

The power of love at the BRICK Learning Centre: Transforming students' lives through caring relationships

OCTOBER 2, 2019



The BRICK Learning Centre staff. Photo courtesy of the BRICK Learning Centre.



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- Jasonⁱ was raised by his grandmother. But last month his nanna passed away and he went to live with his aunt. Yesterday, she kicked him out of her house. He has no other place to live.
- Amanda saw her father die by suicide. She is doing well but does a suicide check-in several times a day with the BRICK's full-time social worker: "I'm a "3" right now".
- Daniel was outside all night. At midnight, he jumped out his bedroom window to escape his drunken uncles. Now he's sleeping on the couch in the school hallway.
- Ashley didn't sleep either. She was having flashbacks to the car crash that killed her mother and little brother.

These are examples of the traumatic experiences that many students at the BRICK Learning Centre – an outreach school in Ponoka - are living with. Staff at the BRICK hear story after story like these ones. *While the intensity and frequency of trauma experienced by some of the BRICK's students is high, these kinds of things are happening to kids every day in every school and community in Alberta.* The BRICK's principal Ian Tisdale says, *"If you don't see it, you need to look deeper"*. And when you *do* see it, the question becomes, *"How can we better support these kids?"*

This story is about just that - how to better support kids who are experiencing trauma or chronic stress. **It's about how the power of love and caring relationships can transform students' lives and set them on the path to hope, self-confidence, mastery and high school graduation.** We think the evidence and principles applied at the BRICK could be fruitfully extended to any individual, group or organization that works with children and youth.

Have you ever walked into a building and instantly felt a peaceful warmth and "good vibrations" – a positive energy? That's the way it is at the BRICK Learning Centre – an outreach school in Ponoka that serves about 240 Grade 10 to 12 students each year. The place enfolds you the moment you set foot in the building – it's not anything you see, but you *feel* it. It invites you in.

"BRICK" stands for *Building Relationships Independence Community and Knowledge*. It's not what you might typically imagine an outreach school to look like. It's not a street front space nor is it in a mall; rather, it is located in an elegant two-story brick building that used to be an elementary school. There are regular classrooms and a five-block schedule of classes, and yes, a principal's office, too. There's also a room where Elders and students can talk and smudge, a photography studio, a workout room, a classroom that doubles as a yoga studio, and a kitchen where staff and students share breakfast and announcements every morning.

ⁱ Names and details have been changed to protect the identity of students.

We spent a day there, talking with Principal Ian Tisdale, Assistant Principal Erin Freadrich and other BRICK staff, and were blown away by what we saw: **the power of love and positive relationships to transform the lives of students.** The entire day was a lesson in this: *“When relationships are the core foundation of what we do, we change kids and we change their futures”.*

This shift in mindset – to privileging relationships as the foundation for all other work - is generating **impressive results.** There is a sense of family - a warm and safe environment that embraces each kid and adult just as they are. Students with eccentric behaviours are accepted as, “just doing their thing”. There is an active GSA and kids feel safe expressing their gender identity; they are thriving rather than hiding their “secret” and being shunned. As teacher Sheila Strychalski observes:

“We aim to ensure that all diversity is embraced and celebrated as a strength in students’ interpersonal and academic lives.”

There is minimal bullying or harassment. In the past 14 years, there has been only one fight, and that ended with the two boys apologizing to their peers for interrupting their learning, and then riding home together with a new understanding of each other’s realities.

“I have heard parents say how their child has been bullied or harassed in previous schools. I happily tell them they need to come and see how we are different.” [Valerie Jones, Administrative Assistant]

Kids who might have dropped out, or who might have been expelled from other schools are attending the BRICK on their own terms. They are completing courses and graduating. And, graduation rates are going up - from 17 in 2017, to 27 in 2018 and in 2019, 36. The BRICK is now a school of choice for students. Rather than having to try regular school first, they can opt to come directly to the BRICK – and they do.

