

**ABORIGINAL ENHANCEMENT SCHOOLS NETWORK  
2011-2012**

**ÉCOLE PUNTLIDGE PARK ELEMENTARY  
#71 Comox Valley**

**Leadership Team**

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**Contact**

Susan Leslie

**School Context/Community Involvement**

I work at culturally and contextually diverse elementary school offering three District programs; Early French Immersion, Late French Immersion and an Aboriginal Primary Program, as well as English instruction. Our student population reflects the combined needs of an inner city school with transient single parent families of low socio-economic status, juxtaposed with middle class, parent involved families with influence on their child's learning.

25% of our 490 student population is Aboriginal, comprised of mostly urban off reserve families from various different Aboriginal Nations. We have 21, K-7 divisions, a school based after school program (day care), a bag lunch program and a dry goods breakfast program for students in need. The Aboriginal Primary Program provides breakfast, snacks, bag lunches, boots, running shoes, coats and clothing for students and families in need.

**School Inquiry and Action**

My school inquiry is a direct result of the findings of my research inquiry into the effects of talking circles steeped in traditional values in understanding primary Aboriginal students' self esteem and motivation in learning. Parents and students who attended the Aboriginal Primary Program between the years 2004-2010 and who were still in attendance at École Puntledge Park Elementary were asked to attend an evening of talking circles to share their stories of their children's experiences in the program with respect to the research question. The stories parents and students shared spoke of the safe, respectful learning environment created by the trusting relationships nurtured and supported daily in the talking circles. Parents stated clearly that their children had become stronger students, they had become better parents and that the lessons learned in mutual respect and speaking from the heart were implanted deeply into their child's sense of self today. The unexpected finding indicated traumatic transitions into mainstream classrooms after leaving the program. Parents spoke of their children coming home in tears for months after leaving and students had begun to disengage from learning in response to the different learning environment. I knew of some families' struggles as the parents had spoken to me about strategies to help support their children in the new learning environment; I did not know the extent of the student's difficult transitions. Five out of seven parents, 71% spoke to the difficult transitions their children experienced, the other two parents' children were still in the program.

Thirteen teachers so far, in English and French classrooms of all grade levels have requested to be part of this inquiry into using talking circles in their classrooms in developing a respectful learning community. I have already begun implementing the talking circles in classrooms, supporting the Aboriginal students who have been in my program in leading those talking circles. In August I have been asked to lead our staff in a Professional Development afternoon on implementing talking circles in all classrooms in developing safe, respectful and collaborative learning environments.

**School Question**

How does the use of talking circles rooted in the traditional values of listening, mutual respect, speaking from the heart and kindness and cooperation effect students' learning relationships and academic achievement in my classroom?

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### **Focus of Inquiry**

English, Early and Late Immersion classrooms as well as the Aboriginal Primary Program in our school will be participating in our school inquiry. Our school mission statement, "A community of learners, exploring our world in a creative, healthy and caring environment," speaks to our collective passion in providing students with a safe, caring, healthy learning environment. Our first learning goal in our co-created School Growth Plan is about student wellness, "Improving student wellness through the development of students' understanding of social responsibility as well as their artistic, physical abilities and appreciation of our unique school environment." These goals and statements align with taking action in creating safer learning environments for Aboriginal students in our learning community. We use a very powerful umbrella phrase at our school, "The Puntledge Way" which covers all the values from the WITS, 6 Pillars Programs and our Code of Conduct. I believe it is "The Puntledge Way" to address these heart-felt stories voiced by our Aboriginal students and parents.

### **Links with District Enhancement Agreement**

All four goals of our Enhancement Agreement are reflected in this inquiry.

- To increase Aboriginal student's sense of belonging; including sense of place, identity and self-esteem, in a nurturing and inclusive environment.
- To improve the achievement of all Aboriginal students
- To increase the awareness and understanding of First Nation, Metis and Inuit history, traditions and culture for all students
- To enhance skills, qualities and confidence in leadership for Aboriginal students.

