

2014-2015 AESN Case Study



School: Courtenay Elementary & SD #71 **District:** #71 Comox Valley

Area of Focus: Transitions

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Our focus for this year: Transitions: exploring courage with a 12th grade student though him being a mentor to a grade 5/6 class.

The quote from Dr Brokenleg that inspired this inquiry:

“My Challenge is my Strength: Unleashing Courage in Myself and in Others.”

"Even young people who have experienced serious personal difficulties can be used in positive leadership roles"

Scanning: This was the third year of an ongoing inquiry by the teacher, Heidi Jungwirth (myself). I was supported by Toresa Crawford.

This inquiry began with my 2012/13 master’s project, “small acts of courage” and joined up with AESN in 2013/14. What I noticed in my learners was the consistent (I might even use the word entrenched) attitude of (apparent) apathy and learned helplessness. This attitude is consistently perpetuated and supported by the education establishment.

When I took the time to dig deeper, I found that while learned helplessness is indeed rampant in my students, their apathy is not genuine. They do, in fact, care deeply about how they do in school. Their apathy is a coping mechanism and a way of hiding their hurt at their consistent lack of success. These observations have been a driving force in my desire to inquire about courage.

The First Nations Principles of Learning have been a guiding force both in my scanning process and in my inquiry.

1. Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits and the ancestors. Living in a state of apathy and helplessness is the opposite of all of these things.

2. Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness on reciprocal relationships and a sense of place). Developing the skill and aptitude for reflection is a natural antidote to apathy and helplessness.

3. Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions. Reflection, a major component of courage, necessitates acceptance of responsibility for one's actions.

4. Learning recognizes the role of Indigenous knowledge. Many of the students in my class, and also our grade 12 student, have Indigenous ancestry. Together, we learned about their ancestry and about Indigenous knowledge.

5. Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story. Especially the element of story was important in this inquiry.

6. Learning involves patience and time. This one might seem self evident. I am always surprised at how impatient both students and teachers are, to see learning take place. This is even more evident when we have to unlearn past negative habits and replace them with positive new habits.

7. Learning requires exploration of one's identity. With every exploration, identities were being reshaped.

8. Learning involves recognizing that some knowledge is sacred and only shared with permission and/ or in certain situations. This is especially relevant in a Facebook and Instagram saturated society!

Focus: I believe strongly that each student has a valuable contribution to make to their world. Most often, the thing holding the student back from making this contribution is their own self-imposed limitations. Learning about courage allows students to view challenges from a different perspective, and rewrite the negative stories that they have heard from themselves and others.

Hunch: This is difficult to put into a few words! Let me try and explain it:

1. When a student's mindset has them look at their challenges as insurmountable, they quickly lose the motivation to attack these challenges. When the "poor you, you have a challenge" mindset is perpetuated by the adults in this child's life, the child adopts the mindset, "poor me, I'm such a victim".
2. When a child looks at a challenge from both points of view, s/he sees that a challenge is indeed something that has to be worked at, but that this challenge is also a strength of the child. Plus, the skills learned when working at the challenge are a valuable skill set that child would not have otherwise acquired. In this way, the challenge is something to be welcomed, rather than something to be avoided.

3. Let me try and put this into practical terms with a concrete example: student X blurts out answers and interrupts others with his thoughts. In the old mindset (poor you) much attention is put on “fixing” this behaviour. The child learns that they have something wrong with them, and they become ashamed of this “flaw”

With the new mindset, the young person still sees that there is a challenge. The big difference is, however, that the young person also sees that this behaviour is a strength. In the case of the young person who blurts out, he learns to recognize that his impulsiveness is both a challenge and a strength. As we discussed in class, student X is the one you want with you when there is a quick decision to be made. He is a quick thinker and expresses himself well. These are indeed strengths. We still work on having the child not interrupt, and control the “blurring out” but this is done without shame because the child realizes that this challenge is also a strength.

My Challenge is my Strength can be applied to any situation, no matter how complex or how personal. The challenge may be external (new material that needs to be learned) or internal (my family is unfortunately struggling). Of course personal challenges need to be dealt with in an environment of trust and understanding.

It continues to be my experience that when students learn to think and act in this manner, they overcome learned helplessness and apathy. It has been tremendously rewarding to watch my students blossom, including the grade 12 student who joined our class twice a week.

New professional learning: This year, I was drawn to the teachings of Jean Vanier, in particular his writings on community. I had read Vanier to some extent before, but as my inquiry work gets deeper and deeper, I find myself wanting to incorporate community as the main focus of my teaching. Next year, I have a new position as a Vice Principal (and still teaching .5 in a classroom). I am hoping and planning to incorporate the ideas of Jean Vanier at a classroom level, and hopefully also at a school wide level.

