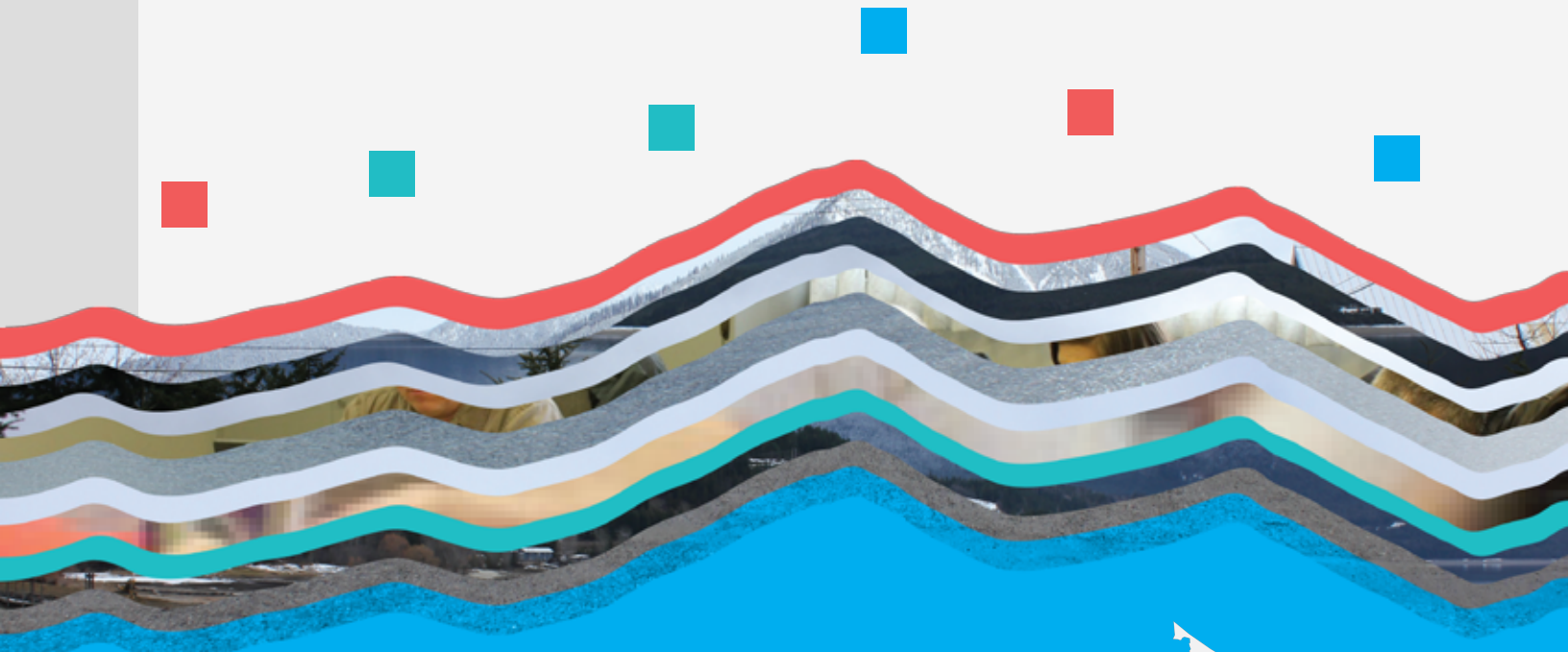


Executive Summary

Aboriginal Inquiry: Lifting All Learners

An Impact Assessment of the Aboriginal
Enhancement Schools Network (AESN)



This study was funded by a grant received from The Office of the
Federal Interlocutor, Aboriginal and External Relations Branch,
Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada.



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An Impact Assessment of the Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network (AESN)

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Enhancement Schools Network (AESN)**

Find the full report online: <http://inquiry.noii.ca>





“The happiest future for the Indian race is absorption into the general population, and this is the object of the policy of our government. The great forces of intermarriage and education will finally overcome the lingering traces of native custom and tradition.”

Duncan Campbell Scott, (1914) Deputy Superintendent of Department of Indian Affairs (1913 to 1932) (ARC, BC website)

“If they catch a little bird they put it in a cage. Probably the cage will be very fine, but still the bird will not be free. It will be in bondage, and that is the way with us.”

Richard Wilson, Lax Kw'alanms, 1887 (in Frank, 1995, para 4).

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“ It’s a place of gathering, the personal and emotional connection. It’s unconditional support. There is no competition; no question is better than another, no hierarchy. It feels so powerful, trusting and not judgmental at all—it’s about improving student learning, that’s the key... What other body or entity is allowing and supporting people to talk about our work? It’s respectful of our vulnerability, and allowing teachers to wrestle with these questions safely. I don’t know where Aboriginal education has a spot for this... it has brought us together. There was no venue before this structure to bring us together, to push our thinking forwards. We are moving away from silos and isolation and instead of [the work] falling to only those who are funded through Aboriginal funding tools, it is allowing us to take up this work among the broader community. It gives us the ability to ask our colleagues the question, “What are you doing to make a difference for our kids?” And it is really growing. ”

— Network member

Executive Summary

This Executive Summary offers a précis of an Impact Assessment completed in early 2013 of the Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network (hereafter referred to as the AESN), a professional learning network for teachers, principals, vice principals and support professionals who are employed in British Columbia's (BC) public schools, and includes both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators. The research project was designed to identify effective practices of the Network; in other words, it sought to quantify its impact on students, teachers, principals, vice principals and communities in reaching its goals. The specific ways in which impact was measured will be described later in this report. To begin however, we start with a description of the AESN and its early history.

1 Background



What is the AESN?

The purpose of the AESN is to improve learning results for Aboriginal learners and to increase understanding of genuine Aboriginal culture and history for all learners. The AES Network is designed to build the capacity of teachers and principals through an annual cycle of inquiry, the application of current research, including Aboriginal knowledges and pedagogy, with an emphasis on classroom based performance assessment as a means for determining success and improvement. This Network has been in operation since 2009 and is effecting change in many BC schools, school districts, classrooms and communities.

The AESN emerged out of the work of the Network of Performance Based Schools—now called the Network of Inquiry and Innovation (NOII)—which began in 1999. The NOII was created by Drs. Halbert and Kaser, and originally sought to engage teachers in school based inquiry projects using formative assessment strategies and the BC Ministry of Education Performance standards. The NOII's central purpose is to shift teacher and/or Network members' thinking from that of teaching and learning as a means of sorting learners (assessment to compare and rank students) to that of a *learning centered system* (Kaser & Halbert, 2009). The critical tool for shifting thinking is the emphasis on inquiry mindedness and how this enables deeper learning for students; an important parallel focus is that of the teacher as a learning professional. As Lieberman and Miller

(2004) suggest: “An inquiry stance is far different from a solution stance. It requires that one ask questions of one's practice rather than look for answers. It places contextual data collection and analysis rather than generalized solutions as the center of improvement efforts” (p. 41).

