

“Expanding The Collective Ownership Conversation”

Gathering of Leadership from Aboriginal Education in Nanaimo Ladysmith Public Schools

Context

The following is a summary of events and outcomes from a brief meeting that brought together Nanaimo Ladysmith School District’s Board of Education (trustees), senior staff for Learning Services, and the Leaders for Learning (L4L) Executive Group. Hosted by Laura Tait, Director of Instruction and the L4L, the meeting focused on the history and current state of Aboriginal Education in the District, and specifically set out to explore the concept of “collective ownership” as a key enabler in the next phase of strategy-setting and action to enhance Aboriginal Education

The meeting was inspired by a unique day-long gathering in Feb 2014, where pioneers and Aboriginal leaders in the District had gathered to create a picture of the history of Aboriginal Education, and identify emerging directions for moving forward. The Feb. meeting was filled with powerful personal and professional stories. While these stories were shared it became clear that a sense of caring, of human-to-human connection, and an impetus to un-do the many ways that Aboriginal communities have suffered, underlies the tireless activity of many Aboriginal pioneers and leaders. We came to talk about this as Collective Ownership, an expression of each individual’s actions from a sense of responsibility (see figure 1). Following the meeting we wondered where else in the education system may individual responsibilities for Aboriginal Education be located? Could the Collective Ownership reside in the larger system, beyond the people in the room? We invited the Board of Education and senior staff to explore this together.

Figure 1: Feb 18, 2014 Collective Ownership Visual Summary



Event Overview:

The event began at 3:30pm with a reception, an informal occasion for L4L to meet trustees and senior staff, and to present some of the findings of the Feb. meeting, illustrated on large posters on the wall.

At 4:00pm Nancy Seward officially welcomed everyone to the traditional territory of the Snuneymuxw First Nation. Pearl Harris and Tim Harris then lead a group of youth in drumming and song, and in introductions in the Hul'qumi'num language. Pearl spoke about the cultural significance of song and ceremony, and highlighted the language program the youth are part of.

Laura Tait followed by framing the Collective Ownership conversation (see below) and began with her own story of "why I care".

Facilitator Aftab Erfan and Stephanie Johnson led the group through an hour of sharing stories in the circle. Participants were invited to respond to the question: "How did you come to care about Aboriginal Education? – Tell us a story." We heard and visually recorded a number of stories (see below), from about 10 people including L4L representatives, trustees, and staff.

In the final ten minutes of the meeting Aftab Erfan led everyone in a "conversation on feet", in response to the questions, "What are you leaving with today? What insights have come to you and what are you inspired to do next?" Several people shared their responses and others joined them when they had a similar insight or learning (see below).

"I thought [the event] was awesome!! It was nice to hear the history some of the trustees had. It was nice to hear from the ones who had a [personal] story too. The only thing I didn't like was how rushed we were. I would love to hear from David Hutchinson and the other trustees"

Nancy, Leaders for Learning Rep

Laura Tait ended the meeting through appreciation, explaining the tradition of witnessing and gift-giving, and distributing gifts.

Collective Ownership Framing by Laura Tait:

Collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal entities continues to increase.

Aboriginal Education and a focus on Aboriginal students has secured a place in our education system. With this success, we must also attend to the fact that Aboriginal students, although better than past decades, are still not participating nor succeeding at the same rates as their non-Aboriginal counterparts. The Aboriginal completion rate in NLPS is 56% - an all-time high, but still not good enough.

There is much we, as a system can do, and one of the most fundamental shifts could be to that of a collective ownership of Aboriginal Education.

Although we cannot take responsibility for the history and treatment of Aboriginal peoples 50 or 100 years ago, we can ask ourselves now

- Knowing the treatment of Aboriginal peoples in this country, what could I do today that might change things for tomorrow?
- As a member of the Board of Education/Dept. of Learning Services/ grandparent/ parent etc. how can I take ownership for the success of our Aboriginal students?
- What needs to be different/same to ensure the success of our Aboriginal students? What part would I play?
- Where do I position myself professionally/personally with regards to Aboriginal Education? Is this where I want to be?

Collective Ownership Stories:



Figure 2: May 7, 2014 Collective Ownership Visual Summary

The themes from the story sharing include:

- We care about Aboriginal Education because we have experienced first hand how children (our own children, or our own students) can either engage and flourish, or disengage and disappear, depending on the sensitivity and skill of educators. One person who believes in the child and has the ability to connect with them and draw them out, can literally change the course of a child's life. We have the ability and responsibility to generate more positive stories of flourishing for our Aboriginal students through how we relate to them and what environment we create in the schools.
- We have witnessed and been inspired by stories of positive change in the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children over the years. It used to be that Aboriginal children (including some of us in the room) lived with shame. Now, many Aboriginal children are proud of their identity, thanks partially to language and cultural programs.
- We have been inspired by stories of collaboration and dialogue, both within Aboriginal communities, and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. We have a long way to go in educating the population on Canada's history and its treatment of Aboriginal Peoples, their struggles as well as their strengths and we have a long way to go in bridging the gap between Aboriginal parents and the school system (legacy of the Residential School programs). But we have seen that this is possible and we want to move forward beyond where we are now.
- Non-Aboriginal people in moving Aboriginal Education in a positive direction, as allies, advocates and educators. It takes leaving one's comfort zone, educating oneself, and speaking out even when there is a fear of not getting it perfectly correct. But non-Aboriginal leaders absolutely have a right and responsibility to be part of this challenge.

Concluding Comments:

Following are final thoughts and insights, shared during the “conversation on feet”:

- This event reaffirms that although unique, we are so much alike: we share a common humanity.
- I learned today that I can’t keep my vulnerability to myself: I need to get out of my comfort zone and take risks to make a difference to Aboriginal Education in the District.
- I am moved by the importance of language to our identity.
- I’d like to see us keep this open conversation going, and to become leaders in showing the rest of the country how we work together.
- I am reminded of the importance of communication.
- Non-Aboriginal parents need to be engaged in these conversations and play a leadership role in bridging the gaps.
- This is about all small communities coming together to make the whole picture. We must include everybody and not leave anybody out.
- There is a sense that I need to be pulling up my bootstraps – and that this is a two-way responsibility that includes Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal leaders. This meeting demonstrates that we do have collective ownership of these issues.

“I believe [the event] was successful in that it put a face to all of the participants, a bit of a feel for our sense of responsibility, and a clear picture from L4L that Collective Ownership is the path we have chosen, which includes all [of the people in the room].”

Joy, Leaders for Learning Rep