And, so are teachers. New teacher Al Wong told us:

“As a new member of the teaching staff at the BRICK Learning Centre this year, I was amazed by how many students who came in eager to register for school despite various challenges they may have faced. Furthermore, anyone coming into the school could see how welcoming and warm-hearted all the staff are here at the school. Having taught at alternate school environments for the past 14 years, I’ll have to say that I am very excited to work with the students and staff here at the BLC this year!”

Foundations of the BRICK’s success

So, how do people at the BRICK Learning Centre make it all happen? Ian says, *“It starts with being part of a strong school division that values alternative education. Strong schools exist as part of a strong division, not apart from one. Within the building, we have a group of adults who believe deeply and authentically in relationship and have this art for looking past everything to see what we can do to help.”*

And then, BRICK staff draw upon **numerous sources of evidence** to inform their practice. This evidence includes **professional wisdom** gained through experience of “what works” with students who have experienced trauma; and similarly, the **wisdom of students, family and Elders**. It also includes **academic research and theory** (see below) and **ongoing evaluation and critical reflection** about how things are going. This evidence is **interpreted through the lens of context** – the environment in which the school is operating, including an understanding of the unique nature and capacities of the school (e.g., budget, resources, skillsets) and of Wolf Creek School Public Schools¹; the broader educational system; and, the local community including history, culture, resources/capacity, demographics, economics and political dynamics.

[To learn more about evidence-informed practice, and applying evidence in your practice, see: [Shared Wisdom for Supporting Mental Health in the Community at mentalhealthactionplan.ca.](https://www.mentalhealthactionplan.ca)]

In terms of research-based evidence, BRICK staff draw upon research focusing on children and youth who have experienced or are experiencing chronic stress or trauma. Foundational is work on adverse childhood experiences (ACES), trauma and resilience. Children and youth who have experienced or are experiencing trauma are at risk for serious lifelong mental and physical health problems². The good news is that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) aren't a life sentence. A substantial and growing body of evidence demonstrates the powerful impacts of protective and promotive factors that buffer against adversity including, for example: stable, caring and supportive relationships with adults; personal skills to build a sense of mastery over life circumstances and to manage stress (e.g., coping, decision making, self-regulation); learning and school engagement; and, nurturing environments that support faith or cultural traditions and that support children and youth to do well³.

At the BRICK, all of these protective factors are abundant, especially caring relationships – they are foundational to everything done in the school. The results are heartwarming and inspiring. We met and heard about many students who have experienced significant trauma in their lives. The BRICK embraces each one – gets to know them, respects them, supports them. And they are blossoming under this care.

BRICK staff also draw upon numerous other bodies of research in their practice. We have listed several of their sources in Appendix A, along with some “teaser” descriptions of the research that might entice you to read further – it's all very interesting and informative! Unpacking all of this research is beyond the scope of this story. Instead, we focus on the common thread running through it all and that applies to anyone working with children and youth: the foundational importance of connection and caring relationships.

CARING RELATIONSHIPS AND “FAMILY” BEFORE EVERYTHING ELSE

At the BRICK, caring relationships come before everything else including course content.

Relationships are embedded in the BRICK’s mission, vision, practices, and policies and every conversation. Each decision and action is based on the question: *“What does this mean for the relationship part?”*

The principle is that if you believe in kids and they believe in you, then they will, *“go to the moon for you and do amazing work”*:

“Some educators put course content in front of relationship. And the sad part to me is if you just put relationship first, you’re going to get all the course content because if kids believe in you and you’re believing in them, they’ll go to the moon for you and do amazing work”.

[Ian Tisdale, Principal]

Here, it is recognized that when teachers focus on content first, they may miss all of the things going on in kids’ lives that are generating attendance and social or behavioural issues. When kids come to the BRICK, it’s relationship first, and students begin to flourish:

“[When kids] come here, all of a sudden, it’s relationship first. And out of that relationship, once we have that relationship established, then we can worry about Math or Social Studies or English. And then these kids come, and they flourish here.” [Ian Tisdale, Principal]

“One of the truly beautiful things about our school is that we get to actualize the entirety of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. We know that kids can’t just leave their deficiency needs at the door before class. We tend to these needs before we tackle growth needs.” [Shawn Halbert, Teacher]

And this extends beyond one-on-one relationships to **building a sense of family** amongst all who work and study at the BRICK. Great emphasis is placed on building a family dynamic.

