

SUPPORTING THE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE OF NON-INDIGENOUS TEACHERS IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES: SPECIAL SUPPORT IN AN INDIGENOUS CONTEXT



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In an effort to find ways of helping students achieve educational and academic success, leaders are constantly looking for ways to support school teams and other school stakeholders in First Nations communities. In 2015, the First Nations Education Council (FNEC), in collaboration with the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières (UQTR), began offering continuing education for school stakeholders in its member communities (Lesage and Ouellet, in this journal). We set up a project combining the FNEC and UQTR's continuing education for school stakeholders with special support in the field for a teacher who wanted to reflect on his teaching and educational practices with a view to fostering his students' educational success.

This article describes the project, including the reasons for its creation, its objectives, a case study and our ultimate findings. We follow up with avenues for reflection on the importance of providing special support for school stakeholders who work with First Nations youth and of implementing strategies for the success of all students.

BACKGROUND

The project's approach was based on an action-research model (Guay, Prud'homme and Dolbec, 2016). It relied on professional support as a means of improving reflective practice in action (Gareau, 2018). Although most teachers in Indigenous communities are well trained in their subject area, few non-Indigenous teachers have a teaching licence from the Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur, since schools in Indigenous communities are under federal jurisdiction. Consequently, it is important to promote continuing education among

teachers and, especially, to offer special professional support. This helps teachers mobilize their knowledge to improve their teaching practices.

OBJECTIVES

Our special support program is designed to meet two inextricably linked objectives: 1) encourage knowledge transfer and continuing education among school stakeholders in Indigenous communities, and 2) support the reflective practice of a teacher attempting to improve his classroom practices. Ultimately, these two objectives have to be consistent with other initiatives in the secondary school in question, in other words, they have to foster the implementation of practices to support secondary school students' educational and academic success and improve the graduation rate.

CASE STUDY

In 2017, a teacher requested special support for one school year. He wanted to learn how to improve his teaching and educational practices. He had taken the courses offered by the FNEC and the UQTR for three consecutive years (2016-2018). After each course, he committed to the proposed process, synthesizing his learning in an effort to continue questioning his practices, mobilize his new knowledge and take a critical look at possible improvements. Several times, he submitted difficult situations in order to implement a problem-solving strategy and initiate change. After a number of discussions, a problem came to light specifically involving the difficulty he and his students had establishing a positive and meaningful educational relationship. He wanted to take advantage of the project to obtain educational support in order to develop reflective practice skills. The special support

offered on an annual basis is based on an action-research approach that culminates in a presentation by the teacher at a professional development seminar or the publication of an article. In this presentation or article, the teacher presents his or her experience, journey and findings.

Four steps were proposed. The first involved observing classroom practices a few times during the year. We agreed on five observation sessions followed by discussions with a view to providing professional educational support. The second step involved keeping a semi-structured logbook to record four elements: a description of the activity (planning), an analysis of the management of the activity (teaching), the difficulties encountered (analysis and modifications) and a critical look at the teaching or educational practice (reflexivity). The third step was an email exchange throughout the year between the teacher and his guide to support reflection, suggest reading materials and discuss exercises and strategies to improve classroom materials. Lastly, the fourth step was the use of an observation checklist (based on Hébert-Houle's checklist, 2017), which allowed the teacher to observe his own practices and the effects of his teaching on students' behaviour since the beginning of the project. The results were presented at an international congress in Quebec City (Hammoud, Ouellet and Flamand, 2018) and published in a special edition of the professional journal *La Foucade* (Ouellet, Hammoud and Flamand, 2018).

THEORETICAL ASPECTS

The theory behind the special support approach is for the most part based on the Holistic Lifelong Learning Models for First Nations (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). Kolb's model, combined with the experiential approach cited by Moldoveanu and Campeau (2016), shed light on Indigenous pedagogy (Campeau, 2017) and how young people learn. Reflections on changes to teaching practices, based on a work on effective class management (Gaudreau, 2017), sparked discussion on the effects of a positive relationship between teachers and students. These discussions, along with the principles of visible learning (Hattie, 2017), were accompanied by several texts on teaching practices.

The special support strategies allowed the various stakeholders to journey together into the workings of teaching and educational practices (Ouellet, 2015), in order to identify the teacher's strengths and limitations and to explore new cognitive strategies with students, including preparation for concentration. The teacher also reflected on confidence and self-esteem as they relate to teaching. He realized the importance of clearly expressing his faith in his students' potential.

FINDINGS

The findings concerning teaching and educational practices highlight three elements: the importance of (1) implementing teaching strategies, (2) using the observation checklist to record changes, and (3) questioning one's teaching practices in order to enhance classroom management.

Thanks to a variety of teaching strategies, such as strategies to facilitate concentration, students experience something different from their usual teaching-learning periods. They take the time to read, draw, colour or do other activities of their choosing. This transition period before the start of class provides a structure for engagement in the learning process and a certain motivation to perform the assigned task.

Using an observation checklist to identify students' behaviours and the changes associated with the assigned tasks allows teachers to critically evaluate their classroom practices, which fosters small changes in students' behaviour. The checklist provides teachers with useful indicators about changes and the need for improvement to help them analyze their practices.

The logbook is used to improve classroom management and the learning climate. It addresses the development of emotional safety and more positive relationships between students, the teacher and the class. The results concerning reflective practice also highlight the impact of teachers' knowledge of Indigenous culture and history on their relationship with students. The First Nations learning model and reflection on evaluation and certification and their incidence on academic motivation are frequently mentioned in discussions. Teachers can also adapt their practices once they realize the impact they have on students: rather than adopting a culture of mistakes (failure), imitation (modelling) and evaluation (judgment), they can adopt a culture of understanding and value students' potential and their academic achievement. Lastly, teachers' awareness of the impact of their teaching and educational practices can have a positive impact on Indigenous students' learning and educational success. Given the duration of the project, it is difficult to measure its impact in the long term. However, the teacher did change his teaching practices.

CONCLUSION AND DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS

So far, we don't know whether the teacher consolidated his learning and realizations, since the project lasted only a year. Obviously, it is impossible to generalize the results, since only one teacher received special support. As a result,

the conclusion will focus on our reflections on the importance of continuing education for all teachers, whether or not they are members of an Indigenous school team. We will also propose two avenues for reflection to enhance special support and reflection on teaching practices and educational support in Indigenous schools.

The first avenue for reflection involves the perceived importance of educational support for school stakeholders. More specifically, this support would help non-Indigenous teachers express their views on learning among First Nations students. It would also allow them to reflect on their practices and see their effect on learning from the beginning of the school year. They might then be able to adapt their teaching practices throughout the year in order to support student success.

The second avenue for reflection involves evaluation. How do we define the concept of failure in Indigenous schools? How can we adapt our actions to improve student success without taking the educational relationship into account? How can we make promoting educational and academic success consistent with our society's quantitative evaluation model, which only accepts one way of preparing for examinations? These questions demand in-depth and courageous discussions in order to be able to provide adequate support for all school stakeholders intent on improving student success among all First Nations youth. ♦

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