

# Adminfo

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**The artful classroom**  
stories within a culture of learning

# Research in instructional leadership

BCPVPA President Jameel Aziz writes about the correlation between instructional leadership and student success.

Over the years, the BCPVPA has been engaged in many conversations around the role of the principal and vice-principal as instructional leader. We know that this is the core of our role — as Stephen

Covey might say, *the main thing*. Instructional leadership is, in fact, the reason that many of us left the classroom and the enjoyment of our daily interaction with students. And while there is an abundance of reading material to support the statement that principals and vice-principals are key instructional leaders, integral to the success of students and our schools, the question remains, ‘where is the hard data?’

Why, you may ask, do we need research or data to support what we all intrinsically know is an important job and role? Quite simply, our roles and their value are not understood by all. As our positions as instructional leaders are eroding and the managerial aspects of our position increasing, we need to have research that supports the importance of the instructional leadership role. We need parents and our school communities to understand the positive correlation between our instructional leadership and student success.

Our quest for hard data has not yielded many results, especially in North America. We have found



some examples from New Zealand and other jurisdictions but there is little that is current or local.

As such, the BCPVPA is beginning to engage in conversations with researchers around this subject and I believe that we will be soon be embarking on research projects that will allow us, as school-based leaders, to have regional and current data that supports the importance of our role as instructional leaders. Although still in its early stages, we have had conversations with Simon Fraser University’s Educational Leadership Department that have shown promise and we will engage other researchers interested in working with us on this area of study. SFU is currently engaged in research on how educators face challenges using research to improve school practice. The researchers are working to identify the barriers that exist within the system that do not allow us the time and/or ability to take current research information and utilize it in a way that can result in better outcomes for students.

We all began our education training programs reading and studying some forms of educational research

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# Walking together for a better future

The Aboriginal Enhancement Network of Schools is helping to realize the vision of a better future for the learners they serve.

by Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert

The vision of the schools in the BC network of schools is every learner crossing the stage with dignity, purpose and options. The Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network (AESN) represents one effort to make the goals of individual district enhancement agreements come alive in classrooms through inquiry, teamwork and creating relationships of respect. The work in AESN schools reflects a small part of the work that is taking place across schools and communities in BC to strengthen the learning experiences of Aboriginal learners. This article describes the way in which AESN schools are 'walking together' to realize the vision of a better future for the learners they serve.

Until fairly recently, Aboriginal education was often perceived as the responsibility of the Aboriginal department within a district or the Aboriginal support workers within a school. The development of Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements is helping to create a sense of shared responsibility — a sense of walking together. Once district educators and community members have worked to es-

tablish trust and have reached consensus about the goals for the First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners in their community, their commitments are made official through the signing of an Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement. On the pathway to the signing event, many obstacles have to be addressed, including histories of pain and mistrust flowing from the residential school experiences of many community members.

Without exception these “new start” agreements have powerful implications for all teachers, all learners, and all learning settings.

How can the important intentions embedded in these agreements be honored in action and become system-wide realities now (not in some distant future) ... and in every setting, not just in a few isolated places?

Although each agreement is

unique to the district and to its specific Aboriginal communities, there are some important commonalities. Young people gain strength through strong identity with their culture and heritage and a focus on language and culture is imperative. High levels of literacy and numeracy are emphasized, as is high school completion. Developing a culture of appreciation for the traditions, histories and ways of life of Indigenous peoples in Canada is also an important outcome for all learners.

Most participants in the agreement process come to a personal conviction that the fabric of our society would be strengthened if we all learned more about the more holistic view of learning — spiritual, emotional, physical and mental — valued by Aboriginal people. We can view these local enhancement agreements as clarion calls for developing a deeper understanding of indigenous ways of knowing for all learners, through the development of what indigenous scholars describe as two-eyed seeing.

### From Agreements to Action

So, the consensus has been created and the agreements have been signed. What actions will now take place? As the poet T.S.Eliot has written:

*Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the shadow*

The shadow of fatigue from the work of building consensus can sometimes overwhelm the desire for action. The best will in the world is not enough. The work of achieving these goals is work for everyone, not just a few.

Concerned about the fatigue factor, in December 2008, Trish Rosbor-

ough the Director of the provincial Aboriginal Education Enhancements Branch, asked a question: Would members of the Network of Performance Based Schools (NPBS) be interested in developing a parallel network willing to explore ways of making the goals in signed enhancement agreements come to life in classrooms? The answer to the question was an emphatic “yes” and the AESN was formed. A small grant was provided by INAC (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada) and the Ministry of Education to initiate the work. Schools were invited to develop a question related to the goals of their local signed enhancement agreement. They were encouraged to explore new ways of developing cultural understandings. They were asked to develop greater individual ownership of learning through the thoughtful application of the six key coaching-for-learning strategies embraced by NPBS. They agreed to use the BC performance standards as a way of knowing what difference was being made for learners and to provide a focus for the school change “story.”

So, what has happened? Since Trish Rosborough first asked the question, two years of exploratory work in

schools has taken place and there are now 75 schools across the province actively engaged in AESN inquiries. Here are some of our observations so far:

### 1. Getting started matters.

At a spring seminar in 2009 Debbie Leighton Stephens urged the 200 participating educators to walk slowly with learners, to walk beside the learners, and to be a known face in their local communities. Gayle Bedard, District Principal (Surrey) and Colleen Hannah, District Principal (Mission) demonstrated through their humor and insight that there are “no dumb questions.” They encouraged educators to find a local Elder with the cultural knowledge, build a relationship with him or her, and then heed the advice. If you make a “mistake” culturally, apologize. Willie Pierre from the Katzie Nation demonstrated and then talked about how to have an appropriate acknowledgment ceremony. With these sets of models, teachers and principals have taken tangible steps to incorporate cultural respect and understanding into their formal meetings and on-going work.