“Our focus here... really, really, we are a family. And we say that as part of our intake process. By coming here, you’re signing on, and we’re going to wrap around you. And we’re going to love on you. We’re not letting go of you.” [Erin Freadrich, Assistant Principal]

In the morning all students and staff eat breakfast together, like any family might, and then they go upstairs to the classrooms together. Mrs. Wilkinson, an educational assistant, comes in early to set out breakfast. Ian and Erin referred to her as a “Norman Rockwellian mom”:

“Every day, she’s there with an apron on and there’s a pot of oatmeal out, plus yogurt and continental breakfast things. For every kid that comes in that door, there’s Mrs. Wilkinson and, ‘Hey, good morning. Get yourself a bowl of porridge’.”

Having achieved a sense of family means that for kids, the BRICK is a safe place. When they need help in their personal lives, many come to the school for support. While we were visiting the school, a student came to the office asking for help. She came because of the relationship the school had built with her:

“That girl is here today because of the relationship piece. Her whole world is crumbling around her, but this is the place to come to. And even if we can’t fix her world, we can at least give her a safe haven for a little bit. And give her some hope of, ‘This is how we can help you right now’.
And story after story of our kids – it is because of the relationship that they come to school.”
[Ian Tisdale, Principal]

Being a “family” means going the extra mile – going beyond one’s “professional responsibilities”- to support the kids. Upon discovering a student had never had a birthday party, and hadn’t ever been invited to one, BRICK staff made her a cake and celebrated her birthday with her. When they knew another student was on her own and couldn’t afford clothes, they all chipped in some money and someone took her shopping at a goodwill store. When a student phoned the school and made some concerning messages, the school’s resource officer contacted the family and did a safety check.

All of this requires a deep and personal investment in the students, and when things go wrong, it can be heartbreaking:

*“You have to be so invested in these kids. You have to love on them and so when we find out they’ve gone to jail, or we find out [they’ve died by suicide], or we found out that they quit school, it breaks our hearts. Because these are our babies. . . . **We weep with kids and we laugh, and we celebrate with kids and we’re human.**”* *[Erin Freadrich, Assistant Principal]*

And that is why Ian demands that BRICK staff build authentic caring relationships every single day:

*“I demand from my staff to build authentic relationships every single day, knowing you’re working with at risk youth. . . . **relationship has to be the core of everything you do with students especially with at-risk kids. If students don’t have those relationships, it won’t matter what you do with them.**”*

The importance of family and caring relationships is also reflected in hiring practices that are geared toward relational competencies. Here’s how Ian describes it:

*“If it comes to hiring staff, your A+ in Sciences in university means nothing to me. **What means everything to me is your ability to connect with kids and build relationships and see the heart of kids. . . .if you hardly made it through science, great. . . now you can identify with these kids here***

who are having trouble with math or science . . . but if you have a heart for kids and if you're ready to take this on, day after day after day after day after day, it's so rewarding."

The payoff is a staff that understands and privileges the fundamental power of connection and relationship. Teacher Jim Wilkinson said relationship building begins with being a servant leader:

"For me, relationship building in my classroom starts with taking on the role of servant-leader. I make it abundantly clear that I am here to serve the kids - everything from picking up a pencil they dropped to being willing to help them no matter what else might be happening. As the classroom leader, my role is to ensure a safe, calm learning environment. It requires a balance of humility and confidence. Like most of teaching in an outreach setting, it's a tightrope walk. Exhausting but exhilarating".

The flexible and individually customized approach to instruction at the BRICK also enables a "relationships first" approach:

"The structure and process of how our school operates gives us the freedom to put relationships first. Students are easily able to pick up where they are at or where they left off and that pressure of not needing to have everyone in the same place at the same time alleviates the pressure on the relationship that we have worked so hard to build." [Teri Lynn Amundson, Teacher]

Below we describe some other ways that caring relationships and a safe environment are sustained at the BRICK.

