



## 2015-2016 AESN Case Study

**School:** École North Oyster School

**District:** #68 Nanaimo-Ladysmith

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**Our focus for this year:** Our focus was strengthening our sense of community at École North Oyster through Eco-education and Aboriginal Understandings.

**Scanning:** At the start of the school year, teaching staff engaged in a study of “Spirals of Inquiry”, and these formed the basis of our initial scanning. In addition, we developed a scale to better determine how students were feeling about school at the start of the year, and again in the spring to gauge the effectiveness of the school interventions. Part of this questionnaire included how students perceived their knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture, particularly Aboriginal perspectives about the environment

We included the four questions in our questionnaire. We had discussed having every teacher poll three random students as well using the four key questions but we didn’t end up acting on that. We designed a student interview form using the four questions and relating it to our nature education, and Aboriginal understandings. The school Inquiry and Innovation teacher then spent a full day interviewing eight students for the grade 2-7 classes to get more in-depth feedback.

At the end of the year, students did have a greater sense of community as a result of the multi-grade ‘Explorer Groups’. Students had a greater appreciation of Aboriginal knowledge of nature, but student answers on the questionnaire and interviews demonstrated that students would like to pursue this further because they were very interested in this, and still did not feel that they were as knowledgeable as they would like.

In the scanning process, we recognized the need to support the social nature of learning, and also to have the students at the centre of their learning through voice and choice.

**Focus:** We selected this area of learning because we want our school to be inclusive for all students and to develop a meaningful understanding of First Nations understandings. This year our focus was on understandings related to our environment. École North Oyster has a significant student population with First Nations ancestry. However, many students have little or only surface knowledge, understanding and appreciation for First Nations knowledge and perspectives. We have many different communities of learners within our four walls. At the start of this 2015-2016 school year, teachers recognized the need for continuing to develop the sense of community at our school.

**Hunch:** In June 2014, École Davis Road Elementary was closed. At that time teachers were on a job action at the end and start of the next year. For that reason, there was no time for closure or effective transition to École North Oyster for two schools with different school populations, with one school École Davis Road being a French Immersion school in a residential area of a small town and North Oyster Elementary being an English speaking school in a rural area with a significant Aboriginal population. At the start of this year, teachers recognized the need for continuing to more actively develop a sense of community at our school. École North Oyster currently has approximately 16% of its school population composed of students with First Nations ancestry. It is important to incorporate Aboriginal understandings into the school community to ensure school is inclusive of all students' backgrounds.

**New professional learning:** Staff engaged throughout the year in professional learning. To start the year, teaching staff did our first school based professional development on the Spirals of Inquiry using Halbert and Kaser's *Spirals of Inquiry* book. Staff examined ways to incorporate The First Peoples Principles of Learning in lessons and learning opportunities. In addition, many teachers attended the "Going Home Star" ballet at the Port Theatre.

**Taking action:** École North Oyster teachers decided that we wanted to use multi age groups in a meaningful way to build stronger connections and to hopefully create a "Sense of Wonder" in our students regarding our natural environment and our local First Nations understandings. This evolved into our Explorer Groups. Now we have 14 Explorer Groups. Each group has one of seven Hul'qumi'num animal names and one of two colours. Each group has 22 or 23 students and one teacher. Staff have used the Professional Learning Community (PLC) to create seven different activities/lessons. Once or twice a month the whole school participates in these Explorer groups. Within the lesson planning of the Explorer Group lessons we have embedded the following First Peoples Principles of Learning:

- Strong emphasis on outdoor activities and nature-based lessons.
- Lessons focus on talking through ideas over paper-based activities (similar to oral tradition).
- Lessons support the deeper understanding of our local, natural environment, our place within it and how our actions and choices affect our community.
- Use of Hul'qumi'num names and images for groups.

In addition, the Explorer Groups, all students participated in:

- Knitting groups with Aboriginal Support Worker and volunteer helpers.
- Celebrating Habits of the Heart (based on Aboriginal values) during assemblies and throughout the month.
- Many classes visited the Nanaimo River Fish Hatchery which is part of the CEDP project (Community Economic Development Program). Objectives of this program include

conservation enhancement of Chinook, chum, coho and pink as well as assisting with Aboriginal fisheries strategies.

In individual Classrooms, teachers incorporated Aboriginal practices into the classroom. Some of these were:

- Talking circle (with eagle feather) to share stories, experiences and feelings.
- Used drum to call students to carpet after literacy centres.
- Visited Museum for presentation on Snuneymuxw First Nation 1000 years ago.
- Guest speaker telling Aboriginal stories.
- Guest speaker shared stories and drumming.
- Aboriginal support person made talking feather with students.
- Used Hul'qumi'num protocols and greetings during talking circle.
- Raven tales.
- Created a book resource list of ENO library books/Aboriginal stories that complement the Raven Tales DVD series.
- A classroom inquiry project with Aboriginal focus.
- Guest teachers (District Specialists) co-teaching with classroom teachers an Inquiry unit on colonialism and residential schools.
- Guest teachers (District Specialists) enacted the Blanket Exercise with upper intermediate classes as follow up to their inquiry unit.
- Residential School survivors shared their personal stories with upper intermediate classes.
- Literacy unit focused on residential schools completed in upper intermediate classes.
- Primary Salmon in the Classroom incubation program explored the importance of salmon to local Aboriginal cultures.
- Salmon in the Classroom program was tied into a unit that utilized a variety of Aboriginal literature to create legends, build totem poles, and learn about the Aboriginal symbolism of different animals (i.e. Raven is a trickster, Orcas symbolize family and strength).
- Build A Whale: connected First Nations stories to the whale skeleton.

**Checking:** The questionnaire we developed as well as interviews conducted with individual students and teacher discussions at our school professional learning community were the basis of the way we determined what kind of differences have been made as a result of this process. While the whole school and classroom practices have made a positive difference, most students indicated that they wanted to learn more about Aboriginal culture as well. Teachers felt that this year was only the start of the process, and that it should continue in the coming years.

**Reflections/Advice:** We learned the benefit of providing enriching, culturally relevant activities. Our feedback showed the students enjoyed the activities and would like to learn more in the coming years. We plan to pursue these multi-age groups next year so students can expand their knowledge of Aboriginal cultures. We would also like to expand the choices students have as they learn about Aboriginal cultures.