An elder told a story of a man in a sweat lodge who cursed when a hot ember from the fire landed on his bare leg. Laughingly he told the man he should thank the fire because it just kissed him. By the end of the sweat, the man didn’t have a mark on him from the ember. . . . It was while I listened to the elder’s story of the ember I grasped the power of hope in the indigenous way of learning (Janzen & Skalski, 2009).

In the indigenous understandings, each child is a gift, and it is the community’s responsibility to care for the child in a way that allows the gifts of the child to grow into skills that ultimately produce caring and responsible children who willingly contribute back to the community. This understanding is encapsulated in Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern’s *Circle of Courage* (McIntyre, n.d.). Children have a need for:

- Belonging (I mean something to you)
- Mastery (I am good at something)
- Independence (I have power to make decisions)
- Generosity (I have a purpose in life)

In the indigenous way, skills are developed through practice, hands-on experience. Not experiencing success is not seen as ‘failure,’ but as a teaching, a learning experience which adopts a more hopeful meaning. In making failure a safe option in the learning environment, the teacher facilitates more powerful learning that resonates more deeply with the student.

Mother Earth’s Children’s Charter School (MECCS) is Canada’s first Indigenous charter school. Respect is the cornerstone of MECCS’ program, one “rooted in tradition, embracing the future.” The facility, located 35 minutes southwest of Stony Plain at the former Saint John’s School of Alberta, is surrounded by Mother Nature. The school provides education grounded in the teachings of the Medicine Wheel, embeds cultural knowledge into programs and activities, offers programs for children from pre-kindergarten through Grade 9, and welcomes all children. It continuously consults with Elders and the community to ensure the needs of students, families, school, and staff are met.

For six years, MECCS operated out of a strip mall and two adjacent portable buildings which surrounded a small cement tarmac. In 2009 the program moved to what many consider a dream school along the North Saskatchewan River among trees and nature. Now there is a fully-equipped cafeteria, space for nine classrooms, a computer lab, and a music room. In addition, the
late Ralph Hole donated an amazing gym facility with two basketball courts, a running track, weight room equipment, and a recreation room with seats for more than 500 people.

According to MECCS’s principal, T. J. Skalski, “The school has the elements needed for movement towards new approaches to curriculum delivery through historical approaches to learning. Preserving the language, sustaining a way of life, and understanding honored protocols are the keys to learning self-discipline. Embracing sacred teachings such as love, respect, courage, honesty, wisdom, humility, and truth — inherent teachings connected to the cultural value system — reignites hope to what seems to be a lost generation.”

Bevan Janzen (2009), a former teacher now working with the Hope Foundation of Alberta, says, “Mother Earth’s Children Charter School is the ember from which we have been kissed.” MECCS, in partnership with the Hope Foundation, will carry out activities with MECCS students through Hope-Focused Service Learning. The Hope-Focused Service Learning program engages students in addressing real and unmet needs or issues in the community using hope as a guide by integrating community service through academic studies to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and build hopeful communities. For example, MECCS students participate in daily smudging (Desy, 2009), traditional ceremonies, and cultural activities, and also participate in the All Nations Track Meet and the Indigenous Winter Games. Students also receive individualized programming, access additional literacy supports, receive support from a guidance counselor, utilize up-to-date computer technology, and have fun learning.

The Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools (see Resources) describes how there are currently 13 charter schools operating in Alberta, Canada. These are tuition-free public schools operated by not-for-profit organizations. They employ certified teachers, are accessible to all students, have no religious affiliation, and offer a provincially-approved curriculum.

References


Resources

Association of Alberta Public Charter Schools: www.taapcs.ca


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The Program Showcases were developed by Michael Kalinowski as a component of the World Forum on Early Care and Education.

They are intended to highlight the work of particularly interesting, unique, and/or exceptional early childhood programs around the world.

Selected programs will appear in future issues of Exchange, and are also available on www.ChildCareExchange.com.