Messages of hope and encouragement only

All messaging to students is always positive. While this shows respect and care to students and helps build a sense of belonging, it also gives peace of mind to staff. When students leave the school or get into trouble or perhaps even die by suicide, staff can rest assured that all their interactions have been supportive and positive and that they have given their very best to each student.

An example is the gentle way in which students who are absent are contacted by the school's administrative assistant, Carolyn Jarrett. The approach builds family by showing students that the school loves them and cares for them:

*"Any time a student is supposed to be here on their schedule and they're not, [Carolyn] phones. The phone message is very clear, that it's, 'Just that we want to make sure you're safe. We miss you. When will you be back in school?' They'll say to her all the time, 'I'll be there tomorrow'. 'All right, see you tomorrow.' And tomorrow she calls them again 'Oh, no, I'll be there tomorrow'. **It's been very specific that her language is just a very kind, supportive, non-judgmental – just missing you, hope you're safe and when can we expect you back again? We've seen over the two years where we've been doing this that our attendance has gone up substantially.**" [Ian Tisdale, Principal]*

And, students often express their appreciation to Carolyn:

“I have received cards from students telling me that they are in school because I phoned them on a regular basis, just checking in with them. Here is an example of what one student wrote to me: ‘Thank you for touching base with me when I’m not here and calling and asking when’s the next time I’ll be back. I’m here today because of that, knowing that someone I don’t know much is wanting me to make it to school and be better. Have a good day.’”

The approach is the same for students who drift away from the school:

“We’ll see students who will just kind of drift away from us. They’ve got a hundred other things that are happening in their lives. So, we want to know that the last messages that we have are ones of hope.”
[Ian Tisdale, Principal]

And when students come back, “they just get loved on”:

“When students come back after missing significant time, they just get loved on. They get hugged. They get, ‘Oh! We’re so happy to have you back!’... It’s just opening the door for kids to learn.”
[Erin Freadrich, Assistant Principal]

Encouraging words. Photo by David Rust, Community Mental Health Action Plan.



After a student died by suicide, Ian looked at the student's progress report to see what kind of interactions had occurred:

“One of the first things I did was look at the progress report. So, we can look back and say, ‘Okay, here’s all the times we called him and gave him a love message. Here’s what we’ve done to support him’. Even on the last progress report we had for him...there were four different messages like, ‘It was so good to see you last week. We hope to see you back again. Excited to see you back. We’re hoping that...’. It was just messages of hope and encouragement.”

Understanding the “why” behind disruptive behaviours

Traditionally, school approaches to disruptive behaviours have included punishment of some sort, or complete removal from the school through suspension or expulsion. But, at the BRICK, the opposite happens – connection and striving to understand the “why” behind the behaviour and then, **“Let’s get you into school because this is what’s going to change your future.”**

For kids who are used to being kicked out of school, this can be a surprise. Ian and Erin said it *“really turns their world”* when they do something they expect to be suspended for, and yet that doesn’t happen. For example, those who turn up at school drunk or high are not suspended. Instead, they are given a firm message that, *“You can’t be at school in this shape. We need you to be in a safe space right now. Who can we call? We’re sad that you’re missing out on this learning opportunity. Come back tomorrow when you’re able to learn”*. And, guess what? They do come back to learn. And they also come to realize that they are respected and cared for, even when they “screw up”.

Ian told us that early in his career, suspensions seemed an appropriate response. But once he started hearing the stories behind the behaviour, everything changed for him. Today, this is his advice for administrators and teachers (and we would argue, anyone who works with children and youth):

“If I could just say this to other administrators and teachers in the province: ‘Do this: understand the why behind the what.’ If a kid comes to school drunk, why do they feel that’s acceptable behaviour? Why do they feel that it’s something normal that they go get drunk or high at lunch?