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Editor

Richard Williams

## 2. Learning more matters.

At the 2010 seminar, Dr. Lorna Williams helped participants understand more about the historical record of cultural oppression. She also suggested ways for educators to deepen their learning including using the Aboriginal Holistic Lifelong Learning models available on the CCL website, (<http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/AboutCCL/Knowledge-Centres/AboriginalLearning/>), reading the BC First Nations 12 text and learning more about the First Nations Language courses. AESN schools have been exploring some of the indigenous ways of knowing shared with us by Dr. Williams. These include:

**Kamucwkalha** – the energy indicating group attunement and the emergence of a common group purpose.

**Celhcelh** – each person is responsible for his or her learn-

ing, it means finding and taking advantage of all opportunities to learn and maintain an openness to learning. Each person must take the initiative to become part of the learning community by finding their place and fitting themselves into the community. It means offering what knowledge and expertise you have to benefit the communal work being carried out.

**Emhaka7** – each person does the best he or she can at whatever the task, and keeps an eye on others to be helpful. To work respectfully and with good thoughts.

**Responsibility** – each person is responsible for helping the team and the learning community to accomplish the task at hand in a good way.

**Relationship** – throughout the course each person will be con-

scious of developing and maintaining relationships, with the people, the teachers and guides, and the communities beyond the learning community. It also means relating what you are experiencing to your past knowledge and to what you will do with what you are learning.

**Watchful listening** – an openness to listening beyond our own personal thoughts and assumptions.

**A7xekcal** – how teachers help us to locate the infinite capacity we all have as learners. Developing one's own personal gifts and expertise in a holistic manner.

**Kat'il'a** – finding stillness amidst our busyness and need to know.

## 3. There is no "perfect" way to start.

Some schools build confidence by



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A number of schools have created videos and banners for their schools in which learners express their belief in themselves and their views about completing school and “crossing the stage with dignity, purpose and options.”

starting with fiction and non-fiction accounts of Aboriginal history, strengths and experiences. These schools don't stay “stuck” in a literacy orientation. They often move on to rich, hands-on experiences drawing on the expertise of local Aboriginal elders. Other schools, sometimes with the leadership of Aboriginal cultural workers, engage with Aboriginal ways of knowing and worldviews right from the start. Regardless of the starting point, learners in both settings are exhibiting more interest in and respect for cross-cultural understanding.

#### **4. Believing in a goal beyond high school matters.**

Having a goal for life after high school is critically important and schools are working hard with their learners to create visual images of possibility. A number of schools have created videos and banners for their schools in which learners express their belief in themselves and their views about completing school and “crossing the stage with dignity, purpose and options.” These banners are “flown” with pride and the short videos help learners communicate with their family members and “see” themselves as part of a lifelong learning community.

#### **5. Learning across types of schools and geographic locations matters.**

BC communities are diverse and our contexts for learning

are varied. Learning across communities and across contexts is an important feature of the AESN work. As example, this year two schools have created a shared inquiry linking learners from Kyuquot, a small Aboriginal community on the west coast of Vancouver Island with learners at Rockridge Secondary in West Vancouver. By exchanging art-based narratives about family, culture and the environment, learners are exploring the world views held by indigenous and non-indigenous people in BC.

Hartley Bay School in the Prince Rupert School District has been exploring the extent to which utilizing traditional Ts'msyen methods of teaching will result in greater student engagement and subsequent academic and personal growth. They turned their goal-setting right-side up by deciding to wholeheartedly embrace the local indigenous ways of knowing – and they are finding

that attendance patterns, learner engagement and learning gains are all being transformed for the better. Every educator who has listened to this story at regional meetings has been inspired to “think differently” about approaches to learning. Three other small schools in Nisga'a, Stewart and Cherryville connected to engage boys in reading through on-line discussions and friendly competition. Each school is creating its own way forward.

#### **6. Connections with community leaders and Elders matter.**

Connecting with local communities, with Elders and with families is important. There are many examples of ways in which AESN schools are reaching out to communities and Elders. One small school in Vanderhoof has made direct and personal connections. The grade four and five learners at Sinkut View wrote formal postcards at the beginning of the year to Grand Chief Ed John, Hereditary Chief of the Tl'azt'en Nation. Their postcards described what they knew about the local Aboriginal culture. After engaging in a yearlong study of the local culture, the students again wrote to him to

### **Know more**

Lewthwaite, B. & McMillan, B. (2010) “She Can Bother Me, and That's Because She Cares”: What Inuit Students Say About Teaching and Their Learning. *Canadian Journal of Education* 33, 1 (2010): 140-175.

Tanaka, Michelle, T.D. (2009) Transforming perspectives: The immersion of student teachers in indigenous ways of knowing. downloaded Nov 15 2010 from:  
<http://dspace.library.uvic.ca:8080/handle/1828/1664>

Williams, L., & Tanaka, M. (2007) Schalay'nung Sxwey'ga: Emerging cross cultural pedagogy in the academy. *Educational Insights*, 8(3). Available at:  
<http://www.ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v11n03/articles/williams.html>

share what they had learned. The growth in the knowledge and insights of the students was impressive. Through the initiative of the Aboriginal support worker, Grand Chief Ed John made the time to visit the school to talk with all the students about local history and traditions – and to commend them on their personal learning journeys.

One of the goals in the *Enhancement Agreement* in Haida Gwaii is that “students will develop a strong sense of belonging to their environment and community.” In their AESN inquiry, the school asked to what extent a focus on oral story telling would have a positive impact on student performance in reading, writing and understanding. Students created their own talking sticks, wrote and told stories, and invited Elders and community members to their story-telling sessions. The school saw recognizable improvement in student confidence as well as in their speaking and story-telling abilities. The support of the Elders was part of the key to their growth.

