

“The work of reaching every child is simply too hard for any one of us to do it alone.”

This is a phrase we have been repeating for years, and it is as true now as it was when we started developing and supporting networks more than twenty years ago. We have learned a lot that we would like to share about networks, but we will start with the origin story.

It was a dark and stormy night when Judy’s phone rang. At the end of the line was Linda, reaching out for advice. We were both secondary Principals, and Linda asked if she could come over to talk through a challenging situation. Over a glass or two of (not very good) wine, we decided that, while sharing ideas as friends was good, expanding the group would be even better. This led us to invite three other female secondary Principals from different districts to meet monthly to exchange resources, strategies, and even a few grad speeches. We talked, laughed, argued, moaned occasionally, and all benefitted from our time together. Our taste in wine improved, too.

A few years later, we were each approached separately by the Ministry of Education with the invitation to encourage teachers to use the BC Performance Standards. Linda turned to Judy and said, “I have an idea. What if we work together on this?” This was the beginning of a partnership that has led us to developing the Networks of Inquiry and Indigenous Education (NOIIE) and leadership programs at the University of Victoria (UVic), Vancouver Island University (VIU), and now at the University of British Columbia (UBC).

What drove us then – and what drives us today – is our absolute commitment to making school a place where every child belongs and where every learner, especially those who have been historically underserved, is equipped to thrive. Our central goal in the networks is that every learner will cross the stage with dignity, purpose, and options. This is what

motivates us to continue to develop and support networks across BC and internationally.

We have been so busy, immersed in the various networks with which we are associated, that we seldom take the time to reflect on our own learning. After twenty-three years, it feels like it’s about time that we did. We have identified a few ideas that – from our perspective, and from the research on social networks – can contribute to the kinds of networks that lead to real change and stronger systems. This is just a start: see what you think.

