



Networks of Inquiry and Innovation

Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network

# Improving Transitions for Indigenous Learners Through Collaborative Inquiry

AESN Transitions Research Report, 2016-2018

Principal Investigator: Dr. Catherine McGregor

Research Assistants: Chelsea Lake & Leah Taylor

January 2019

This report was prepared for the  
**Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network (AESN)**,  
a branch of the  
**Networks of Inquiry and Innovation (NOII)**,  
now **Networks of Inquiry and Indigenous Education (NOIIE)**

Principals: Dr. Judy Halbert and Dr. Linda Kaser

We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the Irving K Barber Learning Centre to this research study and for the on-going support of the Networks of Inquiry and Indigenous Education.

© Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser

All rights reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce all or part of this publication for non-commercial purposes, as long as you cite the following source.

McGregor, C. (2019). *Improving Transitions for Indigenous Learners Through Collaborative Inquiry: AESN Transitions Research Report, 2016-2018*. For the Networks of Inquiry and Indigenous Education (NOIIE): Vancouver, CAN.

This report is available at [www.noi.ca/indigenous/transitions](http://www.noi.ca/indigenous/transitions).

# Contents

Acknowledgements .....	1
Introduction .....	2
Structure of this report .....	4
<b>Part 1: The Process</b> .....	5
The spiral of inquiry: The learning model used by transition teams .....	6
Transitions: An introduction and literature review .....	8
Case studies .....	17
<b>Part 2: Analysis and findings</b> .....	31
Gathering the data .....	32
Method of analysis .....	33
What about impacts? .....	49
A revised framework for transition planning and support .....	51
10 key strategies used by ally-focused inquiry teams .....	54
Final thoughts on impacts, challenges and opportunities .....	58
<b>Part 3: Coaching for success</b> .....	59
An AESN coaching overview .....	60
What is coaching? .....	61
Peer to peer models .....	62
Key themes from the coaching literature .....	63
Why coaching with the AESN teams? .....	66
The coaching process with the AESN teams .....	67
Coaches' perspectives .....	71
AESN inquiry and coaching: What works? .....	77
Coaching recommendations .....	79
<b>References</b> .....	81

---

## ***Illustrations in this report***

<i>Figure A: The spiral of inquiry</i> .....	4
<i>Figure B: First Peoples' Principles of Learning</i> .....	13
<i>Figure C: A learner-centred framework for transition planning and support</i> ....	53
<i>Figure D: Sample agenda for a team coaching session</i> .....	68

*“...our goal of supporting students in transition  
requires us to re-imagine our learners  
as engaged in a journey that isn’t defined  
by the spaces between—the transitions—  
but as part of a continuum  
of being, becoming and belonging.” (pp 15-16)*

# Acknowledgements

1

As a researcher, I am constantly amazed at the passion, purpose and leadership I see among Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators devoted to making a difference for all learners, but in particular, their Indigenous learners. It has been an honour to work with the 10 Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network (AESN) transition teams, their coaches, and the AESN inquiry study team over the last several years.

My thanks to my two graduate students who assisted me in the processes of data gathering and for their input into my initial drafts. Your thoughtful questions helped make this report better.

My deepest thanks to my colleague Debbie Leighton-Stephens, who was the primary contact for all of our AESN teams throughout the study. Because of your efforts, our work moved forward in a good way. I deeply value your perspective and the learning I experienced working with you. Your patience and persistence ensured our report respected Indigenous knowledge, worldviews and voices.

Thanks also to the advisory team: the AESN coaches Debbie Leighton-Stephens, Lynne Tomlinson, Heidi Wood, and Andrea Davidson. Your perspectives helped us all understand the power coaching can have in supporting learning and inquiry. As well, my thanks to Jo-Anne Chrona of the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) for her thoughtful advice on the final report.

My thanks in particular to Drs. Halbert and Kaser, who continually inspire me with their consistent demand for “every learner to leave our settings more curious than when they arrived”, and to ensure each learner “crosses the stage with dignity, purpose and options”.

This report tries to capture the spirit and passion of these educators. My hope is that the story will spread, the work will continue, and the efforts to document its successes will help us spread the impact of this work even wider.

Dr. Catherine McGregor  
Principal Investigator

## 2 Introduction

The Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network (AESN)<sup>1</sup> has been a catalyst for change in British Columbia (BC) schools since 2009. Based on the initiative of Dr. Trish Rosborough, then Director of Aboriginal Education in the Ministry of Education, this network was designed to be a strategy through which school districts could more effectively and productively engage in bringing their Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements to life (Rosborough, Halbert & Kaser, 2017). The purpose of the AESN is “to create an inquiry community where people learn and work together to ensure that every Indigenous learner crosses the stage with dignity, purpose and options, and together, we eliminate racism in schools”.

The AESN is a branch of the Networks of Inquiry and Innovation (NOII) which have, from the beginning, embraced Indigenous forms of learning and knowing as foundational to sound forms of inquiry and improvements in teaching practice. The NOII was formed in 1999 and initially involved 34 schools; since that time, more than 400 schools have joined the networks. Creating the AESN as a branch of the broader network of inquiry and innovation brought a stronger focus to the vision for supporting Indigenous learners and enacting change at the school and district level. Both the NOII and the AESN are voluntary networks of Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators who are working together to create a better future for the learners they serve.

I conducted a comprehensive look at the AESN and its impacts across BC in 2013. Entitled *Lifting All Learners*, this report sought to document the scope and range of the network, and describe how the process of inquiry and shared investigation, in a networked sharing model, enhanced innovation and support for learners. This report made evident the large-scale impact the AESN was having on district systems of professional learning, on developing Indigenous leaders, and on Indigenous students’ success.

In 2016, Drs. Halbert and Kaser invited me to revisit the AESN and its impacts by exploring the dynamics of how inquiry cycles support teacher teams in designing and developing strategies that would enhance the success of their Indigenous learners. One of the primary goals of the network has been to work with practicing teachers and district/school leaders on ways in which we can ensure that every learner “crosses the stage with dignity, purpose and options”; hence, the topic of Indigenous student transitions became an important question to investigate. More will be said shortly about the topic of transitions, but the goal of this particular research investigation would be to determine how an inquiry based focus on student transitions—elementary to secondary, middle school to secondary school, secondary school to post-secondary school, secondary school to employment—

---

1 This network was created when the term “Aboriginal” was in common usage and matched with educational policy put in place by government (i.e., School District Aboriginal Enhancement Partnership Agreements). While the term Aboriginal remains in use in many quarters, throughout this report we use the term “Indigenous” to reflect its wider use by Indigenous leaders, educators and educational organizations throughout BC and Canada. However, where an organization uses the term Aboriginal rather than Indigenous, we have respected their use of the word. We know in some parts of the world, the term Aboriginal is understood to be the more appropriate term. Likewise, when we quote an individual interviewed or reference scholarly writing that has used the term “Aboriginal” we have left their words intact.

would help us to better support Indigenous learners and equip them for purposeful and successful lives, while also demonstrating the catalytic effects of this network as a means of affecting professional change.

Ten teams of teachers from around the province were recruited to participate in this study, including:

- Ballenas Secondary School, Parksville, BC
- Charles Hays Secondary, Prince Rupert, BC
- Dover Bay Secondary School, Nanaimo, BC
- Eke Me-Xi Learning Centre, Port Hardy, BC
- Frank Hurt Secondary, Surrey, BC
- Gudengaay Tlaats'gaa Naay Secondary, Masset, BC
- Peace River North School District, BC
- Smithers Secondary, Smithers, BC
- Southern Okanagan Secondary, Oliver, BC
- WL Seaton Secondary, Vernon BC

Teams were initially asked to: document their inquiry process by completing an inquiry summary form; check in and participate in two coaching conversations at some point in the school year; present their inquiry question and actions to the NOII symposium (2015); and complete a final report (June 2016). All participation of the teams was voluntary and was guided by the Human Ethics protocol of my employer, the University of Victoria. I also agreed to interview the teams at the end of the year and report on what had been learned about the workings of the network and the impacts on student transitions.

As the study progressed, it became apparent a one-year timeline would not adequately address the work of developing transition strategies to support Indigenous learners, as the cycle of inquiry invited a deep and ongoing investigation. At least two full cycles of intentional focus would be required to see the full impacts of strategies employed.

I was then asked to extend my investigation into a three-year cycle. In the final year, the interim report was reviewed with teams and the findings were shared with the NOII Principals and the coaching team. Additional data was collected in the form of interviews with the coaches. Teams were also asked to prepare posters that summarized their three-year inquiry and present these at the 2018 NOII symposium.

This report was created in two phases: At the end of year 2, Parts 1 and 2 were drafted to provide an interim report. In the third year, coaches were interviewed and Part 3 was added to address how coaching supported the teams in their inquiry.

I also consulted with an advisory group which included the four coaches (Debbie Leighton-Stephens, Lynne Tomlinson, Heidi Wood, and Andrea Davidson), Jo-Anne Chrona (FNESC) and the NOII Principals, Drs. Halbert & Kaser. The entire report was reviewed by this group to ensure accuracy and to provide advice on how to represent the findings.

## 4 Structure of this report

This report has three main parts:

- Part 1, The process
- Part 2, Analysis and findings
- Part 3, Coaching for success

**Part 1** begins with a broad overview of what we mean by Inquiry, and the Spiral of Inquiry model the teams of educators used throughout this study. The report then discusses the idea of transitions that informed this research investigation. This is followed by a short literature review. The literature review helps to expand our understandings of the scholarship and research that informs current and new approaches to transitions for children and youth, Indigenous youth in particular. Part 1 concludes with an introduction to each of the ten teacher inquiry teams that participated in this study.

**Part 2** offers a more detailed analysis of our findings, following a careful exploration of the various documents collected from the teams and an examination of the information they shared in focus group interviews. Understanding how these inquiry teams have effected change is an important aspect of our study, and so we consider impacts on students, on teachers and leaders, and on Indigenous communities. The conclusion to Part 2 summarizes key findings and recommends a new model for thinking about Indigenous student transition. It also identifies 10 key strategies that teams used to keep their focus throughout the inquiry process.

**Part 3** summarizes the data collected in year 3 about the effectiveness of the coaching model used to support the inquiry teams. It begins with a summary of the data used and forms of analysis completed; it includes an overview of relevant literature; it then summarizes findings, with a section devoted to recommendations.





# Part 1

## **The Process**

## The spiral of inquiry: The learning model used by transition teams

Readers may be familiar with models of professional inquiry used by educators to help them investigate ways to improve their teaching practice. In this study, our teams draw from the spiral of inquiry (Kaser & Halbert, 2013).

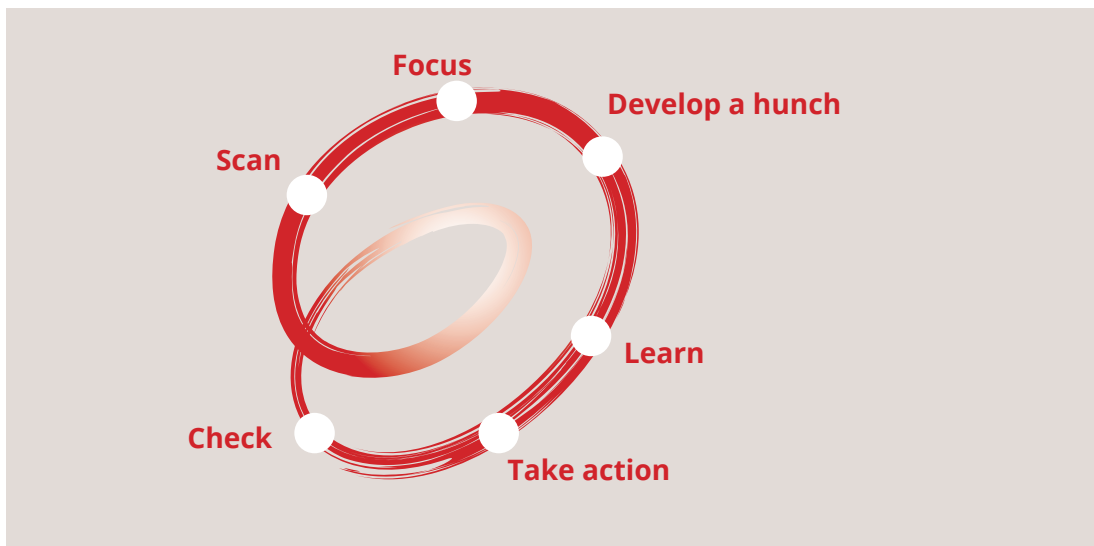
The spiral of inquiry provides an evidence informed and disciplined approach to professional inquiry that is used to change outcomes for learners in a wide range of settings. It provides a ground-breaking framework focusing on changing the experience of learners through the development of new learning and new actions. Recent research suggests that the spiral of inquiry is one of the most impactful examples of professional learning in the world, consistently delivering demonstrable outcomes for learners (Jensen, Sonnemann, Roberts-Hull, & Hunter, 2016).

The following summary is taken from a brief entitled “Inquiry learning networks and spiral of inquiry,” written for the Association of Independent Schools in New South Wales, Australia.

The spiral of inquiry involves six key stages:

- Scanning
- Focusing
- Developing a hunch
- Engaging in new professional learning
- Taking new professional action
- Checking that a big enough difference has been made, and then re-engaging to consider what is next.

Figure A: **The spiral of inquiry**



Although the stages in the spiral overlap, paying attention to each aspect is critical in achieving the greatest benefit for all learners. At every stage, inquiry teams ask themselves three important questions:

- What's going on for our learners?
- How do we know?
- Why does this matter?

The first two questions prompt educators to constantly check that learners are at the heart of what they do, and that all decisions are based on thoughtful evidence from direct observations as well as formal evidence sources. The third question helps to ground teams in the importance of the direction they are pursuing.

## 8 Transitions: An introduction and literature review

### What do we mean by transitions?

The work of the AESN research project is informed by the idea of transitions.

The idea of transitions may seem simple, but it has many complex components and interrelated threads. In this short summary, the goal is to unpack some of how contemporary literature discusses the issue of transitions for students and to what extent the idea of Indigenous student transitions is identified or explained. The findings of this review will inform the ideas discussed in the 10 case studies included in this report.

Why are we concerned with transitions for students? The primary motivation and concern that has been documented in the existing literature is how transitions affect student learning and learning progressions. Transition scholars consider the ways in which transitions result from particular social, cultural, and structural forces, and how this impacts student success and engagement in schooling. The majority of transition discussions reviewed for this report are focused on transitions from elementary to secondary school, but other forms of transition (such as to work and post-secondary schooling) are included.

### An overview of student transitions

#### Sutton 2012

Sutton (2012) conducted a study that sought to understand teachers' views about student transitions in kindergarten to grade 12. Her work focused on how teachers understood the barriers to successful school transitions. She used the findings of her work to devise what she described as a series of "transition bridges" to enable student success. They include:

- The Managerial Bridge (primarily focused on structures and systems to support transition)
- The Social Bridge (primarily focused on student safety and comfort in the school setting)
- The Curriculum Bridge (primarily designed to consider a more seamless connection between institutions such as elementary to secondary, or secondary to post-secondary)
- The Pedagogical Bridge (primarily devoted to considering how to better engage students through new or emerging teaching practices)
- The Learning to Learn Bridge (primarily devoted to engaging students in self-regulating and metacognitive activities that focus on their own learning and progress) (Sutton, 2012, p. 3).

A key focus of these strategies is understanding the role that teachers can play when they fully understand and monitor or engage with transitions. Her publication stresses particular strategies teachers can use within each of the five categories. However, she emphasizes the latter two—pedagogical and learning to learn bridges are the foundation upon which transition work must sit. In other words, while the first three strategies (managerial, social and curricular) are important they are insufficient because they do not focus primarily on the task of learning. This includes attention to the socio-cultural contexts of learners and their families, as well as recognition of the importance of student engagement in meaningful activities that enrich all aspects of their lives.

### Tilleczek 2010

Tilleczek (2010; Tilleczek et al, 2010) conducted a meta analysis of more than 100 articles, studies and reports from Canada, the UK, New Zealand and the US to document the issues related to student transition from elementary to secondary school. Her work is valuable particularly in understanding what she describes as the “nested” nature of transitions. By this she means that the transition from elementary to high school is one of many transitions that young children/youth make in their lives. In other words, transitions can be seen as a period of change, rather than a single issue or event. She suggests that adults consider the ideas of “being, belonging and becoming” as guiding principles for thinking about transitions. The idea of *being* emphasizes that transitions are an everyday part of a young person’s activities and world, and transitions are a normal part of the negotiations they face in living in social and cultural contexts. *Belonging* is important because transition is eased when the individual is valued for who they are and what they bring into their life experiences; and finally *becoming* is important because it draws attention to the developmental or incremental nature of transitions. Attention to these principles will enable adults and/or educators to ensure any transition strategies we develop or implement are more successful. One could argue that these three principles provide a framework for analyzing effectiveness.

An important second feature of Tilleczek’s work is her emphasis on considering transitions at the micro (personal), the meso (the social context such as in school, with friends, family, community) and the macro (the cultural). The meso level is an important one in the context of schools and education: to what extent do our existing cultural boundaries enable or constrain students making transitions? What assumptions guide our efforts and beliefs about transition: who will be successful and who won’t? This speaks to attending to how adults construct, guide and develop programs of transition which may have good intentions but fail to adequately address principles of being, belonging, and becoming.

## Focusing on Indigenous student perspectives

There are a variety of other studies that have examined student transitions. Canvassing the perspectives of students who have or are experienced in transition issues is a critically important perspective to include. Several reports that do this are highlighted below.

### Kirkpatrick 1997

Kirkpatrick (1997, as cited in McGee, Ward, Gibbons & Harlow, 2003) revealed that students hold strong beliefs about the importance of effort in being successful; that is, the students attribute their success to their own personal efforts. Importantly she shows how a group of elementary students who once believed in their own efforts and links to learning success in elementary school, became less likely to do so in secondary school. These same individuals in secondary school were much more likely to attribute success and failure to luck or to blame others when not successful. She goes on to argue that this speaks to a need for secondary schools to focus on building student self-efficacy and agency, as well as becoming clearer about learning outcomes, forms of assessment and standards of achievement.

### Hill and Hawk 1998

Hill and Hawk (1998, as cited in Hawk, Cowley, Hill & Sutherland, 2002) offer an extension of this idea in their study of New Zealand and Maori/Pacific Islander students. The study sought the views of students in transition points in their school career. The students moving from elementary to secondary school indicated their fear of secondary school settings, largely based on the warnings they had received from their teachers about how difficult secondary classes would be. Few felt encouraged or identified positive learning strategies that they could use to adjust to the new setting. Many students indicated that they wanted their teachers to know about their strengths, goals and needs as learners, and to have clearer expectations and transparent forms of assessment. Hawk, Cowley, Hill & Sutherland (2002), drawing from this and two other studies, argue that Pacific Islander students consistently expressed a belief in the importance of having their teachers model and express belief in their students' abilities, attributes and strengths (p.9).