Then once you start exploring their stories, it breaks your heart and you don't want to suspend them. You don't want to kick them out. What you want to do is just love them and give them a place to be that's safe. It just changes, and for me that's what so changed my perspective.”

Here’s an example. We heard about a boy who was inebriated and creating a ruckus on the school grounds at the end of the school day – in front of hundreds of people. Staff calmly removed him from the situation and brought him back into the school. While waiting for his kookum to pick him up, he talked with Ian. When Ian happened to call him “son”, the boy said, *“You know what? No one has ever called me, son”*:

“It broke my heart to think that his whole life, he’d never been identified as somebody’s son... Here’s this boy who’s drunk and you know what? It doesn’t make me mad and want to suspend him for five days because how embarrassing he’s been in front of our school. I just want to hold him and hug him and love him.” [Ian Tisdale, Principal]

Ian made it clear that the BRICK is not a “free-for-all place”, however. To the contrary, BRICK staff have high expectations for their students:

“Academic progress and attendance are monitored consistently. We meet to talk about our students twice per week. When a student has been identified as being a “Student of Concern”, we ensure measures are put in place to help them be successful, and then we hold them accountable.”

Cultural humility

The BRICK Learning Centre is located close to the Maskwacis community, and many students identify as Indigenous. To ensure these kids feel safe and that their culture is respected and embraced by the school, staff practice cultural humility - a process of understanding personal and systemic biases, maintaining respectful relationships based on mutual trust, and self-reflection - humbly acknowledging oneself as a perpetual learner in understanding another’s experience⁴.

“There are many times when, from our colonial lens, we’ll do something that makes sense to us, but it’s offensive... so there’s a lot of just asking... When we’re at the Wisdom Guidance Committee, we can ask questions. For example, we’ve ordered new gowns for our grads and so we’re going to have our logo there, but we want to have the four colours of the Cree Medicine Wheel but what’s the appropriate order of colours?... I think the culture that we have here in our building, of family, is that ‘You know what? Sometimes we’re going to do something and step on someone’s toes because we don’t know ...If we’re doing something incorrectly, let us know because we’d love to do it right.”
[Ian Tisdale, Principal]

Staff also ensure that Indigenous culture is reflected in the school. This is achieved in numerous ways including, for example:

- The school logo encompasses the colours of the Cree Medicine Wheel.
- Elders are present in the school three mornings a week. There is a room where students can speak with them and smudge.



Mural in the Elder's room. Photo by Kathy GermAnn, Community Mental Health Action Plan.

- A **Wisdom and Guidance Committee** made up of parents, elders, community members, principals from Ponoka area schools, lead teachers, the FNMI student success coordinator and the superintendent. They meet monthly over a meal. School-related matters are discussed in a talking circle.
- A **First Nations, Metis and Inuit Student Success Coordinator** – Shelagh Hagemann, helps ensure students are supported through an Indigenous lens.
- A **First Nations, Metis and Inuit Learning Supports Coach** - Josephine Small - helps infuse culturally responsive content into courses.

Together, the *Student Success Coordinator* and *Learning Supports Coach* roles are intended to develop a holistic understanding of First Nations, Metis and Inuit cultures, worldviews, histories and current realities. These supports help to ensure that all students belong and can learn effectively. The approach fosters relationships that nurture and honour individual student's stories and cultures and encourage the blending of both culture and curriculum to strengthen learningⁱⁱ.

ⁱⁱ See: <https://www.wolfcreek.ab.ca/first-nations-metis-and-inuit-education/first-nations-metis-and-inuit-contacts>

- There are **frequent communal activities and ceremonies**. (e.g., teachers and students sharing breakfast and announcements every morning, feasts, smudging, and a round dance at graduation).
- **Indigenous history, art and other artifacts** are liberally displayed throughout the school. A few years ago, staff walked through the school, trying to imagine how their Indigenous students might experience the place. They realized more could be done to reflect the culture and so added more Indigenous art and artifacts to their classrooms.
- **Staff often go to Maskwacis to meet with parents**, recognizing that travel can be a barrier to parent participation in their child's education.



