



Networks of Inquiry and Innovation Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network

2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

School Name: Gabriola Elementary School

School District: SD#68 Nanaimo-Ladysmith

Inquiry Team Members: Andrea Doak, Miranda Culbertson, Catherine Gilroy, Tom Bradbrooke, Sooz Svensson, Kate Reynolds, Alix Hodson, Kathy Gurr, Jane Tufnail, Laura Boulton, and Dave Travers

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Type of inquiry: AESN

Grade levels: Primary (K - 3), Intermediate (4 - 7)

Curricular area(s): Applied Design, Skills & Technology, Arts Education, Career Education, Language Arts - Literacy, Language Arts - Oral Language, Language Arts - Reading, Language Arts - Writing, Mathematics / Numeracy, Physical & Health Education, Science, Social Studies, embedded across the curriculum

Focus area(s): Aboriginal understandings (for example, Traditional Knowledge, oral history, reconciliation), First Peoples Principles of Learning, Inquiry-based learning

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

We focused as a team on sharing responsibility for the integration of Indigenous practices into our school culture through authentic experiences.

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?

Our scanning process was a continuation of our 2015-2016 AESN inquiry and a school-wide commitment to shared responsibility for Aboriginal education as part of a pilot project in our District. In addition, we agreed it was important that this focus was directly embedded in our school goal planning process. We deliberately connected our AESN inquiry with our NOII inquiry, and both inquiry processes have been integral to our efforts to engage continuously with our school goal through professional and student learning.



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Use of the four questions was undertaken this year with the senior class in the school to examine the outcome of learner awareness at the end of the elementary experience. Students participated in this process in an anonymous and collaborative online environment in which teaching and explanation of the questions was supported by the Inquiry and Innovation teacher and students were able to see one another's responses.

The responses clearly showed that students are making connections to our ongoing focus areas for inquiry including: aboriginal learning, research through books and technology, following our interests, and environmental awareness/action. Students continue to have difficulty differentiating between subjects and specific content learning, particularly when discussing their progress as learners.

It was remarkable to note the high level of awareness about the next steps involving our change in curriculum. Once again, when asked to identify the adults who believe in them, students tended to focus on their current or most recent teachers. We want to build more connections across the learning community with adults in the school and beyond our doors. While many big ideas were noted, none of them were aligned with the big ideas expressed in the new curriculum which leads to curiosity about whether this will improve over the year after more explicit engagement with the content and competencies is explored by all learners.

In addition, teacher learners engaged in a strategy introduced to the Inquiry and Innovation teachers during a project with our local community planners. This strategy (SWOT) asked participants to consider Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats to a proposed plan, or in this case, our inquiry. In our Professional Learning Community, educators openly discussed and later contributed ideas anonymously about what experiences help and hinder our ability to collaborate, inquire and innovate together at the school. This information was used to help shape the inquiry and to guide future reflection on how to meet the needs of all learners in the school.

At the conclusion of our 2015 - 2016 AESN inquiry, staff agreed to the importance of sharing knowledge, skills, resources and opportunities to embed Aboriginal understandings, lessons and voices in our teaching practices in 2016 - 2017. One teacher stepped forward to lead this connection process, and another teacher took formal responsibility for ongoing communication and monitoring of our Aboriginal students and Aboriginal activities. All teachers shared commitment to integrated instruction, cultural experiences and curricular expectations.



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

Our AESN inquiry was determined through Professional Learning Community (PLC) discussions and exploration in which we agreed it was important to include our commitment to Aboriginal education explicitly within our school goals and to connect it to our NOII inquiry and learning. Our school goal includes our promise “to integrate indigenous practices into our school culture”. Through professional inquiry and discussion, we have been supporting one another to do so authentically, with growing respect and awareness. We recognized that collaboration and communication is key to supporting one another with this endeavor.

We agreed to continue our focus from the previous school year on the First Peoples Principle of Learning that: Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors. This principle not only informs our approach to the AESN inquiry, it also supports the focus of our whole school on place-based learning.

Our AESN inquiry has also been shaped by our hope for true relationship building and connection with members of our local First Nation, Snuneymuxw. We were fortunate to have a staff member who facilitated the development of a learning partnership which connected our students and staff with the students and staff of the local Snuneymuxw First Nations learning community, Qwam Qwum Stuwixwulh Community School in Nanaimo.

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.

Authentic integration of Indigenous practices requires educators to have knowledge of these practices or a connection with someone who does, and that is simply not easy for all educators. Professional development is helping teachers to grow their understandings, and the curriculum is now infused with Aboriginal content across the disciplines. However, learning, knowing and sharing Indigenous teachings is not a simple process. Teachers have acknowledged that representing a culture and a perspective other than their own can be challenging and sometimes uncomfortable. We recognize that there is fear associated with making a mistake or misrepresenting indigenous practices or knowledge. In addition, we are isolated on Gabriola, in that very few Aboriginal voices are heard in our local community. Therefore, we rely heavily on bringing people to the island to share authentic experiences with our students. This ends up being costly and therefore also infrequent. In



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our discussions, we agreed that it is important for us to increase the frequency of embedded practices, integrated curriculum and experiential learning opportunities to improve our connection to Aboriginal education as a school community.

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?