My other new professional learning was a more in-depth understanding of the work of Dr. Martin Brokenleg. His book, *Reclaiming Youth*, was a major focus of my work this year. Dr Brokenleg has developed the “Circle of Courage” which complimented “My Challenge is my Strength”.

Taking action:

1. In our class, we held a weekly class meeting. Our grade 12 student attended about 90% of the class meetings. The underlying theme was always, “My Challenge is my Strength” but the topical discussion items were always related directly to what was going on in the classroom. The topics ranged from an in-depth analysis of some serious bullying that was going on against one student, to current events, to topics that the students requested.
2. As the year went on, the grade 12 student’s role in the class meetings evolved. In the beginning, he would offer funny comments, or his comments would be less than what you would hope from a mentor. As the year went on, he took on more and more of a mentor-

type role. He took the opportunity of the class meeting discussions to share his life experiences, including things that he regretted doing. His contributions became very powerful.

3. After the class meeting, all students would write a reflective piece. The goal of this writing would be for each student to make a connection between what was discussed in the class meeting, and their own lives. Oftentimes these connections were deeply personal. The writings were always confidential unless permission to share was given by the student.
4. Our grade 12 student joined us for one other time each week. This was an afternoon where the students were doing self-directed work. (I had a bunch of craft kits and the kids were practicing reading directions and following the directions. They were also learning resilience as this was quite a difficult task for many of them) The purpose of having the grade 12 student join us at this time was for him to have an informal time to practice the skills learned in class meetings.

Checking: What a difference this has made in the lives of all the children in my class! I will share some of the dramatic things that happened, as well as some of the writings that the children gave me permission to share.

Was it enough? Of course not! If learning involves patience and time, I would say that learning that “My Challenge is my Strength” is a lifelong study. What I hope is that the seeds I have planted will bear fruit over the child’s lifetime, whenever a child encounters a new challenge.

The evidence I will share with you is the students’ own writing, as well as a video that was taken of our grade 12 student giving advice to a theatre full of students at a special event (about 300 people were in the theatre).

This student, who two years ago could hardly be bothered to do anything at school and was considered one of the most vulnerable students in the entire school district, was the attendee’s favourite at the special event. Touchingly, he received many cards and letters telling him so.

I continue to encounter opposition to the idea that all children are capable of heartfelt reflection. I have yet to meet this child. Here are a few testimonials from two of these children:

Boy, age 11: (this boy’s living conditions have been described as “feral” by psychologists. He transferred to our school over the summer. At the beginning of the year, he would bolt from the classroom at will, and the words directed at me in these moments are not the ones that would be repeated in polite company!)

courage change my anger to being nice to people courage made me good at math and gym and thing I was not good at before in my past life courage help me in a lot of activities I'm a happier person when I was in my other school I was a bully

Girl, age 11: (this year, this girl persevered with the authorities and the result was that she and her siblings were taken out of a neglectful home situation and are now in permanent foster care. Her social workers and the principal of the school agreed that it was her initiative and persistence that made it possible for this to take place.)

Courage has helped me a lot in life I used to try to fit in act like everybody else trying and trying to fit in but then it didn't work and everyone said you're a bully and just got so mad all the time and I would take it out on other people and I got called a bully and they were right and I would have so many reflections and it would take me 2 days to do them

then we started courage and help me a lot it felt like I was different person it made me feel so good cause I used to be a little brat and did not listen at all to the teacher I was rude all the time then I started to change my behavior and it got better and better and its cause courage helped me

I think to myself and say inside my head I am going to do the right thing or not do the right thing and I just think about is it going to help me and it does.

sometimes I do the wrong thing and inside I say what are you doing but then I say it was your choice and I feel bad but you can always fix it

Reflections/Advice: After inquiring about courage for three years, I feel like I am ready to formally write something down. I'm not yet sure what format this will take, but I am leaning towards a book. How does one go about writing a book? I have no idea! I imagine that this will be a multi-year project, but I am excited about this prospect, I do hope that I am up to it.

As for advice for others with the same interest, I would suggest that they first of all cast aside the norms of our mainstream culture. In its present state, our culture encourages and rewards indulgence and passivity.

I believe that what people are most seeking is acceptance. I am convinced that the path to a truly happy, productive and engaged life is challenge combined with encouragement and authentic praise. Most of all, of course, what people need is love.

I will finish with two quotes that summarize everything I am doing:

When we love and respect people,
revealing to them their value,
they can begin to come out from behind
the walls that protect them. Jean Vanier

Man does not simply exist
but always decides what his existence will be,
what he will become in the next moment Viktor Frankl