### Congress of Aboriginal Peoples 2010

The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (2010) included student feedback from Ontario in its report. These Indigenous students indicated they are more likely to play adult roles such as family caregiver, parent, or breadwinner in their families. These students talked about how these roles affected their ability and interest in staying in school.

## Indigenous students in transition

While the concern for Indigenous students being in school has had a heightened focus for some time in BC and Canada (Rosborough, Halbert & Kaser, 2017), there is less research specifically identifying transition issues for Indigenous students. In part, this is because the broader issues of Indigenous student success or “staying in school” are the focus of effort. Two recent studies are highlighted here as good exemplars of the scope of research currently being done. They are:

- Promising Practices in Supporting Success for Indigenous Students (OECD 2017)
- Staying in School: Engaging Aboriginal Students (Congress of Aboriginal Peoples 2010)

We have tried to pull directly from these reports information related to the idea of transitions.

### OECD 2017

The Organization for Economic Development (OECD) is an international organization that has been strongly focused on student success, innovation and learning for the past decade. They recently released a research report (2017) that sought to document effective practices in supporting Indigenous student success based on the experiences of several Canadian provinces and educational jurisdictions in Australia and New Zealand, all countries/regions with significant Indigenous populations. Principles they identified as key to accelerating successful initiatives include: attention to data that tracks Indigenous student well-being; authentic forms of student engagement; and parental involvement. An important point they express is that designing experiences that enhance the success of Indigenous learners benefits all learners.

### Congress of Aboriginal Peoples 2010

In this report by the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, the issue of transitions is given a different focus, with an emphasis on the experiences of rural and remote Aboriginal students and transition issues for them. They describe these transitions as “rocky”, exacerbated by the fact that many students don’t have a local high school (or post-secondary) institution to attend, and so decisions to remain in school mean moving away from home, losing direct contact with family and extended family, and being introduced to urban/city life that is largely foreign to them. The report also highlights the following:

- Early success in secondary school is strongly linked to graduation rates.
- Young Aboriginal men are more frequently identified as at risk for leaving school early.
- Aboriginal students enrolled in public schools and band schools are less likely than non-Aboriginal students to attend post-secondary.

- Parental disengagement with schooling is a contributing factor to dropout/school leaving.
- There are too few Aboriginal educators and therefore there is limited capacity to deliver and support Indigenous programming.
- The quality of Aboriginal courses and curriculum materials is inconsistent.
- Teacher attitudes and beliefs about Aboriginal students reinforce deficit thinking, bias and discrimination, especially among white teachers.

### Baydala et al 2009

Other studies, such as one conducted by Baydala et al (2009), suggest that programs focused on providing students with opportunities to develop cultural connections matter: “culturally appropriate interventions that focus on the development of leadership and study skills may provide children with the tools they need to achieve... [yet] care must be taken to ensure their content supports the ways in which leadership and study skills are defined within the Aboriginal community” (p. 18). Similar results come from a study of a leadership program for Indigenous youth in central British Columbia; leadership in cultural activities led by Elders, teachers, and Aboriginal support workers within their community was linked to strongly increased graduation rates among Indigenous youth (Beaudry, Guevara, & Kaiser, 2017).

## Perspectives of Indigenous educators

### Hamel 2017

Not all scholarship in the field of transitions comes from scholars outside of school settings; an important perspective is that of the educator. Hamel (2017) is a BC educator who argues that engaging Indigenous worldviews and traditional ways of knowledge sharing/teaching will create the conditions for greater student success and, concomitantly, their transition from elementary to secondary school. This relies on an important principle: strong teacher-student relations are needed for student success, linked to a strong sense of belonging and genuine inclusion. Feeling welcome, the recognition of unique gifts or contributions, the valuing of diverse life experiences, and student voice are components of this approach. Like Sutton (2012), Hamel describes the importance of formal bridging programs for students to support them through transitions, yet her approach emphasizes the community, and the social and cultural components of transition strategies. Connecting to community is linked to enhancing the students’ sense of belonging and security, and to their identity.



### Edzerza et al 2017

Edzerza et al (2017) also emphasize that Indigenous learning is highly invested in place, community and language, and that in introducing these components to elementary and secondary schooling, Indigenous students experience higher degrees of engagement and success. While not specifically designed as strategies to assist in transition, the authors note that recognizing and valuing the role of community, of language and culture, and their links to land provide them with tools which deeply engage and connect their students to learning and school.

## Indigenous pedagogy

While it goes beyond the scope of this report to fully canvas the existing scholarship in Indigenous education and approaches to pedagogy, it is important to briefly highlight some key thinkers in this field, largely because, as has already been identified, Sutton's (2012) and Tilleczeck's (2010) seminal work in transition research make clear that educational practices of teachers are a primary tool through which to successfully support student transition. Further, the OECD report (2017) and Hamel's (2017) descriptions of supporting the transitions of Indigenous students hint at how there are particular conditions that face Indigenous learners, and that these demand new approaches for supporting learners in transition. Indigenous pedagogy or approaches to learning and teaching can potentially provide us with some important tools to examine and evaluate the success of particular approaches to transition.

Indigenous approaches to teaching and learning vary from the traditional notion of 'pedagogy' described in much teaching and learning literature. Pedagogy in general, references practices, instructional models and strategies for best engaging learners, operating within a philosophical framework about the purposes within which learning should be grounded. An Indigenous view of pedagogy goes beyond strategies, methods or approaches to promising practice and embraces the epistemological and philosophical beliefs of Indigenous peoples that guide the whole person, and in particular is inclusive of cultural practices (Hodgson-Smith, 2000).

## Learning spirit

Leading Indigenous researchers in Canada have suggested a need to attend to what they describe as a "learning spirit"; a spirit that must be nourished and rekindled using approaches that deeply engage Indigenous learners in a centered exploration or lifelong journey. Such a journey is holistic and involves inclusive forms of learning that "recognize and nurture all aspects of the learner in the learning environment—spiritual, emotional,

mental and physical—within a network of social relations where all are connected by mutual respect” (Anuik, Battiste, & George, 2010, p. 67). Some of this approach to holistic learning means addressing areas of education or curriculum not typically considered in traditional Western schools; issues such as spirit in both human and the natural world, ancestral knowledge and oral traditions, the knowledge that emerges from the land and one’s connection to it, and the collective nature of learning. It suggests profound changes to Western forms of teaching practice—everything from the content of curriculum to assessment methods, will need to be re-considered using a more culturally inclusive lens.

### Relationships

Another key element of an Indigenous pedagogy is that it is relationally focused. Baskerville (2009), in her study of how to best engage with her own Maori learners, described her approach to teaching and learning as a *relational pedagogy*. She argued cultural immersion was foundational to understanding her students’ lives and approaches to learning, and demonstrated respect for their cultural traditions. This replaced her previously held deficit-focused worldview with one that created the conditions for shared learning and reciprocal regard. Her work is important because it focuses on the transformation of the beliefs and understandings of the teacher, a key component of effecting changes in practices.

### Teachers’ beliefs

The importance of altering teachers’ beliefs about Indigenous students is also identified in the Bishop, Berryman, Wearmouth, Peter & Clapham (2012) case study of a teacher professional development program designed to help teachers better address Maori student learning needs. The learning program developed and implemented in a series of schools (33) over a six year, two-phased implementation period, emphasized the need to develop alternative discourses that teachers could use to problematize their assumed thinking, as well as offering them experiences that exposed the contradictions/tensions between their pre-existing beliefs and alternative conceptions—a form of cognitive dissonance. The goal was to create conditions necessary for teachers to see themselves as change agents, individuals capable of affecting the conditions under which their students might better learn. A primary means of supporting this learning was through the introduction of a local facilitator, someone who could provide support to teachers as they attempted to implement new approaches or practices through their personal inquiries.

## First Peoples' Principles of Learning

Finally, we would be remiss if we didn't also provide references to the First Peoples' Principles of Learning (2008), a document created by the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) that now informs BC's curriculum planning processes. Originally designed by a group of BC Indigenous scholars and leaders, the First Peoples' Principles of Learning bridge both the pedagogical issues identified above, but also consider issues of relationality, belonging, spiritual, cultural and sacred knowledges and traditions. The set of principles (shown in Figure B) has become a key planning tool for teachers and leaders in their work on equity scanning, in their approaches to curriculum planning, and in the development of agreements between local school authorities and the First Nations they service. As is also evidenced in this report, many teachers also use this document as a guide to their own thinking and planning for instructional purposes.

Figure B: **First Peoples' Principles of Learning**

- Learning ultimately supports the wellbeing of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors.
- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on 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.

## Weaving the threads

In summary, there are several particular threads and understandings about Indigenous teaching and learning or pedagogical practices that may usefully inform our approaches to considering transitions with Indigenous students. These ideas stress the importance of culturally inclusive forms of knowledge, curriculum, and teaching pedagogy; that these should inform the ways in which we imagine, design and implement transition strategies. It also supports a focus on relationality—one that builds a shared commitment to learning and growing, among adults, teachers, and communities, defined beyond the traditional classroom walls. It also suggests that our goal of supporting students in transition requires us to re-imagine our learners as engaged in a journey that isn't defined by the spaces

between—the transitions—but as part of a continuum of being, becoming and belonging. These ideas will, I believe, allow us to potentially deconstruct operationalized assumptions about Indigenous students in transition, while also providing us with some strong hunches about what might work in the context of BC schools. When considered in tandem with other research-based recommendations, primarily represented in the work of Tillecck (2010) and Sutton (2012), we have a basis from which to knowledgeably assess the inquiries documented in this report. In the summary of this report, we do exactly that.

Ten inquiry teams participated in the three-year study:

- Ballenas Secondary School, Parksville, BC
- Charles Hays Secondary, Prince Rupert, BC
- Dover Bay Secondary School, Nanaimo, BC
- Eke Me-Xi Learning Centre, Port Hardy, BC
- Frank Hurt Secondary, Surrey, BC
- Gudengaay Tlaats'gaa Naay Secondary, Masset, BC
- Peace River North School District, BC
- Smithers Secondary, Smithers, BC
- Southern Okanagan Secondary, Oliver, BC
- WL Seaton Secondary, Vernon BC

We would like to acknowledge the Indigenous traditional territories on which these schools reside. We honour the valued shared traditional knowledge that is critical for all student and staff learning.

The work of each team is described briefly in this report. To learn more, follow the link at the end of each case study.

## Ballenas Secondary School, Parksville BC

With 1000 students at Ballenas Secondary, less than 10% of the student population identifies as Indigenous. For this Inquiry team in Parksville BC, the grade 10 year is their transition focus area. In the process of asking their staff and students how to better support students in grade 10 and beyond, their hunch has been that incorporating Indigenous worldviews and Indigenous resources into their mini-lessons, core courses and making Indigenous culture and history visible within their school walls will foster a greater sense of belonging in the school.

A challenge for this team has been creating opportunities for professional learning within the wider school staff and creating comfort around Indigenous pedagogy and history with the teaching staff. The challenge is to help teachers feel both comfortable and passionate about advancing Indigenous education, while recognizing its importance as part of Canada's history.

The Ballenas team has approached student success and belonging using many different strategies including Indigenizing their school logo with the help of a local First Nations artist. For the school this is an important symbol of their commitment to incorporating Indigenous worldviews and culture into their school. For the Indigenous students at Ballenas this has been a source of pride and the team has noticed that it has also contributed to a larger culture of inclusion. By celebrating diversity in general, the inquiry team is helping to send out a broader message of belonging, inclusion and safety at their school.

**Original inquiry question:** How can we best create and foster learner-responsive school structures to support Aboriginal transitions through grade 10 and beyond?

**Primary activity:** Mini-lessons (LINK, a program designed to enhance Indigenous student connections to our school), grade 10, professional learning, sense of belonging, physical representations of Indigenous culture, flexible learning spaces, teacher collaboration, incorporation of Indigenous resources, Circle of Courage, Inquiry mindset, Social Emotional Learning, Diversity.

**Next steps:** Continued incorporation of Indigenous resources within the core curriculum, including implementation of English First Peoples 10 throughout the school; continued provision of flexible learning spaces; and continued focus on the Circle of Courage and Social Emotional Learning within the LINK system.

**Key learning:** Transforming teacher beliefs about our Indigenous students will create an accepting and inclusive environment; embracing diversity will shift the culture of our school and staff.

**2018 update:** The team is bringing in much more community support and involvement through a planned paddle installation ceremony; team is connecting to kids more often, and visually honouring histories with a visual timeline in the main hallway of the building; plans to talk/reflect/plan for next year's work. (Read the team's own 2018 report at [www.noii.ca/ecole-ballenas-secondary-sd69-qualicum](http://www.noii.ca/ecole-ballenas-secondary-sd69-qualicum))

## Charles Hays Secondary, Prince Rupert BC

Charles Hays Secondary in Prince Rupert BC has 620 students, over 60% of which identify as Indigenous, the majority of whom are Tsimshian, Nisga'a, Tahltan, Gitsan, Haisla, Heiltsuk, Haida and Tlinget. The Inquiry team in Prince Rupert has focused on involving many staff members at the school and building inquiry at the whole staff level. Their questions centre around connection. What would it feel like, look like, sound like, (and taste like!), for all learners to be connected to the school? Using the Spirals of Inquiry model, and the concept of Hagwilaan (walking slowly), the team has endeavored to listen carefully and build collective expertise in order to enhance relationships with learners.

Graduation rates are of particular concern for Charles Hays Secondary. The school principal recalls that when she began teaching at the school graduation rate for Indigenous students was only 25%. While it has more than doubled now, there is still more improvement to be made. Like other inquiry teams, the Charles Hays team has expanded the graduation window, focusing on helping students graduate in a six-year time period instead of five years.

This year, one of the major events at Charles Hays was the Transitions Learning Feast. Involving students as peer leaders, the feast welcomed the new grade 8 students using feasting traditions from the local First Nations planned in collaboration with community Elders. Additionally, based on the feedback of their students, the team has created flexible learning spaces for their learners and put more emphasis on creating time for students and staff to connect.

**Original inquiry question:** What would it feel like, look like, sound like (and taste like!) for all learners to be connected to the school? How could we achieve that for all our learners? For students: What brings you to school and what keeps you here?

**Primary activity:** Relationship building, grade-to-grade transitions, inquiry mindset, Hagwilaan (walking slowly), connecting to local culture and tradition, graduation rates, flexible learning spaces.

**Next steps:** Continuing with ongoing projects, listening carefully and comparing experiences between years to continue growing in a positive direction.

**Key learning:** Genuine relationships, grounded in community and cultural traditions, connect students in positive and meaningful ways.

**2018 update:** Team regularly connecting with community and stakeholders (quarterly), with an emphasis on intergenerational learning; Indigenous learning is a focus of everyone—for example, a group of teachers are working on a moccasin project with students, making moccasins for babies who go into foster care as a reminder of who they are and where they come from. Also planning to build a traditional smokehouse, involving Elders, teachers, students and community. (Read the team's own 2018 report at [www.noii.ca/charles-hays-secondary-sd52-prince-rupert](http://www.noii.ca/charles-hays-secondary-sd52-prince-rupert))

## Dover Bay Secondary School, Nanaimo BC

Dover Bay Secondary is a school of 1400 students. For the team at Dover Bay their inquiry study focuses involving the grade 8 students in their own inquiry projects. In year 2 of the Dover Study, students were involved in a cross-curricular inquiry project with an Indigenous focus. By asking students to reflect on the inquiry question, “How does where one lives affect how one lives?”, the team engaged the First Peoples’ Principles of Learning and Indigenous Worldviews across their learner’s grade 8 experience.

The team focused on developing interdisciplinary projects with collaboration across existing school departments, with an emphasis on social-emotional learning, developing positive mindsets, and promoting skills related to social responsibility. By focusing on a single question and allowing students to explore it across classes and disciplines, teachers had the opportunity to work collaboratively with colleagues in ways they never have before. While students engage in their own self-assessment, teachers also come together to assess student learning in teams: teachers were able to learn from each other’s perspectives as they related to student learning.

For some of the teachers, the professional learning that the inquiry project required of them was to gain and develop confidence in their own ability to teach students from an Indigenous perspective. As one member of the team said: “I was able to develop a lot of confidence around my ability to authentically offer learning for students with an Aboriginal perspective. I had always been quite unconfident in my knowledge and abilities in that sense, because I don’t have a lot of Aboriginal understandings; but I wasn’t standing alone having to do it, so that made a difference.”

The collaborative nature of the approach at Dover Bay offers a useful tool for other predominantly non-Aboriginal teaching communities to consider.

**Original inquiry question:** How can we best improve student ownership of learning through the promotion of First Peoples’ Principles of Learning, Assessment for Learning and the Community of Learners assessment tool?

**Primary activity:** Experiential learning, interdisciplinary learning, collaborative learning environments, teacher collaboration, self-assessment, social responsibility.

### Next steps:

- 1 Continue to provide opportunities for experiential learning and self-assessment.
- 2 Continue helping students to build relationships and social responsibility skills.
- 3 Explore the use of this cross-curricular guided inquiry project as a means of providing students with the skills that they will need to embark on a personal inquiry passion project later in the school year.
- 4 Bring the process of the Spiral of Inquiry more completely into our pedagogy while making the process meaningful for all team members.



**Key learning:** Teamwork helps foster passion and innovation and collaboration supports our learning as professionals.

**Challenges:** To sustain the high level of collaboration that we enjoyed as a team last year. Obstacles to effective collaboration include; lack of common release time, a change in some team members, and the need to balance the collective vision with teacher autonomy.

**2018 update:** Teachers are planning and revising their cross-curricular inquiry project; also tying this work to the new BC core competencies. The team took a group of their students to VIU (Vancouver Island University) to share how cross curricular inquiry deepens student learning about local Indigenous communities; this was presented to educational leaders from across the region, exemplifying how teacher/student inquiry is transforming their school culture. (Read the team's own 2018 report at [www.noii.ca/dover-bay-secondary-sd68-nanaimo-ladysmith](http://www.noii.ca/dover-bay-secondary-sd68-nanaimo-ladysmith))

## Eke Me-Xi Learning Centre, Port Hardy BC

The Eke Me-Xi Learning Centre is a small alternative school located in Tsalquate (drying place), serving the Port Hardy region and Tri-Band communities of Quatsino, Kwakiutl, and Gwa'sala-Nakwaxda'xw Nations. In 2016 they started the school year with 51 students, almost all of whom identify as Indigenous. At the beginning of their Inquiry project this team was interested in the question of how their identity as an alternative school contributed to students', families' and staff members' assumptions about the school and their own ideas of academic success, as well as a sense of belonging and identity. The team in Port Hardy heard stories of racism and stereotyping from their students who had experienced a de-valuing of the alternative education they were receiving from those believing that the larger Port Hardy high school provided a better education.

