



2013-2014 AESN Case Study

School: John Barsby Community Secondary

District: SD68 Nanaimo/Ladysmith

Area of focus: Student Level

Inquiry Team Members: Vivian Aarset, Joelene Akitt, Donna Flett, Kathy Goldsmith, Val White, Shannon Wilson

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Question / focus area: How can we build a positive reception of Aboriginal content and activities in our high school setting and build community?

Scanning: Staff and students noticed that while John Barsby Community Secondary has a strong sense of community and that while most students identify strongly with the school, there was still some friction and absence of understanding between the Aboriginal students, and the rest of the school population. Barsby's student population is approximately 1/3 Aboriginal. In addition, Aboriginal Education's 2012-13 inquiry project unveiled some gaps in staff knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal history and culture (both local and national). Educators on the Aboriginal Education Team supported our student-led inquiry by providing inspiration, information, and guidance, and by welcoming us into their classrooms. Shannon Wilson and Kathy Goldsmith are sponsors of Barsby's student social justice team, and they were actively involved.

Focus: Research confirms that peer-to-peer exchange of knowledge and ideas is very powerful. Our team hoped that by training interested student leaders (both Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal) in Aboriginal history and culture, and participating in the September 2013 *Walk in Solidarity Truth and Reconciliation* event in Vancouver, that our school community would become a more compassionate, understanding one—a community that is committed to social justice for our students. Our Aboriginal department has been hosting a school-wide feast for the past two years and this year we hope to see it develop more of a mealtime visiting atmosphere. We consulted and approached our education team, our district Aboriginal team members, members from the local university's Aboriginal team, and expanded our team of collaborators to teachers who became engaged as we built our project.

Hunch: As mentioned earlier, Aboriginal Education's 2012-13 inquiry project unveiled some gaps in staff knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal history and culture (both local and national). We have a large number of staff members who are excited about Aboriginal projects and activities, and willingly support us.

New professional learning: Throughout our project we hoped to have our professional community at Barsby come to better understand our Aboriginal students and families. We hoped to see more teachers become role models for the students in displaying an understanding of Aboriginal history and culture, and we hoped to see more teachers play collaborative roles, with student leaders, in our solidary projects. In the past year we presented a workshop on Aboriginal history, culture, and residential schools to staff and hope to present to the entire staff again in September 2014. Also, we trained and supported our students in facilitating classroom presentations throughout our inquiry.

Taking action: Our original plan was to gather a core group of students and staff to participate in the *Walk in Solidarity for the Truth and Reconciliation* event in Vancouver, and then plan follow-up events at Barsby. Instead, we took a large group of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, Barsby's social justice student group, and some parents to the *Education Day of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. Some of our Aboriginal Education team members had already met with the social justice group at the end of June 2013 in anticipation of this event. They presented a power point and facilitated a discussion about injustices embedded in Canada's Aboriginal history. Two of our student leaders also participated in this meeting. Our intention was to have this wider group of student leaders be witnesses and be confident enough to share their knowledge about Aboriginal history with a wider student base in whichever occasion might present itself (e.g., private conversations, other school classes).

Upon returning from the T&R event, our core group of students and teacher sponsors met regularly, reviewed resources, and researched other resources. Our student group then selected activities, and some videos, as well as other resources to use in classroom presentations. The students presented in one senior English classroom and one senior social studies classroom. One of our inquiry student leaders talked about the intergenerational impacts of residential schools as they impacted his family. The students from the English classroom asked for more—they told their teacher they had no idea that such things had happened in Canada. The class asked to hear from a residential school survivor and afterwards participated in class follow-up activities. The social studies teacher took over after the student visit, and near the end of the school year taught about residential schools. Again, we held our department's school-wide feast in the winter and combined this with a formal blessing of Welcome Poles from our 2012-13 inquiry. Elders and dignitaries attended both the feast and the blessing.

Checking: Students wrote reflection booklets of their trip to Vancouver's T&R event. They described what they knew beforehand about residential schools, what they expected to learn from the event, and reflected on what they did learn at the event. Students who attended were interviewed and one of our inquiry student leaders made a video of the trip and student responses. Comments were heartfelt and demonstrated that the experiences had impressed themselves upon the students. Several made statements that indicated they would try to personally make some change to help move the healing process forward.

The students from the English 10 class had a discussion during which several students clearly felt comfortable enough to disclose to classmates that their families had been impacted by residential schools. They also did two post-it posters writing short notes first in role as a residential school student, and then as themselves with a note to a residential school survivor.

While fewer students felt able to write in role, one student wrote: "I really don't like school. I don't feel like I belong in this place. It's like a nightmare. I'm trapped. I can't imagine being free from this place. There's a 50% chance that I will survive and all my hopes are upon me being one of the 50% of people. This only happens to us because of our skin colour."

More students were comfortable with the note to a survivor. "I am sorry about everything that happened in those schools. Devastated is what most must feel. What happened was not OK. I hope your life has turned for the better & you don't give up," wrote one student. "How were you so resilient?" asked another.

There were many, many similar reflections that indicated students had thought deeply about what they learned. The English teacher had never taught or included any information about Aboriginal history or residential school stories in her classes before, but says she now "definitely" feels comfortable enough to continue the work on her own.

The Social Studies 10 students had similar responses to the teaching/learning. The teacher involved has been very interested over the years in Aboriginal history but had not included any in-depth Aboriginal topics in his classes prior to this inquiry. He says that he is pleased that teaching about this period of Canada's Aboriginal history is finally making it into the classrooms at Barsby.

Our feast this past year was larger and more heavily attended by students than in the past. We hold the feast over lunch and feed the entire school. Our local Snuneymuxw First Nation provides the salmon. We had visiting dignitaries and Elders attend this year's feast and sit at a head table as well as mix with the students and teachers. We heard lots of positive and appreciative comments from students; those who knew we'd done this in the past had asked about it earlier in the year in anticipation.

We feel we have influenced teachers to take their own initiative in including Aboriginal material in their classrooms, and have offered continuing support for such initiatives. Both teachers profiled here say they will continue to include Aboriginal content in a deeper way than before.

There has been an added bonus to this past year's inquiry at Barsby: formal leaders have decided to broaden student exposure to Aboriginal history, culture, and by providing a course about Canada's Aboriginal peoples through hands-on arts experiences. It is working out very well.

Reflections/Advice: Our department will continue to offer support and resources to any teachers interested in using Aboriginal material in their classrooms. We intend to check in with our two key teachers and the teachers from our staff Inquiry to be proactive in this. We have learned to appreciate and build on the often surprising and hidden interest and encouragement we have at Barsby for Aboriginal topics and materials. We would encourage other schools to begin a proactive program and to start small with what they know they can do and to build on this each year.