A CULTURE OF EQUALITY AND A FOCUS ON STAFF WELLBEING

And finally, we come to the working environment for BRICK Learning Centre staff. Again, the focus is on relationships and equality. While Ian and Erin are ultimately accountable for the school, all staff are viewed as equals and all are included in discussions about what's going on, and should go on, at the school:

“There is no hierarchy here. In all of our discussions about what we’re doing with the school, we have admin assistants, social works, EAs and teachers... I look at everybody here as being equal. We just have different roles that we do.” [Ian Tisdale, Principal]

And, everyone is viewed as a teacher, recognizing that while some staff are in professional teacher roles, everyone else - educational assistants, administrative assistants, the social worker, custodians – also has a critical role in the school:

“When I say ‘teachers’, I mean everybody because everybody has a teaching role in this school. The admin assistants teach people, the educational assistants teach people, the custodian, social worker – everyone teaches people in this building in different ways.”
[Ian Tisdale, Principal]

Focused attention on staff wellbeing

Given that so many of the BRICK's students are at risk, there are expectations on staff to be extremely mindful in their interactions with students. Just one small word could trigger a student or cause them to leave the school.

“We have to be perfect with these kids or they won’t come back, so we have to be at our best everyday... If this doesn’t fit and suit where you’re at, then you can’t be here, because when you work with the most vulnerable kids, you have to be your best all the time. Because one slight little comment can have a deep impact.” [Ian Tisdale, Principal]

But the work is hard – it hurts and listening to kids’ stories requires opening yourself up and making yourself vulnerable. Vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue are real concerns for staff.

“There’s hurt. 100 per cent, there’s hurt... the hard part isn’t marking essays and marking modules as much as sometimes that stacks up. The real hard part is being vulnerable to learn stories of kids because that means you’re going to hear some awful things.” [Erin Fredrich, Assistant Principal]

So, there needs to be significant support for staff wellbeing. And indeed, many strategies are in place for this, including the following:

- **A lot of talking and “checking in” to see how people are doing** : *“We meet all the time and talk about our kids and our school. I meet with staff and just say, ‘How are you doing?’” [Ian Tisdale, Principal]*
- **Staff are strongly encouraged to monitor their own mental health. If needed, they are encouraged to take a day to do something that will support their mental wellbeing** – seeing a counselor, for example. They can access Homewood Health for supports through Wolf Creek Public Schools.
- **Staff also support each other in taking “mental health minutes” during the school day.** If someone needs an extra-long break, their coworkers will cover for them.
- **The parking lot is empty at 4:00** because it is recognized that the work is difficult, and people need to go home to their personal lives:

“If you look at our parking lot at 4 pm, it’s empty because I want [staff] to go home... I tell people to go home because they’ve worked harder than most people have worked and the stories they’ve heard. The seven or eight hours that you’re here are so overwhelming that you need just to go away and enjoy... get into whatever your evening routine’s going to look like.” [Ian Tisdale, Principal]

- Teachers are encouraged to share their own interests and passions with kids. A few years ago, each teacher was invited to develop programs for kids that were based on their own personal passions. So, there are now yoga classes, photography classes, and a workout room.
- Staff spend time together in “wellness” events. They often attend educational and fun events together, further strengthening relationships and mutual support.
- Staff are encouraged to ask, “what’s your why?” – a way of reconnecting to a sense of purpose in the work which is a deep source of wellbeing.



Yoga studio in a classroom at the BRICK. Photo by David Rust, Community Mental Health Action Plan

The work adds to wellbeing

While working at the BRICK can be emotionally demanding and it can be difficult to hear the stories of students’ lives, it appears that the rewards far outweigh the challenges. Erin told us that the many stories of student success *add* to staff wellbeing:

“There’s story after story – there’s no end to the stories of our kids of coming from brokenness that find success. And I think that’s what also helps with the staff wellness piece.”

