

*“The truth about stories is
that’s all we are”*

– Thomas King

Indigenous Education Allies and Leads (IEAL)

by

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Stories are powerful – they can sustain and provide purpose in our lives. Oyate (2021) contends that stories can be medicine, they can harm, they can heal, they can reveal truth and they can unite people for the greater good. Stories are a form of knowledge and when shared they have the potential to transform peoples' thinking and their lives to change the future. As Oyate states, "It's a known fact that stories can be our greatest teachers – when they're well told, when their lessons remain unstated, when we can ponder their many nuances." (Oyate, 2021, para. 3). I will share a few stories of how the Indigenous Education Allies and Leads (IEAL) came to be, its vision, goals and reimagined possibilities. I have learned from those who tell stories that you will take away what you need in the moment.

Indigenous Education Allies and Leads (IEAL) SD 39

The VSB (Vancouver School Board) Indigenous Education Department considers itself to be a family and it is not unusual for us to meet and share details of our lives and the work we do. We often gather over coffee breaks or lunch to share our stories – it helps us feel connected, provides us with an opportunity to share knowledge through relationships, and validates

the work we do. A common story that has consistently emerged from our gatherings since 2015 is the increased demand for our presence in classrooms and schools to share our gifts, talents, and knowledge in regard to Indigenous Education. It is no coincidence that this increased demand came at a time when the newly-revised BC K-12 curriculum integrated and embedded Indigenous history, culture, and perspectives with the inclusion of the *First Peoples' Principles of Learning*. This inclusion required the department to rethink the way we work, and how we deliver Indigenous Education within the VSB. The relentless demand for our support within schools sparked us to reimagine how our work could be more sustainable. The old model of single classroom and/or school visits by district personnel – and ticking the box – was neither sustainable nor respectful of the knowledges/pedagogies we offer. We understood we needed to develop a collaborative network that helps build capacity, and sustain educators' and students' learning about Indigenous Education. The pathway moving forward is grounded in 'collective responsibility' and building 'good relations' so that everyone benefits from Indigenous Knowledges and Pedagogies, particularly children.

The 'Two-Eyed Seeing' Approach and Indigenous Education Allies and Leads (IEAL)

Etuaptmuk

is the Mi'kmaq word for Two-Eyed Seeing

Elder Albert Marshall often explains *Etuaptmuk* – 'Two-Eyed Seeing' – by saying it "refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing, and to using both these eyes together, for the benefit of all."

(Bartlett, Marshall & Marshall, p. 335)

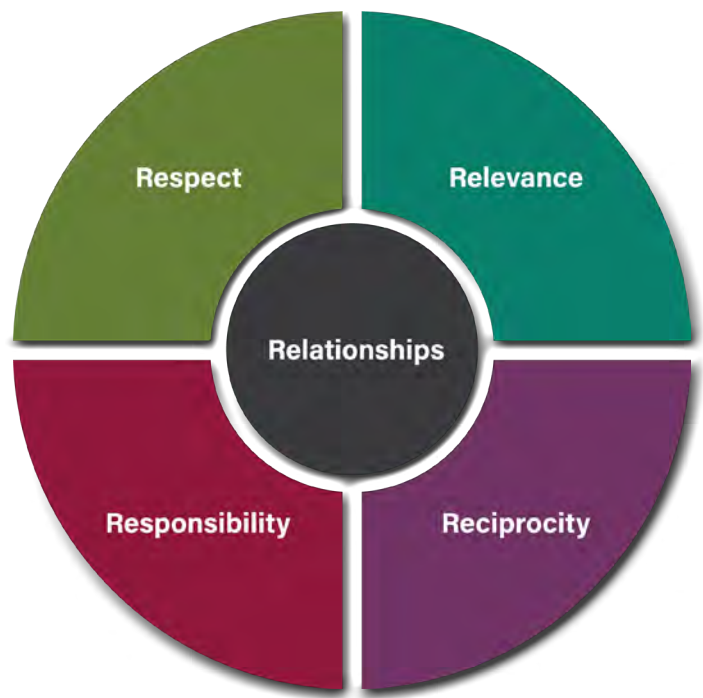


Source: integrativescience.ca

IEAL in School District 39 utilizes the approach of the 'Two-Eyed Seeing' created by Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall (2004). IEAL is an expansive and growing network of collaborating educators, administrators and students whose work is grounded in the guiding principle of the concept of a "co-learning journey of different knowledges and cultures working together" (Institute for Integrative Science and Health (IISH), *Bringing Together Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Western Scientific Knowledge*, para. 3) for the betterment of all learners. Marshall's 'Two-Eyed Seeing' approach, when applied to Indigenous Education, allows for brave spaces to have conversations about one's learning where true "collaborative, cross-cultural work, [that] intentionally seeks to avoid the situation of becoming a clash between knowledges, domination of one worldview, or assimilation by one worldview of the knowledge of another" (IISH, Two-Eyed Seeing, para. 22).

IEAL came together for the first time in 2018, and continue to gather informally in person and, now, online. The gatherings are a time to collaborate and engage in brave conversations and share stories, so we may continue to learn and understand each other's histories, while honouring and centring Indigenous stories. As a group we explore how we can transform our relationships, workplaces, and communities through Indigenous Knowledge and Indigenous Pedagogies. It is through our kinship ties and stories that we connect with the heart of our Indigenous society. It is through a person's position in the kinship system, which establishes their relationship to others and to the universe, and prescribes their responsibilities towards other people, the land, and natural resources. It is the responsibility of all to work as one mind and one heart. As a department, we call in educators, administrators, and students to become a part of our Indigenous families to help do the important work of Indigenous Education.