The Eke Me-Xi curriculum stresses that First Nations traditional knowledge has just as much value as Western science. According to one teacher at Eke Me-Xi, the mindset in Canada has contributed to Indigenous knowledge as being considered 'less-than'. For her, part of the solution is, "Building up students' self-esteem, and [supporting them] in realizing that their traditional knowledge is just as valuable as Western knowledge."

In the second year of their inquiry the focus for this team has shifted to trying to understand the transition of skills and skill-sets that the students learn and develop at school, and their transfer to life outside of school—at home, in the community, or to post-secondary or career opportunities. For the team at Eke Me-Xi the inquiry mind-set is a set of tools that students can draw upon in understanding their own transitions, one they can use and gain proficiency in.

With programs and activities that include clam digging and smoking fish, students build skills while taking pride in their cultures, connecting with Elders and building relationships at school and in their communities.

**Original inquiry question:** How can we best support students in connecting the skills used and developed in school with the skills needed as students transfer to life outside of school?

**Primary activities:** Experiential learning, flexible learning spaces, teacher collaboration, connecting with Elders, self-directed learning, high school transition support, alternative education, teaching for skill transfer.

**Next steps:** Continue to provide opportunities for experiential learning and self-assessment, while increasing parental and community involvement in the processes of the school.

**Key learning:** For students, linking school activities with cultural pride leads to greater engagement in learning; Indigenous knowledge must be profiled and recognized as important.

**2018 update:** We have continued to focus on a variety of on the land cultural learning experiences, clamming, alder gathering, regalia making. We have developed a tool to gather student learning data that connects to the core competencies. This will help both the staff and the students to value and articulate the discrete skills connected with cultural learning experiences. We are also planning a trip to Ba'as (traditional homelands) to help refurbish the clam beds. (Read the team's own 2018 report at [www.noii.ca/eke-me-xi-learning-centre-sd85-vancouver-island-north](http://www.noii.ca/eke-me-xi-learning-centre-sd85-vancouver-island-north))

## Frank Hurt Secondary, Surrey BC

Frank Hurt has a student population of approximately 1200, roughly 10% of which identify as being of Indigenous descent. Starting in the Fall of 2015, the Inquiry team at Frank Hurt noticed through their student surveys, that while many students (73%) could name two adults in their life that they identified as caring about their success and well-being, very few of these adults (9 out of 47) were enrolling teachers. With an overarching goal of making the transition from grade 7 to grade 8 successful for their Indigenous learners, the team at Frank Hurt Secondary made it their goal to, “match-make relationships between [their] students and their caring classroom teachers, who play a meaningful role in promoting positive identities as learners.”

Based on their hunch that this would make a significant impact for their Indigenous learners, the team focused on establishing a transition framework for their students that would include high school visits, relationship bridging, enhancement programming,

parental engagement and methods to enhance the capacity of teachers to build relationships with students in their classes. For the team at Frank Hurt, each activity included in the transition framework, whether it be a grade 7 and 8 kayak trip, an open-house dinner or a drum making workshop, is only as valuable as the relationship building opportunities present within it.

The team has learned that while events and activities are important and create a framework for new and old students, teachers, non-enrolling school staff, parents and community members to come together, it is the quality of these connections and relationships that determine success for students transitioning and building positive identities for themselves as learners. A challenge for the Frank Hurt team is the shifting nature of staffing and space within their building; new team members will be added in the next iteration of their inquiry.

**Original inquiry question:** How can we make grade 7-8 transitions successful for our Aboriginal learners?

**Primary activity:** Transition framework, relationship bridging.

**Next steps:** Continue to create opportunities and enhance capacity within the school for relationship building between students and school staff, enrolling and non-enrolling.

**Key learning:** Relational work with students transforms teachers, teams & teacher practice; shifting personal and socio-cultural beliefs about Indigenous students and communities is challenging but rewarding work.

**2018 update:** The team met with the schools' administration team to talk about how to embed a strength based approach to all school planning processes; we also met with the family of schools in our district to ensure we can extend our transition framework/ approach to working with Indigenous learners. There is also funding for an Indigenous Day community gather event that the team wants to use to ensure a shared commitment to this work across our district/group of schools. (Read the team's own 2018 report at [www.noii.ca/frank-hurt-secondary-sd36-surrey](http://www.noii.ca/frank-hurt-secondary-sd36-surrey))

## Gudangaay Tlaats'gaa Naay Secondary, Masset (Haida Gwaii) BC

The Gudangaay Tlaats'gaa Naay Secondary School in Masset, BC has a student population of 98, 80% of whom identify as Indigenous.

The Inquiry team in Haida Gwaii began their inquiry project by looking at grade 7 transitions into high school. They have since shifted their inquiry, based on feedback they have received from students, as well as their observations of the student experience, to focus on students' ownership of their learning experience.

The team observed and heard from students that the high school experience was something they perceived as being done to them, rather than something they chose to do for themselves. The team, inspired and motivated by the new BC curriculum, set to work thinking and planning ways to increase student self-efficacy, engagement and ownership. One of their main priorities was to find ways of giving students credits for activities and learning that was happening outside of the classroom and often outside of school hours.

When the team had originally been focusing on grade 7 transitions, one of their strategies had been including the grade 7s in their COAST program (Cultural, Outdoor, Alternative Studies). The program focuses on experiential learning outside of the classroom, and grade 7s from the three elementary partner schools were invited to participate twice a year to help build connections and comfort with the high school experience. The COAST program includes activities that range from hunting, to seaweed gathering, to photography, engaging students with staff members and community members to learn new skills and have new experiences.

The team has since put more effort into supporting student self-directed learning through a request-for-credit system allowing students to apply for credits for out-of-school activities and learning.

This year their focus is shifting to transitioning into the new curriculum and providing further student-directed learning through alternative forms of education.

**Original inquiry question:** How can we aid student transitions through creating connections to the Core Competencies, integrating Aboriginal Understandings, and increasing student ownership of learning?

**Primary activity:** Experiential learning (COAST Program), flexible learning spaces, teacher collaboration, incorporation of Indigenous resources, self-directed learning, high school transition support, alternative education

**Next steps:** Continue to provide opportunities for experiential and self-directed learning through the COAST and request-for-credit programs. Find more opportunities for staff collaboration and begin to focus on trauma-informed education. Continue to be guided by student voice/directions.

**Key learning:** Taking ownership over learning goals is an essential skill for students in transition; place based and culturally informed learning opportunities are central to ownership.

**2018 updates:** Empowerment, Cultural Awareness, and Responsibility are all important terms found in our school goals. Opportunities in experiential learning (COAST program) athletics, on the land, and lending a helping hand are all linked to our inquiry, and they all connect to Empowerment, Cultural Awareness, and Responsibility. (Read the team's own 2018 report at [www.noii.ca/gudangaay-tlaatsgaa-naay-secondary-sd50-haida-gwaii](http://www.noii.ca/gudangaay-tlaatsgaa-naay-secondary-sd50-haida-gwaii))

## Peace River North School District, BC

The Inquiry team from Peace River North is unique in that the team spans four schools. Three of the schools are middle schools, with their grade 9 students moving into North Peace Senior Secondary School which also has a separate grade 10 campus. The district has approximately 27% of their students identifying as Indigenous. The Inquiry team includes staff members from each of these schools, Aboriginal transition coaches, members of the Aboriginal Council including Elders from each Indigenous community, and is led from the district level.

The Aboriginal Transition program focuses on increasing academic readiness and creating a greater sense of belonging for the students through both relationship building and infusing Indigenous and First Peoples' ways of knowing into the school curriculum. Part of this shift included taking a strengths based approach, helping students to develop areas of strength and providing choices that would allow students to demonstrate their learning and knowledge in ways that elicited pride and supported a connection to their communities and culture.

One way that the Peace River North team has accomplished this is through a course called *Learning from the Elders*. Students have been given the opportunity to get school credits for working with Elders within their community to benefit from the stories and teachings of the traditional knowledge keepers of their communities. This program continues to develop and many non-Indigenous students have shown interest in the course.

The Peace River North team has created a cohesive system that offers holistic support to students transitioning into high school. The team really appreciates the process of inquiry and what they have been able to learn and develop themselves as educators through this process. In particular, they have come to value the teachings and knowledge they gain from their own Indigenous students. They have also been able to observe how the programs they are running within their schools have benefits that reach far beyond the school, creating connections to local Elders, communities and fostering confidence and cultural pride in their students.

**Original inquiry question:** How can we support grade 9 students to more successfully transition from middle school to high school?

**Primary activities:** Aboriginal support coaches, teacher collaboration, relationship building, academic preparedness, connecting with Elders (Learning from the Elders course), Inquiry mindset.

**Next steps:** Continue with the Aboriginal Transition program and build in more peer-to-peer leadership opportunities as well as creating more meaningful educational experiences through building further connections with Elders and Indigenous communities.

**Key learning:** Relationships are vital to supporting Indigenous students in transitions; place based and cultural learning outcomes are central to success.

**2018 updates:** Transition coaches are having important impacts on student's success and sense of identity and belonging within the schools. Students sharing their stories of learning with district leaders is creating a broader, district wide commitment to this work. The team plans to build on these successes and create an Elders in Residence program. (Read the team's own 2018 report at [www.noii.ca/bert-bowes-middle-school-dr-kearney-middle-school-north-peace-secondary-school-north-peace-secondary-school-energetic-learning-campus-sd60-peace-river-north](http://www.noii.ca/bert-bowes-middle-school-dr-kearney-middle-school-north-peace-secondary-school-north-peace-secondary-school-energetic-learning-campus-sd60-peace-river-north))

## Smithers Secondary, Smithers BC

Smithers Secondary has 670 students, with approximately 20% identifying as Indigenous. There are 10 school staff on the Inquiry team at Smithers Secondary. They began their inquiry project in the fall of 2015 with a focus on grade-to-grade transitions. Since then they have begun to understand transitions more broadly. The principal at Smithers Secondary explained the team's complex understanding of the idea of transitions:

“With transitions we always think of moving from one grade to the next, but I think it's pretty clear from the one-on-one conversations we've had, that transitions are everything from having good attendance, to believing in oneself, to maybe looking at post-secondary, so it's pretty complex for a lot of our learners.”

With this understanding, the Inquiry team at Smithers Secondary has focused on an array of strategies, activities and principles working to help every student graduate with *dignity, purpose and options*. They have been listening deeply to their students, and understand that transition needs can depend on context. For example, some Indigenous learners experience the legacy of violence from residential schooling, and strategies of support need to accommodate these personal needs. The team's approach to transition support can best be described as an individual coaching model and building positive trusting relationships. Further, they identified a need to help students move from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. In conversations with Indigenous students, the team recognized that an interdependent versus an independent model of education can make a big difference because the students are more comfortable and confident working with peers than individually. Incorporating First Peoples' Principles of Learning and Indigenous Worldviews into the school environment also helps to increase student successes.

One of the challenges the Smithers team has identified is the amount of individual support and coaching that is necessary to make a difference for each student. They are hoping that in moving forward they can adjust structures, beliefs and practices that support the

work they are doing in a more sustainable and self-fulfilling way. In the meantime, they are seeing successes with their students and are noticing some peer-to-peer leadership, stronger connections and some learners are changing self-concepts to be more positive.

**Original inquiry question:** How can we better support Aboriginal students to succeed in grade to grade transitions and to graduate with dignity, purpose and options for life after SSS?

**Primary activity:** Relationship building, individual coaching, grade-to-grade transitions, integration of First Peoples' Principles of Learning, increase of graduation rates, building connections, fostering Inquiry and growth mindsets, promoting peer to peer leadership.

**Next steps:** Continue to engage students in an examination of their experiences; continue to engage all staff in efforts to create a culture of coaching and support for Indigenous students; consider how to sustain these activities in a more regularized form.

**Key learning:** Relationship building, pedagogical choice and flexible strategies matter most.

**2018 updates:** This team has developed a transition document called The Learning Journey and is using it to facilitate conversations about belonging, being and becoming. It was co-created by community members, students and educators. The team is piloting it with grade 8 students and hope to use it on an ongoing basis with this and other groups of students. (Read the team's own 2018 report at [www.noii.ca/smithers-secondary-school-sd54-bulkley-valley](http://www.noii.ca/smithers-secondary-school-sd54-bulkley-valley))

## Southern Okanagan Secondary, Oliver BC

Southern Okanagan Secondary School in Oliver, BC welcomes 485 students through their doors each day. Approximately 85 of these students identify as Indigenous, just under half of them living on nearby reserves of the Osoyoos Indian Band. For the team at Southern Okanagan, their inquiry journey began in fall 2015 with a series of 'why' questions. Why were their Indigenous students not engaging? Why were so many not graduating within the five-year window? Why did the extra supports they were attempting to provide not seem to be making a significant difference?

Following the Spirals of Inquiry model, the team had a hunch. They noticed that many of the struggling students they surveyed participated in activities outside of school where they were engaged and focused. They believed that the demonstrated lack of school engagement was a result of an incongruence between the teaching strategies employed by the school and the learning needs and styles of the Indigenous students they serve.

In response to this hunch, and supported by survey data from their entire student body, the inquiry team set to work designing the EPIC program: Experiential, Project Based, Indigenous and Community focused learning. A young teacher of Indigenous descent



led the EPIC program. In its first year, students were able to gain credits in Social Studies, Physical Education, Woodwork and Information Technology over a single semester. Multiple disciplines were woven together to allow students the opportunity to make traditional crafts and tools like fish traps and canoe paddles while engaging with Elders and, “embracing a land-based, cross-curricular and multi-grade structure.” Through creating and facilitating the EPIC experience, making stronger connections with their local Indigenous communities, and creating more opportunity for student engagement, the inquiry team has discovered that they themselves are learning as much as their students.

As the EPIC program moves into its third year, the inquiry team is looking forward to seeing some of the longer term impacts of the program. Asked whether the Inquiry team expects to see a rise in their graduation rate, the school principal replied, “With all the programs we have going right now, and the level of connectedness and the efforts we’re putting in, and the response we’re getting from our Aboriginal learners, ... it would be crazy to think it’s not going to impact students in a positive way.” One of the most powerful comments coming from EPIC has been, “This is way better than school” and so the team believes they are on the right track.

In 2017-2018, the EPIC program was expanded to grade 9/10 students. The credited courses will change but the program will continue with a similar structure, and expand with two additional cross-curricular courses: a combination of English First Peoples 10 and Art 10, as well as Biology 11 and English 11. Additionally, Indigenous content and pedagogy will be introduced in Math, Social Studies, Art and English with ongoing collaboration between the teachers in these subjects.

**Original inquiry question:** How do we make student engagement and success, particularly for our Aboriginal students, our focus?

**Primary activity:** Multidisciplinary education, cross curricular learning, land based approach (EPIC), teacher collaboration, experiential education, project based approach

**Next steps:** In 2018/2019 the EPIC program will continue to run for its third year, as will additional cross-curricular, interdisciplinary courses with Indigenous content, pedagogy and teacher collaboration across multiple subject areas and grades.

**Key learning:** Student engagement is linked to motivation, passion and a connection to community; interdisciplinary approaches create connections and engagement; place based and cultural learning.

**2018 updates:** This team has been working on the creation of a video documentary outlining their inquiry work, and programs integrating FPPL as a part of their design, and the impacts these approaches are having on learners. It will focus on the community engaged, intergenerational learning between the Okanagan peoples and educators/ students at South Okanagan Secondary school. (Read the team’s own 2018 report at [www.noi.ca/southern-okanagan-secondary-school-sd53-okanagan-similkameen](http://www.noi.ca/southern-okanagan-secondary-school-sd53-okanagan-similkameen))



## WL Seaton Secondary, Vernon BC

WL Seaton has a student population of 850 students. In 2016, 156 of those identified as Indigenous. While the team at WL Seaton is moving into year three of this inquiry study, their inquiry project goes back to 2008. At that time they were looking at the transitions of their grade 8 students who were beginning their time at Seaton after attending grade 7 in various elementary schools. The staff at WL Seaton noticed they were losing students, particularly Indigenous students, during this transition and began the inquiry process.

The team at Seaton successfully addressed the grade 7-8 transition, putting into place a year-long program called Junior Academy, whereby grade 8 students go through their first year at Seaton with a focused group of teachers and support staff, completing their requirements through the inquiry and project based program. The program prioritizes relationship building both between students and school staff as well as amongst the students themselves. The team observed a fall in dropout rates as well as an increase in graduation rates. Now, they have chosen to focus their current inquiry project on the transition between high school and post-secondary.

With an expectation of success, the inquiry team has put supports in place that shifts the conversation for students from “if you graduate” to “when you graduate”. The team has found that students need a range of individual supports that might include coaching or counselling, as well as assistance meeting basic physiological and participation needs; this includes everything from food, to rides, to providing the equipment necessary to ensure that all students can participate in extracurricular sports teams and other activities. Seaton has experienced a huge amount of support from their Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) in this regard who are on board to make sure that students have the components necessary for success.

In addition to these individual supports, WL Seaton’s staff have worked hard to ease the transition to post-secondary by providing students the opportunity to see what college and university experiences look like. The school makes trips to the surrounding post-secondary campuses each year, helping students to see what the lived-experience of each place is. They provide the opportunity, for Indigenous students in particular, to build a relationship with a counsellor or support worker at each of the schools so they know where to seek advice and get help.

The team attributes much of their success to the strong rapport they have built between students and staff, creating a caring and nurturing environment within the school that both expects and supports success for their students.

**Original inquiry question:** What are the conditions necessary to encourage Aboriginal Students to transition successfully to post-secondary?

**Primary activities:** Provision of basic needs, teacher collaboration, relationship building, communication of supports available, building connections with post-secondary institutions, post-secondary school visits, individual supports (coaching, counselling), Aboriginal Welcome Room, breakfast program, embedded Indigenous content in classroom curriculum.

**Next steps:** Create a First Nations Academy, expand connections to post-secondary schools, communicate available supports to students in a more effective way, increase professional learning in the area of Indigenous content, continue to build strong connections with students, and create a school lunch program to meet students' needs.

