

Tribes: An Introduction

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A Way of Learning and Being Together

River Heights is a school in Caledonia, of over 500 children in one of the fastest growing communities in the province. With the community growing so quickly, we have been absorbing children from both rural and urban schools including many students moving out from the city of Hamilton. As a staff, we were concerned about the varied behaviours we were facing. We realized that many of the new students felt they didn't fit in. As a result, we began looking for a way to make everyone feel they belonged at River Heights. Our goal became to build an inclusive community where everyone felt valued. Upon investigation, we discovered that the philosophy of Tribes appealed to our needs.

The goals for a Tribes school is,

“to engage all teachers, administrators, students, and families in working together as a learning community that is dedicated to caring and support, active participation, and positive expectations for all students.” (Gibbs, page 22)

As a staff, we were not looking for an extra social program to teach, but rather wanted something that could be embedded into our existing academic programs. The Tribes process met our need to link social philosophy and academic programming.

As part of our school growth plan, we decided that the entire staff would be trained in the Tribes program. In 2003-2004, one half of the staff received inservice and in 2004-2005 the remaining staff members were trained. As a result of our journey, the following four action research papers represent an in-depth investigation into the success of the Tribes program at River Heights.

The main reason that this program's implementation has been successful at River Heights is because we have embraced the “Community Agreements:”

- Attentive listening
- Appreciation/no put downs
- The right to pass
- Mutual respect

These are the cornerstones of the Tribes philosophy. The use of the program's common language among staff and students is a contributing factor. For example, on the afternoon of February 8, the whole school met in the gym to celebrate Mardi Gras. At the end of a video, dancing and a parade of a masks (with over 500 students!) we needed to get the students to explain what would happen back in their classrooms. Excitement was high, it was loud and very hot. This task fell to a new kindergarten teacher. After a few unsuccessful attempts to get their attention, she said, without a microphone, “I need attentive listeners.” The gym immediately silenced and our attention was given to her. The

language reached through the chaos. At that point it became obvious that both the staff and students had internalized the Tribes philosophy.

Everyone at River Heights is somewhere along the Tribes Trail.

Reference:

Gibbs, J. (2001) Tribes: A New Way of Learning and Being Together. Windsor: CenterSourceSystems.