

The Gift of Teaching and Learning from the Land

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Any good education idea usually springs from a need, and our Land Based Learning Program was no exception.

DP Todd Secondary School in SD57, Prince George, is an 8-12 school with 650 students, 210 of whom are Indigenous. We have a wide range of economic diversity, and a significant demographic that experiences social and economic challenges.

We were experiencing a lack of engagement by some of our most fragile learners. These students were exhibiting some telltale behaviours that told us that we were not meeting them in a place where they felt success. These behaviours were telling us that we needed to explore new ways for these learners to feel connection, success and relevance in their learning and within their school experience.

The idea for this program was hatched earlier this school year during a discussion with teacher Reid Roberts about alternatives to suspension. He suggested that he could take students out on his trapline as a way for them to build connections and to gain new skills. He thought that using the trapline and land based education as a way of incorporating restitution and restorative practice might break down students' barriers to learning and engagement.

Reid had already been running a program supported by an Indigenous Learning Team Grant in SD57 one day each week. Beginning in September 2019, he was taking Indigenous students out to his trapline. Reid is a licensed trapper, and owns a trapline that is 50km east of Prince George in the Bowron Valley and up an access road. Students prepare and maintain trapping sites, and build snares, box traps and cubby traps. They set and check traps, and learn about bushcraft. They skin and prep the furs, make bait, build fires, roast squirrels and learn about animal behaviours and tracks – how they move and how they hunt.

Because students accessing the trapline were having success, experiencing engagement and developing

positive connections – and because I was becoming acutely aware of the need to find different ways to support students both academically and behaviourally – Reid and I co-developed a full-time land based resource program. We proposed to make Reid a Landbased Resource Teacher full-time.

We developed five objectives:

1. To support students with behavior challenges who might benefit from an alternate learning setting, with a goal of building a positive self-concept and stopping the suspension cycle.
2. To build for students new connections and engagement, both to their learning and to the school.
3. To support and enhance student interest in land based learning.
4. To provide opportunities for students to engage in Indigenous knowledge, learn cultural practices and language, and connect with elders.
5. To support cross-curricular learning, and to connect land based learning to the classroom.





District. Indigenous Ways of Learning and Knowing have become embedded in what we do and how it is presented. Reid has involved his students in all of this as the subject experts, and they are able to showcase their learning to other teachers and especially to their peers. Not only is success on the trap line expanding where and how kids were learning, but we are seeing the success experienced by these students outdoors spill over into their other classes.

We are excited about yet another expansion of the program next year. Reid will teach this program as a cross-curricular and comprehensive semester for selected students. Students will uncover curriculum in many core and curricular competencies that will either be taught within the program, or as part of classes at the school. Student interest is high, and there has been much to plan.

While there have been many successes to date, there have been challenges too. Transportation to and from the trapline can be limited. Remote access to medical support and limited communication in the bush are also problematic. But we have tried to address risks and challenges with a safety mindset, while keeping “Yes if...” as a means to remain solution-focused.

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As the program has developed, we have noticed that some of the participating students have previous bush experience. Some of them come from families of trappers or hunters, and already lead outdoor lifestyles. Their parents and grandparents are

excited about this new program, and the engagement and satisfaction shown by their child. The program is an onramp to success at school: many families know this, and enthusiastically contribute to it.

There is a lot of interest and curiosity about this program within the school, and we are continuing to find ways to build on our success. We want to take advantage of hands-on learning gained in the field to attach more meaning to classroom based learning, both for the students in the program and for the whole school. Furs have been brought into the school so students can learn about the fur trade. Reid has offered skinning and tanning workshops for teachers and students across our





Reid Roberts and Katie Marren

As for the ethics of trapping animals, we try to address that with transparency and flexibility. It is not for everybody, but it has a strong Indigenous, cultural, historical and economic history in our region, and it has been supported and very well received by our school community. Many schools across SD57 are asking for support to develop similar programming in their own schools.

A program like this is so dependent on having the right teacher. I have known Reid Roberts for 15 years: he is a master teacher who also happens to have this special trapping skillset. And I will also say this: the program has changed Reid. His connection,

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understanding, empathy and creativity towards our most challenging kids continues to grow. He was a great teacher, but he keeps innovating, developing and strengthening those skills every day. It shows through the growth of the kids. He has also become a leader and expert for other teachers in the school and across our District.

My role in this is – and has always been – one of support, encouragement and facilitation. I clear the roadblocks, and navigate the red tape and policy. Then I let Reid create, inspire and change kids' lives.

I am excited about this program and its early success, but we are always looking for ideas and experienced educators who can help us make it even better. If you have ideas or suggestions, I would love to hear from you. And if you are interested in implementing a similar program in your school, I would be eager to support you.