**Key learning:** Safe spaces are important for ensuring student success; relationships are foundational to this.

**2018 updates:** The team is continuing to develop and refine its First Peoples Academy for grades 10-12 and has expanded to offer an Okanagan language course for grade 8/9 students. Post-secondary connections have been an important focus and Indigenous students are being supported in their efforts to be accepted into a variety of post-secondary opportunities. The culture of being a village of adults working with Indigenous youth to support them in all aspects of their lives is foundational to this team's work. (Read the team's own 2018 report at [www.noii.ca/wl-seaton-secondary-school-sd22-vernon](http://www.noii.ca/wl-seaton-secondary-school-sd22-vernon))



Part 2

# **Analysis and findings**

## Gathering the data

In this section of the report, we draw from the themes and ideas we saw as significant or important to the teachers who were involved in the ten inquiry teams. Our interviews with these teams were conducted in June and July 2017. These interviews followed the NOII symposium which was held in May 2017, at which time each participating school team also presented a summary of their inquiry and explored the major findings or impacts of their learning. My assistant (Lake) and I (McGregor) attended these sessions. We also reviewed the inquiry summaries each team completed at the end of 2017. In year three (fall 2017-spring 2018), I conducted interviews with the coaches who were asked to support their teams and reviewed three years of coaching reports to analyze and look for patterns. I also met with each of the teams to share preliminary findings about the inquiry patterns revealed through the analysis. The teams presented posters during the NOII symposium (2018) and were asked to summarize their third year findings in a short written report to their coaches.

These final comments are briefly summarized in the case study summaries in this report. The findings about coaching are also shared in Part 3 of this report.

We also sought to enrich this summary by including stories shared with us that came from our engagement with each of the teams. Stories appear in shaded boxes to help differentiate them from the analysis.

The analysis began with coding each interview to see to what key ideas emerged from each team's experience in conducting their inquiry. To enhance reliability of the coding, the researcher and her assistant coded transcripts separately; we then met and confirmed common and differing codes, adjusting to ensure we were both representing the ideas appropriately. We then created a concept map that listed all of the codes, and began grouping common ideas together. These individual codes were initially grouped into 30 broader thematic areas. As we continued to review our analysis and consider relationships between the various codes, we finalized six broad categories of analysis. The six categories of analysis included:

- Transition strategies: structural and relational
- Being, belonging and becoming
- Student voices
- Process of inquiry
- Teacher learning
- Ally-focused partnerships and leaders

In what follows we will briefly explore each general category, and provide exemplars from the data we collected to bring life to the thematic analysis. We do not list the themes in any particular order, so readers should not take from the discussion provided below that some ideas were more important than others. All were evident and provide insights into understanding transitions for Indigenous students and how to best support them in a school context.

### Structural strategies

As our project is largely focused on transitions for Indigenous students, it makes sense to consider the category of transition strategies first. As you might expect, this was an important emphasis in all of the 10 cases, given that the purpose of the inquiry was to find ways to support students in transition. Not surprisingly, the approaches were consistent with the literature on transitions, particularly Sutton's (2012) framework that identifies strategies related to structures/program design features, social and/or personal approaches, curricular or content change, and pedagogical or teaching approaches. However, all of the cases took multiple and overlapping approaches to supporting students through transitions. These approaches can be broadly divided into two types: structural strategies and relationship strategies.

One of the more common approaches was what could be described as structural; this involves creating either new classes, drop in centers, resource rooms or new programs designed specifically for Indigenous students. For example, several schools offer opening or welcoming events, such as school tours, open houses, baseball games or dinners, at either the beginning of the new school year, or at the end of the previous year—a way to

communicate some key messages about the new school or program students would be attending. The goal of initial events such as these is to make apparent the level of support students can have in transitioning from one school site to another, and acts as a way to share information, to reduce anxiety and make connections with individuals they would see again in the new school setting. In many cases, school teams have designed a series of events or activities to be held over the course of the school year, each designed to take on the particular learning needs, issues or concerns of their Indigenous students.

Another common approach is the creation of a resource room, or a dedicated space (often a classroom) specifically designed to support Indigenous students where they can connect with teachers, Indigenous support workers, community members, Elders or other students who are of Indigenous descent. An important structural component to these programmatic or resource base responses are teachers who are employed in positions where they are responsible for the transition program. For example, in Peace River North there are two teachers employed who are a part of the transition team whose role is to support Indigenous students in their two school locations (in this case moving from a middle to high school).

While individual teachers might be hired to take on formal roles related to transition, their work can vary significantly from district to district. For example, some schools create opportunities for individual coaching; others work with Elders and support workers to identify students who need support and provide specific resources and opportunities to tackle problems or issues that have emerged for particular students. Others work in teams to create shared resources that can be used to guide work with Indigenous students; for example, in Peace River North the transition team members have developed a *Learning Journey* document designed to help staff engage in a structured conversation with an Indigenous student, while assisting the student in setting personal and academic goals. It is a planning tool based on achieving high school graduation, and is often used by the Indigenous support coaches who are designated as individuals who work directly with Indigenous students at their school.

Another way that structural systems have been developed involves creating specific courses designed to support Indigenous learners. In many cases these courses integrate into the school timetable, but with variations in delivery models, instructional design features, or curriculum components. In the next section I highlight several examples to illustrate.

In Peace River North, the transition strategy included the development of a course called “Learning from Elders”; it operated as an elective for Indigenous students to enroll in for a single semester. The Learning from Elders program has evolved over time; it began inside the school and was taught by regular instructors. Now it also involves Elders as teachers and mentors and many of the activities take place in the community, with students leading in the design of their learning experiences based on their interests and under the

guidance of an Elder. This program became widely successful, with student enrolment doubling within the second year of its offering. It provides not only a course that is guided by cultural expression and engagement in traditional First People's activities, but builds pride in cultural identities. It also served as a catalyst for helping teaching staff see their Indigenous students as strong, capable and successful students.

In the Southern Okanagan, the Indigenous Transition inquiry group developed a program they called *EPIC*. EPIC stands for Experiential, Project-Based, Indigenous, Community based programming. This program was developed as a means of engaging Indigenous students in school in a non-traditional way; it is scheduled across subject areas, rather than requiring students to take individual classes in a typical timetable format. It also involves project-based forms of learning using Indigenous cultural themes as a focus, such as learning to build a sweat lodge or carve a paddle. The program also involves land-based activities, such as visiting and/or mapping significant cultural sites in the region. Elders and knowledge keepers in the community are involved in designing and delivering the curriculum, along with a designated teacher, who is of Indigenous descent.

In Vernon, a similar program operates, in this case called the Junior Academy. It is also a project based learning strategy designed to engage community and students in a co-constructed curriculum focused on cultural knowledge and Indigenous language acquisition. The Junior Academy also has a focus on transitions to post-secondary schooling; it invites Indigenous mentors to visit the class, discuss future careers or learning opportunities. In its second year, it has also invited its former graduates back to the classroom as a means of developing peer-to-peer coaches and mentors/guides. The guiding frame that teachers on this inquiry team continually use is a focus on success: as one team member stated, "We don't say to our students, *if* you graduate, we say *when* you graduate" and "*when* you go onto post-secondary". High expectations of success are conveyed by all staff who work with students.

Finally, the Eke Me-Xi student learning center team also took an interdisciplinary, land based, and culturally informed approach to their transition strategies; the integration of language learning (Kwak'wala), science, literacy and health related activities have been designed to embed local Indigenous culture into their offerings for Indigenous students. The Eke-Mei-Xi program differs from some others because it was collaboratively developed and is governed by a formal Tri Bands partnership agreement. Building a community team that relies on shared engagement of school and community is a unique feature of this inquiry team, but one that powerfully illustrates what can happen when the focus on Indigenous student transitions between school, home and community are understood as overlapping and interlocking.

Building on the idea of transforming beliefs about Indigenous students, the Dover Bay team believed that all learners—students, teachers, support staff and community—need to know and understand the many contributions Indigenous peoples make in social,

economic, political and cultural arenas. Their approach was school wide—and engaged all students in learning about Indigenous knowledges and contributions, as a means of creating a welcoming culture where Indigenous students could see themselves and their communities as proud, contributing members of society. Again, this approach involved a school-wide course that was offered in a series of modules throughout a semester; it differs from some of the other approaches described in that it is offered to all grade 8 students, regardless of their cultural/racial identity. It relies on an inquiry, project based method and integrates Indigenous knowledge into multiple strands of regular coursework, utilizing an interdisciplinary approach.

### **Relationship strategies: Being, belonging and becoming**

Structural approaches are not the only means through which transitions were supported by the inquiry teams who have been involved in this research project. Another key strategy employed by all of the teams was a focus on relationships: building genuine, engaged and supportive relationships among Indigenous students, their transition team members, and all other staff in the school community. These ideas certainly fit within Sutton's (2012) model for transition support, what she described as "social or personal transition strategies", but they also reflect Tilleczek's (2010) categories of "being, belonging and becoming". It's important to consider how Tilleczek's categories help us to understand how these inquiry transition teams approached their work as educators, allies and advocates, and the extent to which their approaches to transitions, particularly relationally driven approaches, drew from emerging knowledge about the diverse needs of their Indigenous students, Indigenous communities, and culturally appropriate means of engaging with students in learning situations.

The notion of belonging in particular has significance in the context of these schools and inquiry teams: when these teachers listened to their students describe what helped them feel like they belonged and what really mattered in the context of their school, it was a profoundly transforming experience for them. In these moments, the idea of transition shifted from approaches that emphasized becoming familiar with structures and expectations, to thinking about how the school culture itself created the spaces for genuine inclusiveness of diverse cultural identities. It also signals a shift from thinking about transitions as an individually managed skill or motivation to understanding the more complex, interactive nature of transitions, and why some students transition easily and others do not. What these educators were learning is that transitions are as much about processes of becoming a member of a school community, and how all are implicated in creating the conditions that can support Indigenous learners in multiple ways as they deal with diverse transitions in their lives.



The Frank Hurt Secondary team is a good example of a transition inquiry team that has deeply engaged in thinking about belonging, being and becoming as a part of their inquiry. They have deeply explored the idea of genuine and authentic engagement with all Indigenous learners as key to their approach. This has included creating spaces in which Indigenous students can explore their own identities and cultures in activities and projects designed to engage with their personal and collective histories. They also explicitly identified how engagement with Indigenous families and communities had to be done differently; moving from single or “one shot” efforts at outreach for particular events to ongoing engagement of parents and community in genuine consultation and shared learning. This understanding transformed how the team worked with members of the Indigenous families in their area, but also provided an impetus for setting new goals that would try and further shift the culture of other adults in their school community.

Working with the community and within cultural traditions was also a strategy used by the Charles Hays team: welcoming the broad community to the school, and engaging in shared planning using the Transitions Feast as the catalyst, provided a platform from which to bring together diverse communities and opportunities to honour cultural traditions, in a way that built a sense of belonging for all. So while one could say their approach was structural (creating an event that celebrated transitional accomplishments), the structure was responsive to and engaged with the relational understandings staff brought to creating its structure, as well as how it enabled a further enhancement of stories of belonging and being. This speaks to the complexity of transitional strategies and the sophisticated and thoughtful ways in which beliefs about identity and belonging are enmeshed within structural approaches.

All inquiry teams in this research project were engaged in exploring the ways that social and cultural belonging were implicitly involved in approaches to school transitions. As noted earlier, the Seaton secondary team understood about the power of language to shape beliefs about self and *where I belong*. They used this language to help their learners see themselves as successful, but also to persuade adults in the building to adopt its use so that mindsets of success replaced mindsets of deficit. Similarly, the Dover Bay team understood that shifting beliefs about Indigenous culture is part of dismantling long held assumptions that have traditionally valued Western achievements over Indigenous histories and stories. As was noted in the earlier literature review, teachers’ beliefs fundamentally shape their interactions with students, and so addressing this by showing a deep respect for the knowledge contributed to Canadian society by Indigenous peoples can create a culture in which all students can feel they belong, leading to more successful learner transitions. It also shows why these teams have identified the need to extend their transition inquiry to other adults in the school and community, in order to effect widespread cultural change.

We see these as practices that affirm identities, recognize their value, and validate their contributions to the school community. Structural approaches such as the Learning from Elders, EPIC and Junior Academy are also embedded with knowledge about the relational aspects of learning and, in particular, the value of cultural identities and the ways these identities are valued, recognized and central to creating a rich and inclusive school community.

While the focus in these latter examples has been to enhance Indigenous students' sense of belonging and being, we know these experiences also impact non-Indigenous learners and teachers who live and work within these school communities.

I want to share my story about Shona. She's from a community up north, she has to board in town as well. She often doesn't go home for weeks. She participated in the "Learning through Elders" course, did a total of 90 hours. She completed a project on storytelling, her Grandpa was a storyteller. She did this presentation for us at the end of her project. Then she decided she wanted to talk about it in front of the Aboriginal Council. Our superintendent was there too. She got up and said: "I can't believe how wonderful the program was, how much it made me grow".

Here's a student who when she began couldn't talk in front of others. She told me "I just didn't know other people would care about what I knew". She spent about 10 minutes talking about her process, and she had every person there—about 20 adults—in tears. So proud of her, and her culture, and how meaningful it was to her and the people around her. It was beautiful.

## Student voices

Each of the teams we met with understood the importance and value of student voice, although how this voice was honoured or included varied. In this section, voice has two important elements I want to briefly consider. One aspect of student voice is the inclusion of student perspectives and experiences in coming to understand the issues of Indigenous student transition. The second is about how voice enables emancipatory action and agency, an idea not universally held by school organizations. I will take each in turn.

It was clearly evident that all of the teams listened deeply and frequently to the voices of their Indigenous students. This was an important commitment that the NOII principals, Drs. Halbert and Kaser, repeatedly emphasized in their discussions with the teams and in sessions the teams attended in which the principals reviewed the features of the spiral of inquiry, and the process of scanning, the first phase of the spiral, in particular. The goal was to frequently and regularly "check in" with students to ensure that the inquiry team was heading in an appropriate direction as they explored how to better meet their

student transition needs. The importance of this should not be understated; Indigenous learners needed to be central to teachers' understanding of transitions, and engaging in direct conversations with their Indigenous learners was integral to an approach that puts learning at the center of why we engage in inquiry based practices. Each of the teams clearly understood this expectation, and when we met with them described how they engaged their learners in formal and informal ways—sometimes with surveys or interviews with scripted questions, or through anecdotal evidence collected by team members in their ongoing interactions with students. Student voices were powerful catalysts for action on the part of their teachers: stories of exclusion, stories of anger and fear, stories of acceptance became touchstones and motivators for teachers to shift their traditional practices or approaches to working with their students, hunt for new approaches, argue for new resources, ask questions and push for answers, or approach colleagues to ask for support. Students deeply appreciated the efforts of their teachers in creating positive pathways for them, and these stories of success were also deeply motivating for the teams we met with. It is also a source of deep learning for many teachers: Monica's comments illustrate this:

In the past couple of years I've learned a lot from the [Indigenous] kids, they've taught us a lot about their culture, their heritage. There are some that dance, some that drum, and they also tell us what they have learned from their Elders. I've learned some of their language too. They teach me a lot when they tell me about what they did on the weekend, when they went home [to community]. A lot of the learning is me—being the student to them—I would say in the last two years I've learned a lot about Indigenous culture in our area from the kids.

Other teams talked about the value of ongoing, consistent and persistent communication with students, but also the importance of acting upon those concerns and identified needs. This was an important aspect of Seaton Secondary's approach to student voice: as one team member said "The culture at our school is that we seek feedback from students...They respond because they see their opinions matter."

We also heard other stories from the inquiry teams about how much the engagement they had with learners changed their perspectives on their approaches and plans. For example, the Eke Me-Xi team made checking in with their students a central focus of their inquiry work and surveyed their students in ways that engaged them in a discussion of outcomes and experiences that assisted in their learning. One area of particular note is that of 'self assessment': the team links the idea of self-monitoring and goal setting with voice and choice, both principles of their inquiry work. In other words, voice has purpose, and it needs to inform how students make sense of their learning and future directions

they wish to take. These are powerful pedagogical tools that shift beliefs about learners by adults they work with and the youth themselves. It serves as an important exemplar of how being, becoming and belonging are implicated in successful transitional work.

This leads us to examine the flip side of student voice—as a means of changing approaches to the teaching and learning relationship. This means creating a reciprocal space in which teachers and learners co-construct their curriculum, their experiences, and the approaches used to support success. In other words, it means changing from the one-way dynamic of teacher helping student, the more familiar approach in Western schools, to a cyclical dynamic of teacher-learner-teacher engagement in shared learning and co-constructed instructional design. Some teams are engaged in thinking through this dynamic: for example, the Ballenas school team identified this issue directly and have decided that in the next iteration of their inquiry to involve their Indigenous students in the design of lessons so they will be with partners in a process of Indigenizing their schools' curriculum. The earlier discussion of the Eke Me-Xi team makes this approach of engaging Indigenous learners in program design efforts evident as well.

Similarly, the Seaton team has also focused on providing students with the lead role of teachers, mentors and leaders in their EPIC program. These are positive directions that other teams would benefit from considering: inquiry teams could initiate processes of ongoing engagement with their learners, and begin to more regularly model and openly acknowledge the reciprocal nature of learning.

It would be really powerful if our district was able to see our students as teachers themselves, and be able to shine the light on students more as the teachers, and, do a role change... You know, students can lead little parts of their classes. It would be really cool if our district could see the value in those teachings from students and how it has an impact on other students, other teachers, and their confidence.

## Processes of inquiry

The spiral of inquiry has been the familiar frame or routine that teachers in our transition research study have used throughout their two years of inquiry. The Spiral was developed initially by Drs. Halbert and Kaser along with Professor Helen Timperley from New Zealand. *The Spiral of Inquiry* (Halbert and Kaser 2013) has informed the work of the networks they lead, including the AESN. There has been considerable research done on the effectiveness of the spiral in supporting teacher learning and in effecting teaching practice (see for example Halbert & Kaser, 2015; Kaser & Halbert, 2014; LeFevre, Timperley & Ell, 2016; Parr & Timperley, 2010; Timperley, Parr & Bertanees, 2009; Timperley, Kaser & Halbert, 2014;). One thing that has been learned in conducting studies of similar inquiry

networks is the importance of coaching—coaching provides a direct support to a team as they are working through their inquiry plans. In the case of this research study, coaches were identified from among experienced, practicing members of the AESN and they were asked to confer with their teams on two occasions, scheduled to make contact with teams between regularly scheduled network meetings or events. A total of four coaches participated in supporting the 10 teams.