### **7. Respect is essential.**

Two Manitoba science educators, Brian Lewthwaite and Barbara McMillan (2010) have studied what Inuit intermediate students say helps them with their learning. In their report, aptly titled *She Can Bother Me, and That's Because She Cares: What Inuit Students Say About Teaching and Their Learning*, they describe the helpful behaviors of the teachers from the perspective of the learners. These include:

1. Teachers consider how their students perceive educational success (what students perceive as success is based on their recognition of, and pride in their tangible achievements). Teachers

then reposition their efforts to acknowledge success in students' terms, especially regarding perseverance and working through to an end product.

2. They listened to learners and then reconsidered what they believed to be the attributes of a positive learning environment. As a result they became more interactive and cogenerative in their approach.

3. They let their learners know that they care about their educational success. They do not see deficits in their students and they are committed to their success.

4. They allow room for learners to use their first language in the classroom.

5. They communicate clearly and concisely and directly with their learners – they undertalk rather than overtalk.

6. They use multiple strategies including modeling to foster learning. They adapt their instructional practices based on learner need.

7. They allow time and provide individual support for learners.

They provide generous amounts of informal and informative feedback to their students.

8. They establish reciprocal learning opportunities within their classrooms. They recognize that others can contribute to the overall learning and promote students to both seek out and provide support in learning as the need arises.

9. They use local contexts, stories and resource materials in their learning program. They do not believe they are the central figure in their students' learning.

10. They recognize that they can and must change their teaching to help learners learn. They do not insist on their own way, they change to better suit their students reflect their home culture.

These findings match the strongest work in BC schools where educators are demonstrating these qualities in their work with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners.

### **Changing Perspectives – Walking Together**

Educators can learn a great deal

## AESN partnerships

The AESN has benefited from a number of helpful partnerships. Productive partnerships developed with members of the Ministry Aboriginal Enhancements Branch staff, with the leaders of the Healthy Schools Network and with representatives from INAC. Key Aboriginal educators such as Dr. Lorna Williams, Debbie Leighton-Stephens, Colleen Hannah, Gayle Bedard, Trish Roshborough, Laura Tait and Stella Bates were generous with their advice and guidance. Colleen Hodgson from the Métis Nation of British Columbia made sure schools were aware of resources available to all learners through MNBC. Another important and significant early partnership was with the BC Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association, particularly with Gaila Erickson, the Manager of Professional Learning. Gaila understood the urgency of confronting deficiency stances and she provided a model of genuine and strategic collaboration. The production of short videos with First Nations educators answering questions about protocol and honouring ceremonies was just one tangible example of her leadership (see <http://www.bcpvpa.bc.ca/node/78>)


— JH & LK



Students from Sinkut View Elementary cleaning the day's catch.

about the forms of professional learning that are most helpful in changing perspectives from reading the work of Michelle Tanaka, a doctoral student of Dr. Lorna Williams's (Canadian Research Chair in Indigenous Studies). In Michelle's research study, summarized in her thesis, *Transforming Perspectives: The Immersion of Student Teachers in Indigenous Ways of Knowing*, she found that four important areas had to be confronted for non-Aboriginal teachers to learn and grow:

1. They had to learn to work alongside, and to walk alongside each other and Indigenous people.
2. Teachers had to put aside the familiar and connect to the unknown.
3. They had to learn to let go of perfection.
4. New teachers had to overcome their fears of engaging in emotional territory.


These observations have powerful implications for practice and are helpful in forming a conceptual framework for the work of AESN schools. Walking together and working together across spaces, places and cultures, we are confident that we can make a learning world of which we will all be proud – one that affords dignity, purpose and options to every learner in our province. We believe that the AESN schools, through their willingness to take risks, to work together in a spirit of respect and inquiry, and through sharing their stories with generosity and openness, are helping to create new ways forward. 

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Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser are co-leaders of the Network of Performance Based Schools and assistant professors of studies in Educational Leadership at Vancouver Island University. They recently collaborated to write *Leadership Mindsets: Innovation and learning in the transformation of schools*. They can be reached at [jhalbert@telus.net](mailto:jhalbert@telus.net) and [lkaser@telus.net](mailto:lkaser@telus.net)

*Aziz, continued from page 2*

but the trend now seems to use scholarly opinion as the basis for philosophical and curricular change in our system. We read books from high-level individuals who have been immersed in education for years. We know the information they provide is influential and believe the information to be accurate, but we are still left without the research that quantifies the influence and importance that principals and vice-principals as instructional leaders play on student achievement.

Our members have told us that it is time we engage in and encourage research that can help us guide our leadership in a significant way. This work will engage principals, vice-principals and teachers in addressing these questions. I will share in upcoming issues of *eNews* opportunities for you to engage in and respond to this work. 

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# The artful classroom: stories within a culture of learning

An educator describes how the artful classroom fosters learning and capacity for growth by actively engaging students in their learning.

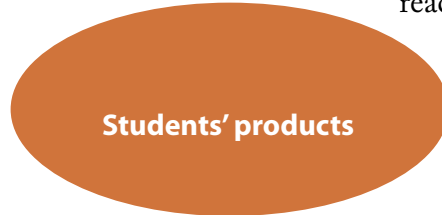
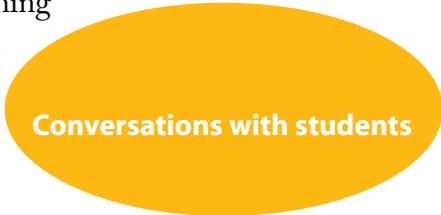
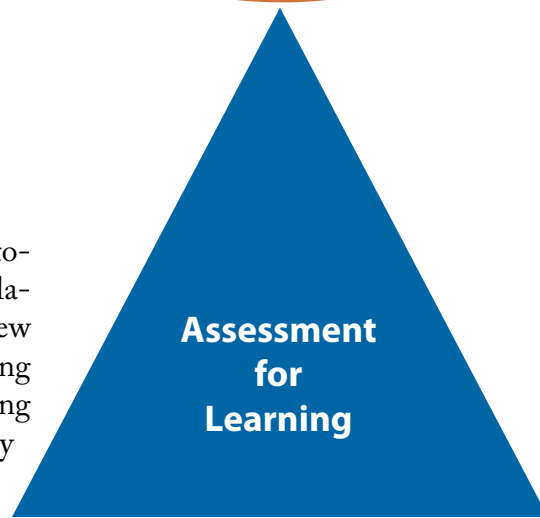
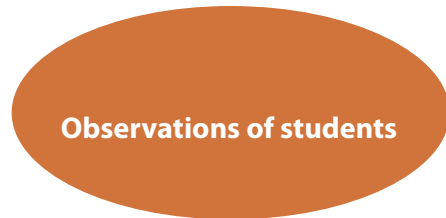
by Don Ottosen

