



2013-2014 AESN Case Study

School: Boston Bar Elementary Secondary School (BBESS)

District: SD78 Fraser-Cascade

Area of focus: Transitions

Inquiry Team Members: Theresa Dantuma, Michele Dekok, Alison Webber

Contact Information: theresa_dantuma@hotmail.com

Question / focus area: If our Aboriginal learners are exposed to a wide variety of real life, hands-on experiences, will they be inspired to ask questions and pursue answers? Will they become engaged in and enthusiastic about their learning? Will they be better prepared to transition between grade levels?

Scanning: BBESS is a small, k-12 school with an enrolment of 55 students, 80% of whom are Aboriginal. Our staff, primarily non-Aboriginal, noted an overall lack of enthusiasm, inquisitiveness, and engagement in classroom learning. Students didn't seem to be aware of the possibilities that were open to them as they moved from primary to intermediate; intermediate to middle; middle to secondary; and secondary to post graduation levels. Our staff were committed to understanding why and adapting the curriculum to better meet the students needs.

Focus: If our curriculum reflects and honors the Nlaka'pamux culture of the students, and if the students are provided opportunities to engage in real life, hands-on experiences that interest them, will they be more inquisitive about the curriculum, more engaged in their learning, and better prepared to transition comfortably and successfully between grade levels? We know that all our students need to be exposed to purposeful educational experiences, to develop relationships with a variety of adults to broaden their perspective, and to be encouraged to develop a personal vision of the possibilities.

Hunch: In 2012/2013 we recognized that there was a need for a change in curriculum delivery to engage all students and inspire them to follow their interests and passions. As a predominantly non-aboriginal staff, we recognized that we needed to learn more about the Nlaka'pamux people and culture, and to identify how to best incorporate culture into the curriculum and teaching. We did so by merging the *Seven Principles of Learning* and the *First Peoples Principles of Learning*, blending PLOs in core curriculum (English and social studies, science and math), and inviting First Nations support people from SD78's Aboriginal resource List, as well as local Elders from Boston Bar First Nation and Boothroyd Indian Band to assist in delivering curriculum (fine arts and applied skills).

New professional learning: In response to our concerns and resulting inquiry, a group of people gathered to form a BBESS Culture of Courage Committee. The Committee was made up of representatives of BBESS staff, SD78 staff, PAC, SPC, local First Nations communities, Fraser Region Health Authority, MCFD, & Hope & Area Transition Society. The Committee supported and encouraged our team and our vision of promoting respect for and recognition of our students' gifts, of the importance of cultural support, and of the benefit of creating community for students. Together, we pursued the resources about reclaiming youth, and introduced a model of positive youth development (the Circle of Courage) based on the universal principle that to be emotionally healthy all youth need a sense of belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. It became evident that each of these four elements are essential in raising confident, caring children and youth and in establishing environments in which all young people can grow and flourish.

Taking action:

- Our student population was divided into four educational groups – primary, intermediate, middle and secondary
- Our school year was divided into five terms with school-wide themes – belonging, generosity, independence, mastery and courage
- Our days were divided into morning 'Core classes' (integrating English/social studies & science/math) and afternoon 'Explore classes' (offering multiple electives from k-12 in the areas of fine arts, applied skills, technology, physical fitness, and outdoor education)
- Our physical environment was re-organized into two 'Wings', one with a homeroom for primary, intermediate, middle and secondary groups, and a second one with a focus on exploring electives
- Our terms allowed for a variety of assessments so that students could demonstrate their understanding of learning
- Our final three terms brought Elders and community members into the school to engage students in learning, discussions, and story telling about the culture and traditions of the Nlaka'pamux Nation

Curriculum and pedagogy were organized utilizing the four elements of the *Circle of Courage* complemented by Nlaka'pamux knowledge and values. Students were taught that they are all related to one another, responsible for one another and connected to all of the adults in the school, not just their assigned teachers. The team worked together with students and community to create and develop our school theme: *Creating a Culture of Courage and Respect*.

Checking: The initiatives implemented during the 2013/2014 school year were transformative for BBESS. What began as a focus on student engagement to learn, and promoting a desire to learn evolved into something much bigger...an initiative that positively enhanced the school climate by supporting both staff and students in pursuing culturally and socially/emotionally relevant learning and approaches to teaching. The community became involved, as did parents. Everyone was invited to engage in

discussions to guide staff on this journey. The resulting input helped staff to reflect on and re-evaluate practices.

Reflections/Advice: Change is hard work; it's scary and it is also exciting. However, well-organized and researched change is a good investment. And, like any good investment, both patience and persistence are essential. BBESS embarked on a transformative journey in September 2013 that required patience, persistence and trust in bringing a vision to reality. Nurturing relationships along with open and honest conversations within the school community were and will continue to be essential to the success of the 'Culture of Courage and Respect' in the school community of BBESS.