

## Combining Outdoor Education and Anishnaabe Culture in a Four-Credit Semester Program in Blind River

By Alexandra Thomson

A testimony about the New Trails program at W.C. Eaket Secondary in the Algoma District School Board, written by Alex Thomson, based on an interview with program teacher / facilitator Ryan Forsyth:

Before the course the kids weren't achieving because they're not attending class for a variety of reasons. But in the program they become part of a group. Because they have the same teacher and see the same classmates every day. We start with team building activities. They become part of a cohesive unit where their individual skills are appreciated. They're learning skills, which boosts their confidence. If students aren't achieving, we can spend a whole day on something. So they see immediate success and receive positive feedback. They start getting good marks, they start going to class and their character improves. I tell them "this is success. This is what success feels like". And I believe success is addictive. Many of them start attending their classes and succeeding in the year after the program. Some of them need reminders about their successes after the program is over in order to continue to do well. Because of the success we've been having, it's not surprising that we now have a partnership with the Mississagi First Nation. They support the program with equipment, supplies and a financial contribution.

Ryan Forsyth attended a four-credit semester program at Elliot Lake Secondary School in the late 1990s. The program, led by Mark Robinson, changed his life. Ryan found work in the outdoor guiding industry and went on to lead several month-long canoe trips in remote locations in Ontario. This led him to a teaching job in Moosonee, Ontario, after he received his teaching certificate from Lakehead University. Ryan taught for two years at Northern Lights Secondary School

in Moosonee, where he led an Outdoor Education program and later taught at W.C. Eaket in Blind River, Ontario.

Sheila Nyman, the principal of W.C. Eaket, was immediately supportive of Ryan's idea to implement an outdoor education program in conjunction with the First Nations community. They found financial support from the Gosling Foundation, and the Algoma District School Board matched the grant. They started making connections with the local First Nations community, who mostly come from Mississagi First Nation and Serpent River First Nation. The program, now called New Trails, was born. Recently, the Mississagi First Nation has supported most of the program's financial needs.

W.C. Eaket has a Native resource worker, Reg Niganobe, who plays a key role in building and maintaining relationships with the local communities and Elders, promoting traditional Aboriginal culture with the school, and helping all students, regardless of their heritage, develop cultural awareness. He has been instrumental to the success of the program. Ryan says of the Blind River and area's First Nations and Métis community: "You make a call to the community. And if it's got to do with education, people will volunteer, and right away you'll have what you need. It makes me wonder why historically that kind of partnership wasn't utilized."

Connecting with local First Nations communities, however, is a skill. People who know local protocols<sup>1</sup> and who know the community know how to ask for support. Non-Aboriginal teachers should ask for help in developing this skill if they want to involve local First Nations, Inuit, and Métis leaders, artists, Elders, teachers, and traditional people in their school. Local friendship centres, post-secondary Aboriginal support services, and Band offices can help non-Aboriginal teachers develop these skills.

Teachers wishing to acquire these skills need to realize that “cross-cultural skills can only be developed in relationship” (Sutherland, n.d.). Teachers need to first develop friendships with local First Nations people in order to learn the skills involved in bringing local Elders and resource people into the school. Building relationships with local First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities takes time and needs to be nurtured like any significant relationship. A good resource is Chapter 4 from *Our Words, Our Ways: Teaching First Nations, Métis and Inuit Learners*, produced by the Alberta Ministry of Education (2005). Furthermore, Principals and school boards wishing to improve their relationships with local First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities should hire Native resource workers so that this expertise is within the school.

The students in the New Trails program have learned how to set up a tipi from local volunteers, and they participate in a sugar bush in March. Volunteers have taught the class how to make a big drum, which the students bring to local area elementary schools to teach younger kids. In fact, the name “New Trails” was given by a member of Bear Creek, a local big drum singing group who is one of the most famous pow wow groups in Turtle Island<sup>2</sup> at the moment.

Of the big drum, Ryan says:

It’s almost like a magical thing. It brings the kids together. You have to work together. It’s an awesome team task. You have to be on beat. They develop hand signals, you have to know how to hold the drum stick. You have to take care of that drum. You can’t swear around it. The drum represents the heartbeat, and needs to be treated with respect. It’s great for character education and for promoting local culture. It brings me closer to those kids.

