Educators develop as Aboriginal allies through professional networks

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW
Networks can be an effective tool in professional development. This study looks at how a professional network in BC can contribute to educators’ understanding of Aboriginal culture and history. Supporting Aboriginal students and communities is a significant concern in Canada and many educators are non-Aboriginal. Professional networks can provide a sense of community for educators to learn about Aboriginal culture and implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s Calls to Action.

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?
Recent research suggests that supporting Aboriginal students and communities is crucial to Aboriginal students’ success. However, many teachers in Canada are non-Aboriginal and they may experience discomfort teaching Aboriginal culture and history. It can be intimidating to teach a topic that is new and unfamiliar to you.

Professional networks provide an opportunity for professionals to learn together, support each other, and change practices. A professional network of educators may provide support to non-Aboriginal teachers as they learn to overcome discomfort and incorporate Aboriginal culture in their teaching. This can ultimately help to improve the quality of support for Aboriginal students.

This research looks at the Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network (AESN), a professional network of educators in British Columbia. Developed in 2009 as an initiative of the BC Ministry of Education, Aboriginal Education Branch, the AESN’s purpose is to develop awareness and knowledge of Aboriginal history and culture and improve Aboriginal students’ learning outcomes. The network has approximately 75 schools and 400 teachers and principals, who participate in professional development individually and in local school groups and in regional and provincial meetings.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHER DO?
The researcher conducted a study of over 50 members of the Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network (AESN). She collected information through site visits, interviews and focus groups, and by reviewing documents. She also asked participants to share stories of their experience in the network. Then, the researcher collected and analysed the stories into themes.
WHAT DID THE RESEARCHER FIND?

Educators who participated in the AESN network experienced learning and changes to their thinking and teaching practice. In particular, the researcher found that:

- The network was a safe space that allowed teachers to build trust and relationships
  - The dialogue with colleagues and reflection activities helped non-Aboriginal teachers break the silence and overcome discomfort about teaching Aboriginal culture
- Teachers felt more comfortable talking about and using Aboriginal resources in their teaching
- The network’s leadership and structure provided role models for social justice and activism

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

Learning networks can be an important tool for changing professional practices. Teachers, school-districts, and policy makers may find this research useful for professional development and incorporating Aboriginal culture and values in public education. We all have a responsibility to implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s Calls to Action. Professional networks may help professionals in any organisation understand Aboriginal culture and be better allies.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

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KEYWORDS

Professional networks, professional development, Aboriginal education, teachers, public education, Canada

CITATION


TERRITORY ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The University of Victoria acknowledges with respect the Lekwungen-speaking peoples on whose traditional territory it stands, and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.