



## 2013-2014 AESN Case Study

**School:** Randerson Ridge Elementary

**District:** SD68 Nanaimo-Ladysmith

**Area of focus:** Student Level

**Inquiry Team Members:** Mary-Lynn Epps, Carlo Pavan, Rachelle Tanner

**Background-Scanning, Focus, Hunch:** For several years at Randerson Ridge Elementary School, we have engaged as a school team in developing AESN inquiry questions and have evolved into the development of student led inquiries throughout this process. During this year's inquiry we chose to start the year with a broad inquiry question to guide students' learning and develop background or a foundational understanding for deeply engaging in their own inquiry questions. Therefore, September began with the following inquiry question:

What can we learn about the truth and reconciliation process and the broader context of social justice to support us transforming our thoughts, beliefs and actions as a global community of learners?

During this particular inquiry cycle the teachers formed a learning partnership to support one another throughout the inquiry cycle. The first teacher was very experienced engaging in student and teacher inquiry and the second had more experience with Aboriginal Understandings and brought depth and authenticity to the inquiry cycle. In addition, the second teacher was also beginning their postgraduate work and wanted to partner with the first to support their development of inquiry. It was a match that mutually benefitted both the educators as well as the students. As part of the learning partnership we worked with our student teacher from Vancouver Island University to help her experience the application of many of the concepts she had learned in theory at the university.

Our intention of developing our inquiry was to engage in trying to deeply examine the truth about our Aboriginal history in Canada. It was a timely focus since this was the first time the Reconciliation Commission had held a Truth and Reconciliation forum in Vancouver, BC. Using the initial grant funds from AESN we decided to immerse ourselves in the topic by planning our first field study to the forum in mid- September. This was an amazing kickoff to the inquiry and immediately engaged students in the inquiry question. Parents were also intrigued with this inquiry and we had numerous parents wanting to volunteer as chaperones for the trip.

**Process-Professional Learning, Taking Action, Checking:** Before attending the Truth and Reconciliation Forum we realized that we would need to prepare our students for managing the field study as well as handling the highly sensitive issues that might arise throughout this inquiry cycle. About a third of the class had some background of residential schools but had never understood the intergenerational effect of residential schools or the harsher truths about what happened. This became a real concern for us as teachers being that our students were only 11 and 12 years old and in grades 6/7. Furthermore, we realized some of our parents might have difficulty with the information. Therefore, we decided to think through how to uncover the more difficult facts about residential schools in a way that would prepare them for the personal stories they might hear at the forum or within the literature they read. Due to the abstract nature of the facts, we wanted to present the information in a way that would help students understand and empathize with the emotional impact of the facts on residential school survivors and their history. As a result we used a circle learning protocol platform for discussion and sharing of feelings.

During the circle learning protocol we placed our shoes in a circle and used the shoes as an analogy for residential school children. For example, each pair of shoes represented a child that went to residential school. All the shoes together represented 75,000 children taken to residential school over 150 years. When we took every second pair of shoes away from the circle we said it represented  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the children that did not return home from residential school. The exercise continued to delve into the statistical information we had learned and represented it in a way that the students could internalize the numbers and the emotions that surfaced during the exposure of the “truths.” This is how we tackled the sensitive issues through the comfort of our community of learners circle and the analogy of using a pair of shoes to state the truth.

Reflecting on the use of the circle protocol, our community of learners’ culture and the use of analogies to understand abstract concepts, we felt confident our students were prepared to attend the Truth and Reconciliation Forum. Throughout the field study, parents that accompanied us commented on how knowledgeable and respectful our students were during the forum. They also stated how unfamiliar they were with the information presented at the forum. As a result, this field study became a learner experience for both parents, teachers, and students.

After the field study our awareness of the injustices pertaining to our Aboriginal people was heightened. Our students became strong advocates in speaking the truth to their families as well as the community. They responded to an editorial article in our local newspaper that reflected racist remarks. Although their responses were not published we displayed them in our school hallway as a way to educate others about the truth. Throughout the time they were in the hallway many parents and school guests took the time to comment on how amazed they were with their responses and felt they had learned a great deal of information about the history of residential schools from their writing.

