



Making Our Ancestors Proud: The Isbister Park Heritage Project

Westview Community School/Kistahpinanihk at Isbister Park, Prince Albert

The staff of a newly opened community school became interested in the history of Isbister Park, the area of Prince Albert in which their school was located. They began to learn about the early Métis and First Nations history of Saskatchewan, particularly the history of the early settlement on the school site that was established in 1862 by James Isbister and his wife, Margaret Bear. Gradually, a school-wide heritage project evolved that allowed students to learn about and celebrate their history and their culture. Propelled by the enthusiasm generated by numerous creative learning activities, the project quickly moved beyond the walls of the school to involve local families and the larger community.

Primary Research

Study of the records available on the early settlement of Prince Albert revealed serious gaps in most histories of the city. They tended to overlook the fact that the area was used for centuries as a traditional First Nations meeting place (“kistahpinanihk” in Cree) and the fact that the Isbister settlement predated European settlement by several years. In developing a heritage project for students, therefore, care was taken to look critically at historical accounts, understand the pain experienced by First Nations and Métis people in recalling this period of history, give visibility to their accomplishments and their culture, and ensure the

contributions of women were recognized as well as those of men.

The primary historical research led the school to take action on several fronts, e.g.:

- “Kistahpinanihk” was officially added to the name of the school.
- School traditions were developed, such as the “Art and Heritage in the Park” celebration on June 3, the date the Isbisters arrived to settle in the area.
- The school adopted the motto, “Making Our Ancestors Proud”.
- A Family Tree Project was initiated to help local families trace their genealogies.
- The school became a site for the display and exchange of historical photographs within the community.
- Representations of the city’s history that omitted or minimized the role of First Nations and the Métis were challenged.
- Information about the heritage project and its view of the city’s history were shared with the local media.

Action Research

Data about the impact of the heritage project was gathered from journals that staff kept throughout the project, reflection opportunities at staff meetings and planning sessions, writers' retreats for staff and parents, student writing and discussions, feedback from community agencies, and tapes of celebrations, events and meetings. Analysis of the data revealed four major themes:

1. Innovative Teaching/Experiential Learning

The children's quest for knowledge of the past, because of hands-on experience, has increased dramatically.

– Parent comment

Based on a curricular framework and objectives developed for the heritage project, numerous learning activities were developed for the school and the classroom. They included painting a mural to form a pictorial timeline of the area's history, making a model of a river lot in the Isbister settlement, sewing period clothes for a dress-up trunk, making books that told the stories of the Isbister settlers, using the "storyline" strategy to help students experience history, and working with a drama instructor and students from the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program in a demonstration project on contextual drama. Through the project, valuable lessons were learned about the power of innovative teaching strategies and the importance of experiential learning for student engagement.

2. Genuine Interest/Engagement in Learning

I saw the students wanting to participate, even the shy ones. I saw their true emotions showing through as if they were really there.

– SUNTEP student comment

The most important and common theme that emerged from the project was the genuine interest that students had in learning about their heritage. Teachers, parents and community members recognized that the students were engaged in learning, and their engagement fed the enthusiasm for the project.



3. Pride in Seeing Oneself as Part of History/Making History

It was seeing pride and the unspooling of a personal history, a connection to the past and to ancestors and a feeling of being more than just an isolated self.

– Teacher comment

As the project continued, pride in the heritage of the community served by the school began to blossom. Students, staff and parents expressed their pride in being Métis, Cree or a resident of Prince Albert. The school's Métis and Pow Wow dancers were in great demand and students were invited to sing the songs they had written in the Legislative Building in Regina. Parental involvement in the project grew to the extent that it became the most significant aspect of the final year.

4. Connectedness

I have learned that mostly everyone is family cause in some way we're all related. I learned that people's cultures are different a bit from each other and it doesn't matter that we're the same culture or different.

– Student comment

As the school began to display family trees that connected students to famous ancestors, a sense of connectedness developed among families, the school and the community. A new sense of belonging grew from a shared history.