know parents; contact appropriate organizations; Look for resources; Learn about contemporary issues in the Aboriginal community; Be willing to invest time; Participate in professional development.
- Pay close attention to the learning styles of Aboriginal students and design programs and lessons to capitalize on their strengths, e.g., use more visual and oral learning styles.
- Adopt a more culturally-appropriate teaching style by learning about First Nations culture, showing humility and openness while teaching, using humour, and creating a relaxed classroom atmosphere.
- Use traditional Aboriginal approaches to learning such as learning through stories and oral storytelling rather than an emphasis on written information. Stories provide a safe context for students to discuss and share their thoughts and ideas.

- Use a holistic approach to education that addresses students' mental, emotional, physical and spiritual aspects. This will help to address various learning styles. Use culturally relevant examples.
- Familiarize self with Aboriginal legislation (both federal and provincial) and policies and educational programs.
- Balance between the multiple Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal world views.
- Increase awareness and appreciation of Aboriginal peoples' cultures in the non-Aboriginal settings.
- Create a supportive classroom environment to increase opportunity for oral participation of Aboriginal students by using Aboriginal examples.
- Create a physical setting in the classroom that supports academic and social goals by communicating respect for diversity, connectedness and community (e.g., world map or welcome sign in various languages, book center with diversity themes).



Student participants at a school-based Pow Wow

Engaging Students and Building Relationships

The Students Say:

- It is your own outlook that makes you feel welcome.
- When a teacher shows commitment.
- A teacher who: “makes me feel welcome”, “does not pressure me with questions”, “says good morning, [name], every single day”, “believes you can”, “doesn’t give up on you”, “knows when something is wrong”, “[has] a good sense of humour”, “who listens to students”.



The Teachers Say:

- See the student as a holistic learner and person. European cultural education focuses on the content, their class, for that one small 75 minute block of time...but that isn't how aboriginal students see themselves or their role within the school.
- I make myself available after school to help students who need support to complete work. I spend time getting to know students so that they feel that they are welcome. I ask questions when I don't know and I try not to assume that my experiences are the same as everyone else's.
- Getting to know students and meeting them at their level. Engaging students in real life conversations - showing them that a caring adult is in the building.
- If students arrive late, encourage them to keep attending and to get here on time. Don't chastise them...work on it and things will improve. Have a positive and welcoming attitude and try to understand improvements will take time but will come if you are kind.
- Welcoming - encouraging, phone calls, a welcome sign in Oji-Cree, food, getting to know them, asking about where they're from, asking what they need, offering aboriginal courses, changing timetables long after I would for other students.
- Engage in conversations that make the student feel valued. Explain why I would like to see them there and on time.
- Do not focus on one student to make him/her stand out. Allow them to start the assignment on his/her own time. Allow students time to THINK first before beginning a task.
- Building School Community: more grade reps and cultural groups on SAC – only one activity council, Multicultural Reps on Student Council, activities must be inclusive and not segregated, provide a safe place in the school at breaks and lunches (program classroom and tutors), needs to be a room that is supervised create a safe place for different groups.

- Strong leadership and vision for programs that is advocated by the principal with organized volunteerism planned far in advance (e.g. sign up in September for whole school year the way coaching is – whole school involvement needed and put on Annual Learning Plan)
- Multi-cultural week that celebrates all cultures (ACCEPTANCE AND EQUALITY)

The Research Says:

- Build relationships - Connect with students – show warmth, caring, sensitivity, humour, trust and high expectations for students.
- Develop a caring classroom environment by sharing stories of your own life, connecting with students and allowing FNMI input and choices in the classroom activities.
- Focus on gifts and strengths, and encouraging students to use these to overcome their challenges.
- Help students to recognize and own their successes—even the small ones.
- Help students to become effective self-advocates.
- Welcome students' diverse home cultures into the classroom to help students feel supported and valued.
- Create a classroom environment that supports feelings of acceptance and respect.
- Identify barriers that prevent Aboriginal student success and develop strategies to address identified barriers.
- Build trust within your classroom.



Team-building and “name-games” help build trust among students.

Additional Resources and References

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