The NOII design is centrally focused on how to engage teachers in moving from solutions towards asking questions informed by their local context and the needs of their learners. It is a team based approach; the Network structure requires members to work with others in their school, including their school principal or vice-principal, in structuring an inquiry question for a year-long effort to improve the success of their students. Ongoing meetings and discussions with colleagues/partners in the inquiry are encouraged; formal meetings are built into the model (2-3 per year) and at least one regional meeting of inquiry teams from a particular geographical zone is held where investigations can be shared - referred to as a “showcase” where individual teams share their questions and approaches to their inquiry and findings. One large provincial meeting is also scheduled in May of each year in Vancouver. Here again, individual teams selected to represent the diversity of inquiries around the province are invited to share their work and participate in seminars/discussions about current research from exemplary educational scholars. Finally, each team must write up a summary of their case which is submitted to



Downtown Nakusp in February.
Photo by Allyson Fleming.

the NOII principals for inclusion on the website and accessible to other Network members to use as a resource for future/current inquiry work. At the end of this process, each team is awarded a small grant; originally these grants were \$1000.00

but due to funding have been reduced first to \$500.00, and in 2012-13 schools will receive \$250.00. Schools use such funds to purchase resources, fund release time, or attend professional conferences.

AESN as a branch of NOII

The idea of creating a parallel network structure came from the BC Ministry of Education Aboriginal Education Branch; the goal was to involve teachers, principals and Network leaders in a network that specifically focused on Aboriginal student achievement. The principals of the NOII, Drs. Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser, were enthusiastic proponents of the idea, given that they had always promoted Aboriginal ways of knowing as a core “big idea” that helps teachers develop equitable, quality learning strategies that promote the goal of enhancing student success for all students.

Like its original counterpart, the goal of the AESN is to work with educators around the province to focus teachers and school leaders on the specific goal of enhancing student success; specifically, the success of Aboriginal students. It also utilized the highly successful structure of the NOII, with one important addition: rather than focusing on specific curricular performance standards, it invited participants to focus on the local Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements that were in place for each school district in the province.

“

As a result of my involvement with the AESN, I learned that inquiry and evidence-seeking mindsets are not about seeking evidence that will look good on a résumé. Doing a research question for the AESN allowed me to see that learning is not easily measured and that learning for students needs to be from the student’s perspectives and from their families not from the perspectives of the vocal (non-Native) professionals who have nothing invested in the community and stay a very short time. I also learned that when we have non-Native teachers (I am not Native) the teachers need to learn to take a wider perspective on learning not just a focus on aspects of academic learning that are easily measured, look good, sound good so the non-Native educator can leave.

— Network member ”

Early history of the AESN

The network idea was launched in the spring of 2009 immediately following the annual NOII Seminar (May, 2009). At this particular seminar, Debbie Leighton-Stephens, a well known Aboriginal educator from Prince Rupert, provided a keynote lecture that highlighted the ways in which non-Aboriginal teachers might develop stronger ties with local First Nations as a necessary first step in developing deepened relationships between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal communities. Her discussion was the starting point for having NOII members think differently about how they approached issues of Aboriginal education and the success of all students. Network participants were also invited to explore the foundational principles of Aboriginal learning and pedagogy:

- » Learning ultimately supports the well being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits and the ancestors.
- » Learning is holistic, reflexive, experiential and relational - focusing on connectedness, or reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place.
- » Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions.
- » Learning involves generational roles and responsibilities.
- » Learning recognizes the role of indigenous knowledge.
- » Learning is embedded in memory, history and story.
- » Learning involves patience and time.
- » Learning requires exploration of one's identity.
- » Learning involves recognizing that some knowledge is sacred and only shared with permission and/or in certain situations (BC Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 11).

From this point, active Network members were encouraged to consider how they might incorporate these principles/approaches into their specific NOII inquiries; several schools who were experienced in network inquiry and had served as catalysts for action within their school jurisdictions were contacted and asked to consider how they might take a lead role in the initial launch of the AESN. In its initial year, a total of 50 schools



Creating Aboriginal medicine pouches during class.
Photo by Debbie Koehn.

were involved in Network questions specifically focused on Aboriginal student success. By the 2012-2013 school year, about 75 schools and approximately 400 teachers, teacher leaders, and school principals are involved in the AESN. Perhaps more interesting are the numbers of school support professionals (non-teachers) who have also become members of the Network. The team based approach of the Network structure and process has led many teams to recruit the involvement of other school professionals such as Aboriginal Education Workers, Educational Assistants and Special Education Assistants. Many of the AESN members are also themselves Indigenous; some declare as Status Indians, others as urban Aboriginals, mixed race Aboriginal people or Métis. Individuals from diverse First Nations are represented among the members of the AESN.

What does an AESN inquiry look like?

As noted in the introduction, we wanted to include one example of an AESN inquiry project so as to provide the reader of this executive summary a deeper understanding of how an inquiry unfolds, and provide more evidence to show the impact such work has on learners. More examples can be found in the full report.

A Vancouver Island middle school infused Aboriginal inquiry into their grade 7 programming. At the heart of the inquiry is raising awareness and understanding of Aboriginal ways of knowing. All grade 7s take a six-week exploratory course designed to expose students to the “big stories” – an overview of Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia and Canada. In the four years the program has been offered, approximately 700 students have taken the exploratory course. Its mandatory nature makes it a unique feature of the educational landscape and it was partly this feature that led a neighbouring school district to seek permission to borrow this approach (having heard about it at a regional Network presentation). The neighbouring district has a significant on-reserve Aboriginal population and suffered some struggles with racism in their schools between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. This district has now implemented the course in all of its schools and have extended the model to include Elders and Aboriginal language instructors working with students to help raise awareness and understanding of Aboriginal ways of knowing and to start to eradicate some of the systemic racism apparent in their school district.

The programs described above have helped shift the conception of Aboriginal students and peoples as “deficit” towards a more positive perception. As this AESN member noted:

“The inquiry process lends itself to learning. At times working with Aboriginal kids in the school and district, we often get to the specifics, like ‘Why doesn’t Jimmy get to class?’ Sometimes you can’t seem to pull yourself out of the detail, can we focus instead on the positive – ‘What can we do so Jimmy will come?’”

This shift in understanding of the role of the teacher in creating engaging and meaningful spaces for student learning was something we heard repeatedly as teachers became more engaged in the AESN. Another AESN participant put it this way:

“The deficit approach is often the approach taken by teachers and districts in working with Aboriginal kids, populations. The AESN (inquiry) is a strength based approach, ‘how do we get better, will this help our kids? It’s about moving all of our students, not just picking on Aboriginal students. The level I work at, you are always working with a problem...this is more about making things better, that’s why I latched onto it. School learning, system learning, kids learning...”

