

January 11, 2016

SFU-Psychologists release community report on the Aboriginal Focus School in Vancouver BC

SFU researchers Scott Neufeld (MA Candidate, Psychology) and Prof. Michael Schmitt (Psychology) have partnered with Vonnie Hutchingson, the first principal of the Aboriginal Focus School (AFS) in Vancouver, to research the perceptions of parents and community members of the Aboriginal Focus School. Hutchingson is an SFU alumnus from the Haida and Tsimshian First Nations. The Aboriginal Focus School is located at Macdonald Elementary and is now in its fourth year of operation.

Hutchingson says she engaged in this research partnership because of her lifelong passion for integrating Aboriginal language, culture and histories into the classroom. She wanted to learn how the AFS was perceived in the community, and how it could be improved. Neufeld says, "The purpose of the research was to talk to parents and staff at the AFS to learn from their perspective what was working well in the school and what could work better. In addition we wanted to talk to parents who did not have children in the AFS, to learn about their perceptions of the AFS. Now we are reporting what we have learned to the community at large, with the hope that our findings contribute to an ongoing community dialogue and ultimately serve the interests of the children in the Focus School."

The research partnership is now releasing its findings in *The Aboriginal Focus School, Vancouver, BC: A Community Research Report*, available online (<http://tinyurl.com/AFSreport>) and in print at various community locations in the neighbourhood around the school.

Regarding experiences at the school thus far, the report finds that the Aboriginal Focus School has already delivered positive outcomes for students, including fostering a strong sense of Aboriginal cultural pride. When asked if they would send another child to the school, over half (57%) of the parents with children in the AFS said they 'definitely would' and another 21% said they 'might and would consider it'.

However, the researchers also report that parents, teachers and staff did express concerns. For parents, one of the more common concerns was that there was not enough Aboriginal cultural content in their child's classroom. In particular, parents wanted more cultural content delivered by people of Aboriginal heritage. In addition, parents, staff and teachers agree that for the school to flourish, more robust support for the program is needed from the Vancouver School Board.

Neufeld points out that, "In response to concerns raised by parents at the AFS, the school board has recently voted to recommit their full support to the school, which is a great step in the right direction. Based on what we learned from talking to many parents at the school and in the surrounding community, we make several recommendations for how the school board can better support the school."

For example, the researchers recommend that the VSB do more to promote awareness and accurate understanding of the AFS. They found that many parents in the surrounding community were either unaware of the school's existence, or lacked accurate information about the school.

One common misperception was that most parents assumed that the school was for Aboriginal students only, despite the fact that the Aboriginal Focus School is open to students from all backgrounds and there are ten students currently enrolled who do not identify as Aboriginal.

According to the researchers, non-Aboriginal parents often could not see the relevance of the AFS for their children. However, Schmitt points out that there is good evidence from research in social psychology that there are many potential benefits for non-Aboriginal students enrolled in the AFS. Schmitt says, “These benefits include positive cross-cultural relationships with Aboriginal peoples, enhanced creativity and problem-solving skills from learning in a culturally diverse environment, and a deeper connection with their own heritage cultures.”

The researchers found that Aboriginal parents in the surrounding community often anticipated the AFS would provide a substandard education, and that the negative expectations of Aboriginal parents were based on negative past experiences with other Aboriginal education programs. The researchers suggest that efforts to promote the school could be enhanced with an increased recognition of these past experiences. To build trust and promote accurate information about the school, the researchers recommend that the VSB pursue meaningful, ongoing engagement with the Aboriginal community in Vancouver.

Based on their findings, the researchers make several additional recommendations to the VSB: To increase Aboriginal representation in the AFS among teachers and staff, increase Aboriginal content at the AFS, and actively promote the school to both Aboriginal *and* non-Aboriginal parents.

Vonnie Hutchingson, who completed her time as the first principal at the AFS this past Spring, says “The Aboriginal Focus School was implemented at a momentous time in history for Aboriginal peoples, at a time when there is so much hope for the future of our children and our communities. Culturally responsive education is pivotal to the success of our communities. This report, and these recommendations, provide a set of concrete suggestions for how the VSB can respond to the recent calls for action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by building on the strengths of the Aboriginal Focus School.”

Scott Neufeld, SFU Psychology, MA Candidate, 778.378.8782, sdn2@sfu.ca

Michael Schmitt, SFU Psychology, Professor, 604.569.4697, mschmitt@sfu.ca

Vonnie Hutchingson, First Principal at the Aboriginal Focus School, 604.215.4467, vhutchingson@gmail.com