The author thanks Anne Davis for her work on assessment. For information <http://annedavies.com/>

The brisk, heavy air of October is upon us. We are a relatively inexperienced crew aboard a grand vessel containing much precious cargo. Sailing along beautifully, we are oblivious to any menacing turbulence or obstacles, of anything that would impede our year-long journey.

In plain language, we are a typical grade six class that has been together for about a month. Our room is packed with friendly banter, laughter and vast potential. Unaware of anything that might come against us and our learning, we continue to learn the skills that help shape a desired future.

The year begins with a deceptively simple dialogue. What would we like to do and learn this year? We talk and write about our interests, what we already know and what



ideas on several charts and put them up so we can refer to them throughout the year. The activity is repeated, this time answering, what makes an excellent student? The side wall is covered with our ideas, printed large enough so that everyone can read them from their seat. We agree that if students and teachers follow these criteria, our class-

room will be an awesome place this year.

## What do we think makes an excellent teacher? Excellent teachers:

- care about their students;
- give challenging, interesting work;
- are fair and consistent;
- help students with their work;
- explain clearly what students need to do to be successful;

things we wonder about. We introduce ourselves. We share. We listen.

Our teacher asks what we think makes an excellent teacher. In 10 groups of three, we record our thoughts on Post-it notes and a member from each small group takes a turn presenting their ideas. When all of the presenters are done the large chart paper at the front of the room is covered with bright, green slips of paper. Many groups have similar answers. Later, we record our

- describe in detail what needs to be done to improve work;
- don't lose their temper or yell at their students;
- are respectful of their student's feelings;
- listen to their students;
- compliment students when they deserve it;
- teach in different ways for a change sometimes;
- encourage their students;
- laugh with their students and sometimes tell riddles and funny stories;
- take their students on field trips;
- provide brain breaks and sponge activities;
- give enough homework but not too much; and
- make learning fun.

### What do we think makes an excellent student? Excellent students:

- are respectful and care for each other;
- use *put-ups*, not *put-downs*;
- care about their learning and accept learning challenges;
- use self-control;
- try to do their best quality work (BQW);
- ask for help when needed;
- don't give up easily and know how to problem solve;
- use their W.I.T.S. (Walk away from the problem, Ignore the problem, Talk it out, and Seek adult assistance);
- are helpful and responsible;
- include others and work well in teams;
- listen well and don't interrupt another;
- don't complain and are patient;
- are creative thinkers;
- are calm and use appropriate

voices, and;

- compliment each other.

Safe moorage lies beyond a narrow neck of water; a harbour destination where a vessel can be replenished. Navigating through treacherous, mysterious seas, we align three markers ... Triangulation is a method of assessing our learning. It points to where learners are and where they are headed. Our conversations, observations and products are all evidence of learning.

### Conversations that Illuminate

Teachers can learn much from listening to and talking with their students. Our conversations guide us, illuminating our paths.

Once a week we enjoy something called our 'class meeting.' During this time each participant has a chance to speak and be heard. On most Friday afternoons, desks are pushed aside and we arrange our chairs in a large circle with 'Sharkie,' our driftwood mascot in the center.

A small, wooden box containing four distinctive stones is passed around the circle: the compliment, problem, question and idea stones. One stone represents compliments and is shaped like the perfect 'skipper.' It's one that could be skipped across calm water, sometimes right onto the far bank of a little pond. Compliments are a lot like skippers, we are told. They create a ripple effect. When a person is handed the box, they hold the compliment stone and say something nice to someone in the circle. It has to be a sincere, meaningful comment, because this is about respecting others. Everyone leans in to listen and no one else talks while you have the box and are sharing. Each person compliments at least one person but no more than three. There is also a problem stone that you may use if you want

to describe a problem that occurred during the week to you or someone else that needs solving. Individuals can't be named when a problem is mentioned and a possible solution must be shared by the speaker who brought it up. If there is an idea that you'd like to share, such as a special activity that the class could do together, then the idea stone is used. Questions, if there are any, are posed using the final rock. One or two students record ideas that have been shared and also problems and questions, if they are important enough. The final part of the meeting is when the student(s) of the week are presented with their recognition, a *Power Performer* certificate, by the teacher. That night, their parents will receive a positive phone call.

Paying close attention to classroom conversations is vital and the ideas and stories we share help guide us, providing illumination and direction. Moreover, our discussions often point to our desired future, that which words and actions ultimately paint.

Cheerful landscapes line both sides of the hall outside our classroom, interspersed with geometric, perspective drawings and pastel resists. Our *Wow Wall* is plastered with a variety of student's best quality work. Creative, personal mobiles hang above each desk. Our classroom is a welcoming place and it's evident that students are proud of their efforts.