The strength based, asset based approach to learning was prevalent in this and other cases which are discussed at greater length in the full report.

The purpose of our study

We sought to trace the impact of the AESN around BC. We wanted to know answers to questions such as “How is the network affecting the success of Aboriginal students? How is it affecting the practice of teachers in schools? Is there evidence of changes at the school and district level that would indicate the network is a vehicle through which change can be initiated and sustained? To what extent have schools and teachers become familiar with the Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements?”

We used multiple sources of evidence through which to collect the data for this report, but we relied primarily on the stories of impact we heard from teachers, leaders, and community members. The full report details the data collected from

the completion of two specific district case studies (Arrow Lakes and Prince Rupert), as well as five other focus groups, 11 individually submitted written narratives and 13 interviews. A total of 67 individuals from multiple school districts around the province as well as the network principals, Drs. Kaser and Halbert participated in this study. Ethical Approval was received from the University of Victoria, the institutional home of the Principal Researcher, Dr. Catherine McGregor. The research study was completed under the guidance of an AESN Advisory Group which included a number of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Network members (listed on the cover of the report) as well as the network principals, Drs. Halbert and Kaser.



Teachers in the Network in Prince George reflect on student learning. Photo by Allyson Fleming.

2 Stories of Impact



As noted above, we were most interested in hearing from AESN participants how they perceived the impact of the Network on their work as educators. However, we also understood that our impact assessment needed to use methods and representations of its findings in ways that were *culturally responsive*. By this we mean that the methods we used should reflect the cultural and ancestral knowledge traditions of Aboriginal peoples in BC. We also wanted to ensure that the findings of the study were conveyed in a way that was accessible and respectful of the knowledge of those participants who have been foundational to the work of the AESN. Drawing from the oral traditions of First Peoples and the qualitative research tradition, we determined that the collection of data as well as the representation of what we learned in the study would be best conveyed in narrative form. An approach that acknowledges the centrality of story as a culturally inclusive means of describing impact seemed a powerful and compelling way to meet our goals of reporting the impacts of the AES Network, and was very much in keeping with the AESN purposes

of broadening the knowledge of non-Aboriginal peoples about First Nations histories, cultures and contributions to Canadian society. One of the ways we achieved this was to insert narratives collected from participants and to invite participants to share their own written stories. These narratives are designed to provide exemplary voices that corroborate and extend the observations and analyses of the researchers.

In the next section of the Executive summary, we draw from these many stories to provide readers with a deeper understanding of the range of impacts the Network has had on teachers, leaders, and students. As the title of the report suggests, our study highlights the way in which inquiry enabled learning for students, teachers, and leaders alike. This is followed by a detailed description of one AESN inquiry; again, this serves as an exemplar of the many examples included in the full report. In the summary sections that follow we discuss the key themes of the final report; we do this by using a scale to illustrate the extent of impact. We call these categories: sustained, initiated and potential.

Stories of Student Learning

We have strived to make our students visible by developing their voice. Success depends so much on language skills - vocabulary, cadence, tone – when speaking – vocabulary and ability to make sense when writing. Ability to manipulate language often defines how our students succeed at school. In all of the AESN inquiries I have been involved in we have sought to make our students visible by developing their voices in the learning community. We have worked to build language

skills, social emotional learning (sense of self) and a connection to the “big ideas” in traditional Aboriginal knowledge. We have seen measurable improvements in reading and writing skills, and we have observed the building of self-confidence when we have participated in an inquiry that focuses all members of the learning community, students and adults. We wanted our students to be heard, and listened to with respect. — **network member**

I have always asked myself how can I help students to connect to themselves and feel proud of their Aboriginal ancestry when society has mostly looked down on Aboriginals. Lots of youth want to be anything but Aboriginal and avoid anything that looks

like Aboriginal culture at school. I know when things are working by how many Aboriginal youth say where they are from and the ancestry they are. I try to do things that help all students feel proud of who they all are and where they all are from. — **network member**

“Any of the projects where the students have learned traditional Aboriginal knowledge and non-Aboriginal students see and appreciate this, it really shows value for traditional knowledge, this builds self-esteem among Aboriginal students. The Aboriginal learners have a personal investment and this improves

student achievement... students appreciated this opportunity to get outside, beyond the traditional classroom. They were more engaged. When they made the personal connections the engagement was huge.” — **network member**



Students from Bulkley Valley school district.

Stories of Teachers' learning:



Student reading in
Koksilah, Cowichan
Valley School District.

“The AESN gave me the vehicle and a place to do the work that was near and dear to my heart, it kept me going. You need a place to be validated where you work... I am motivated because the AESN validates me in a way that I haven’t been validated in my own district.” — **network member**

“The Network has given people permission to learn about Aboriginal education; it wasn’t in our sight lines prior to this.” — **network member**

“I found an extended family... It doesn’t matter that we are in different sites, we can support each other. I’ve got my team, my sisters... It’s really grounded me.” — **network member**

“Looking at what the student needs, how are we going to meet their needs? The Network made me ask for each child, “Who are you as a learner?” It made me understand who I am as a learner. It was an ‘aha’ moment. “Wow, I don’t even know how I learn”. That emphasis on the learner and learning is critical. That changed me, I was always a good teacher, but we moved from being good to excellent. That’s because we focused on who that learner is in each child... [so it’s a shift] from knowledge holder to learner.” — **network member**

Stories of Network Learning

This is why networks of professionals are important to me they fuel our talk. I live and work on Haida Gwaii; professional development opportunities that are commonplace to teachers in other parts of the

province are hard to get to. The Network allows us to feel connected, gives us ideas, gives a place to organize our thoughts, a place to shape our vision, and energizes our practice doing work that is relevant here. — network member

I became involved in the Network of Performance Based Schools about nine years ago. I was inspired by the passion and knowledge of the presenters and by the dedication and curiosity of the others participating in the Network. My level of involvement changed over the years, sometimes increasing and sometimes decreasing depending upon available time and resources, but I continue to be inspired and challenged by the leaders and participants of the Network. I get some really clear messages from the Network; we (teachers) CAN do a better job, we MUST work together and we MUST learn from each other.