The professional learning for our AESN was supported in a number of ways. We continued to benefit from the use of our District Aboriginal Resource Collection which enables us to borrow a range of materials for use in our school. In addition, we worked on building our school-based library collection of authentic resource materials. These materials were stickered, kept together and shared explicitly with staff and students. We are fortunate to have local access to Strong Nations, a bookstore with a remarkable collection of Indigenous materials. The selection of these materials was connected to our intentions for supporting teacher and student learning and included both fiction and non-fiction books for students as well as professional resources for teachers. Because our NOII inquiry and school goal focus includes a place-based approach to learning, local subject matter and knowledge was sought. Two books that will be used in the upcoming school year include, *We Are Born with the Songs Inside Us* by Katherine Palmer Gordon and *Island Kids* by Tara Saracuse. At the NOII Symposium, the FNEESC First Peoples Science resource was introduced to our Inquiry and Innovation teacher who has registered for a full-day FNEESC ProD workshop over the summer. This resource provides researched guidance and recommendations and invites intentional local experiential development of units. It is hoped that teachers and students can learn together through the use of this resource..

Perhaps the most powerful learning this school year came through shared experiences with Aboriginal educators, students and guest presenters. The impact of building relationships and understanding through authentic exchanges of cultural and personal knowledge was evident for student and teacher learners alike. In addition, we engaged in ongoing professional learning together, at PLC meetings, ProD days and by collaborating together and including the wisdom and support of District Coordinators. All staff members at our school were committed to sharing knowledge and resources with one another and were open about curiosities and wishes and wants for more learning. By engaging in learning alongside our local First Nations students, teachers and education assistants, we made real connections and developed new authentic understandings. We also benefited from the opportunity to learn with our students, the local language, Hul'q'umin'um', from a skilled district tutor. A number of events brought Indigenous people to our school to share



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their experiences, skills and perspectives. Throughout the year, we were fortunate that several experienced educators in our school led by example, and shared their personal and professional knowledge of Indigenous practices and how to infuse them meaningfully into our teaching.

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

The entire staff shared responsibility as a team to ensure that Indigenous practices were infused in our learning experiences. We included this intention in our school goal planning and undertook this AESN inquiry as embedded within our NOII inquiry. We recognized that attention to learning Indigenous practices was part of becoming place-based. We dedicated time in our Professional Learning Community and Professional Learning Group to sharing resources, asking questions, making observations and exploring interests. We collaborated to co-plan and co-teach units that supported our goals. We shared opportunities for learning with our local First Nations school. We formalized teacher leadership for Aboriginal Education and benefited from informal leadership by our School Support Teacher. Highlights of our efforts to engage in meaningful learning include:

- Development of library collection of local Aboriginal resources
- Support from Val Martineau, Library Coordinator
- Participation in Aboriginal Day Events and Arts
- Co-learning at Pro-D with Qwam Qwum staff
- Shared learning and island walking tour with Qwam Qwum staff and students
- Primary and intermediate classes visit to the Big House with Qwam Qwum
- Hul'q'umin'um' lessons with District Language Tutor
- Creation of a Welcome Blanket
- Metis stations and school-wide hands-on activities
- School Gathering Activities
- Feather Circles

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

We checked in on our learning through two formal processes, but much of our checking was on an ongoing observational basis. The evidence that encouraged and motivated us was growing comfort with and use of Indigenous practices. It was clear that the ongoing use of practices and exploration of content as well as perspectives and language helped students and staff to become increasingly familiar with local Indigenous culture. Touching



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base formally, using the four questions with the senior class demonstrated the following:

- Strong sense of connection with the informal teacher leader of our inquiry
- Students who valued feather circle as part of weekly educational practice
- Growing cultural awareness, particularly of our local First Nation
- Continued need for explicit explanation of how practices are related to big ideas and curricular objectives (core competencies and content)
- The importance of supporting our learners' ability to describe their progress and place in learning and their purpose as learners on a regular basis

When we revisited our school AESN inquiry focus through the SWOT process introduced in the fall, staff provided compelling anecdotal evidence that change was happening. Discussion and anonymous written descriptions of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats to this inquiry, revealed that our collective ability to share responsibility for meaningfully integrating Indigenous practices at our school was improving. However, we continue to see the need to address challenges to this important goal and to work together to increase access to authentic voices of Indigenous culture. Observations and conclusions included:

- Students became more familiar with indigenous practices.
- Learning and planning takes time, patience, respect and authentic resources.
- Acknowledgement of territory, introduction to language and use of the feather circle made an impact in an ongoing, embedded way.
- Exchanging local practices with Qwam Qwum and beginning to build a reciprocal relationship with field trips and professional learning was valuable.
- Access to local elders, models, literature, experiences and knowledge is critical to bringing meaning to practices and understanding of culture.

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.

We are experiencing a significant change of staff in the upcoming year. The work and learning that informed this AESN inquiry and our NOII inquiry is only the beginning of an ongoing process to improve our understanding of our learners and of Indigenous practices as an integral part of all education in BC. We are working together to develop a respectful, sensitive and locally aware school culture that supports continued growth as a place-based learning community which is richly connected to local First Nations people and knowledge. One activity that will help bring this commitment forward was recent collaborative



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development of Guiding Principles for our school which specifically states this intention. Our first principle states that:

“We believe in Place-Based Learning, which means learners participate in their community by exploring and connecting to their culture, neighbourhoods, parks, local histories and collected knowledge. In doing so, we acknowledge and honour that we are teaching and learning on the traditional territory of the Snuneymuxw First Nation. While teaching and learning, we are deepening our understanding of local indigenous culture.”

In our next steps as a changing staff team, we will begin again to share where we are and what more we have to learn in order to feel confident that Indigenous practices are being authentically embedded in learning at Gabriola Elementary School. We intend on nurturing continued connection with Qwam Qwum students and staff and hope to continue to build relationships and share professional learning experiences. In particular, the FNESC First Peoples Science resource offers a tool with potential to support learning together in the context of our local environment. Whatever tools and opportunities become the means through which we develop and deepen knowledge of Indigenous practices with staff and students, we see that relationship building is at the heart of this learning.