Ian similarly told us that this has been by far the most challenging job of his career, but also by far the most rewarding. And it appears to be the same for all staff at the BRICK because **there is virtually no turnover of staff**. In fact, staff who retire often stay on as substitutes:

“People are here and staying and they love it. And even for people who retired from here, they’re our key substitutes and they come back in bulk to be here.” [Erin Freadrich, Assistant Principal]

Custodian Jacquie Burton told us:

“I just love how the kids are so respectful and kind. I love coming to work every day.”

Our guess is that this work affords a deep sense of meaning and purpose - of doing important work that makes a difference. And, it also fosters a sense of belonging as part of the school family that consists of all students, family, community members, Elders and staff.

Ongoing learning and adaptation

As a school the BRICK has a philosophy of continual growth and development. This means a continual openness to change, and to discussing what's working, what's not, what could be adapted and what should be dropped:

“So we need to explore everything we do all the time and realize that we can change. Always we should. We can and we should change and adapt. Because when we change and adapt, we meet kids’ needs.

We always say to staff, ‘Everything is always on the table all the time. ...If there’s any practice that’s not working, let’s ask questions about why it’s not working and adapt it or get rid of it.’ [Ian Tisdale, Principal]

BRICK staff are guided by the ultimate goal of increasing graduation rates, with the logic that this can be achieved by meeting the social, emotional, behavioural and academic learning needs of students. As a team, staff have developed their own mural of where they want to go as a school, and they reflect upon (and adjust) it regularly. The mural highlights areas of excellence – things they are already doing well and that could be showcased to others, as well as areas of growth – things that still need to be addressed. One area of focus for 2019-2020 continues to be increasing graduation rates. The school had anticipated that 50 students would graduate in June 2019, but for various and multi-faceted reasons, only 36 did. So, staff will spend time this year trying to understand more about why that happened, and how things could be improved.

Applying “what works” at the BRICK in other settings

The BRICK Learning Centre is an exemplar of the power of connection and caring relationships between students and school staff. It is also an exemplar of how adopting a different lens and approach can serve students who don't fit the mold of traditional schools in a way that enables them to succeed personally and academically. And that shift in mindset costs very little. It doesn't take a lot of time or resources; in fact, the effort invested in getting to know kids pays off in spades - greater student achievements, growth, and in the case of the BRICK Learning Centre, graduation.

“It’s about taking those moments to find out about the kids – it doesn’t take a whole lot of time.”
[Erin Freadrich, Assistant Principal]

We noted at the outset that while the intensity and frequency of trauma experienced by some of the BRICK's students is high, this is happening with students in every school and community in Alberta. Imagine the potential if, in every child-and youth-serving group or organization, caring and trauma-informed relationships came first and “programming” second? What if every child and youth felt welcomed, nurtured, respected and accepted wherever they went?

Brendtro and colleagues⁵ believe this is very possible – that anyone can make a difference in the lives of children and youth who have been exposed to trauma:

*“Building restorative relationships is not limited to those with formal training in counseling. **An adult who is involved in ongoing daily events has many opportunities to show small acts of kindness and respect.** While trained therapists make important contributions, **everyday supportive relationships are the most potent way to heal trauma.** Clinical psychologist Ricky Greenwald⁶ writes:*

“You do not have to be a therapist to create a therapeutic or healing relationship with a child. Parents, counselors, teachers, coaches, direct care workers, case managers and others are all in a position to help a child heal. The quality of your relationships is the vehicle for learning’.”



Appendix A: Research-based evidence applied at the BRICK

Ian and Erin cited the work of several researchers that guide work with students at the BRICK. When we looked at this research, we realized that although much of it is focused toward teachers, it can apply to anyone working with children and youth. Here is a brief description of the research and some “teasers” that might intrigue you to check these resources out.