The Spiral as a model is an inspirational and motivational tool, according to our teams. It provided them with a flexible structure from which to progress through their own thinking related to the ideas of transitions for their Indigenous learners. There are documents that teams are asked to complete to help guide them through the process, and each of our teams were familiar with these tools and used them as a part of their ongoing deliberations and in particular, in reporting progress at established points in the inquiry cycle. However, the introduction of coaches enhanced these features by inserting new forms of accountability; as the Smithers team shared “It keeps you accountable, it makes you sit down and look more closely at what’s been done, and where you’re going. It allows you to look and connect the dots”. This is the real power of a coach: not that they necessarily guide the work itself, but provide a catalyst for critical thinking and perspective taking. Much like participating in the NOII seminar itself, an upcoming visit from a coach asks teams to think about the most important aspects of their work, to focus on progress, and to tie their work back to their initial questions and evidence that shows how they are progressing (or not) towards a refinement of their thinking. In other words it is a powerful reflective opportunity.

Another feature of how reflective work and the coaching experience come together is in the idea of vulnerability. Several teams spoke about this phenomenon: teachers typically consider themselves as expert knowers, and engaging in a process that explores hunches does mean that some ideas or approaches don’t work. Talking about experiences and making evident how one “doesn’t know” or has “failed” can be difficult to do, unless you are comfortable in revealing your vulnerability. What we heard is that these coaches provided a context that engendered trust. Coaches encouraged teams to describe their struggles and challenges, and sought to re-frame the work as a learning journey, and central to the role of a learning professional. This helped teams to see their vulnerabilities as essential to the process of inquiry and sense making.

We also heard how the inquiry process builds collaborative teams: as the team leader in Dover Bay said, “there is a messy part...and talking to our like minded colleagues.. [but] when that all came together, and we presented our work at NOII, that’s the experiential component, we can say ‘oh I get it, that’s collaboration’”. What was important to this team was how their own learning paralleled that of their students: building learning teams through the inquiry process helped them to better understand the learning needs of their students.

Clearly the inquiry process supports teachers' engagement in learning; this is an important theme that I will return to shortly. However, before moving on it is important to also acknowledge the structures of the AESN, particularly local, regional or provincial meetings that are regularly scheduled as a part of the network, and how it assisted teams in their process of thinking about transitions. In other words, when these teams participated in meetings with other teams, they were given another opportunity to make sense of their project, reflect on progress, and consider next steps, and this deepened their understanding of transitions for their students. Sharing this learning also had a catalytic effect: in other words, in coming together, other perspectives could be shared that helped illuminate aspects of an issue that hadn't necessarily been traced by the team, and also provided new information they could consider when other teams shared their approaches. The teams essentially taught one another about the complexity of transitional issues and deepened their understandings as they questioned one another. So the structures of the inquiry network provide valuable tools that guide learning and helped teams consolidate practices and effect important changes for their learners.

## Teacher learning

In exploring the work of these teacher inquiry teams and their efforts to support their Indigenous students in transition points, it became obvious that the teams and the teachers and leaders they worked with needed to do more than “learn about” theories and ideas that helped their students with transitions. In particular, they had to engage in unlearning or re-learning because much of what schools have typically done in the way of student support is based in deeply held beliefs, understandings, traditions and practices. Some of these beliefs are based in stereotypes about Indigenous students, such as believing Indigenous students are less motivated or interested in school, that they can't achieve as well as mainstream western students, or that Indigenous communities don't value education. Such biases aren't often made explicit but our teams talked about how these stories often underpinned beliefs and therefore approaches taken with those who work with Indigenous students in their schools.

Stereotyping... because we stereotype this [Aboriginal] school and the students. You went to this school, so you didn't get the same education... Yet we are following the same curriculum as they [other local school] are, but most of our students are Aboriginal. I think there's a connection between the two—the community ... and the school district look at our students differently. So they are making a stereotype, which really goes back to racism. Our students have talked about racism when they talk about going to the other high school in town... Indigenous doesn't mean less than, because I think for many generations, in Canada, that was the mindset. First Nations' knowledge was viewed as less or inferior...

We need to honour our parents and the relationships they have...life experiences in their homes need to be valued and need to be honoured. There is a tendency to treat parents in a patronizing view. I think when people interact with other parents, as parents of our students they are assumed peers or assumed equals. I think there is some view of Indigenous parents, systematically, that's different.

Just as important, the professional discourses of western ways of thinking about school, and how it should be organized, normalized certain practices, often making it difficult to 'see' how a different approach might be possible. For example, schools are often organized around subject specialists so, not surprisingly, many of the transition approaches developed by these teams began with an approach that gave the responsibility of transitions to particular individuals. Sometimes their titles also reflect that dynamic: several of the individuals involved in this study were described as "Transition Coaches" for example, or "Transition support staff". These dynamics are powerful shaping mechanisms that guided teams to think about their transition approaches in particular ways. When these assumptions became evident and were explored as a part of the inquiry, then the teams engaged in what is described in the literature as 'difficult' knowledge, or 'dissonance' learning. In other words, they became unsettled and struggled to understand how they could best respond to critiques or ideas that didn't seem to fit within the models they had initially developed or considered.

Such learning is often confusing, and seems to progress more in circles than it does in progress towards an outcome; as a result, the team can become discouraged or worried that they are not making sufficient progress. This was a role that coaches could play: they could help identify the struggles, but also let people know that the process of making sense and grappling with dissonance was an important part of their collective personal and professional learning. Teams also took up new discourses to help them explore these areas of dissonance: the idea of 'walking slowly' for example, became a way for the Smithers team to discuss their learning differently while working with an Indigenous colleague or ally who could assist them in thinking through their approaches. Credited to Debbie Leighton-Stephens, one of the AESN Directors and a coach for the network, these educators took the time to deliberately and carefully contemplate and reflect together, walking slowly with their collaboration and inquiry, a practice that enabled them to see a different direction forward as the story below illustrates:

We need to stop asking, what do our students need, but who are they? My inclination is to jump in and start doing and get things done in a good way, respecting relationships, but jumping in and doing it. In a western frame you have different ideas of knowledge, where things can be defined and taken apart and analyzed, and named



and categorized... Yet I know what people should be doing is having conversations around tables, around food, they should be getting to know each other, I think people should be asking questions and questioning what they're doing and why they're doing it... Conversations around kids, where we present kids that need love, and wrap around support, conversations that are emotional and relational... Focusing on the things that endure.

Teams also talked about “seeing students through new eyes”; this idea of perspective taking and exploring diverse worldviews also came from NOII/AESN seminars and discussions, but was brought into practice when the teams were encouraged to deeply and genuinely listen to the voices of their students. From these approaches, teams heard their Indigenous learners describe patterns of invisibility and moments of connection in ways that engendered new understandings of the value of cultural identity, the power of place, the legacy of residential schooling and the potential of spirituality. Valuing these “wise” ways of knowing and being became new and powerful learning moments for teachers, and they understood themselves to be important conduits of this learning to their colleagues. Such work was truly transformational; and while it is difficult to accurately convey the depth and scope of the transformational work accomplished by these teams, it is a central hallmark of their inquiry.

Something that struck me this year is the need to meet basic needs. We have so many students in our school that don't have food, don't have a home. They rely on the school to provide that... That's probably the biggest thing for me this year, just not overlooking that basic need, rather than looking past that and assuming you can work on other things.

Honestly, I think there is a lack of trust between our students and staff. One of my students has said, if a staff member is greeting or welcoming her, or complimenting her... she is second guessing that compliment and wondering: “Are they being sincere? Or are they just being told to do this today”? That's a level of distrust. I'm hoping that will be addressed with sincere relationship building, which I think a lot of our staff members are doing. What's interesting about this is that we talked about trust, and these girls recognized that they need to also change their mindsets about the adults in the building... and the people that [these students] believe think they will be successful, are people who have high expectations of them, and who express those expectations to them in a good way, a sincere way.



Some teams did also talk with some degree of frankness about the scope of resistance from some teachers and staff in their schools who express the view that they cannot, or even should not be expected to become experts about Indigenous students, their histories or communities. As noted earlier, they describe how some teachers or staff hold deficit views of their Indigenous students, or excuse their lack of performance by blaming families or parents. They described their concern about how to approach teachers who hold such deficit views, and how their assumptions undo the good work done by those who are shifting from deficit to strength-based models of thinking. Others use the excuse of having inadequate knowledge as a screen for shifting away from taking responsibility to learn about Indigenous students, their communities or cultures.

## **Becoming ally-informed partners and leaders**

There is clearly evidence in our work of non-Indigenous teachers taking up roles as allies with their Indigenous students and communities, and that they are understanding more deeply their role in building pathways towards reconciliation and decolonization. Many non-Indigenous educators understand their settler histories, and recognize that western systems of schooling have failed Indigenous peoples. More than this, they acknowledge their personal and institutional privilege, understanding that social, political and educational systems which have privileged Western ways of knowing and being, advantaged settlers and their descendants, and marginalized many diverse communities (Ma Rhea, 2016, 155). Recognizing this knowledge enables a move toward allyship, an important mindset and practice that will change existing educational systems. Allies can also assist in shifting teaching practice and policy, can champion Indigenous educational pedagogy and practice, and model how to enact an ally-informed professional identity. However, like all allies, educators need to also acknowledge that ally work is ongoing and emergent: undoing the centuries of discriminatory practices embedded in educational policy, practice and systems requires consistent and persistent action. It also requires continually examining one's own beliefs and assumptions for how unconscious bias continues in the everyday work we do as educators or leaders. It requires working with Indigenous communities openly and transparently, responding to invitations for collaboration and checking in regularly with communities to ensure approaches are meeting needs and expectations—as partners in shared purpose. Over time, these approaches can build genuine, authentic partnerships in the shared enterprise of learning. Ally-informed partnerships have the ability to shift professional identities and beliefs in profound ways, and impact how non-Indigenous educators work with colleagues, their learners and communities.

Some of our Aboriginal students are really on the periphery; really on the edge of our school community. They are also on the edges of peer groups. Sometimes they try out for teams, like softball, but then all of them get cut. I guess the reasoning is they aren't really good enough. They are still on the periphery, regardless. Sometimes we also might think these students choose to be alone, but I wonder now, is this really a choice?

There are also gaps in terms of whose voices shape the direction of our school. When students come up from elementary school, we base our actions and our choices in our inquiry on the responses of the students who are there, we haven't necessarily tapped into the students who aren't there, and connecting with them...

Throughout the data reviewed for this study were examples of activities, discussions and approaches that made evident that ally-informed leadership was present, and in fact shaped much discussion among the inquiry teams as they described their approaches to creating successful transition opportunities for their students. One of the biggest concerns among these inquiry leaders included implicit bias and how it operated within the structures of the school as well as implicitly within the practices of teachers. So, for example, something as seemingly simple as assigning space to Indigenous students or transitions student projects was sometimes fraught with tensions around symbolic meaning: by assigning particular students to a space their "differences" were made public and evident, re-marking Indigenous students as needing "help" or support (a deficit model). Yet if space had not been deliberately assigned, the work would have become even less visible, and there would have been very few opportunities to engage in intimate relationship building, an essential feature of much of the transition work done by teams. Negotiating space was an important role that ally-informed inquiry leaders did in a range of social and political environments of their school and district.

Other teams struggled to understand how to influence their colleagues' perceptions of Indigenous students; overt stereotyping was not an issue that was flagged by the inquiry teams, but assumptions about parents of Indigenous students, or the "racism of low expectations" would become evident when student achievement became a topic of conversation among colleagues who did not work directly in the inquiry team. Deficit-focused mindsets were identified as significant barriers to effecting change with colleagues "beyond" the inquiry team. Frustration was also expressed among inquiry teams who saw that their programs were labelled or described in ways which reinforced this thinking.

Yet there were also many positive examples of how members of the inquiry teams with an ally-informed mindset helped created Indigenous learning pathways for their colleagues. In some cases, it was about deliberate outreach to others who interacted with the students engaged in the project; in other cases such opportunities arose because of the public

nature of the activities and the efforts taken to afford important schoolwide recognition to the event, program, or outcome. Several examples have been described in earlier sections of this report: the transition feast; sharing Elder learning projects; announcing students' successful acceptance to post-secondary programs; incorporating Indigenous Language into school signage and ceremonies; incorporating traditional Indigenous knowledge into the formal program curricula; recognizing Elders at school events or asking them to share their experiences with students. These are all powerful ways in which an ally-informed mindset can alter the culture of a school and begin the process of decolonizing educational spaces so all students, particularly Indigenous students, see themselves as valuable members of the community of learning.

Ally-informed leadership is also an enabling practice. By this I mean non-Indigenous leaders need to know and understand their current systems and policies well so as to bridge into new or altered structures or approaches to building support to Indigenous students in transition. The example of the timetable comes to mind: the timetable is a very powerful force which shapes how education is organized and delivered, particularly in secondary schools. An ally-informed school or district leader who willingly alters the shape of this mechanism to support alternative modes of delivery, the inclusion of Elders into classes, place-based or community-based programming—is central to a team's success.

There was also evidence in the inquiry team conversations we had that there is a generosity of spirit with colleagues—both a desire to engage others in the work and to help them understand their inquiry in greater depth. In my earlier work assessing the AESN network, I described this process as “catalytic affiliation”—a way that engaged, passionately committed individuals genuinely “invited” their colleagues to participate or share in their inquiry learning became a factor in extending or accelerating the growth of an inquiry-based initiative. In other words, the relational aspects of engagement created extended opportunities to attract others to the work.

So on a Pro-D day I asked her to help me collect some creek water for an activity I was doing with my Indigenous students; we talked about the relationship between place and nature and how the environment can be our teacher... Now we are working on bringing our classes together so we can visit this creek and talk about these ideas.

I was really touched when we talked about clam digging and the skills and purposes of this activity when someone mentioned decolonization... I talk a lot about decolonization with my senior class, and sometimes I feel like they are not always grasping it, and then she was able to articulate this in relation to our discussion. ... that was really impactful for me.

This report traces the courageous, challenging and fulfilling work of becoming an ally with Indigenous communities, and illustrates the impacts such work is having through personal consciousness raising, education about Indigenous forms of pedagogy and practice, connecting with communities, and through their spiral of inquiry methods. However, it is also evident that this work is made easier when school and district leaders share a similar commitment to transformational change, and who themselves model and champion such efforts. When we combine ally-informed professional identities with the act of leadership—enabling, showing and supporting Indigenous knowledge and practices in school and/or educational settings, and engaging in a deep analysis of their own biases, assumptions and beliefs about education, then the impacts of this form of Indigenous inquiry work will be accelerated, and all students benefit.

## What about impacts?

49

This report has sought to summarize the progress the ten inquiry teams have made in the first two years of a three-year research study. There are some key learnings that have become apparent in reading the case summaries and the analysis in conjunction with the literature review. However another critically important avenue of analysis is measuring impact. In this section of the report, I offer a few thoughts about the depth and scope of impact these inquiry teams are having on their own students, the learning of the participants, their educational colleagues, as well as impacts on BC's school system, and the pedagogical practices within.

The impacts seem most deep and significant in three distinct categories: among students, among and between educators, as well as at school and community level learning.

The reports and discussions with the inquiry teams documented the following primary impacts on Indigenous students:

- Increased rates of graduation
- Increased student attendance
- Stronger academic achievement
- Improved sense of belonging
- Increased engagement in school activities
- More reported cases of students successfully transitioning to post-secondary schools
- Increased belief in one's ability to succeed
- A heightened sense of cultural pride
- An increase in the connections with Elders and local Indigenous communities.

In addition to these and other impacts occurring for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, there are further impacts being felt and realized by the teachers and other inquiry team members engaged in the Inquiry projects, for example:

- Increased levels of collaboration and shared learning
- Increased literacy and comfort with Indigenous content
- Greater interest and ability in embedding First Peoples' Principles of Learning into classroom curricula
- Personal transformation of beliefs about Indigenous peoples, worldviews and pedagogy/practice
- Shifts in understanding one's role as an educator
- Development of innovative approaches to enhancing students' sense of belonging and inclusion
- Ally-focused identity development, including becoming advocates and allies to Indigenous students and communities
- Efforts at decolonizing practice.

Beyond the impacts being created in individual students, educators and schools, broader impacts are rippling out across school districts and into school and Indigenous communities. We have seen, for example:

- Increased connections between schools and Indigenous communities, and
- Stronger relationships among all of the stakeholders responsible for ensuring student success.

Students, teachers, support workers, principals and vice principals, school district representatives, parents, guardians, extended families, Elders and community support workers are coming together through this work to build a greater support network for student success. Each of the individuals involved in the inquiry is also impacted, having donned a new lens through which to view student learning, schools and the education system more broadly. From these new perspectives emerge a greater possibility for transformation and change.

# A revised framework for transition planning and support

51

There are also important observations to be made about changes in teaching, pedagogy and support initiatives. As described above, we saw teachers engaging deeply with their own cultural biases, beliefs and understandings about learners and processes of learning. A primary tool for this learning came from a deepened understanding about their learners, triggered by the inquiry framework, particularly the requirement to “scan” comprehensively as a means of identifying issues with Indigenous student transitions. The inquiry project leaders have emphasized this component of the inquiry cycle at various points in the two-year study—such as during the NOII symposiums, in coaching calls, and in written documents which summarize the inquiry process. They have said repeatedly: your scanning process needs to rely on a comprehensive investigation of what your learners think and know about the conditions under which they can learn and be successful.

What we saw is that when inquiry teams focused in on listening to their learners, the focus became much more to do with learner’s social and emotional sense of self—issues of belonging, being, and becoming. When the educators engaged in this form of deep listening, they were then reminded of other learning tools at their disposal: such as the First Peoples’ Principles of Learning. These principles then became important resources that enabled them to imagine and enact different forms of support, focused directly on their learners.

This is an important shift in understanding the issue of student transitions itself. The more typical studies included in the earlier literature review in this report, are dominated by ways of supporting students in transition that have been designed to consider how teachers and educational systems can be modified or altered to support the needs of the learner. In general these can be described as institutionally focused supports—such approaches put ‘system needs’ at the fore of the discussion.

What we saw with these teams is that their focus sought to map solutions that came from life experiences of their students and that the primary concern students had were about feelings of inclusion, safety and belonging. What the teams noticed is that the notion of being safe, included, respected and valued was the most important element if one wanted to stay or be in schools or classrooms. Academic success was important, but not as important as recognition and belonging. So the approaches each team took put this notion of belonging, respect and inclusion as the overriding principle that must be satisfied in meeting their inquiry objectives. When students’ perspectives are put at the center of the strategy, the strategy shifts away from institutional solutions to learner centered interventions, and in each case the strengths and systems from the entire community were accessed.

