



2015-2016 AESN Case Study

School: Hidden Valley Elementary, Whitehorse, Yukon

District: Yukon

Inquiry Team Members:

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Your focus for this year: Will taking small steps (making small changes) lead to transformation to an authentic and embedded, culturally-inclusive school environment?

Scanning: In order to ascertain how our school was already incorporating Indigenous perspectives into the learning environment:

- we distributed a survey to school staff
- we divided the general school environment into four categories, for greater clarity: activities/décor/environment/resources
- we created a simple chart (our 'categorizing scan') for further reference during our inquiry

We repeated the 'scan' midway through the school year (based on our observations and staff input) after several changes had been implemented, and produced an updated chart.

Early in the school year, we considered 'what was going on for our learners' by contemplating our general school population, including the fact that approximately 25% of our students are of Indigenous heritage, and that the academic performance of many of those students is 'below grade level.' We wanted to learn more about the degree to which these students experience connection with the context and content of their learning. Later in the year, we used the 'four key questions' directly by interviewing individual students. Not only did this illuminate the students' perspectives for us, it reminded us how easy it is to make erroneous assumptions about student engagement and understanding.

Focus: "Building horizontal connections" was one of our main guiding principles. We felt that by linking 'new initiatives' with existing curriculum and instructional programming throughout the school, along with nurturing community partnerships, we could affect authentic and meaningful change.

Hunch: A few key elements came to the fore at the beginning of the 2015-16 school year:

- unlike previous years, our school did not have a "First Nations Language" Teacher
- thanks to our participation in Yukon Education's *Learning Networks*, utilizing the 'spiral of inquiry,' we had the opportunity to directly contemplate the 'incorporation of Indigenous perspectives' into our school's learning environments
- we sensed a 'loss of momentum' in regard to continuing previously-implemented teaching and learning activities based on Indigenous teachings, along with a need for someone to take a direct role in ensuring that our school move forward in recognition of both "B.C.'s New Curriculum" and the "Calls to Action" for Education in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

New professional learning:

Outside the school:

Our ongoing participation in Yukon Education's *Learning Network* provided the structure for sharing ideas, resources and feedback with other educators in the Territory. In particular, we learned of the 'Old Crow Experiential Education Project' resources (available online through First Nations Programs and Partnerships – Curriculum, at www.yesnet.yk.ca)

Inside the school:

- each week, we dedicated one 30-minute 'prep' period to engage in collaboration, reflection and planning
- once a month, we held a staff book study, using a resource introduced to us by Yukon Education: 'Our stories about teaching and learning: culturally responsive teaching in Yukon First Nations settings' (Trondek Hwechin, 2014)
- learning more about the new B.C. Curriculum, especially pertaining to "Aboriginal Education"
- providing updates at regular staff meetings, inviting questions and feedback

Taking action:

After our initial scan (October 2015):

- direct involvement from personnel from "First Nations Programs and Partnerships Unit" of Yukon Education, including visits to classrooms and experiential learning opportunities
- reaching out to local First Nations
- sitting in a circle during school assemblies
- acknowledging traditional territory
- 'O Canada' in Southern Tutchone language
- weekly Indigenous music listening
- inviting Elder to provide opening for Christmas concert in Southern Tutchone

After the arrival of First Nations Language Teacher

- weekly drumming and dancing club
- staff learning Southern Tutchone – basic conversational expressions, for use in everyday communication with others (e.g., greeting students, at end of day, on bus duty)
- visual displays around school, incorporating language
- commencing "Elder in the School" program
- collaborative team meetings, involving as many partners as possible
- making presentations to School Council and Yukon Education representatives

Checking:

Tools we used:

- student survey
- student interviews
- staff questionnaire
- "First Nations Understanding Learning Progression" (Laura Tait, 2011)
- tracking student participation in lunch hour club
- providing opportunity for questions/feedback at various meetings

Collectively, we received much positive feedback and recognition of meaningful change. As our 'circle widened' and new community partnerships started, we gained a sense of the immense potential for expanding the learning environments of our school. We learned that becoming a more culturally-inclusive school involves *active, place-based learning*, providing our students with more opportunities to link curriculum with local knowledge, traditions, language and people. We have observed students taking on leadership roles when they see their own knowledge 'validated' through this linking.

Reflections/Advice: One of our most striking realizations, during the second half of the year, was how **vibrant** our 'inquiry spiral' had become; engaging in the process flowed from one phase to the next, driven by a sense of student-focused purpose. By the end of the school year, with the embedded 'small steps' in place, we envisioned the subsequent development of an experiential learning resource (based on the 'Old Crow' model previously mentioned), linked to K-7 curriculum, whereby students learn from and through the local land and its knowledge keepers. Our next scan, therefore, will likely lead to a revised focus, as we strive to listen closely and respectfully to the various 'voices' of our collaborative work.