It was through my participation with the Network that I became aware of and learned

to apply Assessment for Learning (AFL). Although I was a seasoned teacher AFL took my practise to a new refined level. My participation also taught me that I wasn't alone in challenging current beliefs and attitudes and thus gave me the courage to continue to ask important questions and explore "better" ways of doing things. As I grew in my understanding of inquiry, unknowingly I was bringing some of my colleagues along with me. Through informal conversations they were witnessing my practise and inspired to examine their own. We were no longer evaluating methods or approaches as good or bad but instead were wondering, tweaking, applying, revising, sharing and wondering some more. — network member



Stories of Culturally Inclusive Teaching Practice

“If we are going to be professional, and thoughtful teachers, then we have to ask, challenge, and question: How do we do this better, make it better for kids? In our discussions,

we’ve also come to understand that what is good for Aboriginal students is good for everyone... but it took all of us challenging the status quo to finally figure it out.” — network member

Each day I strive to be a facilitator of learning when working with my students and encourage them to guide their own learning. The Network has helped me aspire to situate myself in a transformation orientation to my teaching. I now strive to teach in a holistic manner that is quite different than my previous teaching practices. Adopting a more holistic approach to my practice

allows me to continually stop, reflect and be culturally aware of the needs of all my students. I feel I would not be engaging in inquiry if I did not continue to be an active participant in the Network and for that I am truly grateful. I try to instill in my students to be the best they can be and the Network allows me to strive at being the best I can be. — network member

Stories from Aboriginal Leaders in the Network

I am part of a core team of three which often expands as we bring other people in on our projects...With advanced communications and technology we all work at different sites but communicate very effectively and work to bring about change in our fellow mainstream teachers. We help them understand how to interweave Aboriginal learning outcomes and ways of teaching into every subject area by asking the deep questions, looking for the big ideas. Working with Network and district based professional partnership grants is a way we can challenge our own thinking and teaching and model for others how to think more deeply about the learnings of our most fragile learners... Since I am able to share my personal self and my journey from small

“rez girl” I feel fulfilled and peaceful about my heritage. I also feel I am far more able to reach out and support struggling Aboriginal families and help de-mystify the education system for them, or at least offer support with groceries and school supplies. Although I have added a whole new layer of meetings and staff responsibilities by attaching myself honourarily to the Aboriginal education department I feel have gained so much personally. Professionally, I am impacting the knowledge base of my district by adding a voice of other First Nations beliefs, teachings and protocols. Working with the Network on improving Aboriginal student learning and awareness of our district’s Enhancement Agreement has led me to rich personal growth. — network member

I have really appreciated the message that bigotry can manifest itself as low expectations for our First Nations students. As a First Nations woman, having this message stated clearly by non-First Nations educators has been very powerful. I have witnessed educators examine their practise and ask themselves if in fact they have perpetuated this destructive pattern. I

have also walked alongside teachers as they begin the journey to doing things differently. These teachers are all good, hardworking, well-intentioned teachers. “One of the hardest things teachers have to learn is that the sincerity of their intentions does not guarantee the purity of their practice” (Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*) — network member

Stories of marginalization, racism and decolonization

It is interesting to note that those students who were the most engaged are confident, happy, healthy First Nations students with supportive families and quiet pride in their heritage. It was also interesting to see reluctance and resistance to the topic itself from some students who, in my opinion, were speaking words not their own, but comments and attitudes that seemed to have been learned outside of the school system. Tensions immediately accompanied the lessons and the division that I remember so clearly from growing up as a teenager in this community entered into our discussions. That is one reason

why we did not post as I had planned. The resistance from some, even after lots of talking, was too strong. This was not what I expected and it changed my plans to have each student post a weekly response.

If anything, I learned many things about my students, for example, that prejudice and discrimination are seated deeply in some, while pride and an eagerness to share about one's culture is ready to burst forth. The discussions we had were very powerful and raw at times.”
— network member

“I hoped that the impact on writing would improve if Native students saw themselves within the content and it did, significantly. But I was surprised at how many other impacts that this question would have outside of the obvious answer or data collection. I did not fully think about how giving the power of understanding certain concepts (especially those that non-first nations students might not have encountered), would put my First Nations students at an advantage for talk, reading, and writing...the same advantage that we usually afford other students. Racism is when one group has power over another.

I know that racism is a very powerful word. It does imply some negative intention, which I do not believe teachers foster. I believe that teachers are involved in education to make the world a better place. It is important however, once we become aware of a practice that does not promote that agenda, to change the way

we think and act. Being part of the Network helped me to understand that in order to change the way we think and act, we need the support of others; a network as it were, where collaboration and change are part of the learning cycle.

As a result of my involvement with the AESN, I learned that inquiry and evidence-seeking mindsets are not about seeking evidence that will look good on a résumé. Doing a research question for the AESN allowed me to see that learning is not easily measured and that learning for students needs to be from the student's perspectives and from their families not from the perspectives of the vocal (non-Native) professionals who have nothing invested in the community and stay a very short time. I also learned that when we have non-Native teachers (I am not Native) the teachers need to learn to take a wider perspective on learning not just



Cross grade cooperative drum making for Thornhill Elementary. Photo by Debbie Koehn.

a focus on aspects of academic learning that are easily measured, look good, sound good so the non-Native educator can leave. In the four years and six months I was at the rural First Nations School I had two Superintendents, two directors of Special Education, four Principals and I worked with twenty-three teachers. Over the time I was employed at this school the enrolment of the school was between 40-60 students from kindergarten to grade 12, with a teaching staff of four to five teachers per year. If I had not participated in the AESN I would not have focused on a specific aspect of student learning. By focusing on a specific question I had my eyes opened to the injustices that are still happening in our small rural schools that enrol First Nations students. I personally believe that the lack of support our governments are giving schools enrolling mostly First Nations students is equally to that of Residential Schools. After working at a school that enrolls mostly First Nations students I wonder if our

government's hidden objectives are still to remove and isolate the First Nations children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate these caring, children into our dominant culture? While I was at this mostly First Nations School I noticed that the most first-year professional outsiders that came and went all demanded their own teacher autonomy, this caused a yearly whirlwind of changes for our learners, every year these extreme changes had to be learned by the students and support staff and took valuable time away from the students learning. In my four years and six months at this school I only saw the professionals try to assimilate these students into the non First Nations culture. It is my personal opinion that almost all these Professionals never wanted to be connected to the school or community. Without the AESN inquiry and evidence seeking mindset perspective, I would not have seen and felt this concern.

— network member

Stories from District Leaders

“It’s a place of gathering, the personal and emotional connection. It’s unconditional support. There is no competition; no question is better than another, no hierarchy. It feels so powerful, trusting and not judgmental at all—it’s about improving student learning, that’s the key... What other body or entity is allowing and supporting people to talk about our work? It’s respectful of our vulnerability, and allowing teachers to wrestle with these questions safely. I don’t know where Aboriginal education has a spot for this... it has brought

us together. There was no venue before this structure to bring us together, to push our thinking forwards. We are moving away from silos and isolation and instead of [the work] falling to only those who are funded through Aboriginal funding tools, it is allowing us to take up this work among the broader community. It gives us the ability to ask our colleagues the question, “What are you doing to make a difference for our kids?” And it is really growing.” — network member

I’ve learned that-I have strong connections with other members of the Network. I communicate at least monthly with a number of Network members. We share ideas, problems, solutions, laughter – we have built a community of learners.