Reflecting on the spiral of inquiry our field study became our professional learning as well as student learning. They were woven together which strengthened our motto, we

are all learners, and we are all teachers. The responses became our way to check for understanding, as well as gave us information about next steps.

Once students had time to explore more information we gave them the opportunity to create their own inquiry questions. Here are some sample questions:

- What process of reconciliation has been provided for Ukrainians in Canada that were sent to internment camps during World War 1?
- Will interviewing Margaret Feniak help us further understand the truth and reconciliation process?
- Why would the outlawing of cultural dances be a social injustice?
- How can researching the institution of residential schools and reconciliation in other countries help us understand and learn what we could do in Canada?
- How do the social justice issues of Ireland compare to the issues of Aboriginal people in Canada?
- How can creating an electronic board game that depicts the Dukabor's history in Canada inform us and others about other social injustices in Canada's history?
- What can we learn from Aboriginal athletes to inspire us to achieve our goals?
- What can I learn to help us become stronger advocates for social justice from female athletes that overcame racism?
- How did Bhagath Singh support the social justice movement in India and what can we learn from him to strive for social justice in Canada?
- How can we eliminate racism in professional sports today?
- Will comparing Aboriginal social justice issues globally help us be more aware and informed of how to move forward?
- By researching Nelson Mandela how can we learn more about his impact on social justice within his country and around the world?
- What can we learn about black Canadians' history and their challenges regarding social justice to inform myself and others?
- What can we learn from Aboriginal role models to help us understand the truth and reconciliation process?
- what were the social injustices against the Australian Aboriginal people and how are they still suffering from intergenerational affects?
- What was Einstein's impact on social justice and how has his legacy been misunderstood by so many people?

Afterwards, students accumulated all their learning throughout the inquiry process to showcase at Vancouver Island University, Gathering Place. We invited community representatives, VIU faculty and students, Aspengrove School, and families to attend and ask the questions: what have you learned, why is this important, what supported your learning and where will your learning go next?

**Networking, Reflections and Advice:** Holding our learning showcase at VIU has helped to strengthen the ties between the university and schools. It has enabled us to form learning partnerships at multiple levels (involving classroom teachers, graduate

students, and undergrad students). Overtime, it will strengthen our capacity to develop an inquiry learning mindset at both the teacher and student level.

When students engage in deep inquiry cycles their learning continues to spiral long after the teacher's facilitation. In this case students became self-regulated, social justice advocates. In February the Nanaimo community held a community dialogue to support healthier communication between the media and the Aboriginal community. We recognized this as an opportunity to send the responses to the event organizers as a way to represent student voices. The organizers agreed to post our responses on their website for the dialogue. This opportunity led to our class connecting with one of the panellists for the dialogue, Wab Kinew.

In the traditional way, we welcomed Wab into our learning circle at Randerson Ridge. We acknowledged our traditional territory and presented him with a picture the students created of our school emblem (the raven), mounted in a collage. The picture was framed in traditional wood indicative of the westcoast, red cedar. Following the gift giving we asked Wab questions that would connect to our next inquiry on sustainability. He offered us much guidance about balancing our perspectives to recognize the impact on the environment, culture and the economy. Furthermore, he helped us understand the importance of a sense of place. This was truly a memorable experience for all of us.

### **What did we learn?**

- This kind of learning must be prefaced by engaging in activities that prepare students for the emotional impact of some of the topics discussed. These activities also form the basis:
  - Circle protocol, community of learners values
- Many Canadians are unaware of the history and legacy of residential schools and the other atrocities of colonialism in Canada. Therefore, this work is important in transforming our perspective of place and the gifts our Aboriginal people bring to the cultural foundation of Canada. They are the frame of the Canadian mosaic that keep us grounded in who we are, united as a community as we try to balance perspectives to carve our future while remembering our sense of place.
- Introducing students to inquiry with salient, controversial, and sensitive material increases the likelihood of them self-actualizing and taking on an advocacy role in the future.
- The presentation given at the NOII spring seminar 2014 gives a snapshot of this story as well as provides us with evidence of student learning.
- The OECD seven principles of learning were a focus in everything we planned throughout this inquiry cycle as well as the First Peoples Principles of Learning