Researcher(s)	Some key ideas from the research that can apply to anyone working with children and youth
Brendtro, L., Brokenleg, M., & Van Bockern. 2018. <i>Reclaiming youth at risk. Futures of promise. 3rd Ed.</i> Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.	A model of resilience and positive youth development to help people connect with and “reclaim” traumatized youth. How four Circle of Courage values – Belonging, Mastery, Independence, Generosity – enable youth to thrive. Strengths-based approach.
Carrington, J. 2019. <i>Kids these days. A game plan for (re)connecting with those we teach, lead & love.</i> Alberta: Jody Carrington.	Relationships and connection with kids matter. It is only through relationships that we can teach kids to regulate their emotions. If they don’t have control of their emotions, they can’t connect or learn. “ <i>Kids aren’t seeking attention; they are seeking connection.</i> ”
Dweck, C. 2016. <i>Mindset. The new psychology of success.</i> New York: Ballantine Books.	In contrast to a “fixed” mindset where people believe their basic abilities, talents and intelligence are fixed for life, a growth mindset is the opposite – it’s the belief that one’s talents can be developed through effort, persistence and good teaching: “everyone can get smarter if they work at it”. People with a growth mindset are more likely to continue working hard despite setbacks.
Greene, R. 2014. <i>Lost at school. Why our kids with behavioral challenges are falling through the cracks and how we can help them.</i> New York: Scribner.	A framework for understanding challenging child/youth behaviours. Put simply, Greene argues that every kid wants to do well, but some don’t know how to do that, and so it is up to professionals to help them figure it out.
Souers, K. & Hall, P. 2016. <i>Fostering resilient learners: Strategies for creating a trauma sensitive classroom.</i> Alexandria VA: ASCD.	How ACES affect student readiness to learn. We should view every student as though they have experienced trauma. The importance of understanding the “why” behind behaviours and of fostering a safe and secure environment where it is okay to be “not okay”. By nurturing and holding high expectations you will build relationships that enable students to grow, thrive, and learn at high levels. They outline ways trauma sensitive learning environments.
Tileston, D., & Darling, K. 2008. <i>Why culture counts. Teaching children of poverty.</i> Bloomington IN: Solution Tree Press.	Key considerations about, and a model for teaching children/youth living in poverty. “ <i>We cannot build resilience for children of poverty without addressing the impact of their culture on achievement.</i> ” While it might not be possible for teachers to fix poverty, it is possible to teach so that students can learn and succeed despite obstacles.

Inspired? Intrigued? Encouraged? Want to make similar changes in your practice or organization? For a smorgasbord of ideas for how you can make it happen, search for “*Shared Wisdom for Supporting Mental Health in the Community*” on the Community Mental Health Action Plan website at mentalhealthactionplan.ca

Endnotes

¹ The BRICK Learning Centre is in the Wolf Creek School Division, which has been recognized for its efforts toward reconciliation.

² Center on the Developing Child. 2009. *Roots of adult disease traced to early childhood adversity*. Harvard University.

³ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2015). *Supportive relationships and active skill-building strengthen the foundations of resilience. Working paper 13*. Author.

Ungar, M. (2011). *The social ecology of resilience: Addressing contextual and cultural ambiguity of a nascent construct*. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 81(1), 1-7.

Scales, P. & Leffert, N. 2004. *Developmental assets. A synthesis of the scientific research on adolescent development, 2nd Ed.* Minneapolis: Search Institute.

See also:

Roehlkepartain, E., Pekel, K., Syvertsen, A., Sethis, J., Sullivan, T., & Scales, P. 2017. *Relationships first: Creating connections that help young people thrive*. Minneapolis, MN: Search institute.

Li, J., & Julian, M. 2012. Developmental relationship as the active ingredient: A unifying working hypothesis of “what works” across intervention settings. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 82(2), 157-166.

⁴ First Nations Health Authority. N.d. *Creating a climate for change. Cultural safety and humility in health services delivery for First Nations and Aboriginal Peoples in British Columbia*. Author.

⁵ Brendtro, L., Brokenleg, M., & Van Bockern. 2018. *Reclaiming youth at risk. Futures of promise. 3rd Ed.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press; pg. 36.

⁶ Greenwald, R. 2005. *Child trauma handbook: A guide for helping trauma-exposed children and adolescents*. New York: Haworth.