



2015-2016 AESN Case Study

School: Gabriola Elementary

District: #68 Nanaimo Ladysmith

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Your focus for this year: We worked together in our Professional Learning Community (PLC) and with our students to enhance awareness and develop a greater understanding of Aboriginal culture and worldview.

Scanning: Our scanning process was based on individual reflection and team discussion. Our initial meeting and inquiry planning was guided by our District Aboriginal Coordinator. There was shared agreement of concern for an inadequate depth of understanding about Aboriginal culture and worldview. We were curious to know how best to support our students and ourselves as educators to develop authentic awareness of Aboriginal peoples and history. Two intermediate students in each division were interviewed using the four key questions. These interviews highlighted our students' focus on improving themselves as learners, particularly as readers and writers. They also emphasized strong connections with classroom teachers and families. There is a strong community element to our school which encouraged us to be focused on local history and local culture. The most motivating question was: Where are you going with your learning? It was interesting that most students had difficulty connecting to big ideas or curricular content. They responded directionally, broadly about subjects and were vague when asked why it was important. This revealed the importance of setting and discussing clear learning intentions. We determined that it would be beneficial to more widely acknowledge, celebrate and connect some of our school wide themes and the purpose for our learning. This further encouraged us to explicitly focus on the First Peoples Principles of Learning in our planning and our approach to the delivery of curriculum.

Focus: School staff initiated a school-wide commitment to responsibility for Aboriginal Education at Gabriola at the end of the 2014-2015 school year. In the fall of 2015, we focused our first PLC meeting on Aboriginal education and were supported by District 68 Aboriginal Education Support Staff and loaned district resources to facilitate our inquiry. Subsequently, we met as an inquiry committee to investigate how best to develop our understanding and ability to meet the needs of Aboriginal learners as well as to develop knowledge and appreciation of Aboriginal understandings in all students. We took a deeper look at the First Peoples Principles of learning and our discussions determined that a focus on the following Principle would best serve our community's learning needs. "Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits and the ancestors". All of the aspects of this Principle address the issues, strengths, challenges, and understandings we identified in our scanning of learners, both staff and students.

We hoped that exploring learning as a support for the well-being of all would help us to connect our dedication to developing Aboriginal understandings to the other key school-wide areas of

focus which included addressing the needs of our vulnerable learners, environmental and outdoor education, and inquiry through Learning in Depth. It was important to us that our inquiries give our learners a sense of the deeper meaning behind learning for oneself and for others. Ultimately, it was our goal for both teachers and students to gain insight about themselves as learners.

Hunch: We have experienced a number of years in which support for Aboriginal education was impacted by our isolation on Gabriola and the difficulty this commute imposed on programs. In addition, we recognized that there is a relative lack of school wide resources and access to authentic experiences and guests. Interest in being authentic and respectful may also have contributed to hesitation to explore Aboriginal worldview for fear of misrepresentation or perceived disrespect. Thus far, staff has had limited opportunity to engage in capacity building activities around Aboriginal understandings. We saw a need to build staff and community understanding especially with our local history. This year introduced significant change to our small staff and all three of the incoming teachers brought with them substantial knowledge and experience with Aboriginal education. As a school community, we benefited from the introduction of new perspectives which helped to enrich and expand on existing practices.

New professional learning: We individually explored how and where we saw ourselves able to indigenize the curriculum. This looked like highlighting BIG IDEAS from the new curriculum such as “The Aboriginal Concept of Interconnectedness” in science. Together we sought and shared ways to infuse the exploration of Aboriginal culture and worldview into our yearly overviews and daily planning. We submitted requests for District Aboriginal Resources to support our learning intentions, and were provided a wide selection of units and books to utilize. Many teachers, and our teacher-librarian frequently used picture books as a window into a world different from our daily lives. Additional resources that were particularly helpful included *From Time Immemorial: The First People of the Pacific Northwest Coast* by Diane Silvey, *First Nations Journeys of Justice: Building Bridges of Understanding Between Nations*, Indigenous Fun Facts, The Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada website, and Strong Nations leveled readers for early primary.

Taking action: Our first strategy was to share with one another in the context of our PLC, how we identified ourselves on an Aboriginal Understandings Learning Progression that was created by our District. This enabled us to see one another’s strengths and desire for growth which facilitated future connections, both formally and informally to co-plan and exchange ideas. We also met with Buddy Class teacher partners to brainstorm ways for our classes to work together to support our inquiry. We also gathered input on the following questions by circulating in an Around the World group process to contribute to the following goals:

