



2014-2015 AESN Case Study

School: Nanaimo District Secondary School (NDSS)

District: #68 Nanaimo Ladysmith

Area of Focus: Enhancement Agreement

Inquiry Team Members: Carey Avender, Linda Cassidy, Brett Hancock, Patti Mountain, Crystal Petersen, Sean Walsh

Our focus for this year: The specific purpose of this study is to analyze the relationship between Aboriginal student engagement in schools and positive student-teacher relationships. Further, this study highlights the connection between levels of engagement in Aboriginal learners and the teachings of the Circle of Courage model. A great deal of this research was done through the graduate research of Brett Hancock on “Engaging Aboriginal Students through the Circle of Courage.” A complete copy of the thesis can be found on the Vancouver Island University website.

Scanning: Across the province of British Columbia, the issue of engaging Aboriginal learners is a serious concern. This is not a new issue, but continues to be an area of alarm for educators, Aboriginal communities, and the Ministry of Education. Residential schools, stereotypes, racism, oppression and poverty lead to a loss of engagement in education, poor academic results and a higher mortality rate for many Aboriginals (Toulouse, 2013). With so many Aboriginal students non-engaged, it appears that Canadian educators have not been able to fulfill the educational promises of treaties that were negotiated between the Queen’s representatives and First Nations groups (Anuik, Battiste, & George, 2010). Over the past 5 years there has been a 21% increase in Aboriginal graduation rates in Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools. We wanted to have a look at what was working and what might have caused this. We wanted to get ideas directly from the learners about what they need from us.

Focus: After speaking to a number of recent Aboriginal graduates, we decided to focus on the question: How can positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the teachings of the Circle of Courage, help engage our struggling Aboriginal learners?

Hunch: We believe that findings would show that positive student-teacher relationships, focused on the teachings within the Circle of Courage model, might help to engage struggling Aboriginal learners. Using the data from Brett’s research and the information gathered by the other team members, we wanted to share success stories to continue to improve our graduations rates, engagement and curiosity of all of our learners.

New professional learning: Look for evidence of trends between Aboriginal student engagement and positive student-teacher relationships. The study analyzed students who were a product of teachings from the Circle of Courage model, which was adapted from the philosophies behind the tribal Medicine Wheel. The study also investigated teacher's struggles and successes in engaging struggling Aboriginal students. Sharing the research from "Engaging Aboriginal Students through the Circle of Courage" helped show staff a wealth of both qualitative and quantitative data from graduates and NLPS teaching staff.

Taking action: The research (student and staff surveys) evaluated the need to focus on the teachings of the Circle of Courage teaching practices in order to help engage struggling Aboriginal learners. The research findings demonstrated that positive student-teacher relationships were the most important part of engaging Aboriginal students. "[Students] need to be surrounded in their homes and schools with adults who believe that they can learn" (Halbert & Kaser, 2013, p. 38). Former student and teacher responses suggest that struggling Aboriginal students require an atmosphere that will allow them to have success and build their self-esteem and confidence.

Checking: The data gathered through this study showed that both students and teachers believe that positive student-teacher relationships are important for engaging Aboriginal students, but further support to teaching staff is required to improve the engagement of struggling Aboriginal learners. Teachers expressed a strong need for more information for how to engage Aboriginal students in their classroom and school building. Strategies such as the Circle of Courage model emphasize approaches that have been refined for over 15, 000 years of culture, and have been preserved through oral traditions (Brokenleg, 2002). This study illustrates that programs, such as ABOUT (an alternate program in NLPS), that provides instruction that has relevant and meaningful learning with a strong emphasis on culture, not only helps students feel a strong sense of self, but allows for engagement that leads to successful academic results.

Reflections/Advice: This research has allowed us to gather evidence that we hope will help effectively lead a change in learning and engagement for both students and teachers. It has also left us with many questions about what we would like to study next. These questions were quickly answered for us when we were contacted by Dr. Hare and Dr. Archibald of the University of British Columbia to invite us to contribute a chapter for their upcoming book. This contribution will allow for further research on the topic of engaging our Aboriginal learners. This book will be titled "Celebrating K-12 Aboriginal Education in British Columbia: Curriculum, Pedagogy and Policy Successes." It is being published in collaboration with the BC Principals and Vice Principals Association (BCPVPA) and UBC Faculty of Education's Indigenous Education Institute of Canada, Associate Dean of Indigenous Education, and the Professorship of Indigenous Education in Teacher Education. We will move our ideas based on evidence into school change action.