Another important observation is how the First Peoples’ Principles of Learning came into play. Once the students told their stories about how and when they were—and felt—successful, the focus on a more holistic approach to transitions became possible. The First

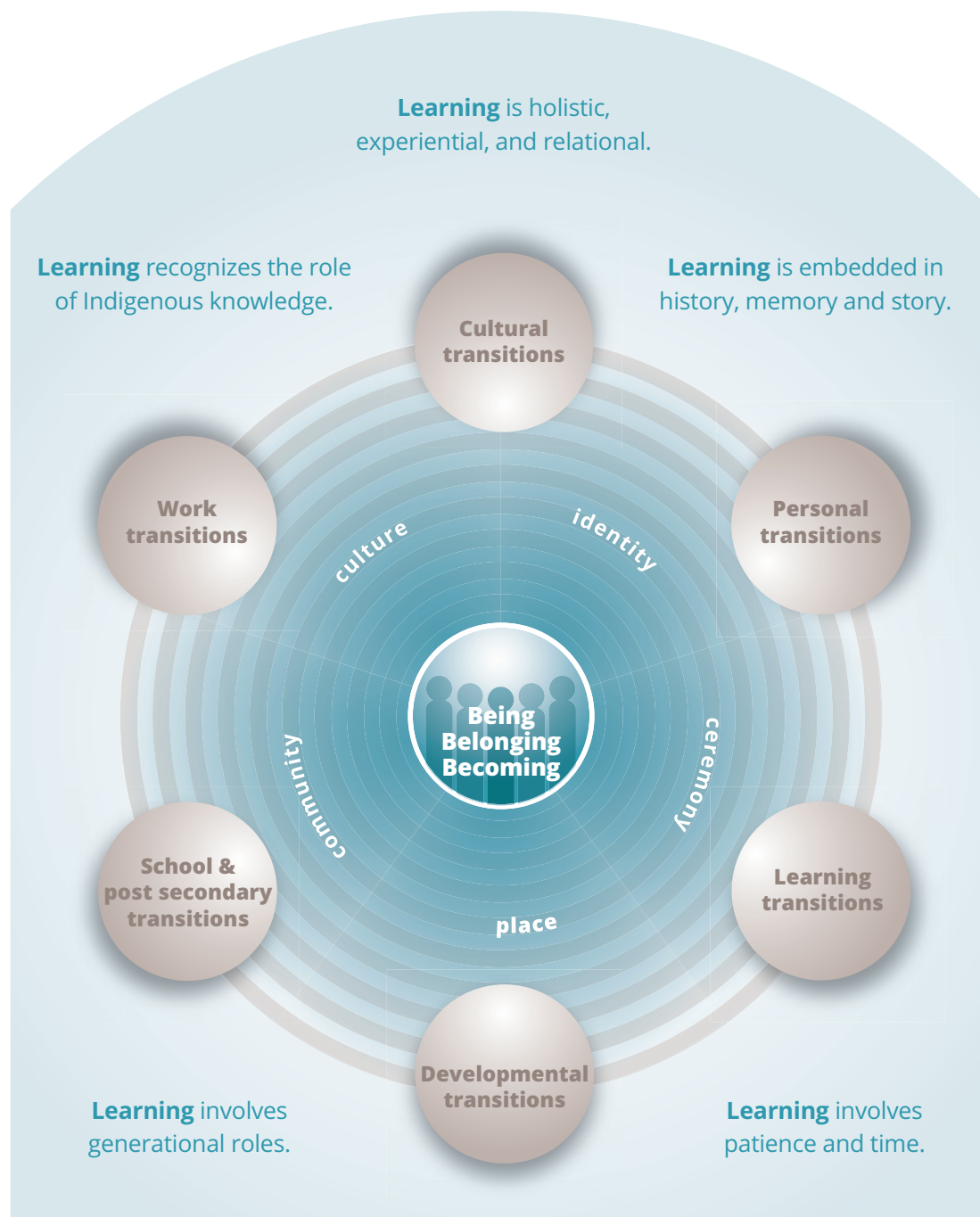
Peoples Principles of Learning then became a backbone for driving forward innovative or creative thinking, primarily because they honour a way of learning that is holistic, shared, collaborative and accepting of the value of place, culture, spirituality and community. When this happens, pedagogical practices shifted, and teachers and others began to learn more about the ways in which Indigenous ways of knowing could replace existing system driven pedagogy and structures. It becomes what Jan Hare described as a series of “wrap around supports” that focuses on learner at the center of thinking, engagement and intervention design. The last stage in the design process involves thinking about the types of transitions that may be of issue with a learner or group of learners; in other words, the type of transition then provides a final lens for equipping the solution to fit the circumstance.

The framework in Figure C shows the different emphases the inquiry teams brought to their inquiry practices.

*Please note:* While this framework shows a number of things the inquiry teams considered as they designed strategies to support their Indigenous learner, it was the inquiry process as a whole, and the practices of scanning in particular, that enabled them to explore this terrain deeply and comprehensively.



Figure C: **A learner-centred framework for transition planning and support**



## 10 key strategies used by ally-focused inquiry teams

This report has summarized general themes that emerged from a review of the cases and interviews with the 10 teams. The themes help to illustrate the overall challenges and opportunities that the transition inquiry teams encountered and how inquiry enabled deep and transformational changes that impacted Indigenous learners facing transitional issues in profound ways. Providing multiple opportunities for student voice, for example, was a very powerful theme, as was the move towards thinking about Indigenous students' identities—creating a sense of belonging and included as a valued member of a community, and recognizing their potential as Indigenous peoples capable of much success. The process of inquiry itself enabled a structured, learner focused approach, and was valued for how it kept teams moving forward on a positive trajectory. However, there were other things that can be learned from the ways in which the teams persisted in their inquiry; and what tools, words, or strategies enabled them to do so is worthy of sharing with educators across BC and Canada. In the next section several key strategies are outlined.

The strategies are not meant to be considered in a particular order but rather are simply means of identifying a series of potential ways in which to stay engaged and focused in your inquiry work. They can also be considered as tools for fueling, re-focusing and re-charging commitments to collaborative forms of inquiry.

### **Relationships matter, and matter most.**

There is no word more frequently referenced in the team or coach interviews than relationships: relationships with students are of course at the heart of this, but so too are the relationships among and between team members, the team members and their coaches, the team members and their school principals and vice principals, the team members and the other educators in the school, and relationships between the teams and the Indigenous communities they served. In all cases, inquiry thrived when the relationships were understood as a necessary foundation to everything else. Relationship building is the first, middle and last step needed in inquiry work. Relationality is generative; that is, it produces both spaces for action but also spaces to learn. Relationality is also one of the primary foundations of the First Peoples' Principles of Learning and ensures our practices are consistent with the principle of decolonizing education and schooling.

### **Create interdisciplinary pathways.**

What was strongly evident in the work of the teams is that they consistently and persistently worked to bring in other teachers, support workers, principals, and community members into their inquiry. One of the most powerful ways that transition practices spread was in building the inquiry team's approach into other subject areas, or places that students worked or played in. When more teachers or other adults were

involved in using or adapting an approach that a team had developed, it was more likely to succeed and spread to the everyday work of all adults in the school community. When something becomes embedded in our understandings, persistent and meaningful change becomes much more possible.

## **Adjust your risk meter.**

Researchers tell us that risk is a big barrier to achieving change in systems. Studies show that risk perception matters: imagining potentiality and positive outcomes and benefits can make individuals feel more favourable about an idea. Alternatively, a culture that amplifies risk as less favourable, can lead to resistance towards any form of change because risk is perceived as high (Paek & Hove, 2017). It was clear that the AESN teams were quite prepared to take risks—suggesting approaches and activities that really challenged the norms and standard ways of thinking about educational systems. It was when they were able to frame the risk through the potential pay-off lens—particularly in imagining and seeing the positive impacts on their students’ experiences in school—that others became willing to also support taking a new measure.

## **Question your bias and privilege.**

Bias and privilege are inherently linked to the unconscious biases we all have. The AESN teams worked continuously to unpack their assumptions, particularly those about Indigenous learners and communities. The predominantly white, middle class composition of BC teachers and school leaders means educators have to work doubly hard to understand how we unconsciously incorporate colonial ways of educating within our systems, practices and daily assumptions. This is challenging work, and we cannot ask our Indigenous colleagues to be our teachers—we need to make a professional commitment to setting goals to decolonize ourselves, our teaching practice and beliefs a part of our daily lives and, from time to time, check in with our Indigenous colleagues, mentors and coaches to see how we are doing. In this way we are becoming allies and ally-informed practitioners.

## **Listen to and honour all learners.**

Earlier in the report I emphasized student voices, and listening to their perspectives and experiences. But giving voice is really about perspective taking, and putting into your thinking the various views, perspectives, experiences of many others, particularly those whose experiences and perspectives come from beyond the four walls of the school. Listening to Indigenous communities and Elders fits well here because their voices and views have been missing from the ways in which we conceptualize schooling and school success.

## **Connect head, heart and hands.**

Often people forget to value and support the emotional side of learning and engagement: when we feel deeply connected to a powerful idea, it engages our passions and purpose, and resonates with our belief systems and values. The AESN teams were genuinely engaged in looking for strategies and approaches that deeply resonated with their beliefs that every learner can succeed. The 'heart test' is how I describe their efforts to trust their intuitive selves, to believe in the power of their efforts, and to determine the best ways forward. There was evidence that the AESN teams looked for the intersection of heart and head—affect and reason—to examine carefully their plans and processes to ensure they fit for each learner, and how they would build connections of being and belonging.

## **Become an ally-informed partner and leader**

The work of the AESN teams required efforts at encouraging others to become more aware of their own privileges and biases. It also involved working with youth, children, families and communities in ways that supported their goals for seeing change in schools. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) made clear, educational systems are both barriers and opportunities. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators need to be advocates for transforming schools into places where their Indigenous learners feel included, valued, respected and honoured—a place where they feel they should be and belong. Working with communities in making this happen was an important leadership function AESN teams served.

Being an ally-informed leader also becomes a way of broadening the uptake of Indigenous approaches to teaching and learning, enabling deep changes to existing educational systems that marginalize our Indigenous learners.

## **Practice professional vulnerability.**

Bringing good hands and good heart to our work as teachers is a principle of Indigenous teaching and learning. But this perspective reminds us that good intentions aren't necessarily sufficient... there is a need to openly consider and make spaces for new and wise ways of practicing our pedagogy. What we saw our AESN teams embrace was an openness to letting go of ways of teaching that felt comfortable, to reveal the limits of their knowledge as professionals, and to re-imagine their teaching practice in new ways. This is a practice of professional vulnerability, a receptivity to being vulnerable and a deliberate engagement in new learning, relearning and unlearning.

## Share stories that connect and inspire.

As Thomas King famously reminded us, “all we are, are stories” (King 2003), Stories inspire us to action and to personal commitment. Stories are key to how we saw the teams broaden connections, and how they kept themselves inspired. And there are some stories, as Frank (2010) said, that once heard, belong under one’s skin; they become a part of us. They make us whole. They remind us of our purpose. A goal for ally-informed, learning leaders is to tell stories that get under the skin of our partners... identify the words, phrases and moments that set you afire with purpose... and then share these stories.

## Talk with Knowledge Holders and Elders.

The final point is how the teams reported on their regular efforts to engage with their local Indigenous communities, in an ongoing effort to open the opportunities for ongoing dialogue, to learn more about cultural and spiritual practices, to listen and respond to their stories, experiences and perspectives. This often meant repeated trips to check in with local knowledge holders and Elders, and to take the time to deeply listen to stories and histories. It meant as well exploring connections with place and the land, and explore the many ways that traditional learning emerges through land based activities and cultural events. Dr. Michelle Tanaka, an ally-informed researcher at UVic who worked for many years with Dr. Lorna Williams, notes that connections to the land and community “ keeps us humble, with ...an openness to the spirits of the place and the wonder of the unpredictable moment when the connection is made” (Tanaka, 2017, p.8) . We can often become comfortable again in our own knowing and beliefs. A visit to community and a reminder of our relations with the land, its spirit and history, will move us forward in a good way.

## Final thoughts on impacts, challenges and opportunities

Each of the impacts listed in this section of the report make evident the many benefits to participants in the inquiry, their students, families and to their communities. Listening to the stories of students and educators alike provide us with convincing evidence that these projects are making big differences in the lives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners, and are helping the network members deliver on their goal of ensuring all students experience success, and feel valued and included in their school community. This section of the report captured our initial two years of data collection in which we attempted to measure the scope and range of impacts, and in particular, provide information to the inquiry teams about some of observations in hopes that this will assist them in their ongoing work.



## Part 3

# **Coaching for success**

## An AESN coaching overview

As a part of the three-year AESN research study (2016-2018), participants were given an opportunity to have a “coach” work with them throughout the three years of the inquiry project. Coaches are learning leaders, members of the AESN network, who were selected to work with each of the ten teams, and asked to regularly meet with the AESN teams engaged in the Transitions inquiry at key points in the school year. Debbie Leighton Stephens, project coordinator, guided the coaches in designing sessions that had a common agenda and format for discussions.

However, before talking more specifically about how this formal coaching support was offered to the teams, it is important to canvas the concept of coaching itself and consider how it operates in supporting the development of professional learning and professional learning communities.



# What is coaching?

61

Coaching has been and is a well-studied area in field of education and in research involving the development of an individual's or team's potential in a variety of activities, roles or organizations. The field has evolved over time; about 20 years ago the primary focus was on what was called mentorship, and models developed by a variety of authors and scholars primarily focused on the pairing of experienced and novice organizational members (see for example, seminal authors Clutterbuck, 1985, 2001; Wellman & Lipton, 2001; Kram, 1985).

Over the past 10 years, the approach to mentorship has changed to a greater focus on coaching, and a more sophisticated analysis of how the learning relationship operates in a reciprocal form, with benefits to both the protégé(s) and the mentor/coach(es), creating models of instructional improvement. There is also greater recognition of a continuum of practice and cyclical processes of engagement over time, how context effects outcomes, and efforts to better describe the conditions and strategies under which the educational coaching relationship can thrive (Ragins & Kram, 2007).

Some jurisdictions (for example the Alberta Assessment Consortium, 2018, the Australian Council for Educational Research, 2016, and the UK National College for Leadership, 2010) are now firmly differentiating coaching from mentorship because of its sustained focus on improving learning outcomes for teachers as instructional leaders, its potential for impacting student learning, and its ongoing, cyclical application to professional practice. For the purposes of this summary, the focus is on coaching for teacher professional learning, and therefore draws substantially from literature that explores coaching or mentorship models in the education and teaching practice sector. It has deliberately excluded literature that is about self-improvement in business or industry workplaces, such as executive or management coaching. In most cases the idea of coaching for learning involves the use of professional peers, that is, individuals themselves already engaged in educational activities as their primary career and work activity.

## Peer to peer models

Peer coaching can be conceived of quite broadly as a means of enhancing and supporting the learning of an professional, a group or team, and such support can be delivered by a variety of individuals. For example, some individuals become coaches as a part of a shared process of learning within a team; often such roles emerge informally as members with particular expertise are asked to take lead roles by others on the team. In this sense, coaching is a natural outcome of working collaboratively on a project.

Individuals can also be asked to support a learning team in specific learning tasks for short periods of time, and in response to the team's identification of gaps in knowledge. These individuals can be considered a type of short term coach who is involved for a shorter or specific period of time.

For the purposes of this study, we consider coaching as a more formal process, deliberately offered to the teams by experienced AESN network leaders. Formal approaches to coaching are characterized by a focused purpose in advancing the team's learning and discussions. Good coaching is designed to encourage "teachers to become more reflective, articulate, exploratory and metacognitive in relation to their work and its impact on learners. As such they are more aware of themselves and their capacities as teachers, more knowledgeable about the activity of teaching and the processes of learning, and more confident to deploy a wide pedagogic repertoire suited to the job"(Lofthouse, Leat & Towler, 2010, p. 36). They develop mindsets focused on developing strong, intentionally focused professional learning as a part of their ongoing professional role and identity (Sharpe & Nishimura, 2017).

## Key themes from the coaching literature

Constraints of time and space do not allow an extensive review of the existing professional and scholarly literature on educational coaching. However, there are several important models that have developed that are worthy of discussion in order to consider their application to the AESN coaching strategies and context described in this report.

### Cognitive coaching and professional development

Costa and Garnstom (1985; 2015) have been primary authors of this model. They have promoted cognitive coaching as a strategy that will ‘unlock’ teachers’ assumed thinking—to make evident what drives their approaches to teaching—and to assist them in analyzing their practice. Derived from supervision models, but concerned specifically about the effects evaluation measures have on teacher performance and efforts at improvement, the model replaces the one-over model with peer to peer coaching. It is focused on coaching through lesson study in which a set of questions are explored during a pre and post lesson discussion. The coach observes the lesson and guides the discussion with their peer teacher. The authors believe that trust is more easily established in collegial pairs, and in this way teachers can openly take risks without fear of being negatively viewed. With trust high, risks are more likely to be taken.

Another application of cognitive coaching comes from scholars studying how exemplary coaching practice can be applied to help teachers learn about data analysis, and apply it to program planning, teaching, adjusting curriculum and guiding student learning. Much like the cognitive coaching model, it uses a job embedded approach, and asks teams (including coaches) to use existing school or district data as the means through which to engage in coaching to improve performance. A good example is Huguet, Marsh & Farrell (2016); their discussion of the attributes of strong and developing coaches provides detailed evidence of the practices and characteristics of good coaches. In their model coaches assess, model, observe, provide feedback, share expertise, engage in dialogue and broker information.

### Mentoring matters

Wellman and Lipton (2001) have been working in the field of mentoring for several decades and have hosted dozens of seminars with school authorities across Canada and the US describing their model and approach to mentoring. Like cognitive coaching, the emphasis is on peer partnerships and is focused on examining and learning more about a lesson, lesson strategy, and assist in setting and delivering on goals for improvement. A lot of effort has been put into developing a coaching protocol, with focused questions to follow to ensure a reflective stance but one that gets to the roots of lesson activity/purpose. The model does however, assume that more experienced teachers are effective guides for the novice or emerging teacher. Much like cognitive coaching, the coach is essentially the expert or initiator of the learning cycle, a skilled listener and questioner.

Wellman and Lipton (2001) also identify a series of skills for the good coach, including attending fully, structuring and scaffolding conversations, inviting thinking, balancing support with challenge, and facilitating professional vision.

