



## Networks of Inquiry and Innovation Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network

### 2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

**School Name:** Ecole Hammond Bay

**School District:** SD#68 Nanaimo-Ladysmith

**Inquiry Team Members:** Natascha Proctor and Jacqueline Kellam

**Inquiry Team Contact Email:** jkellam@sd68.bc.ca

**Type of inquiry:** NOII

**Grade levels:** Primary (K - 3)

**Curricular area(s):** Language Arts - Literacy, Language Arts - Oral Language, Language Arts - Reading, Language Arts - Writing, Mathematics / Numeracy, Physical & Health Education, Science, Social Studies

**Focus area(s):** Core competencies (for example, critical thinking, communication, problem solving), Experiential learning, First Peoples Principles of Learning, Inquiry-based learning, Land, Nature or Place-based learning

#### **In one sentence, what was your focus for the year?**

The effect of place-based learning on student engagement

**Scanning:** Briefly summarize your scanning process. How did you use the four key questions as part of the scanning process? What did you notice about the experiences of your learners that were most important to your team?

We asked a sample of students in the focus classroom the four questions:

Can you name two adults in this school who believe you will be a success in life? What are you learning about Neck point (forest and beach) and why is this important? How's it going? Where to next?

All the students were able to state that they are learning about nature and knew that it is important to care for nature. Some were able to give very in-depth answers, with lots of details, while others so far have a beginning understanding of the big ideas and the reasons for what they are learning. When students were asked "What would you like to tell others about how you are doing with your learning?" they were less able to articulate, but could still relate some sense of how they think they are doing, which we think is fairly



## Networks of Inquiry and Innovation Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network

### 2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

typical for this age and grade, but clearly it will be a focus for us to improve the students' ability to reflect on their learning in this inquiry. Each student had some thoughts about where they wanted to go next with their learning, but answers were somewhat limited. By the end of the year and the inquiry, we would like to see richer responses. All students were able to name two or more adults who care about them and their learning (believe they will be a success in life), which was highly encouraging. One student easily listed 4 teachers, especially noting our grade 6 teacher who is his soccer coach.

Asking these questions and recording their answers has helped us to see that we are doing a good job in getting across the learning objectives around the science, social studies, and social responsibility big ideas, but that students need more practice with self-reflection, and that we need to focus on authentic and timely feedback so they know how they are doing.

**Focus:** In a few sentences, explain why you selected this area. What changes were you hoping to obtain for your learners?

Our school is located adjacent to a municipal park (Neck Point Park) that contains environmental features such as forest, bog, Garry Oak ecosystem, and seashore. We have been inspired by the work of colleagues in our school who have been instrumental in beginning to use the park as a way to teach science, social studies, and physical and health education. Recognizing the rich variety of ecosystems at our fingertips in Neck Point Park was a catalyst to begin to explore the concept of place and expand knowledge and competencies as we enlarge our campus to include the park as a classroom.

**Hunch:** Describe your hunches about the ways in which practices at the school may have been contributing to the experiences of your learners that were of concern to you.

Although our school is situated next to this beautiful park, we have under-utilized it. We have successfully focused on the health benefits of regular whole school runs here, and some classes have undertaken some learning activities in the park, but little has been done to intentionally incorporate it as a learning environment in and of itself. As a staff, we appreciate and value this place, and understand that the time is right to take steps to develop a closer relationship through stewardship.

Over the course of the year we began to focus our inquiry on student engagement. "In education, student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education." (Glossary of Education Reform, 2016) We became curious whether place based learning



## Networks of Inquiry and Innovation Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network

### 2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

would lead to greater engagement in the classroom.

**New professional learning:** What new areas of professional learning did you explore? What resources were most helpful? What specific designs did you use to support the learning of your colleagues?

1. Place Based Education: website, Promise of Place, at [promiseofplace.org](http://promiseofplace.org)  
PBE can feed “three birds with the same seeds” as it addresses the integrated goals of student achievement, community social and economic vitality, ecological integrity. “PBE emphasizes learning through participation in service projects for the local school and/or community.”
2. Green Teacher Magazine, “Igniting Curiosity with Pocket Museums”, July 5, 2016 describes developing engagement by allowing students to bring back artifacts, to share, make connections, and then return them to the natural environment.
3. We each took part in a series of Indigenous Pedagogy workshops with our school district coordinator of Aboriginal Education over the course of the year, focusing on Hul’q’umi’num language, Ethnobotany, first nations storytelling, drum making, and cultural protocol.
4. NOII/AESN Symposium, May 12 and 13, Richmond BC
5. Ocean Network Canada, Ocean Science Symposium, University of Victoria, April 28/29

