

?How blessed are we,? say Coe Hill students



By Jim Eadie, Special to This Week

?How blessed are we,' say Coe Hill students

?This string represents the caring and loving energy that flows between us.

Each bead represents every single person around this circle ? and their commitment for today.

Tying this string together symbolizes we are a family?

a community that helps one another to reach our goals.

How blessed are we!?

(Coe Hill Public School grade 3-4 class commitment)

Every single morning in Mrs. V's grade 3-4 class at Coe Hill Public School the students solemnly, and with obvious commitment, gather in a circle with their teacher to start their day. As a bead box is passed, each student speaks freely about his or her hopes, and makes a commitment for the day ahead. They place their chosen bead on a well-worn string, and then it is passed to the next student around the circle until it reaches Mrs. V, who ties the string as everyone repeats their class commitment. A different student each day is appointed the ?guardian of the commitments,? and wears the beads proudly until classes are nearly over for the day. The students return to the circle to talk respectfully about the day, the string is untied and the beads returned to their wooden box.

?The kids themselves insisted that they should hold hands in the circle,? said their teacher Annette Vandendriessche, known to the students best as Mrs. V. ?They wanted to make sure their circle was unbroken even when they left school too. That was their idea!?

In fact, the class commitment did not originate from a book or online somewhere. ?It has evolved from the kids and myself over the past few years,? she said. ?The last line was added by this year's class ? they wanted that in there.?

Mrs. V attended a First Nations/Métis/Innu workshop a few years ago where she was inspired by the circle concept shared at that time. ?First Nations peoples used circles to talk, and to help one another,? she said. ?That's why we use it too.?

Students sit on a rug placed symbolically in the centre of the classroom, bearing symbols and words illustrating the Anishinaabe people's ?Teachings of the Seven Grandfathers? ? wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility and truth. Several students in the circle expressed how important this story was to them in their life.

?I am going to try to have more patience today,? committed one student.

?I am going to stay focused on my work today, but still have fun.?

?I will try my best today, because I was sick yesterday.?

?I will try to listen more carefully.?

?I will try to think of ways instead of being mad ? and respect Ms. V.?

One boy told the circle how he wept with joy recently when he learned he was getting a pet cat, and could feel his classmates

celebrating with him in that moment, even though they were not physically there.

A special stone was passed around the circle allowing the holder to speak uninterrupted.

After the string was tied, the class played a very enthusiastic game of 'I spy', except entirely in French. In fact the first hour of class was conducted primarily in French.

The students used symbols on the rug to demonstrate their understanding of circumference, and perimeter, one of the lessons of the day.

Taking a break, the class then sang along and danced vigorously to a CD of the music of the popular French Canadian singer Greg LaRock, followed by a healthy snack.

An amazing demonstration of personal reflection, community building, mathematics, music, language, nutrition and physical exercise integrated all together, with the circle in the centre of it all.

'The circle brings spirit into the class,' said Mrs. V. 'The four pillars to successful learning are intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing. It is not necessarily about God but learning to think beyond ourselves. The students often speak about sending love and energy to others, to each other, to their grandma, to the world. And it allows us to be imperfect while we are trying to be better. We learn to be honest with each other in a respectful way.'