I’ve learned -that there must be change in Education. What is happening in most classrooms around the province is not meeting the needs of the learners. We must examine, on a daily basis, how our learners are doing – do they know where they are going with their learning – how are they going to get there

– how will they know that they have learned what they needed?

I’ve learned-innovative and creative initiatives need to be examined by all – not necessarily adopted, but we need to know what is being thought of, talked about, or considered on a provincial scale. — network leader





A focus group in Vanderhoof. Photo by Allyson Fleming.

Assessing the Impact of the AESN

In this concluding section of this executive summary, we include our final observations about impact of the AESN. Readers should note that the full report provides significantly more detail including detailed case studies of two school districts, an analysis of more than 50 teacher inquiries completed as part of the AESN, as well as

many detailed thematically organized discussions that emerged from interviews and focus groups completed. As noted earlier, our goal was to assess impact; to accomplish this, we created a rubric to measure the level of impact that emerged from our research analysis.

Potential: the AESN has provided an inviting pathway through which to consider change	Initiated: the frequency of engagement is shifting context, process or practice	Sustained: the AESN has transformed the context, process, or practice
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Observations on district size and geographic location

Before beginning our final section on overall impact, it is important to discuss one additional matter that does not emerge directly from the data collected for this study, but instead represents an observation about the impact and scope of the AESN in effecting change in the BC educational landscape. We looked carefully at our participant list to see if we could determine the extent to which our study represented the diversity and sizes of the school districts across BC. As a part of our study we met with teachers and leaders from: Nanaimo, Sooke, Comox/Courtney, Prince Rupert, Smithers, Prince George, Vanderhoof, Kitimat, Ft. St. James, Fort Fraser, Ashcroft, Nakusp, New Denver, and Hartley Bay. As is evident from this list, the school districts and regions on this list are generally small and more rural and re-

mote. Prince George is the more obvious outlier in this group as it is a larger, more urban region. However, we wondered the extent to which our observations should be framed through the lens of district size.

As our data does show, many individuals credit the Network for providing them with the tools and strategies for effecting changes in their teaching practice. One of the ways this was frequently expressed was in conversations that described the limitations of working in more remote or rural parts of the province. For example, in both of the case studies of school districts (Arrow Lakes and Prince Rupert) district leaders and teachers alike spoke to the lack of access they had to professional development opportunities, or how long

distances over diverse geographical terrains often make travel and connecting with other teachers difficult. They sometimes spoke with envy of the availability of resources ‘down the coast’. Despite these stated drawbacks however, what we saw was an expression of the saying “Necessity is the mother of invention”: in other words, teachers, leaders and community members alike did what needed to be done in order to find a way to make things work despite obstacles. And there was certainly plenty of evidence to suggest that this effort paid off in big ways as they have accomplished much over the years they have been involved in the Network, even if this involves working in more isolation or depending on less frequent visits to external professional learning opportunities. Districts also fill the gap as best they can by providing forms of financial support: we heard about teachers carpooling to make travel dollars stretch farther, or how a principal would provide internal support to assist with travel and/or professional development plans. We saw much creativity as individuals struggled to use what resources and strengths they had and put them to good use. And we saw how these districts embraced the AESN model deeply into their existing structures and processes, making a much more seamless and integrated delivery system devoted to improving Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student learning.

These districts also took great advantage of the supports offered by the AESN principals, Drs. Halbert and Kaser. They visited these districts frequently over the years of their involvement as a way of providing on site professional support.

Could it be that smaller districts more avidly embrace the Network because of their size and perceived lack of resources? While we cannot be certain this is the case, we believe this observation warrants additional investigation. If this is true then it may be that the Network principals and its Network leaders should redouble their efforts to effecting changes in districts that are described as more rural and remote as the bulk of BC school districts fall into this category. We believe that any subsequent investigations into the effects and impact of the Network might also want to target what we would call “mid sized” school districts—Nanaimo might be a good example of this category—to see how well a larger, more resourced district supports the work of the Network. It would also be useful to see how larger school districts – such as Surrey, Vancouver, or Victoria – use and/or promote Network activities in their districts. This would enable its principals to make informed decisions about how to continue to grow and support the AESN, and consider the extent to which its model might require modifications or enhancements.

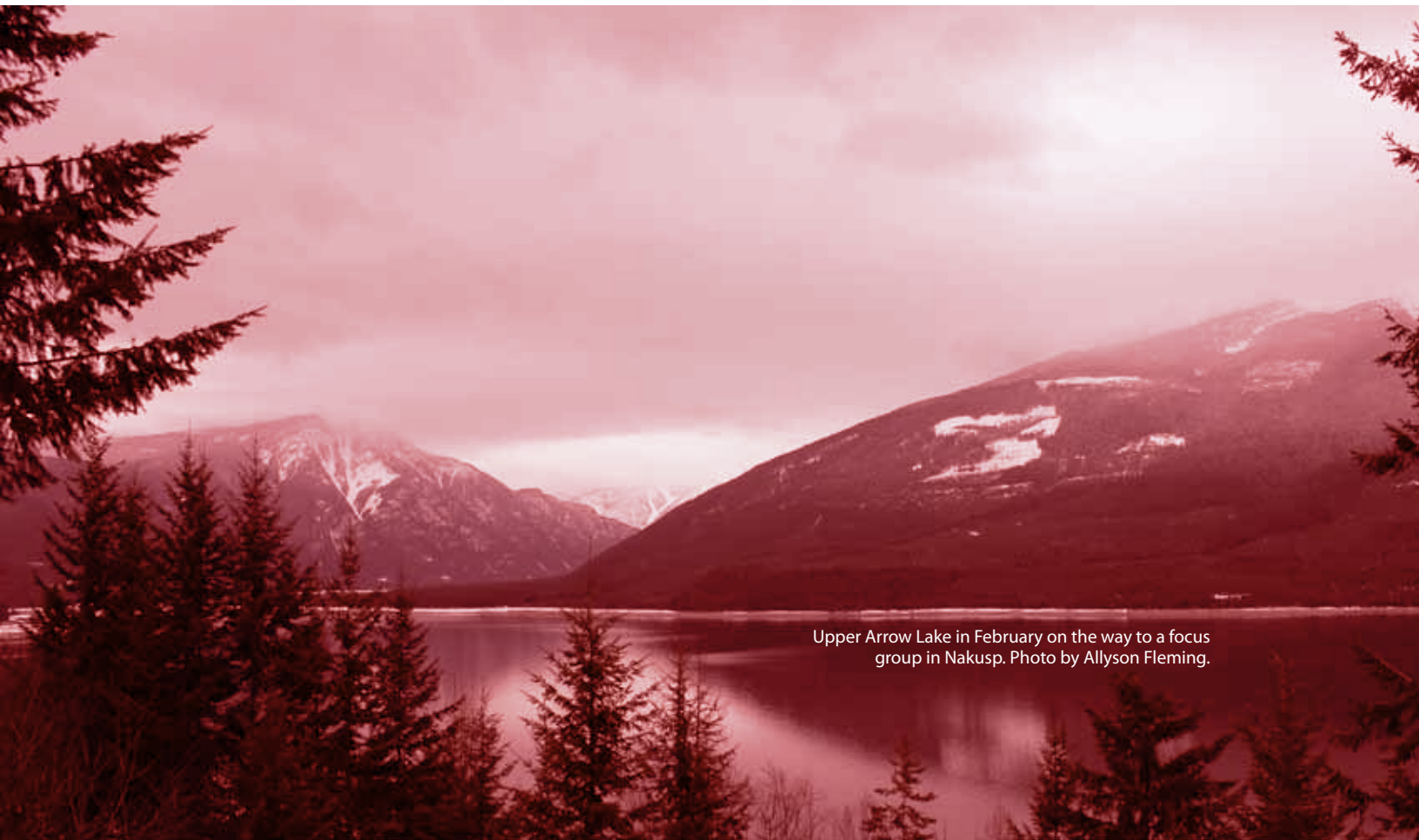
3 Summary of overall impacts: Sustained, initiated and emerging