We have asked our allies to walk alongside us in this work and collectively lift up Indigenous Education so it can be sustained and honoured in a good way across the entire district. We gather as family and in good relations 'miyo-wicehtowin' – our way of being together is founded on the 4 R's of Indigenous



Philosophy (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991) – Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity and Responsibility, and the 5th R: Relationships. The 4 R's, embodied and enacted in collaboration, have guided us to create meaningful, supportive, and sustainable good relations which has allowed the IEAL members to do the following:

- Create a common vision of *né' a?mat ct* - 'we are one' – collective responsibility which all members can embrace and share.
- Collaborate with others to build understanding and strengthen 'miyo-wicehtowin' good relations.
- Become a leader in your community and school to lift up students and families while honouring their journey.
- Witness and share experiences with others.
- Support and guide others to achieve success around the planning of Indigenous Education.
- Create resiliency for all educators while providing appropriate educational resources and experiences for all.
- Champion the innovation of Indigenous peoples.

As a co-learning group, we take a collective approach to leadership and everyone is given the opportunity to share their gifts, talents, and knowledge. Everyone is in the circle, and we do our best to support each other on this learning journey.

To date, we have covered the following areas of interest:

Community Building –
What is an ally? Co-conspirator?

Meaningful Reconciliation
& Land Acknowledgements

Walking Together
& Shared Responsibility

Cultural Appropriation

Sharing Our Work –
Allies & IEAL Team sharing
examples of impactful projects/
programs across the district

Drumming Circle -
Davita Marsden

Cultural Resilience -
Monique Gray Smith

*First Peoples' Principles of Learning
& Indigenous Ways of Knowing
and Being*

Critical Thinking & Indigenous
Pedagogy (2 workshops)

Indigenous Art – Approaches,
Appropriation & Social Justice

Sessions for remainder of the
2021 year include Racism, Lateral
Violence & Micro-Aggressions

Re-imagined Stories from IEAL members

Barbara Parkin

Educator at Dr. A R Lord Elementary

"I feel IEAL supports collective responsibility by being present and active. The monthly meetings keep teachers coming back and wanting to learn more, as well as fostering a community of engagement. As our questions and connections between curriculum and history develop over time, we have a place we can go to share and to learn more. Knowing that there is a meeting 'the next month' makes participation in IEAL feel like a collective that is engaged in an action.

IEAL is creating a foundational presence in the District. Teachers know they have somewhere they can go to listen, learn, and ask questions on an ongoing basis. Years ago, the classroom teacher did not necessarily know where to go, did not know how to begin, and may not have been aware of protocols. Although we were trying to do Indigenous focussed work, it was in isolation, according to what we could find on our own. The framework of support for front-line classroom teachers came with the IEAL. As well, the Indigenous focussed district professional development days were transformational for broadening and deepening the conversation amongst all teaching and support staff. Today, in 2021, even if a teacher is not a part of the IEAL collective, they may be aware of IEAL or know of someone who attends. Such people have become leads in their school settings, and are turned to for helping to enhance the Indigenous education work being done at school sites.

Rose MacKenzie

Principal of xpey' Elementary

As the Principal of an Indigenous Focus Choice School in Vancouver, working with Chas and the Indigenous Education department has been instrumental in moving our school forward in fostering a sense of belonging, mastery and identity in our students. It has been an honour and one I embrace with great humility as I continue my journey in learning more about Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Our district is exploring in great depth the impact of systemic racism in the school system and the impact it has had on students and staff, especially those who identify as BIPOC. As a non-BIPOC member, participating in the numerous sessions hosted by the IEAL has guided me in becoming a more effective ally and advocate. It is some of the most intense work I have done in my career as an educator, but it has been transformative and has reframed my thinking around the educational system and the steps we need to take to decolonize our education system.

It is heartwork!

Amanda White

Indigenous Education Knowledge Keeper

I share with you the wise words of Chief Dan George of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation from his book *My Heart Soars*:

"You and I need the strength and joy that comes from knowing that we are loved. With it we are creative. With it we march tirelessly. With it, and with it alone, we are able to sacrifice for others. The only thing that can truly help us is genuine love. You must truly love us, be patient with us and share with us. And we must love you - with genuine love that forgives and forgets . . . a love that forgives the terrible sufferings your culture brought ours when it swept over us like a wave crashing along a beach . . . with a love that forgets and lifts up its heads and sees in your eyes an answering love and acceptance."

This what Indigenous Education Allies and Leads (IEAL) means to me.
We are finally learning how to walk side by side with each other in education.

We must continue to come together as náč a?mat ct – ‘we are one’ and be in good relations ‘miyo-wicehtowin’ for the good work to continue. The stories shared by both an educator, Principal and knowledge keeper are truths to how collective responsibility, when approached with a common vision and goals, can indeed transform those involved and the schools and students they work with.

We are still in the beginning phase of the ‘Two-Eyed Seeing’ approach envisioned by Mi’kmaw Elder Albert Marshall; mainstream education in BC has only recently embedded *First Peoples’ Principles of Learning* across the K-12 curriculum. The Western eye has not had to share the vision of what education could or should be. The Indigenous eye is just now being given space to see. With this understanding, Elder Albert Marshall (IHS, n.d.) advises that this co-learning journey is going to require that we learn to weave back and forth between the knowledges. As the Two-Eyes begin to see together as one, we may yet get to an aligned and shared vision of education that is truly transformational and benefits all. However, until then, we will continue to share our collective stories.

References

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