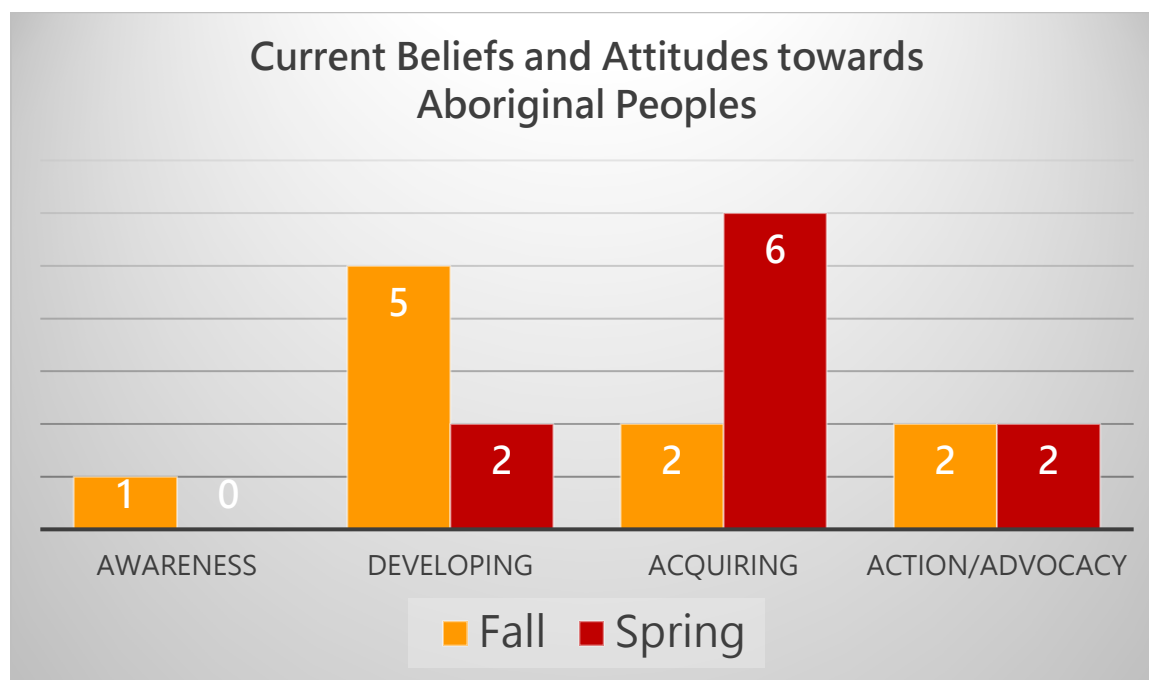
- Identify the resources and expertise that we have access to here at GES.
- Identify the materials and experiences that we would like to acquire.
- Identify other creative ideas that we would like to explore together.

This process led to informal leadership and sharing of resources. Upon reflection, it would have been enriched with more time to follow-up as a team and perhaps formalizing responsibility for pursuing materials and experiential opportunities. Many teachers worked independently to gather and connect. In addition, school-wide activities such as Aboriginal focused dance lessons, nature-based cultural learning sessions, and author readings were organized for all students to participate. At the beginning of May, we met again to review our progress and share ideas and experiences. This process helped us to build capacity before the year was over, to add to our existing plans for the final term and determine next steps for the coming school year. In particular, we agreed to formalize a leadership role with regard to future planning for

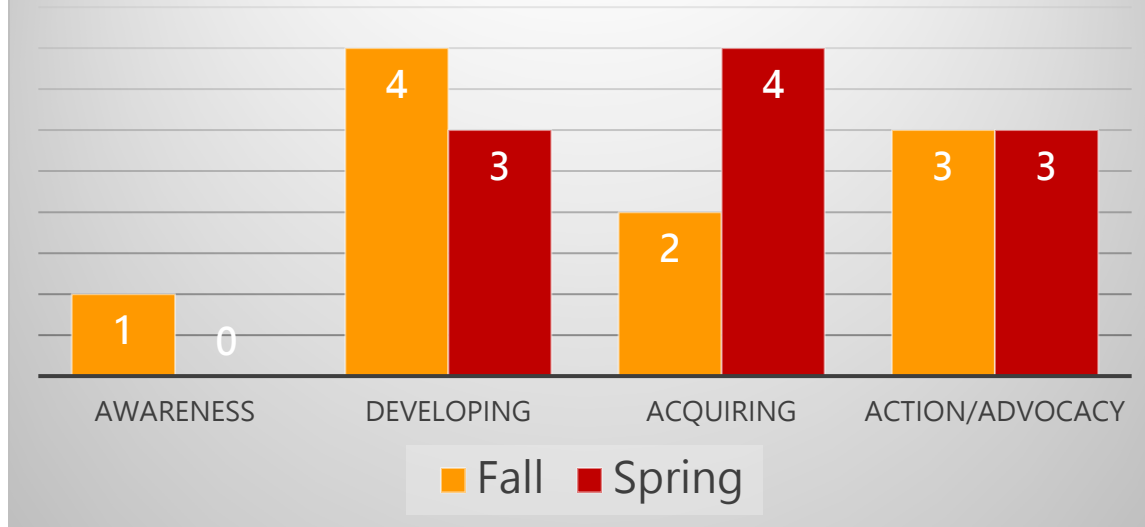
our school-based Aboriginal education. We are also committed to building relationships in the pursuit of meaningful connections with authentic voices from our local Aboriginal community.