A sustained overall impact on the culture of teachers, schools and districts

We think there is strong evidence to show sustained, deeply transformative impact in a range of school districts and schools. Both elementary and secondary schools are participants in the Network and demonstrates that its inquiry based approach engages all teachers—from those involved in early learning initiatives to those who work with young adults transitioning out of the school system. This is because the inquiry model starts with the interests and needs of teachers within his/her own specific context. It provides space to develop thinking in diverse and unique ways and doesn't impose a particular model or 'way of doing things' but rather enables the diversity that is the teaching force in BC. It also capitalizes on teachers' deep interest in supporting student learning: this emphasis on putting learning results at the center of teachers' efforts to innovate is a spectacularly successful

approach. It avoids all the pitfalls of top down, systemic efforts at programmatic change because it values the professional knowledge, experience and know how of teachers. It honours their commitment to teaching and making a difference, and then uses that natural energy and passion for the work to invoke deeper thinking about how they can enhance student success. We think the model of teacher-based inquiry is here to stay; as we heard from some participants, it has become embedded in their own ongoing efforts to engage in professional development and learning. A network that achieves the degree of commitment, passion and dedication we saw throughout this study tells us that it will be sustained even if only by the strength of will shared by its proponents. This is the Network's deepest and most profound area of impact.



Upper Arrow Lake in February on the way to a focus group in Nakusp. Photo by Allyson Fleming.

A sustained impact in creating and profiling leadership for change

It was often difficult to discern if leadership enabled change, or if the changes wrought through the Network enabled leadership. Certainly we can say that the initial leadership of Drs. Kaser and Halbert was fundamental to launching the Network. It was their initial vision and belief that change could be supported using a grassroots, invitational approach. Yet we can also say that leaders emerged from the work of participating within the Network, and from there, the spiraling of these emergent leaders' influence to broader and more diverse contexts became evident. Several AESN members talked about 'shoulder tapping' as the way in which their strengths as teacher leaders within the Network were initially identified and recognized. Recognition did help to broaden the scope of Network impact as teachers could "see" role models that inspired and motivated. But it wasn't just this informal system of identifying and promoting "innovative thinkers"; existing formal school and district leaders who had an interest in and capacity to stimulate Network efforts were also built into the Network's early work. In this way, several prime locations for innovation were identified as early "lead organizations"—districts such as Prince Rupert for example, where school district efforts at improving Aboriginal student performance had been in place since at least 1989.

In this way the process of embedding the Network into district cultures was both nurtured and modeled. In some ways, BC is a small province—when using an educational lens-- and formal leaders, particularly Superintendents are transferred from district to district, they import their previous efforts to effect change through the Network, bringing new jurisdictions into the fold of inquiry-based districts. It is this two-pronged effort of nurturing existing innovative cultures while promoting or championing new leaders who emerge through the work that has the combined effect of bolstering the commitment of the AESN to a broader network of schools. We think that the creation and promotion of educationally centered leadership is a significant and sustained impact of the Network. In sum then, what we noticed was the importance of having educational leaders at the provincial level who have the capacity to support the work of local districts and schools, nurture the growth of new leaders and provide a professional 'spark' by creating and hosting events which profile promising and emerging practices in education that address diversity and create culturally inclusive spaces. In essence, these individuals bridge between multiple educational worlds by acting as knowledge translators for the field professionals they work with.

Clam diggers in Hartley Bay. Photo by Tara Zuk, Hartley Bay School.



A sustained impact on student learning

We would be remiss if we did not highlight the scope and scale of change we saw in student learning, amongst both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners. The case study in the full report that examined more than 50 inquiry projects around the province illustrated the ways in which each and every inquiry traced and assessed the impacts of their inquiries on student learning. It is not that teachers don't regularly focus on improving their students learning; this is the everyday work of teachers as they engage with their students. *However, the Network provided a structure and a process for systematically collecting written summaries of this work* into the case study format promoted by the Network leaders in each district. The cases illustrate in concrete form evidence of how teachers went about engaging in improving their practice and investigating ways in which learning might be better realized. As such, the cases provide a remarkable record of and a database for documenting and building on initial investigations. We are not aware of any other programmatic initiative in the province that has this feature of documentation and evidence gathering (although we do note that annual Accountability reports and annual Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement/Aboriginal Education Partnership Agreement reports produced by school districts aggregate student achievement data more broadly).

As was indicated in the case study analysis, there were ranges of different learning impacts reported by AESN members, although a focus on literacy and performance standards in reading and writing were a frequent early emphasis of inquiry work. In the full report we discuss how teacher learning appeared to work through stages of understanding about the learning that matters for Aboriginal

students in particular. We conclude that there was evidence of a staged approach; that the focus on student learning began with more of an interest in academic measures and then shifted toward understanding how identity, self-worth and belonging/acceptance were even more important to effecting school success. We draw from Cadwalader's (2010, BC Ministry of Education) Prezi, who makes this point: strong Aboriginal student identities are enabling. When learners have strong foundational roots into knowing themselves and their communities, they are more resilient and are less likely to feel they are being "forced out" of the schooling system.