As we prepare to share with our parents on the annual parent interview day, students are asked to facilitate each meeting. An agenda is developed that covers many important areas of growth and learning. (See an example agenda for a student-led conference on page 11). Parents have been advised of the student-led conference format well in advance and

## Student-led conference agenda

Name \_\_\_\_\_

If your teachers are available, introduce (or re-introduce) us to your parents when you enter the classroom. \_\_\_\_\_ (initial when completed)

Explain how our class created our excellent teacher/student criteria and share with your parents at least 3 ideas that resonate with you. \_\_\_\_\_ (initial when completed)

Read a selected page aloud to your parents. Choose the novel you are presently reading. Next, explain what you have been doing regarding your reading reflections each day. (You may want to share some of your reflections in your Duo-Tang). \_\_\_\_\_ (initial when completed)

Share with your parents, your favorite composition (story) that you have recently written. \_\_\_\_\_ (initial when completed)

Using a protractor, measure and correctly label the angles that have been provided for you on the back table. \_\_\_\_\_ (initial when completed)

Teach your parents some French and German. (Refer to your Duo-tang if you would like). \_\_\_\_\_ (initial when completed)

Share what you have been learning in Science. (Refer to your Duo-Tang). \_\_\_\_\_ (initial when completed)

Complete the self-assessment work habits sheet with your parents. \_\_\_\_\_ (initial when completed)

Share some of your art with your parents. \_\_\_\_\_ (initial when completed)

Explain a few of our important routines and activities we do each week in our class. (ie: class meetings, washroom routine, voice levels, smooth transitions, etc.). \_\_\_\_\_ (initial when completed)

Explain how reporting works this year in our class, using our performance scales for each subject area. Explain what is meant by the term, *Triangulation*. Also, with the assistance of your parents, write one or two personal 'learning related goals' that you wish to work on for next term. (Please write your goal(s) on the last page of the reporting document). \_\_\_\_\_ (initial when completed)

\*If you haven't already had a chance to introduce your parent(s) to your teachers, meet with them now. Please bring this completed conference form and the work habits sheet with you.

We hope that you enjoyed sharing with your parents. Students participate in this type of exercise to showcase their work as well as to increase accountability for their own learning.

Mr. Ottosen and Mrs. Kuschel

they've been provided with a copy of the actual agenda their child will use. We know from experience that the successful completion of many classroom activities depends on parent support and good communication. This day will provide an opportunity for each student to reflect on their successes this term and to provide parents with examples of what they have learned in each of the academic areas. Students are also asked to explain what they are learning in the area of social responsibility and work habits. This is an extremely positive opportunity for students to showcase their strengths, acknowledge the areas that they need improvement in and, with parents in attendance, to set a few goals for students to reach by the end of the academic year. Due to the unique nature of these conferences, we are able to accommodate a few groups at a time and are therefore be more flexible with scheduling times. Each student-led conference will last approximately 30-minutes, which includes approximately 10-15 minutes to confer with the teachers.

We usually pursue a new art project each Monday. Most students complete their assignment by Friday but those who aren't quite finished by week's end are given more time. People process and learn differently and at different rates. Students are encouraged to persevere, re-think and to go deeper ... to explore. Some personal tasks and explorations are challenging and take a lot longer to complete but they can be even more rewarding when the destination is finally reached.

Students learn best when they understand where they are going with their learning. They need to know their learning destinations and why they are learning the things being presented. Students also need to

know where they are in relation to the goals that have been set. When they have a say in determining classroom learning goals and destinations, students discover where they need to go and what they must do to get there. The more students are involved in co-creating criteria and in their assessment process, the more they will learn.

The artful classroom fosters learning and capacity for growth by actively engaging students in their learning. As authors attempt to hook readers with an intriguing opener, teachers aim to draw their class in, to engage them. Students who are active in their learning are more likely to be successful in school. Creative, nurturing classes build bridges each day that are lined with life experiences. Such bridges connect us and improve learning as we work together and share our best thinking and stories.

Educators have learned to act on their inner sense of urgency and conscience in matters that they believe are important to their schools, and to navigate reflectively and with intent. Sharing our stories and ideas may not help solve all the problems and challenges within our schools. But as we continue to understand our interactions as a significant part

of our learning and culture, we may be prompted to ask ourselves change related and growth-oriented questions such as: How then, should we have acted? Where do we go from here? And, what have we learned from our work?

A painting metaphor can be used to explain how we consciously and unconsciously explore, create and process much of our learning in the artful classroom. We begin by defining or sketching an event, by being actively receptive to input or information. Once the canvas, or board is primed and our attention is focused, we begin to "flesh in," or paint the outlined sketch. We transform it from a simple contour drawing into a detailed memory image. A contour is a sensitive, modulated line that is the framework, or essence of the subject. Pressure is felt, and needed, as the weight of the sketching utensil meanders across the page creating interesting channels of thought and organization. This weighted demarcation, or creative pressure can be thought of as experience. Filling it in often appears messy and unpredictable; it is a problem-based exercise, but that is precisely what makes it so appealing and engaging. Learning this way is an exciting journey; a passage lined with many




## Cover story

Our cover art this month is a mixed-media painting entitled, *Giraffes Can Dance* by Kate Cooledge, who is a grade 2 student at Pinecrest Elementary in Campbell River. Our thanks to Kate, her teacher, Heather Kennedy, Don Ottosen, vice-principal and Hendrick Horsthuis, principal.



Our personal stories often evoke powerful emotion and imagery. They propagate more than facts and data through the use of description, personal connection and experience. Our stories disseminate

hard-wired to create meaning and to share what they have discovered. Ultimately, it is a stirring up of experience, emotion and imagination that produce the greatest longing in many people. Knowing how to combine them is a challenge. Humans are a compilation of everyone we have grown to know; our personalities are far more dynamic and enigmatic than any shifting ambiguity or powerful tension found in a masterpiece by Cézanne. Together, in our artful classroom we continue our grand journey. 

opportunities.

