



## 2013-2014 AESN Case Study

**School:** Springwood Middle School    **District:** SD69 Qualicum

**Area of focus:** Transitions

**Inquiry Team Members:** All homeroom teachers with Brad Davidsen, Tandy Gunn, Anne Jenkins, Colleen Manson

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**Question/focus area:** How can we create an integrated, welcoming and all-inclusive community for our learners that values First Nations teachings within our diverse population? Creating a plan for grade-to-grade transitions to capture vital information about learners to ensure a smooth journey through middle school is a focus.

**Scanning:** As we referenced the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FPPL) with posters in classes and linked them to lessons throughout the early fall, we noticed that students had a general curiosity for events relating to the Truth and Reconciliation (TRC) process and hearings, in which many local participants were involved. They wanted to understand what was happening and why “learning is embedded in memory, history, and story” (FPPL) because they could see that adults were being asked to “recognize the consequences of actions,” (FPPL) without the background to understand the impact over time. While initially we’d expected students to have a different focus based more on their age/grade levels and specific grade-to-grade readiness for transition, in fact, this was not the reality.

**Focus:** While learning about the TRC we heard many questions about the residential school system for First Nations along with more general queries that fell into three categories: heritage, culture & traditions, and land connections. We chose to present a series of presentations about the residential schools. Based on students’ reactions and reflections, we invited the voices of survivors to come to the school, because “learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors” (FPPL).

**Hunch:** Opening all activities to an all-inclusive group of students is the first and most important step that we took. This brought a new level of friendship, inspiration, attachment and awe to students that would historically be separated for cultural activities. We referenced the *First Peoples Principles of Learning* in every classroom, along with the *BC Map of First Peoples*, to ensure that common language was presented to every student and adult. In surveying the students to determine their ‘next’ most important need (January and June), they overwhelmingly indicated that where they had once placed themselves in the *emerging* strand of understanding about the

three aspects (heritage, culture & traditions, and land connections), by June there was a significant shift not only to an *acquiring* level of understanding but into the *deep* level as well. Continued focus on the three aspects with experiences that are connected, holistic and reflective of connections to the land is an area for recommended change.

**New professional learning:** In-class presentations about the residential school impact were instrumental in providing reflective professional learning with students. This, in conjunction with a school book that focuses attention on the requirement for inclusion and an “exploration of one’s identity” (FPPL) in relation to the book was deeply effective. Making time in a school year to plan for authentic voices to help us learn is essential and is shifting the school culture. We learned that preparing children well by answering their questions about important social and cultural experiences is a profoundly effective way to prepare them for transitions, building confidence and sustaining curiosity.

**Taking action:** All classrooms were provided with a poster of the *First Peoples Principles of Learning* and a *BC Map of First Peoples* for reference during lessons and follow-up to special experiences. The seven learning principles from *The Nature of Learning* was provided to staff, discussed at a staff meeting and copied for discussion and follow-up. The team could hear the effects of the actions taken because both students and staff spoke frequently and positively about the impact.

**Checking:** In establishing a baseline for this year’s work it was clear that the simple progression used with the students was effective and left room for personalization. It was titled “My Understanding of First Nations Heritage, Traditions and Culture”. Although there had been an expectation of grade-based or age-based trends, this was not evident. Students were asked to place themselves on the progression using a simple three-part chart: *emerging awareness, acquiring awareness, and deep awareness*. This format allowed simple collection of information and was easy to access for the learners. Students’ self-selection of awareness was the key determinant in showing growth.

**Reflections/Advice:** The current middle school is being re-structured to become an elementary school so the continuum that had initially been planned will not continue as staff and students will be spread to other sites. Collecting students’ perceptions of their awareness at an earlier month in the year would allow more time for planning lessons and presentations; it would also allow for opportunities to stretch the learners into deeper understanding, possibly across more than one band. Our advice for others is to ask students about their learning needs in understanding Aboriginal knowledge and culture. They are clear about their desires to learn and can focus the planning so that is “structured and well-designed” (*The Nature of Learning*, OECD 2010).