This deepened understanding of the importance of identity required that teachers develop new or alternative ways to trace progress; we saw that some schools and districts were developing and/or modifying alternative forms of assessment, most notably rubrics that sought to map or chart students' progression in the development of "Aboriginal understandings". This points to another impact of the Network: its focus on assessing student learning in using different formative approaches so as to document over time shifts among students' attitudes and beliefs about Aboriginal peoples. While in its infancy, we certainly saw evidence of how teachers are approaching the task of measuring non-academic outcomes more consistently and in ways that incorporate Aboriginal pedagogies, knowledges, and ways of knowing and being.



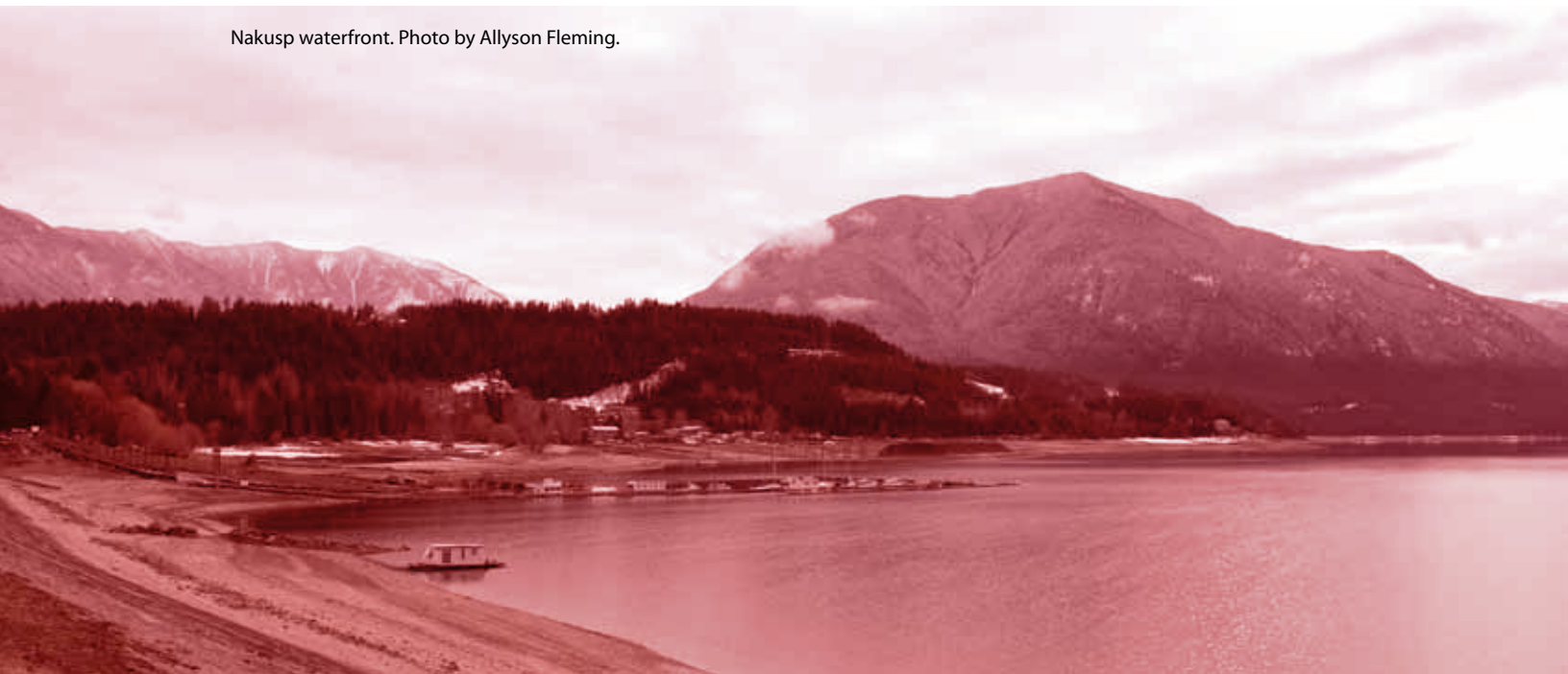
A sustained impact on Aboriginal education policy and programs

In the full report we briefly review the efforts to effect change in Aboriginal education at the provincial level. What we noted was that systemic approaches—initiated by government or the Ministry—were framed through policies that sought to shape districts’ approaches to the goal of improving the success of Aboriginal students. This included the development and formalizing of local Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements. We know that these were necessary initial efforts that would bring greater political attention for these matters to all school districts, but we also saw how the development of locally responsive Aboriginal education measures offered a more successful approach as it built on the diversity and strengths of local communities and capitalized on the strengths of existing locally developed Aboriginal education programming.

The AESN has been a sustained and effective mechanism through which to bridge the chasm between provincial policy intentions and the needs of local Aboriginal learners (and their communities). This is because policy documents do not mandate or include specific measures used in classrooms or schools; that isn’t their purpose.

They offer a framework for *value statements*. But without the specific intentionality of action, policies are often more cerebral: they represent “good intentions” but they are more difficult to enact. The AESN structure however, *enables a move to action*. The Network relies on the “good intentions” expressed in the EAs as a starting point, but bring it to life by requiring teachers to consider how to directly implement or bring those intentions to life in classrooms. This movement from policy to practice is a sustained activity of the Network and it has had considerable impact on the work done with teachers, leaders and community members as is evidenced by the data collected for this study. It has been a powerful catalyst through which local change has been realized. It has forever altered the landscape of Aboriginal education in BC, as systems, districts, schools and teachers have been inalterably affected by their efforts at deepening the learning of their students through the inquiry based approach. As importantly however, as the title of this report suggests, learning is at the center of all educators work. Teachers, leaders, students, community members—we are all engaged in the shared enterprise of learning with and from each other.

Nakusp waterfront. Photo by Allyson Fleming.



An initiated impact on culturally responsive teaching practice

We also think that the AESN has made significant inroads into developing a space for how one goes about shifting teachers' practices in ways that decolonize their approaches to teaching and learning. The AESN was an outgrowth of the NOII, as noted earlier. It provided an important early platform for introducing inquiry-based research into teachers' daily practice. But it was when the idea of culturally responsive teaching and Aboriginal ways of knowing were incorporated into a second network, that significant changes in teacher's beliefs and attitudes began to happen.