Paul Cézanne, the Father of Modern Art, was fascinated and challenged with his self imposed task of creating an ambiguous push/pull of action (or perception) on his canvas, a sort of juxtaposition of the positive and negative space within the image. He hoped that by pursuing this course of action, a person who studied the work of art would see and experience an almost physical tension or dynamic “twisting” sensation in their brain when viewing it. Have you ever entered a dimly lit room with clothes strewn haphazardly on a chair or table? Your first thought may be that there is a person or cat crouching there ready to pounce, but suddenly there is a shift or twist; you can physically feel your perception alter. There is the realization that they are simply clothes heaped in a mess. The challenge, as Cézanne envisioned and struggled towards, is to “flip-flop” your perception from clothes to creature and back again.

The use of metaphor in stories is common and adds a layer of complexity and greater understanding. This is not surprising, for the Greek origin of the word metaphor comes from the verb to transform. Our stories have the power to transform.

nate knowledge; they conjugate. The paradox, if there is one here, is that as stories are flung far and wide, told and retold, debated and agreed upon, the emotional response they evoke unites participants. Like Cézanne’s creative tension our stories can touch something unseen, yet recognizable in each one of us, often revealing important new truths about our lives, our world and ourselves.

When students are taught how to make meaningful connections with others and bravely cross those difficult bridges in their lives, they learn to imaginatively combine a complex field of ideas into something new and meaningful; they thrive. We are all storytellers and artists; value is added to our stories, our images, and to our lives as we interact with others. Such a human endeavor and creative investigation is vital, for people are

Don Ottosen, pictured above, with his class, is vice-principal at Pinecrest Elementary in Campbell River. This is his first article for Adminfo. Don enjoys writing about his classroom teaching experiences and would like to continue sharing what they are doing throughout the year. He can be reached at [don.ottosen@sd72.bc.ca](mailto:don.ottosen@sd72.bc.ca)

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# A league of writers, poets & filmmakers

Staff at a tiny school employ engaging and imaginative strategies for developing their students' literacy skills.

by Leslie Dyson



Writer, poet, editor, and creative-writing instructor, Stuart Ross helps to inspire students at Lucerne Elementary Secondary.

“I’m a pretty good writer,” said Quade Chodat, in grade 6 at Lucerne Elementary Secondary School in New Denver (Arrow Lakes School District). “I’m writing a fantasy adventure novel. It’s about a person battling and going on an adventure against an evil lord, you know, that sort of thing. I write because I want to read something but I know it doesn’t exist yet. It uses a bit from other books but has my own twist. I just finished the prologue.”

There is a belief that young people

don’t read books, don’t like to write using correct grammar and punctuation and can only communicate in text snippets and sound bites. However, that’s not the experience of the staff or parents at Lucerne. “We must not fall into the trap of believing they don’t want to write,” said Principal Natasha Miles. “They do want to write lengthier pieces, poetry and persuasive statements.”

Staff at the school are employing numerous engaging and imaginative strategies for developing their students’ literacy skills and expand-

ing their world. The K-12 school has just 87 students. The challenge for a small school is finding ways to connect students with the wider world, expand their circle of peers and give them experiences to write about.

“We’re looking for different routes into writing,” said Miles. Those avenues include organizing an annual writers festival that brings in Canadian authors, online literature circles, trips to WordFest (the Banff-Calgary international writers festival), producing documentary films about issues in their community and

creating YouTube messages for the Prime Minister.

Paula Shandro, parent of children in grades 3 and 6 and one who just graduated, said she appreciates the school's emphasis on reading and writing, especially with the prevalence of computers. "I've always read to my kids, but it's a bit of a challenge with the computer age because it's so seductive.

"The difference when you pick-up a book is that you have to make a commitment. Your own imagination is engaged. Computers can teach research skills, but it's provided for you in full. In movies and [online] games, imagination doesn't play as key a role. Maybe that's the way things are evolving, but I think it's really important to have your own mind."

While recognizing these concerns, the school also embraces new technology methods. Miles pointed to the remarks made by Tony Wagner, author of *The Global Achievement Gap*. He believes there is a gap between what even the best schools in North America are teaching and the skills that students will require in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Miles said students in other countries may be more competitive than North American graduates. New recruits to large corporations like Google and Apple are expected to be independent, self-motivating, engage in self-development through technology and be comfortable collaborating over great distances.

From her experience teaching in international schools in Europe, Miles said she's seen bi- and trilingual students view technology as an important part of their lives. Many young people regard themselves as citizens of the world, living away from their place of birth but maintaining ties with people in all the places they've lived.

Miles said she's concerned about the number of jobs that Canadians can do but that are being outsourced to other countries. Economics do come into play, but she said she sees value in schools assessing students' use of technology, ability to collaborate and level of comfort in working independently, not just the traditional 10 subject areas. "They still need to learn the lessons of the past to make decisions [but] to continue competing, students need that innovation piece. We [as educators] are teaching students to use technology, but once they have the information, do they know how to use it?"

The school's mission is "to use technology to further students' thinking, to have them engage in real-world problem-solving and to use digital media to communicate important ideas," said Terry Taylor, the district literacy coordinator and the English teacher at Lucerne.

### Online Literature Circles

Larger secondary schools have the advantage of being able to link students in several English lit blocks. That same benefit came to the grade 5 to 12 students at Lucerne when online connections are made with other classes in the district and the province.

"They're used to [online] chatting with their friends and some are more comfortable commenting online than speaking up in class," said Miles. Comments are saved so students can see how their depth of understanding has grown. Students also self-assess their learning

in online journals. Evidence of their growth is shared with their parents at student-led conferences.

Taylor, the district literacy coordinator for eight years and teacher at Lucerne since 1996, said once students started writing for their peers, teachers saw a dramatic improvement in their writing. "It's a genuine audience. Teenagers are more engaged if they see the relevance," she said.