### **Strategies**

I plan to have Tami our Aboriginal Resource Aide assist me in implementing talking circles into all classrooms in our school. I anticipate starting one classroom per week after the teachers feel they are ready to begin implementing them in their classrooms. Here's how:

- I will facilitate the first talking circle in the teachers' classroom and they will cover my classroom during a center time activity.
- The second talking circle the teacher participates as the students do as I lead. My class is covered by administration for 1 hour. (already agreed upon)
- The third talking circle the teacher leads.
- The fourth talking circle, an Aboriginal student has graduated from my program has the opportunity to lead.
- The fifth a student who feels comfortable may lead the circle. The idea being that the students eventually direct the learning in the talking circles with the teacher present in the circle to ensure that appropriate protocol, and behaviour is followed.
- I check in weekly with the students and teachers to see how everyone is feeling.

As students begin to develop trusting relationships, the circles can be used for sharing and checking learning, cooperative problem solving and collaborative group work. All of these activities are important in inquiry learning and formative assessment.

### **School Findings**

I began this project in April 2012 and between April and June had begun the implementation process in 11 classrooms in our school. I have included some of the students' written feedback based on their reflections of the talking circle process in their classroom. Our inquiry journey is just beginning, we will continue to delve deeper into this work school-wide in the following 2012-2013 year.

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### **AESN Plans for 2012-2013**

In August I am engaging our staff in an afternoon of Professional Development using the talking circle as the vehicle to provide staff members with an opportunity to share their learning stories in building trust and making connections with each other. In order for teachers to embrace talking circles in their classrooms they need to feel comfortable facilitating or participating in them. Therefore I would engage the help of Tami our Aboriginal Resource Aide and we would initiate an inquiry talking circle with the staff to model procedure, protocol, values and learner talk. We would begin with an appreciative inquiry into the kinds of activities they witness in their classrooms that support relational trust.

- “What are some activities or processes that you see supporting relational trust in your classroom?”
- “Do you feel safe in sharing your feelings in this talking circle?”
- “What kinds of activities would support you in feeling safe speaking the truth in front of your peers?”

I would have a series of talking circles on a regular basis to support teachers in their learning just as they are having daily talking circles in their classrooms to support their students’ learning. I would like to begin each staff meeting with a talking circle to build confidence in sharing through practice. The talking circle protocol is presented below.

“The talking stick will be passed to the right, following Territory protocol, after the question is read and each participant has the opportunity to speak to it until they have finished what they want to say. After the talking stick has been passed to everyone in the circle once, the facilitator will ask if anyone else would like to speak. If so the talking stick will be passed to the right to that person, and when everyone is satisfied that they have finished speaking, the facilitator will close the circle and thank the participants for their words. Participation in these talking circles is voluntary and the participants may choose not to speak each time the stick is passed.”

Our initial talking circle may involve asking for responses to the inquiry research study I did. Whatever the inquiry is that directs the circle, protocol will be set and discussion will begin according to the needs of the teachers at the time of facilitation.

### **Reflections, Advice**

I can only reflect on the first few lengths of my journey as we have just left the shore. Establishing a community of learners built upon relational trust is the first step in creating an inquiry based learning environment using formative assessment. I have experienced this in my classroom. Learning conversations need to be developed in a safe, respectful environment where students feel motivated to engage in their learning. Talking circles provide a vehicle to create that safe trusting space to share your feelings, ideas and resolve conflicts in a process where your peers listen to your words and can offer feedback in a respectful way.

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(Circle)  
I like the talking circle because you get it off of your chest and it good to do that one or twice a week.

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And I also like how what you say in the circle stays in the circle.

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if you have a problem with our friend the friend no that that being mean.

Tanya  
June 14 2011

Talking Circle

Tanya  
June 14 2011

circle

1. I like how you can let it all out and get everything off your chest.

2. what you say in the circle stays in the circle.

3. if your friend is being mean to you, you can tell them to stop.