**Taking action:** Describe strategies you and your team decided on and how your actions worked out.

- Twice a week students walked through Neck Point Park with their classroom teacher. Each visit focused on questions, such as Who Lives Here?
- The Seasonal Round was the organizing principle for examining life in the environments at Neck Point
- Setting the stage: outdoor classroom vs indoor classroom
- Qui vit ici? (inspired by We Live Here, by Brenda Boreham and Terri Mack) Looking at what animals, plants, and ecosystems exist in the park from an indigenous perspective
- Where are we? Exploring and inquiring about the seashore, forest, bog, and garry oak ecosystem
- Zooming in on forest animals: specific animals, such as the Pic-bois (woodpecker)
- Research and projects: habitat box of the woodpecker as a group project (guided) and then individual habitat box projects with the choice of one of 6 animals studied over the course of the year



## Networks of Inquiry and Innovation Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network

### 2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

- Zooming in on the seashore, looking at seaweeds and sea creatures
- A “showcase of learning” was held in early June for families of all the students to come and see the children demonstrate their learning in practice, and to display and present their habitat boxes.

**Checking:** Summarize the differences you made. Were they enough? Were you satisfied?

We became very interested in learner engagement as the year evolved. We wanted to know if students could develop in their attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion in their learning in general and around the ecological education taking place in our trips to the park specifically.

The French language adds a layer of complexity to the inquiry process. Students require support with vocabulary and comprehension of concepts. In an inquiry we are responding to learners needs, but in the French Immersion context, students need more structure in terms of learning the language in addition to the concepts.

We interviewed students in the fall and saw a variety of responses. (See section on scanning) Interviews conducted at the end of the year revealed similar responses. Students could name more than two teachers/adults in the building that they believed cared about them and their future. Many felt that reading was something they were proud of and would like to tell others. In answering the question, “how is your learning going?” they mentioned reading specifically. One student said “Some things are hard, some are easy. Sometimes concentrating is hard.” Student answers varied and were not as rich as we hoped, but we have noticed that these students at this age are very “in the moment” and take for granted that the adults around them care about them and their learning.

By engaging in hands-on projects in April and May we were able to gauge student interest and curiosity by their comments and enthusiasm for the work they were doing on their boxes. We felt that the richness of student learning was actually better reflected in their attitudes and enthusiasm for their hands-on projects, which were habitat boxes (dioramas) demonstrating what they had learned about the plants and animals at Neck Point. One student in particular often displayed low enthusiasm for school and learning, yet was energized, motivated and eager each day to work on his habitat box, discovering a sought-after talent for shaping animals from salt dough! It was these moments and observations that showed us that learner engagement is high when we link learning outdoors with opportunities to show what they had learned.

**Reflections/Advice:** Finish by sharing what you learned from this inquiry, where you plan to go next, and what advice you would offer other schools with a similar interest.



## Networks of Inquiry and Innovation Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network

### 2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

#### Our Learning

We learned that hands-on learning in the natural environment promoted a connection to the place. The children sometimes demonstrated what we perceived as a lack of attention, but that turned out to be much more related to their physical comfort than what we were studying. If the children were well dressed for the weather and were given instruction ahead of time as to the focus of the day's inquiry question, they were better able to focus on the learning.

We also learned that such an inquiry was a big bite of a whole sandwich full of many tasty and wonderful ingredients, but that we got full fast! There was so much more we wanted to taste and try.

Aboriginal understandings, especially historically and locally relevant knowledge, will be important to delve into in greater detail in the future. We would like to have a connection with an elder and the local Snuneymuxw people.

Who Lives Here? By Terri Mack and Brenda Boreham provided a good jumping off point for us although we wondered whether we should have explored more such books. However, it made sense as the inquiry evolved that students needed abundant time with the concepts, to truly explore and make meaningful the idea of "who lives here". We frequently began to remind each other that "Learning involves patience and time" (First Peoples Principles of Learning, AESN). Observing a natural environment also involves patience and time, as the seasonal round teaches us. A favourite quote we came to rely on is that "Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished." (Lao Tzu) This was particularly reassuring, as the school year relentlessly forges onward, and we have a constant sense of having to hurry.

Engagement can look different for different children, yet when we have created relationships with our students, we can more easily watch for the subtle daily, or moment-to-moment, shifts that signal a positive change in attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion. We saw firsthand how "learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)".

#### Where to Next?

Expanding our circle to include an elder, as well as engage more knowledge bearers in ethnobotany, forest ecology, and seashore to partner with us would foster a greater sense that we are all connected in learning, as well as supplying richer content than we might be able to provide. That said, we found ourselves learning alongside the students, and were



## **Networks of Inquiry and Innovation** **Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network**

### **2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study**

engaged and motivated to research things we didn't already know.

#### Advice for others

While such a project may seem daunting, all it takes is the first step of committing to getting outdoors, wherever you are. Locate yourself in the specific context of the local environment and take your cues from the changing seasons and what nature has to offer. Allow the project to evolve, while having overarching goals and intentions. We were able to conduct this inquiry with grade one students, in the context of French Immersion language learning, in a local park next to our school. Start where you are and be willing to see what evolves.