In addition, teachers know their students well and choose novel study books based on their students' interests. "Our kids love reading," exclaimed Taylor. Popular titles include *The Absolutely True Story of a Part-Time Indian* (by Sherman Alexie) and *Maus I and II* (by Art Spiegelman). Meeting authors at the WordFest in Banff has led to students choosing *Thunder Over Kandahar* (Sharon E. McKay), *Last Night in Montreal* (Emily Mandel) and the *Three-Day Road* (Joseph Boyden).

Using technology to post their writing and comment on one another's work is providing greater flexibility. Students have a deadline of 11:55 p.m. on Sunday to get their comments in. Taylor said she's amazed at the number of students who are awake and working at that time of night.

In addition, many take advantage of the opportunity to revise their work after receiving feedback from their peers and teachers, not just for better marks but because they want to show their best work, Taylor said.

*(continues, next page)*

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## Elective options

To ensure students have something to write about, the staff came up with a plan to offer grade 8 to 12 students one-week intensive immersion electives combined with field trips in September and May. While some schools have pulled back from their field trip offerings because of funding and liability issues, Miles said “staff are committed to field trips. We’re willing to go that extra mile to make sure the trips are safe ... We live in this beautiful part of BC. It’s important for students to see what’s on our doorstep and appreciate it.”

Students are given several choices in each of the two sessions. Last fall, students could hike through Glacier National Park, kayak on the Nakusp Range river system or go to Vancouver to see Bard on the Beach and visit the Emily Carr School of Art and Simon Fraser University’s Contemporary Arts Program. Previous electives have included small motor repair, FoodSafe certification, orienteering, cycle trips, animation film school and environmental sustainability.

Each 30-hour session provides one credit to the fine arts or applied skills requirements of their graduation diploma. Students demonstrate what they’ve learned through a presentation to an audience after they’ve returned. Some do free verse writing, others present a descriptive piece, use digital media or tell stories, Taylor said.

## Writers Festival

The one-week literary festival hosted by Lucerne and held in April is a highlight for the New



Elective options at the school give students an opportunity to see and appreciate the natural beauty in their part of BC.

Denver community. It’s in its eighth year and has attracted authors from across Canada, including Stuart Ross, Nikki Tate, Andrea Spalding, George Bowering and Arthur Black. One of the favourite features of the festival is the Word Wall made of shoe boxes. The boxes are decorated with pictures and poems by students, parents and other adults and form a portable display during the week’s activities.

The festival concludes with two coffeehouses of spoken word presented by elementary students on one night and by the teens and professional authors on the second evening.

Parent Paula Shandro said that 90 per cent of the K-7 students take the opportunity to present short pieces and poems. “They’re on stage with an MC. It’s done in a lovely way. It’s very professional.” Last year’s coffeehouse performances were recorded and broadcast by the local radio station. “It validates that it’s important

and it’s being witnessed.”

The audiences are swept along through the gamut of emotions and are touched by the poignancy of the writing. “One that stuck out for me was by a grade 1 girl,” said Shandro. The student’s mother was in a new relationship and the new man had greatly enhanced their lives. He also worked out of town a lot. The poem was called *Bill’s back*. It talked about how important he was in her life. “It came through in such a pure way.”

Shandro said she appreciates that elementary students at Lucerne are given just as much opportunity to express themselves as secondary students are.

## YouTube videos

Last November, grade 12 students responded to a call from the David Suzuki Foundation’s website to make videos of themselves calling the Prime Minister’s office with a message about what Canada should

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be doing about climate change. It gave students a chance to think about how they would talk to the Prime Minister and work on their persuasive writing skills using detail and powerful examples. To the students' delight, two days after the videos were uploaded, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that he'd changed his mind and would be attending the Copenhagen Summit.

### Documentary filmmaking

The school received a grant to bring in documentary filmmakers to show students what would be involved in creating a film about the Nikkei, second generation Japanese Canadians who were interned in New Denver during World War II.

The town was the site of an internment camp that housed 2,000 Japanese Canadians who were removed from their west coast homes and denied all their possessions not long after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Students talked to elders and spent time at the Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre in New Denver.

Students working in groups or individually created 60- to 90-second documentary or animated pieces which are amazingly perceptive and touching. They will be available online at CitizenShift (<http://www.citizenshift.ca>), at the Japanese Canadian National Museum in Burnaby and the Nikkei Centre this spring.

In April, students will begin working on a documentary about aboriginal issues in the area.

### Multi-grade elective writing class

Writing is a favourite pastime for many students at Lucerne. A grade 10 to 12 writing class is offered as an elective and of the 27 students

eligible to take the class this year, 17 have signed up.

"Writing is something I like doing," said Joseph Hodsall, in grade 12. This is his ninth year at Lucerne. "Most of my schooling has been here, but I do know our school is very different. We have a much more close-knit community of students and teachers. If someone is really disliked, they have to work very hard for that to happen."

Joseph enjoys writing poems, short stories and lyrics. "Everything I write is tied into my experiences: relationships, the world I see around me and the questions they inspire.

"I like the way our writing class gets together and reads to one another. They're like-minded people and it's a good atmosphere."

Sadye Butler, grade 11, said the writing environment set up by Taylor with couches and cushions is a "really chill place." The students in the elective writing course are very supportive of one another. "I used to be worried about what people would think. But everyone's different and we all do different things... You get support no matter what you're doing."

Danika Hammond, in grade 10, said she enjoys the writing class and learning the many different ways to write poems and the inspiration that she receives. "Another thing about writing is reading your writing [and] listening to other

writers," she pointed out. The class and school's Writers Festival provide those opportunities. Students also take advantage of having their work reprinted in the local paper and a youth-oriented publication published in the region.

"Sometimes I think how can I get that good?" Hammond said. "You just have to keep going. And with the resources we have, it's not hard to keep going."