The program also has the support of local Aboriginal professionals, and includes a weekly sharing circle led by a certified addictions counsellor. Many of the students are grappling with personal challenges, and

being in the program helps their self-esteem. In the past, students have participated in a fasting ceremony, and they also might do a sweat lodge ceremony this year. Ryan says of the circles and ceremonies that the students participate in:

I take part in all those things, even though I don’t have any First Nations heritage. I have to sacrifice some of my privacy, and tell the students what’s going on in my life. But the students don’t disrespect me for that. It goes both ways. I share and so they share. I would come off as a phony if I didn’t do that.

The students also develop strong friendships with their peers, which last after the program ends.

When students are struggling with managing their own behaviour, Ryan finds that using a corrective, rather than a punitive, approach allows students to make good choices for themselves. W.C. Eaket Vice-Principal Brian Beauchamp has been critical to the implementation of this behaviour management strategy. Almost all students successfully complete the program with this guidance and the role modelling from the many adults involved in the program.

The program is based around physical education and leadership, geography, Native studies and English credits. The students are outside much of the time. The students become certified in the use of GPS and in map and compass work, and earn accreditation in chain saw use, ORCA Tripping I, Basic Flatwater, Basic Kayaking, WHIMIS, Skidder/Cutter operator’s license, Pleasure Craft operator’s card and Wilderness First Aid. They have used these skills to fundraise for the program, for example by cutting trees for a local home. Students also engage in a two-week co-op placement with local municipalities and tourism businesses to prepare for work in the growing eco-tourism sector. Finally, the program integrates elements common to many four-credit semester Outdoor Education programs, including cross-country and downhill skiing, fitness, and a culminating canoe trip. Students

say that it is the canoe trip that really creates bonds between students, and helps them recognize what they have accomplished.

The New Trails program has impacted many students and is strengthening the bonds of the community at large. The Native resource worker who works with the program told Ryan that before the program existed, there was animosity between the local First Nations people and the school. Ryan said:

The First Nations people felt like they didn't have enough of a voice in the education system. If you don't have community partners with your school, if there isn't a dialogue, then people aren't going to trust the school. The program has filled that void. It's made education more relevant to the local population.

W.C. Eaket Secondary School has also engaged in other initiatives to ensure that the local First Nations are equal stakeholders in education.

Challenges do remain. Ryan says the biggest one is "keeping your energy level up... You always have to be aware of their safety. With Native cultural activities and overnight trips Reg Niganobe is there to support us, but with the daytime outdoor activities, I'm sometimes the only chaperone with the kids." Since it is very difficult to find a co-teacher with the right skills and character, Ryan remains the only instructor. Luckily, the partnership with the Mississagi First Nation means that the program does have fewer financial challenges than Ryan expected it would, which allows Ryan more time to dedicate to improving the program.

Ryan gets supportive feedback from community members, teachers and parents. In the first year of the program, he received an anonymous gift of home-baked cookies that lay on his desk one day after work. He said: "I never did find out where it came from. I know it wasn't the principal." Those tokens of appreciation go very far for Ryan, who says teaching can be a lonely profession. Small gestures that just go to show how successful

a program can be when so many people contribute. If there is any lesson to be learned from New Trails, it's that it really does take a village to raise a child.

<sup>1</sup> Protocol is "the code of etiquette appropriate to the customs of the people or community. . . . Each Aboriginal community has its own cultural and social traditions that translate into protocols that should be followed carefully" (Alberta Ministry of Education, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Turtle Island is the name that many First Nations, Inuit and Métis people use for North America. Its origin is several creation stories, including that of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), who live in what is now southern, central and eastern Ontario.

#### References:

- Alberta Ministry of Education. (2005). *Our words, our ways: Teaching First Nations, Inuit and Métis learners*. Available for order at [www.lrc.education.gov.ab.ca/](http://www.lrc.education.gov.ab.ca/) or for free at <http://bit.ly/hXs4dG>
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- Thomson, Alexandra. (n.d.) *Seeing the homeland and the trees? First Nations/ environmentalist relations in N'Daki Menan/Temagami 1986–1994*. Available from the author at [alexmackaythomson@gmail.com](mailto:alexmackaythomson@gmail.com); can also be found online on ProQuest's Dissertation Database.
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- Alex Thomson teaches Aboriginal Education and Outdoor Education at Lakehead University in Orillia.. She has worked in youth camping for many years. She completed a Master's degree in Canadian Studies and Indigenous Studies at Trent University. Alex is a qualified teacher looking for principals interested in starting up a similar program in the Peterborough/Orillia/GTA area. Please email [amthomso@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:amthomso@lakeheadu.ca) if you're interested.*