We had also intended on working together to create a student friendly Aboriginal Understandings Learning Progression. This tool was to be used to assess student learning over the school year. However, an urgent shift of our focus to vulnerable students occurred during our Professional Learning Community time and this project was postponed.

Checking: As educators, we used the Aboriginal Understandings Learning Progression to determine a baseline and assess evidence of change over the year. The following charts summarize the shift that we experienced. In our discussions, there was a lot of agreement about how in between categories we often felt. In particular, the transition from DEVELOPING which implies a willingness to address one's own understandings and beliefs to ACQUIRING which implies a demonstration of knowledge and respect caught people in the middle. By the second review many teachers who found themselves torn between categories felt they had progressed from one to the next over the course of the year. Though there is evidence of strength and growth among our educators, we continue to see the need to foster this growth collaboratively in the coming year and to deepen our understandings for ourselves and our students.



Knowledge of Aboriginal Peoples and History on Local, Regional and National Levels



As previously mentioned, we did not obtain a comparable measure of student progress along the Aboriginal Understandings Learning Progression. Instead, student work samples, interview conversations and engagement in learning provided us with evidence of the impact of our inquiry focus on Aboriginal culture and worldview. Enthusiasm, dedication to learning tasks, bravery speaking before an audience, and respectfully sharing connections in open discussions demonstrated the importance of our focus on infusing Aboriginal education across the curriculum. Some of the most encouraging evidence was observed with our most vulnerable learners. These observations have encouraged us to move forward with our learning. Through our focus on the first of the First Peoples Principle of Learning, we have seen many of our students become much clearer about how and why learning is connected to the well-being of all. When questioned, students have been able to express both greater understanding of these concepts and an enhanced ability to articulate where they are going with their learning.

Further investigation of our progress was undertaken specifically with the Grade 5 and 6 students in two intermediate divisions. For our Fall Write sample, students were given the topic Humans and Nature. Their samples were assessed using the BC performance standards for Writing to Communicate Ideas and Information. In the Spring Write sample, students were given the topic Aboriginal Culture and Nature. These samples of student writing were used to evaluate learner progress with meaning, style, form and conventions in the traditional sense. In addition, the choice of our second topic also allowed us to clearly observe the degree to which the students in these classes could reference the Aboriginal teachings we embedded throughout the year. Comparison with their initial thoughts on humans as an undefined category gave insight into the challenges that students experienced differentiating between cultures, traditions, practices, habits and standards of societies. We could observe the emergence of a growing understanding of a clearly defined cultural reference to Aboriginal ways of being. The Fall Writes produced generalizations, in which the discussion of humans focused on the practices of the modern industrialized world. The Spring Writes generated far more specific examples drawn from references that had been learned over the school year. While they could share their understandings about traditional Aboriginal culture, many students struggled to be explicit about how those cultural traditions were connected to nature. There was a tendency to repeat facts and retell stories rather than make inferences or share interpretation based on new understanding. These samples of writing urged us further in our

work to help students develop greater knowledge and deepened confidence in their ability to explore, connect and represent Aboriginal worldviews and cultural perspectives.

Reflections/Advice: Through engagement in this focused inquiry we have learned about one another as teacher learners in a way that is often not readily apparent or shared. We have been vulnerable in sharing our journey along the river of understanding. When we discussed our development we talked about Moving Toward the Water, Boarding the Canoe, Raising a Paddle and Journeying into Deeper Waters. Being an educator is a perpetual learning progression, and sharing that growth with one another about a subject that is both sensitive and critical to the development of our learners has been very impactful. It has helped to strengthen the relationships between staff members in our learning community.

The focus of our next steps is to deepen connections with local Aboriginal contacts and seek more opportunities to bring authentic voices to our school. We hope to continue to assume formal responsibility for Aboriginal Education at Gabriola Elementary. While we intend on sharing this responsibility collaboratively, we also see the need to recognize and support leadership roles within our professional learning team. It continues to be our intention to develop or discover a scoring guide to assess Aboriginal Understandings which is accessible to all students. This focus is one which will warrant our attention always. One organizing structure that was particularly helpful for making connections across inquiries was the use of the First Peoples Principles of Learning. It helped to identify where we could focus our attention, individually and as a team. To support all teachers to independently develop their own collection of resources, money has been budgeted from our inquiry to provide gift cards for teachers to use at Strong Nations – a fantastic local resource for authentic indigenous resources (<http://www.strongnations.com/>).