All these tools have led to a school of enthusiastic writers. "Even our students with special needs in writing are doing better and are more comfortable," Miles said. "They see themselves as writers."

"Without question, students' writing has improved," said Taylor. bcp  
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Leslie Dyson is a regular contributor to Adminfo. She can be reached at [Leslie@F2Fcommunications.ca](mailto:Leslie@F2Fcommunications.ca)



Rod Maclean is a former Surrey principal. For a weekly cartoon email Rod at [ramaclean@shaw.ca](mailto:ramaclean@shaw.ca)

# A collaborative force

Three teachers work together to improve learning for a quiet and disengaged student.

by Dani Garner

Cooperative learning strategies were not working, as he chose not to engage with any group of peers his teachers sat him with; assessment for learning strategies were not working, as he was not doing any work that could be assessed; innovative instructional strategies were not working, as Joe chose not to participate in any style of learning.

In his grade 8 year at Quamichan Middle School (grades 7-9), Joe was the only First Nations boy in his classes. He showed up every day, but was quiet, disengaged and showed no evidence of learning. For the first few months of the year, his teachers (Mrs. H, Ms. L and Mrs. G) struggled with finding ways to make a connection with him and build a relationship. At first, cooperative learning strategies were not working, as he chose not to engage with any group of peers his teachers sat him with; assessment for learning strategies were not working, as he was not doing any work that could be assessed; innovative instructional strategies were not working, as Joe chose not to participate in any style of learning. While Joe was not showing any evidence of learning, he was exposed to structure, predictability, and consistency in all of his classes, for his three academic teachers had similar classroom expectations and

teaching strategies.

In addition to their many after-school conversations and brainstorming about how to meet Joe's needs, Mrs. H, Ms. L, and Mrs. G were also discussing ways in which they could integrate their different subject areas. They came up with an idea to combine science content (Mrs. H's teaching area) with writing skills (Mrs. G was the Grade 8 English teacher) and literacy skills (Ms. L was the Grade 8 Literacy teacher). For an entire term, grade 8 students studied the circulatory system in science class, worked on their creative writing skills in English class, and practiced presenting information in different ways in their Literacy class. For example, early in the term, students wrote dialogue scripts for the Oprah Winfrey show, having Oprah interview Dr. Oz about blood cells. A part of the Dr. Oz interview included reference to a 3-D model of a blood cell, which

students created in their Literacy class. In an average week, students were exposed to seven hours of time to think and talk about blood cells. This project offered Joe immediate, frequent and specific feedback about his learning because he was working on the same assignment in three different academic courses (this is not even including his Drama class, where his teacher allowed students to perform their scripts for Drama credit) and could get specialized feedback from all of his teachers. He started his morning in science class and was able to take his science work right to his English class and continue to work. At first, the amount of work Joe was producing was minimal, but as the project progressed, things began to change.

Mrs. H, Ms. L and Mrs. G made extra efforts to sell this project to their students as an opportunity to get credit in three courses (four, if students were also enrolled in Dra-

While he still didn't like to sit with other students, he did begin to grin more often, walk into class with more confidence and initiate casual conversations with his teachers. His teachers were able to get to know Joe on a new level.

ma class) by completing just one project. Because Joe had previously demonstrated a reluctance to show his learning, his teachers made sure to provide him with an alternative template in which he could write his Oprah script. Rather than using a regular sheet of paper, his teachers created a script template that included photos of Oprah and Dr. Oz to indicate their speaking parts. This template was simple to use, and allowed for Joe to do as much or as little as he wanted. Because the template was so easy to fill out, and because Joe could not escape knowledge about the blood cells (seven hours a week!), for the first time all year, Joe was demonstrating some academic success — in *three* different courses!


This project also offered Joe the opportunity to show responsibility and independence with his learning. It wasn't difficult for him to fulfill his responsibilities with keeping track of his learning resources, as his Literacy and English classrooms were adjacent to each other, but even that small, simple amount of responsibility was a start. Joe also began to show some independence with his learning for this project: in his script (*Oprah, featuring Dr. Oz*), Oprah and Dr. Oz discussed the blood cell, but also engaged in a lot of sarcastic barbs, got into a fight, and did a lot of screaming and yelling at each other. He completed the learning and was able to make it have meaning for him.

Mrs. H, Ms. L and Mrs. G were

so surprised and excited about Joe's increased engagement in class; they expressed their pride and excitement to him multiple times a day. They also spoke of Joe's achievements to other teachers, the administrative team, district specialists and to Joe's grandfather. In addition to his academic successes and this new, small amount of positive school-to-home communication, Joe began to demonstrate enhanced self-confidence. In fact, by the end of the project, he did not want to submit his script on the template he used. He asked for extra time so that he could type it up so it looked like everyone else's. While he still didn't like to sit with other students, he did begin to grin more often, walk into class with more confidence and initiate casual

conversations with his teachers. His teachers were able to get to know Joe on a new level.

Partway through each term, each student at Quamichan receives an Interim Report. These reports do not include any grades or assessments; they simply report on work habits and whether or not students are missing any assignments. Joe's interim report card during this term reported that in all eight of his classes "all assignments had been handed in" and that he "works and behaves well in class." It was virtually identical to the interim reports for outgoing, high-achieving students, and the complete opposite of the interim report from Term 1. This documented positive change helped to keep Joe's momentum going through to the end of the term.

By the end of the term, Joe had written a picture book (*The Adventures of Bob the Blood Cell*), began to speak during class, regularly said "hi" to adults in the hallways, and stopped grumbling when he had to work with his classmates. 

Dani Garner was a teacher at Quamichan Middle School and is now is vice-principal at Lake Cowichan Secondary School. This is her second article for *Adminfo*. Her previous article was *Teacher Professional Learning* (April, 2010). She can be reached at [dgarner@sd79.bc.ca](mailto:dgarner@sd79.bc.ca)



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