## Leadership coaching

An important approach to coaching was developed by Robertson (2008) who worked with school leaders in New Zealand and other educational jurisdictions, including British Columbia; the goal of this program was the development of leadership practice and potential. The coaching teams were made up of leaders—one often in the early stages of their career and the paired individual, more likely a mid or later career leader. An important stance however, is that both leaders set goals and learn with and from one another, and that their focus is on mutually building and enhancing their educational practices as leaders. This model uses a series of strategies designed to help the partners initiate and deepen their conversations. Another key feature is its individualized or personalized approach: each participant determines their personal learning goals. This can vary substantially in terms of how the pair sees their practice, their priorities for learning, and/or their role as a formal leader in their school or district setting. Robertson (2008) also emphasizes the importance of transformational practice and the principles of adult learning; this discussion guides the core understandings of how one improves self and others. She identifies active listening, reflective interviewing, giving evaluative feedback, and goal setting as key components of a leadership coaching approach.

## Collaborative co-coaching

Not unlike other authors reviewed here, the team of Lofthouse, Leat and Towler (2010) have focused on how the coaches can develop improved teaching and learning practice. They describe their model as collaborate co-coaching: “a structured, sustained process between two or more professional learners to enable them to embed new knowledge and skills from specialist sources in day to day practice” (p. 7).

Like Costa and Garnstom (1995) trust is a key principle; they argue that genuine coaching is driven by participants, not by evaluators or other external organizational requirements. The purposes are primarily to celebrate and share good practice. They go on to explore how rich and focused coaching sessions are best accomplished, and based on a research study, have developed a staged model to focus attention on how to improve coaching practice over time. An important observation is that coaches often begin by ‘sharing’ personal practice—in this sense, more of an expert/novice pairing—but that over time develops the capacity to ask questions that delve more deeply into experiences and problems, helping their peer to find evidence to support or reject particular approaches, and generally deepen their analytical capacity. Over time, the co-coaching stance will

emerge, and the pairs become more likely to support one another in mutual learning activities. Like the other coaching models described here, lesson study provides the primary means through which the exploration is guided.

## Mentoring meets coaching

The above discussion has shown how mentoring (helping a novice to become more expert) has evolved into thinking about coaching for learning; the focus on lesson or school improvement are evident as the primary purposes. Sharpe and Nishimura's (2017) recent publication offers an interesting hybrid of these programs. They use the term inquiry—an important stance for those who participate in the AESN—in describing how coach/mentor teams will learn together, building a model that is relationally centered.

They describe it as a “collaborative learning relationship and reflective process that is established together.” They go on to say: “this co-created partnership, of ongoing support and challenge, evolves over time through structured conversations to facilitate engagement, capacity building, desired growth, and change” (p. 3).

Somewhat differently than the earlier models, Sharpe and Nishimura (2017) delve deeply into the relational aspect, developing themes such as authenticity, connectedness and being present; showing vulnerability and assuming competence and capacity of others. The emphasis on relational work makes it differ from the earlier, more clinical descriptions of what mentoring/coaching needs to look like. Other language helps to discern their approach; they describe how critical identifying pivot points are in moving a team forward, as well as ideas such as “holding space” for the growth that will occur. They also emphasize story-telling and meaning making, as these are tools of building shared spaces of relationally focused learning. The assumption of competence and creative potential is evident of a positive, growth oriented stance; this nuanced way of describing the partnership as relational shifts the ground towards respect, dignity and purpose, developing teacher's professional identity rather than simply working to develop their practices.

## Why coaching with the AESN teams?

The inquiry process that guided the AESN teams (described in Part 1 of this report) has been operationalized within the network for more than 10 years. Both the AESN and NOII teams that operate across BC regularly meet in regional and provincial settings and share their learning. This process of networked learning and sharing their inquiry journeys has helped grow expertise among local, regional and provincial educators. Coaching is integral to how the NOII and AESN operate; that is, regional leaders are active in the continual activities of the network teams, and these individuals serve as catalysts to support, energize, and collaborate with teams in their region. In essence, these regional leaders were a form of *regional coach*. The NOII principals, Drs. Kaser and Halbert, also act as coaches and supporters to network members when they travel the province, working with various school districts who use inquiry based practice in their school districts.

As the network has grown internationally, other jurisdictions, particularly in England, New Zealand and Australia, have adopted the spiral of inquiry and have found ways to more consistently build external support for the inquiry teams, particularly the idea of providing an inquiry coach for teams. We also knew that several BC school districts have been essentially creating “inquiry coaches” as a part of their district infrastructures. It seemed timely then, to consider how coaching might inform the work of the AESN. As part of our study of the AESN, we wanted to see how providing a more systematic system of support through inquiry coaches might assist the work done by the transition teams. Hence, the next section of our report discusses how the coaches did their work, and what benefits teams saw from their work with their coaches.

## The coaching process with the AESN teams

Each team was notified in the first year of the study that a coach had been assigned to them and that there would be formally scheduled meetings held with the teams at various points in the year, although not more than four times (in the fall for an initial discussion on inquiry directions and then again in the spring). Each coach was asked to assist the teams through informal, ongoing contact as well, generally via email and over the phone, providing support between formally scheduled meetings when requested to do so.

It is important to identify the ways in which these coaching sessions may differ from those processes or procedures described in the coaching literature: rather than having the coach visit the teams in their own work sites, these coaches were distant participants, who contacted the teams electronically or via phone. There were occasions when coaches and teams might meet (related to other network activities) but this was not a requirement of the role. The lead coach, Debbie Leighton Stephens, was the official point of contact, and she acted as a coordinator of the coaches and also as the primary contact point for the AESN transition teams. Debbie also reminded coaches about contacting their teams, to keep and share summaries of their conversations as points of reference. She also provided specific guidance as to when to host a meeting with their teams, as well as questions that could be asked as a part of the coaching sessions scheduled. Most coaching sessions were scheduled at the end of the school day to facilitate attendance of members of the AESN teams, although not all team members participated in all calls.

The frames for each coaching session were deliberately created to be open ended and leave room for teams to describe and report on their own challenges, opportunities, and processes. Figure D shows a sample agenda.

Figure D: **Sample agenda for a team coaching session**

Date: _____
School: _____
Coach: _____
Team members on call: _____
<p><b>Call Agenda</b> (30 minutes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcome/Introductions</li> <li>• Summary of inquiry by Team             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How is your team feeling about where you are with your inquiry?</li> <li>- How are you staying connected to the First Peoples' Principles of Learning, to Community and to Place?</li> <li>- How are you staying connected to the spiral and the four questions?</li> <li>- How is this inquiry making a positive difference for the Indigenous learners you are supporting?</li> <li>- Did you make any organizational/institutional changes to meet the learning needs of your students?</li> <li>- Is there further learning to take place for your inquiry team?</li> <li>- What are you noticing? Where to next?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

There were four coaches who worked with the AESN teams. While as individuals, they had many positive attributes as professional leaders, they shared two important characteristics necessary for this project: they were experienced members of the AESN community, were intimately familiar with the inquiry cycle and had participated in various network events, particularly sharing seminars. A second characteristic is that each of these individuals were also teaching support professionals, already active members within their own school authority/district setting, and therefore had a wide range of formal and informal experiences working with individuals or teams as a part of their daily role as a learning leader. As noted earlier, one of the coaches was also a member of the AESN research team, with responsibilities for coordinating the work of the coaches, collecting information from the teams, and communicating with other coaches and the lead representatives of each of the AESN teams.

As a part of the study, each of the inquiry teams were asked about their experience working with their coach. Teams were asked to reflect on how their coach assisted them in their ongoing inquiry work.



## What the teams said about their coaches and the coaching processes

One of the most powerful themes was that of accountability; the teams all talked about the ways in which the coaching calls served to keep them accountable to their coach, but as importantly, to each other. The teams frequently expressed guilt or worry that they had not made enough progress from one time to the next, and then talked about how the upcoming meeting reminder caused them to think about and reflect on their work more deliberately. They expressed appreciation for the checking in component of the discussions; how routine questions designed to provoke a conversation about their inquiry, generated rich, dynamic and thoughtful shared reflections as a team. The timed nature of the contacts with the team also gave them a way of scheduling times to meet as a team, not just to talk about what had been recently done as a part of their inquiry plan, but opportunities to think more deeply about what they had accomplished, why they had approached tasks the way they had, and how they could describe their progress or stage in the inquiry process. Several of the team members identified deep reflection and thoughtful engagement as central practices that were inspired by the scheduled coach-led discussions.

Some of the teams commented on how the reflective time was a way of re-visiting their thought and planning processes, and felt that the process of having meetings with their coaches on a semi-regular basis enabled them to “walk slowly” together in shared learning. Walking slowly is an idea that many AESN inquiry teams had become familiar with because of their work with Debbie Leighton-Stephens, a long time learning leader who had shared many of her insights into how she (and her teams of educators in a Northern BC school district) worked to create conditions for Indigenous learners to thrive. An idea she spoke of at some length involved how *walking slowly* was an important metaphor and practice that would enable deeper, deliberate learning between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators.

As this discussion makes evident, the educators in the AESN transition project used this term “walking slowly” to help identify a way that their coaches enabled them to engage together in shared learning. In other words, the meetings with coaches enabled a deeper dive into a look at the why of their work, and helped them to develop deeper reflective practices using a shared approach that would better serve their diverse learners. It also helped them to realize that relational learning takes time and taking time to reflect and learn is time well spent.

The coaches were also sometimes described as a valuable outside voice, a critical friend who could help the AESN teams to see new or emerging moments or factors that had become invisible to them because they continued to look at things in similar ways. Sometimes the perspective taking of their coach provided a new view of a familiar

context—in effect making the familiar strange. In putting these alternative views forward, the teams felt enabled to see with new eyes, or see in new ways.

Coaches also created a time and space for stepping out, for taking time to review, to consider, and regroup. In essence, it created breathing spaces, particularly when things might be feeling hard or difficult. The provision of coaching support gave new and renewed hope, because the team knew there would be another voice that could provide them with external confirmation of their efforts, their progress, and their insights. Coaches, in their role as facilitators often summarized what they heard from the team: when such summaries were spoken aloud, the teams often expressed a feeling of gratitude, because they could hear the progress their team had made when the story was narrated as a whole. This was particularly important because from time to time a team might become lost in the specifics of the daily work they were engaged in. The coach therefore became a story teller, weaving together their inquiry journey into a story that enabled the work to be appreciated in new ways.

Readers of this report will recall an earlier discussion of trust as a central element in the evolution of coaching scholarship. Coaching, it was argued, took away evaluative judgements and created a safe place in which to take risks, try new strategies or work in new ways. Similarly, the coaches who worked with the AESN transition teams were highly trusted individuals who provided safe spaces in which to report on successes and failures, to consider new questions, and to probe and critique. Conversations were encouraged and open ended questions provided the means by which a team could wrestle with a problem or idea... for as much time as it took to make sense from it. The coaches were also able to draw threads from each conversation, carefully providing a temporary path for making sense of something, without judgement. Yet they didn't try and make the path simple or easy; they reflected the complex and often conflicting stances they heard from teams. But this work of clarifying and mapping the work of the team showed how the messy and contradictory components of inquiry were an essential part of the learning, and that the teams could safely describe their dilemmas because they were foundations upon which they all learned together.

Stated another way, coaches were considered allies in learning; they openly expressed their own stance as learners and posed questions designed to assist in collective sense making and knowledge production.

In this next section I summarize data gleaned from a review of interviews and written reports created by the four coaches that supported the AESN teams. As noted earlier in this report, the lead coach, Debbie Leighton Stephens, provided each of the three other coaches with a template for the meetings, although it was very broadly constructed to permit variations in its use and flexibility for emerging directions in the conversation. Figure D on page 68 includes a sample of this meeting framework (2017-18). However, readers should be aware that this framework for discussion evolved over time as the coaches tried to support the inquiry teams over the course of the three years of the project. Early reports (2016) had a framework that emphasized what has been done to date, and a focus on what is working well, and setting next steps/future goals for the inquiry; there was also space for offering help or support, with suggestions for possible actions to take in the coming months. Despite these differences, it is possible to trace progress and outcomes from the reports, and to draw some tentative conclusions about how the model and the coaches were able to guide and support the AESN teams.

I was given copies of each report created by the coaches over the period of the three years (2015-16, 2016-2017 and 2017-18) that they worked with their teams, and took some time to read and then code these reports, looking for similarities or common themes, as well as surprising and/or unusual observations or comments. I also reviewed and coded the interviews conducted with the coaches themselves. Once both of these forms of analysis were complete, I looked for patterns to report, and then finally considered issues or topics that seemed a bit more like outlier perspectives. The sections below are representative of this summary analysis.

### Reflections on the coaching process

The coaches understood their purpose was to assist, support and encourage the work of each AESN team in conducting their inquiry. While there were varying degrees of personal and contextual knowledge each coach had of their teams, all expressed the importance of having strong familiarity with the team in order to have a strong and productive relationship. As all coaching was done over the phone, efforts at connection were largely verbal, although there were opportunities to connect personally at the annual spring NOII/AESN symposium held in Vancouver. Some of the coaches did have opportunities to visit the site, but this was not the norm. Coaches asked questions, both formally and informally, that helped them to learn more about the context of the inquiry team; as the three years unfolded, this became less of an issue, although as later comments will also indicate, there were changes in team membership as the inquiry process unfolded, so there was also a certain amount of time needed for connection and re-connection. The cycle of check in's also developed into a more standardized process over time; the goal was three contacts with each team over the course of the school year and inquiry cycle, in the fall, spring and May/June.

As noted earlier in this section, the lead coach, Debbie Leighton Stephens developed a model agenda that included proposed questions to guide the discussion. Most of the coaches sent copies of the agenda ahead of time to their teams, suggesting this helped them to prepare for the discussion. Other coaches preferred to use the agenda as a personal guide to their facilitation rather than a prompt for their teams, although the generally repetitive nature of the questions became quite predictable, and did not generate any concern on the part of the teams. Email correspondence came out from Debbie Leighton Stephens to all of the teams on a regular basis; sometimes the information was generally framed, such as a discussion of potential resources, upcoming events, or information about a team's report, but usually sought to provide general encouragement with their inquiry work. A personalized message to a team helped them to see the coach as an ongoing ally. Such correspondence also reminded the teams they could contact their coaches (or Debbie) for advice and/or assistance at any time.

Questions were generally framed, as the example in Figure D shows, but also had a particular focus on components of the inquiry process. All coaching sessions began with a summary; this served as an important context setting/connective space. It often gave the team, or particular team members, an opportunity to create a story about their inquiry, and this often led to new insights (as reported by the coaching teams in an earlier section of this report). This also became a place for the coach to inquire more about context, to learn more about personal, social, political or cultural settings which affected the inquiry. Other questions were more specific, and targeted to enhance the team's familiarity with the spiral of inquiry process. For example, a question about where the team was at in the Spiral process, or how they were using the 4 questions, provided a way of reminding the team about key elements of the process of inquiry, while also clarifying how this process could enable a deeper look at their question and proposed approaches. It is fair to say the coaching questions varied in intention: on the personal (how are you feeling about...?), on the professional, (what new learning have you experienced?) and Indigenous learners (focus on First Peoples Principles of Learning, land/place based and community learning).

## A sample question a coach would ask

To help reflect the scope and range of discussions the teams had with their coaches, it is useful to look at an exemplary question.

The question *"How are you staying connected to the First Peoples' Principles of Learning (FPPL), to the community and to place?"* provides a definitive direction and a need to report on particular parts of their inquiry work, but also leaves space for teams to report on the diversity of practices and processes they've engaged in as a means of meeting this outcome.

Teams reported that they took a variety of steps, such as:

- forming a club of teachers in the school to report on how FPPL were being integrated into daily teaching practice
- hosting and visiting communities regularly
- offering a land based, student leadership camp
- creating an Elder-in-residence program
- completing a hunting trip and then a student podcast to share and reflect on the experience
- preparing a salmon lunch and sharing food with school and community
- developing courses with Indigenous content embedded within them
- reviewing Canada's Truth and Reconciliation report and recommendations
- designing learning maps with cultural approaches integrated within
- accessing First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) Journey career resources
- finding two champions that will promote FPPL in the school/community
- using the Aboriginal understandings rubric
- drawing from local community resources, such as Friendship Centers

These examples speak to the range and diversity of work the question is designed to surface, without prescribing to those teams particular approaches. There were also qualitative differences between early actions (2016) to later actions (2018). For example, an early action described by one school in 2016 was a focus on relationship building between students and staff to build an environment of trust between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous staff. By 2018, this general statement was replaced with specific actions, such as sponsoring a series of cross-curricular activities that had a cultural focus such as river/ water paddling journeys, food preparation, or weaving, in which students and teachers were collaborate engaged in experiencing together the cultural practices of their region. In other words, the inquiry process began with an important principled focus and goal, but later reports provide direct evidence of strategies that had been developed by the team and implemented, in order to assess progress on the original goal. Coaches were key players in helping the teams to move into more specific actions.

## Coaching to think and synthesize

*“I tried not to come in and give them what I thought, but hook them back to the spiral, or hook them back to the First peoples principles, or the data... it needs to come from them as a team”*  
(coach interview)

All of the coaches spoke about the ways in which they tried to enable deeply reflective conversations with the goal of ensuring the team worked through their inquiry using their own knowledge, skills, and resources. “Holding space” is how Sharpe and Nishimura (2017) describe this phenomena: the coaches assumed their teams had capacity, professional knowledge, passion and purpose which guided their efforts, and the coach served as a conduit to co-constructing a space in which deeper explorations and thinking might happen. There was no assumption that the coach had answers: the answers come from the teams and their collaborative work.

However, nudging or brokering (Huguet, Marsh & Farrell, 2014) were also strategies used by coaches. When brokering is discussed in the coaching literature, it is a reference to how a coach might draw from a related idea or context and bring that information forward to be applied in an alternative context. The coach then acts as a type of bridge, connecting or threading connections between contexts or ideas, providing potential tools that a team might consider in how they approach a task, activity or problem.

Brokering is a metaphor about navigation, more than it is about a particular bit of knowledge or idea. The key to brokering is that it emerges in discussion and in exploring an idea fully. When its done well, the team doesn't really notice how the coach enabled the thinking or discussion to shift directions; rather, it is seen to have emerged naturally from the toing and froing that occurred in the dialogue among the team, including the coach. The skill of brokering or nudging is not easy to learn or use: coaches need to get good at reading their team's language, engage in really deep listening to hear ideas or approaches that are perhaps missed or skipped over, and learn to wait and give space for someone to step into a tension that has developed in exploring an idea. The point here is that no one can necessarily know when bridging is appropriate. If the team is working through the problem or idea, they don't necessarily need a catalyst to engage them. However, teams do get stuck—and there were genuine examples of stuckness that the teams and coaches identified, and in these moments nudging or bridging were useful ways of assisting the team. This wasn't the only strategy for stuckness: sometimes it is simply picking up on a consistent thread and making it more explicit to the team. Some coaches asked their teams to look at other inquiry reports, or find a colleague to chat with... the approach was different, depending on context. As one coach said *“as a coach you have to understand that new conditions emerge and that the process is always evolving”*.