As the narratives and case studies provided in the full report illustrate, there were many teachers for whom this introduction to thinking about Aboriginal ways of knowing and culturally inclusive practices was completely new. For non-Aboriginal teachers in particular, the familiarity of school and schooling and the idea that as teachers they played a largely positive role in the lives of the children and families they worked with was the norm. To have this challenged; to see themselves as part of the problem and not part of the solution was an enormous shift. The powerful stories indi-

vidual teachers shared with us show the extent of the dissonance they experienced as they came to understand their complicity in maintaining a colonizing system. But the narratives and discussions also showed their perseverance and willingness to embrace new ways of being and teaching. This is an important point; teachers transformed themselves as much as they transformed their teaching. The report profiles some big successes; but there is much work yet to do. As the stories from some Aboriginal educators makes evident, there are still patterns of privilege that exist in schools around the province. And the voices of Aboriginal teachers, while strong, isn't always enough to end decades of settler thinking. We think that this is a powerful role that the Network can play; to model deconstructive thinking and to promote what has been described in our literature review as anti-oppressive teaching practice. A focus on this, when coupled with the existing emphasis on understanding the holistic nature of teaching and learning with Aboriginal communities will ensure the impact builds towards sustained transformation.

An initiated impact on culturally responsive leadership

In a related observation we also believe that the Network has done a very good job in initiating practices that value and support the work of Aboriginal teacher leaders. As noted above, leadership is an absolute strength of the Network; but one aspect of that leadership work that needs to be further nurtured and supported is that of promoting the work of Aboriginal educational leaders. The AESN has provided an important mechanism through which individual Aboriginal leaders have been both promoted and recognized, yet we believe this work has not yet reached a point where

the understandings of Aboriginal leadership have permeated the culture of the Network itself.

We believe there is some structural work that could be done to the Network model through which to more actively promote the role that Aboriginal leaders can and should play in transforming school district cultures and approaches to Aboriginal education. Aboriginal educational leaders bring the strength of what was described to us as "walking in two worlds" or "speaking in two voices" to the Network model: their heritage, values and ways of knowing and being provide the foun-

dation from which their pedagogy flows ensuring that their endeavours in meeting student needs is approached in a holistic manner. This is modeled well in some school districts, such as Nanaimo and Prince Rupert where Aboriginal teacher leaders have been promoted into formal positions of leadership. There is room, we think, to explore how this might be formalized in the structure of the Network so that emerging Aboriginal leaders

can be given roles to develop their strengths as educational leaders and transformational change agents. From this cadre of dedicated learning centered leaders, districts and Network teams alike will be able to grow their capacity to engage in culturally responsive practices and transform the cultures of their schools to ones that embrace the capabilities and passions of their Aboriginal learners.

An initiated impact on understanding learning as a community based educational partnership

We saw in the review of the AESN case studies that more inquiry teams are venturing beyond the formal classroom walls into the broader community and looking to find partners in completing their inquiries. We see this as a particularly positive development; in districts like Prince Rupert where Aboriginal peoples have been deemed “partners” for more than 20 years, the approaches to integrating services and support systems is deeply embedded and district leaders, teachers, non-teaching staff and community members (Elders and other leaders) are genuine partners in planning and delivering education in ways that embrace the potential that their Aboriginal students clearly have. We are reminded in particular of an inquiry in Vanderhoof where an Aboriginal Network leader is actively weaving together the spaces of formal school, pre-school and adult learning. She is carefully tying together the goal of authentically situated, life-long learning opportunities for adults and children alike. She has done this by drawing upon culturally inclusive and responsive

practices that enable all learners in the community to learn with and from one another. She takes her lead from the needs of her diverse learners and in doing so creates a much more seamless and integrated approach to thinking about the learning needs of the *family*. There are other communities and schools around the province where this work is also in its early stages. We think this work needs to be more fully valued and recognized as a part of Network inquiry processes and so think that the Network structure might be altered so as to more deliberately require teachers to name how and who they are involving as partners in their work. Supporting community members to participate in showcases at the regional and provincial level might also be a tool through which this could be achieved. This could be accomplished with the addition of designated funding to support community members who travel to share their learnings with teachers and leaders across the province.



Network team meeting in Arrow Lakes School District. Photo by Allyson Fleming.

An emergent impact on recognizing and disrupting colonial mindsets and actions

While we think the AESN has had some very significant transformational impacts on schools, teachers, and districts around the province, we think that how non-Aboriginal teachers are ‘taking up’ the challenge of deconstructing their existing colonial mindsets is in very early stages and so we characterize it as an “emergent impact”. Certainly some of the narratives we’ve included in this Executive summary (and the full report) point to the deep reflexive work of some non-Aboriginal teachers: the impact for these individuals is profound and important to their emerging identities as anti-oppressive educators. Yet this is

not something promoted with regularity in the Network; nor is it necessarily regularly modeled by its participants in formal settings. Anti-oppressive educators and Aboriginal scholars make the point that the work of deconstructing one’s own privilege is an ongoing and necessary part of how one ‘becomes’ an Aboriginal ally. We would like the Network to find ways of more frequently highlighting the nature of continually engaging in this deep, deconstructive work as a hallmark of inquiry.

Final words

It seems fitting to end our report with a story, one that might serve as a metaphor for what the AESN and its partners seek to accomplish as it “lifts all learners”.

Eber Hampton is an Aboriginal educator and former University President who has devoted much of his career to thinking about and promoting what it means to reform education in Canada in ways that include and honour wise ways of knowing and being in the world. He tells a story in a 1995 publication where he meets an older white man in a grocery store who asks him if “he has some time”. Assuming he wants help carrying groceries, Hampton agrees, only to be confronted by the man who walks towards him with an empty cardboard box. They explore the box together, eventually discovering “You and I together can see six sides of this box”. Hampton writes:

Standing on the earth with an old white man I began to understand. I had thought he wanted me to carry his groceries but instead he gave me something that carries me, protects me and comforts me... I am often so close that I can only see one side. Rarely am I able to step back and see one or two other sides but it takes many of us to see more than that. As in all conversations, it is the difference in our knowledge and language that makes the conversation difficult and worthwhile. It is this common earth that we stand on that makes communication possible. Standing on the earth with the smell of spring in the air, may we accept each other’s right to live, to define, to think, and to speak. (1995, p. 41-42).



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There's a network in British Columbia that is transforming schools. In this report we explore how these teachers and leaders are examining their practices with Aboriginal children and communities.

"If we are going to be professional, and thoughtful teachers, then we have to ask, challenge, and question: How do we do this better, make it better for kids? In our discussions, we've also come to understand that what is good for aboriginal students is good for everyone... but it took all of us challenging the status quo to finally figure it out."

— Network participant

"I know that racism is a very powerful word. It does imply some negative intention, which I do not believe teachers foster. I believe that teachers are involved in education to make the world a better place. It is important however, once we become aware of a practice that does not promote that agenda, to change the way we think and act. Being part of the Network helped me to understand that in order to change the way we think and act, we need the support of others; a network as it were, where collaboration and change are part of the learning cycle."

— Network participant