## Transformational change

The coaches interviewed all discussed the transformational changes they had witnessed in their role as coach to their teams. Sometimes these changes happened in the coaching session; when a team connects to a very powerful idea (such as mindfulness or growth mindsets) that shifts their thinking and approach in very important and significant ways. Other times, transformation was described in stories that the teams told; for example, a team's genuine excitement about a new approach, a new finding, a new story from a student or staff member that helped them to see a significant shift in culture, pedagogy, practice or policy. Transformation was an important goal for the inquiry teams because they work in predominantly public schools where the majority of teachers and staff are non-Indigenous, and the existing mindsets often preclude acceptance or incorporation of Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Indigenous team members in particular can feel overwhelmed by the continual efforts to persuade and convince others that Indigenous approaches to teaching and learning can profoundly impact all learners in positive ways.

Coaches expressed in various ways how they sought to create safe, accepting spaces for such discussions, to empathize with difficult situations and to provide assistance in re-directing their work so as to make inroads where they were possible, celebrating successes as they arose. The coaches were genuine and authentic in their approach to such discussions. They expressed profound and deep respect for their colleagues, and gratefulness for the opportunity to learn with them. One coach described this as a two stepped process: first, affirming what the team was doing and then moving on to support them to develop questions or approaches that might disrupt educational norms so that there were spaces for thinking differently. Often these conversations revealed opportunities for leadership, as a team member sought to share their learning with colleagues and district personnel. These moments helped the teams to feel momentum and hope for how schools could change to accommodate their Indigenous learners.

## Challenges

There were a variety of challenges articulated by the coaches. Firstly was the issue of relationality, and maintaining and building strong relationships on which to engage with their teams genuinely, deeply and purposefully. All of these coaches are exemplary learning leaders and they have immense skills in supporting professional learning and embedded forms of professional learning. They saw that the work could have been accelerated or advanced with stronger ties between the team and the coach.

Team turnover was also a challenge; in reading through the three years of coaching conversations, it becomes evident how much time was spent in re-focusing the team as new members join the team and others leave. There is also the emotional work that needs



to be done as a team feels undermined by changes in support (for example, the loss of a supportive school principal or of an informal inquiry team leader) at various points in their inquiry.

Knowledge of the inquiry process was also identified as a challenge; some teams know the approach well, others need much more explicit direction and exposure to various ways to engage in the stages of the inquiry cycle. Scanning was a particular stage mentioned by coaches, and how some teams do this repeatedly and thoroughly, while other teams need to be reminded about the ongoing nature of taking numerous looks from alternative perspectives.

Another challenge was the relative infrequency in which the coaching sessions occurred. Some coaches discussed the need to embed coaching into the everyday practices of the team, others suggested monthly check-ins might help support the teams more fully. Having check in's with either the school's formal leader/principal was also an idea discussed by one coach; they argued that administrative support gave the team strength and empowered them to enact a variety of dissonance raising strategies. Almost all of the coaches described a need for face to face discussions, and how this could really accelerate the relational work so that the inquiry work could be better supported.

An important challenge is the dominance of non-Indigenous educators in schools across BC. The AESN teams are passionate about making changes that benefit Indigenous learners, but they can become quite discouraged by the work with those who seem unaware of their implicit bias and privilege, and how systems reflect dominant Western beliefs. The teams themselves can reflect these biases; in other cases, their colleagues needed opportunities to learn more about Indigenous perspectives, forms of learning, and cultural context, including the genocide of residential schooling. One coach reminded us of the “perfect stranger” (Dion, 2016) stance taken by many educators who insist they don't know, or shouldn't need to know anything about Indigenous peoples because they “don't teach any Aboriginal students” or “there is no Indigenous content to add to my course”, or “the Aboriginal worker takes care of that”.

One coach also discussed the persistence required: “It's amazing no matter how many years, the scope of modeling and teaching, the reminding, and the direct teachings that have gone on, you still need to be there to remind someone or say “Wait a minute, don't forget this...” And some [colleagues] just take it on, but for others you need to gently remind. And sometimes it might mean a less than gentle reminder, getting a bit clearer.” It is definitely important for coaches to support their teams who are front line leaders in the decolonization of schools across the province.



## AESN inquiry and coaching: What works?

77

Targeting efforts focused on Indigenous learners and learning matters. It is also a strategy that works and transforms schools and teams. The information provided by the coaches, their team members and the data from the coaching sessions all serve to reinforce the power of inquiry and how coaching enhances and strengthens the inquiry process. Personal evidence is likely the strongest exemplar of how coaches enabled teams to dig deeper, re-consider and narrate their successes in meeting the needs of their Indigenous students. The deliberate construction of questions designed to reinforce the inquiry process and the First Peoples' Principles of Learning helped embed these ways of thinking into their inquiry work; indeed, the process of inquiry became a way of approaching any number of challenges in the work of teaching, policy or practice. The coaching process and the work of the teams also became sites of learning for others, as the teams shared their learning with other educators across the province when they participated in regional and provincial network meetings.

However, there is also strong evidence gleaned from an examination of the three years of reports to illustrate that there was significant and qualitatively richer approaches taken by teams in their approach to inquiry work as time evolved. The nature of inquiry questions changed as AESN teams explored the evidence collected from their learners about what worked, what didn't, and why. Coaches helped to hone these questions. There is also evidence to suggest these teams were more frequently able to discern obstacles to change created by Western colonial notions of schooling and organizational policy, and that as their ability to challenge grew, so too did the capacity of the organization as a whole to embrace new ways of working with Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners. Coaches helped to solidify the value of this work, and reinforce the ways in which dominant thinking could be challenged or questioned. Many of the outcomes from these inquiry teams will create lasting legacies in schools and districts, as new land based programs, Elder led programs, and student focused leadership initiatives become part of the DNA of the districts and a celebrated and valued part of their culture. Teacher leaders emerged from the inquiry process, and coaches helped them to develop narratives to share their work and spread its impacts.

The literature reviewed for this study made evident that coaching is a powerful means of enhancing instructional practice for educators. It argued that coherent, comprehensive, structured and thoughtfully engaged conversations can enable improved teaching practice. Some of the coaching models, particularly Sharpe and Nishimura's (2017) model considers coaching as an intimate, relationally focused practice that builds capacity and leadership. The authors emphasize that particular ways of communication—including creating genuine, collaborative, shared spaces for reciprocal learning as critically important. Holding space and believing in the capacity, power and professional abilities of the team is another key approach; again, this comes through in the coaching approaches taken by the team involved in this study. The power of this comes from a mindset that

honours the professionalism of educators, but also from an inquiry stance, a deep and powerful belief in how asking questions and listening to learners will create a pathway to learning success. The coaches who participated in this study are exemplars of relational practice, and in their words and actions there is ample evidence to show how they see relationships as central to their ongoing efforts to support the AESN teams. In this way professional learning is enhanced and capacity is built and strengthened.

However, the literature doesn't emphasize how coaching (and in this case, inquiry) enable leadership. While personal improvement is a stated goal, the ideal of changing and improving systems is less of an emphasis. And certainly there is little or no emphasis in the existing literature on how coaching and inquiry might enable a decolonization of educational systems, and serve as a potential tool for reconciliation.

Yet it is clear from the work of these teams and their coaches that leadership is an outcome of doing inquiry that supports Indigenous learners. Once a light was shone on the question of "how are our Indigenous learners doing?" the teams soon understood the necessity for change in their colleagues, leaders, district staff, and community. So the inquiry process and inquiry work became more than working with young learners, but with adult learners too—the other adults in the building. While the inquiry questions focused on the transition of Indigenous learners at various points in their lives, the impact of measures often couldn't be realized without other partners in the school and community. This meant that the work of the AESN teams and their coaches had a dual focus: transforming student opportunity AND transforming the systems and cultures that student programs and education were embedded within. Doing this work requires and builds leadership.

So while the coaching literature emphasizes individual professional learning as transformational practice, the inquiry teams and coaches in this study suggest that *relational coaching* can produce collective efficacy and system transformation. This suggests some potential additions to the skill and attribute lists created to showcase how good coaching is accomplished. Some initial thoughts include the importance of perspective taking, an understanding of allyship, an ability to embrace discomfort, taking responsibility to identify privilege, and deconstructing naturalized forms of bias.

## Coaching recommendations

79

The coaches and teams both expressed a desire for more frequent contact; while face to face contact was referenced by several individuals, a move to increase the number of regular contacts between coaches and teams would be a valuable way of enhancing the success of the AESN inquiry processes and teams.

There could potentially be opportunity to pair teams and have them meet one another on at least a yearly basis; we know that sharing progress and telling the story of our inquiry helps motivate teams, but it would also provide a means of growing the community of practice, and potentially expand the opportunity to creatively imagine new or revised supports for Indigenous learners of all ages who are experiencing various moments of transition.

If there are going to be new teams selected to work with coaches during their AESN inquiries, consider pairing existing teams with new teams. There could be new forms of coaching and support that emerge in a model that has created a variety of learning leaders within their particular context.

Keep the structured yet flexible/emergent nature of the coaching calls; consider adding a question that focuses the team's attention to how this initiative is being shared with other educators in the school, the community or leaders. An early AESN coaching question asked teams to find champions in their school/community for the work they were doing. An approach like this could help create ripples out that would speed the system transformation needed in districts across BC.

Create a visual tool that highlights the learning of the inquiry teams; use it to advance the cause of the inquiry network while building a stronger focus on transforming learning for Indigenous learners across BC. Promote it with educational leaders, districts and teams in NOIE.

*"In all cases, inquiry thrived when the relationships were understood as a necessary foundation to everything else.*

*Relationship building is the first, middle and last step needed in inquiry work."* (p 54)

- Alberta Assessment Consortium (2018). [https://aac.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Lit\\_Review\\_Sustained\\_Coaching\\_Model\\_of\\_Teacher\\_PD.pdf](https://aac.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Lit_Review_Sustained_Coaching_Model_of_Teacher_PD.pdf)
- Anuik, J., Battiste, M., & George, P. (2010). Learning from Promising Programs and Applications in Nourishing the Learning Spirit. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 33 (1).
- Baskerville, D. (2009). Navigating the unfamiliar in a quest towards culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 25, 461–467.
- Baydala, L., Rasmussen, C., Birch, J., Sherman, J., Wikman, E., Charchun, J., Kennedy, M., Bisnaz, J. (2009). Self-Beliefs and Behavioural Development as Related to Academic Achievement in Canadian Aboriginal Children. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 24(1), 19-33.
- Bishop, R., Berryman, M., Wearmouth, J., Peter, M., & Clapham, S. (2012). Professional development, changes in teacher practice and improvements in Indigenous students' educational performance: A case study from New Zealand. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 28, 694-705.
- Beaudry, T., De Guevara, J., Kaiser, K. (2017). Together we empower Aboriginal students of All Nations... to Lead. In J. Archibald & J. Hare (Eds) *Learning, Knowing, Sharing: Celebrating Successes in k-12 Aboriginal Education in British Columbia*, pp. 183-192. Office of Indigenous Education & BC Principals & Vice Principals: Vancouver, CAN.
- Clutterbuck, D. (1985). *Everyone Needs a Mentor: How to foster Talent within the Organization*. Institute of Personnel and Development, London, UK.
- Clutterbuck, D. (2001). *Everyone Needs a mentor: Fostering Talent at Work*, 3rd ed., Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, London, 2001.
- Congress of Aboriginal Peoples. (2010). *Staying in School: Engaging Aboriginal Students*. Ottawa, ONT.
- Costa, A. & Garmston, R. (1985). Supervision for Intelligent Teaching. *Educational Leadership*, 42(5), 72-80.
- Costa, A., & Garmston, R. (2015). *Cognitive Coaching: Developing Self-Directed Leaders and Learners*. Roman & Littlefield: USA.
- Dion, S. (2016). Mediating the space between; Voices of Indigenous youth and voices of educators in service of reconciliation. *Canadian review of sociology*, 53(4), 468-473.
- Edzerza, R., Leighton-Stephens, D., Swaka, R., Clifton, M., & Fettes, M. (2017). Persistence and Change: Strengthening Aboriginal education through language learning, relationship building, and resource development. In J. Archibald & J. Hare (Eds) *Learning, Knowing, Sharing: Celebrating Successes in k-12 Aboriginal Education in British Columbia*, pp. 193-204. Office of Indigenous Education & BC Principals & Vice Principals: Vancouver, CAN.

- First Peoples' Principles of Learning* (2008). First Nations Education Steering Committee, Government of British Columbia. <http://www.fnesc.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/PUB-LFP-POSTER-Principles-of-Learning-First-Peoples-poster-11x17.pdf>
- Frank, A. W. (2010). *Letting Stories Breathe: A socio narratology*. University of Chicago Press: USA.
- Guide to Support Coaching and Mentoring for School Improvement*. (2016). Australian Council for Educational Research. [https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=professional\\_dev](https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=professional_dev)
- Halbert, J. & Kaser, L. (2013). *Spirals of Inquiry for Equity and Quality*. BCPVPA Press: Vancouver.
- Halbert, J. & Kaser, L. (2015). Learning to Be. A perspective from British Columbia. *European journal of education*, 50, (2): 196-213.
- Halbert J. & Kaser, L. (2018). Inquiry Learning Networks and the Spiral of Inquiry. *The Brief #2*. The Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales Limited.
- Hawk, Cowley, Hill, & Sutherland (2002). *The importance of the teacher/student relationship for Maori and Pasifika students*. Available from: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237266911\\_The\\_importance\\_of\\_the\\_teacherstudent\\_relationship\\_for\\_Maori\\_and\\_Pasifika\\_students](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237266911_The_importance_of_the_teacherstudent_relationship_for_Maori_and_Pasifika_students)
- Hamel, N. (2017). Supporting Aboriginal Students' Transitions to High School Through the Transition Program. In J. Archibald & J. Hare (Eds) *Learning, Knowing, Sharing: Celebrating Successes in k-12 Aboriginal Education in British Columbia*, pp. 101-109. Office of Indigenous Education & BC Principals & Vice Principals: Vancouver, CAN.
- Hodgson-Smith, K. (2000). Issues of Pedagogy in Aboriginal Education. In M. Brant Castellano, L. Davis & L. Lahache (Eds) *Aboriginal education: Fulfilling the Promise*, pp. 156-170. UBC Press: Vancouver, BC, CAN.
- Huguet, A., Marsh, J.A. & Farrell, C. C. (2014). Building Teachers' Data-use Capacity: Insights from Strong and Developing Coaches. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 22(52). <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v22n52.2014>.
- King, T. (2003). *The 2003 CBC Massey Lectures, The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*. Available from: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/the-2003-cbc-massey-lectures-the-truth-about-stories-a-native-narrative-1.2946870>
- Kram, K.E. (1985). *Mentoring at Work: Developmental Relationships in Organizational Life*. Scott Foreman, Glenview, IL.

- Le Fevre, D., Timperley, H. & Ell, F. (2016). Curriculum and Pedagogy: The future of teacher professional learning and development of adaptive expertise. In *The Sage Handbook of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment*, p. 309-324. Sage Publications: USA.
- Lofthouse, R., Leat, D., & Towler, C. (2010). *Coaching for teaching and learning: a practical guide for schools*. CFTB Education Trust: UK.  
<https://www.ncl.ac.uk/media/wwwnclacuk/cflat/files/coaching-for-teaching.pdf>
- McGee, C. Ward, R., Gibbons, J. & Harlow, A. (2003). *Transition to Secondary School: A literature review*. A report prepared for the New Zealand Ministry of Education. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.621.2039&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- McGregor, C., (2013). Lifting All Learners: An Impact Assessment of the Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Networks (AESN). A report commissioned by Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. [www.noii.ca/aesn-impact-report-2013](http://www.noii.ca/aesn-impact-report-2013)
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2017). *Promising Practices in Supporting Success for Indigenous Students*. Paris: FRA.
- Paek, H. & Hove, T. (2017). Risk Perceptions and Risk Characteristics. *Communication theory, health and risk communication*. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.283
- Parr, J., Timperley, H. (2010). Multiple Black Boxes: Inquiry into learning within a professional development project. *Improving Schools*, 13 (2): 158-171.
- Rhea Ma, Z. (2016). *Leading and Managing Indigenous Education in the Postcolonial World*. Routledge: London & New York.
- Ragins, B. R., and Kram, K. E. (2007). The Roots and Meanings of Mentoring. In Ragins & Kram, (Eds) *The Handbook of Mentoring at Work: Theory, Research, and Practice*, pp. 3-15. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Robertson, J. (2008). *Coaching educational leadership: Building Leadership capacity through partnership*. Sage: LA, New York, London.
- Rosborough, T., Halbert, J., Kaser, L. (2017). Walking together in a spirit of respect and inquiry: the aboriginal engagement school network. In J. Archibald & J. Hare (Eds), *Learning, Knowing, Sharing: Celebration Successes in k-12 Aboriginal Education in British Columbia*, pp. 28-43. BC Principals & Vice Principals & UBC: Vancouver, BC, CAN.
- Sharpe, K. & Nishimura, J. (2017). *When mentoring meets coaching: shifting the stance in Education*. Pearson: Toronto, ONT.
- Sutton, R. (2012). *Successful Student Transitions*. Portage and Main Press: Winnipeg, MAN.
- Tanaka, M. (2017). *Learning and Teaching Together: Weaving Indigenous Ways of Knowing into Education*. UBC Press: Vancouver, CAN.

- Tilleczek, K. (2010). Building Bridges: Transitions from Elementary to Secondary School. *Education Canada*, 48(1), 68-71.
- Tilleczek, K., Laflamme, S., Fersuson, B., Roth Edney, D., Girard, M., Cudney, D., Cardoso, S. (2010). *Fresh Starts and False Starts: Young People in transition from Elementary to Secondary School*. For the Ontario Ministry of Education Student Success/Learning to 18 Implementation, Training and Evaluation Branch. Toronto, Canada.
- Timperley, H., Parr, J., & Bertanees, C. (2009). Promoting professional inquiry for improved outcomes for students in New Zealand. *Professional development in Education*, 35 2): 227-245.
- Timperley, H., Kaser, L, & Halbert, J. (2014). *A framework for transforming learning in Schools: innovation and the Spiral of Inquiry*. Seminar Series 234, Melbourne: Center for Strategic Education.
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015). Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: Summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. [http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls\\_to\\_Action\\_English2.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf)
- Wellman, B. and Lipton, L. (2001). *Mentoring Matters: A practical guide to learning focused relationships*. Miravia LLC: Arlington, MA. minar Series 234, Melbourne: Center for Strategic Education.