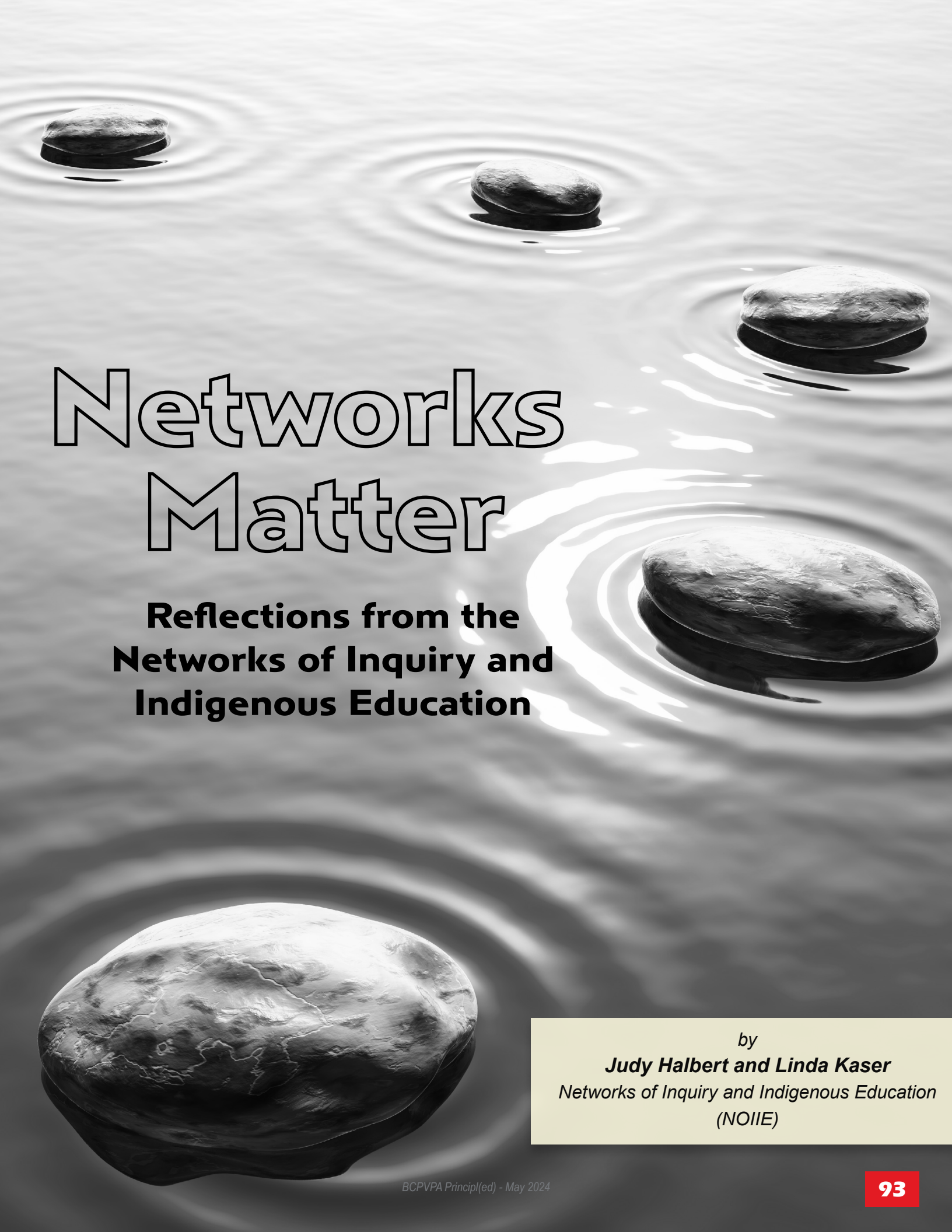
Purpose and Focus

We have experienced and observed networks in many different countries. In one case, millions of dollars were invested to incent schools to join networks. In another, schools were arbitrarily organized into clusters and told to function as a network. Neither approach worked, nor were they sustained.

Among the distinguishing features of successful and lasting networks are a shared purpose and



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Networks Matter

**Reflections from the
Networks of Inquiry and
Indigenous Education**

by
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*Networks of Inquiry and Indigenous Education
(NOIIE)*

voluntary participation. Initially, our focus was on formative assessment and building learner agency through the use of the performance standards. With the encouragement of Trish Rosborough, then Director of Aboriginal Education with the Ministry of Education, we expanded our focus. The challenge was to use an inquiry approach to realize the intent of the local Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements in classroom practice.

Nine years ago, we were approached by the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre at UBC to focus on improving transitions for Indigenous learners. This has led to a multi-year study with twenty-four schools currently involved in a third cohort. We have witnessed the value of smaller focused networks within the larger umbrella network, and now there are groups focused on cognitive engagement, literacy, numeracy, and self-regulated learning. Each of these smaller networks is facilitated by experienced NOIIE leaders and supported by inquiry partners.

What connects all these schools is their commitment to collaborative inquiry and to publicly sharing their stories, their successes, and their challenges. It was never our goal to have every school in BC be part of the network. We do, however, want every school to have a chance to learn from a network school. This is why network schools make their inquiries public through case studies on the website, through local celebrations, through the learning bursts and at the annual symposium.

Catalytic Affiliation and Kindredness

We have been fortunate to have UVic's Dr. Catherine MacGregor study the network for the past dozen years. She has written two substantial reports about the impact of educator involvement in NOIIE, and introduced the frame of *Being, Belonging and Becoming* to shape the transitions work. Catherine created the concept of catalytic affiliation to describe



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what she has seen in the network, where the strength of interpersonal and professional connections helps to accelerate substantive change.

Among the aspects that she identified as contributing to catalytic affiliation are trust, inclusive and collaborative practices, a shared purpose, and kindredness. Catherine conceptualizes kindredness as a deep regard, love and care for others that implies a responsibility to engage in complex conversations, challenge biases and assumptions, and deepen social links.

One of the first things that we ask of network educators is to (metaphorically) leave their roles at the door. This flattened hierarchy provides a space where all voices are heard and valued. It can sometimes be a relief for formal leaders not to feel they are defined by their roles; they can participate as curious peers. Over time, kindredness has developed across roles.

Shared Leadership

Early on, we recognized that the two of us could not possibly support the network all on our own. We needed help, and we needed a team.

What is most gratifying for us today is to be surrounded and supported by educators – across many different roles – who believe in this work and who are always ready to say yes. There are far

too many to name here, and invariably we would unintentionally leave someone out. You know who you are, and we are deeply grateful.

There are many contributions made by NOIE leaders: they serve as regional coordinators, bringing people together locally; they host and present at learning bursts; they host, organize, and present at the symposium; they manage the website and handle communication; they organize and lead study tours; they develop and freely share resources; they convene regular coffee chats. And this is just a start.

A network is only as good as the people who step up to be involved. It is the involvement, the commitment, the kindredness – and the catalytic affiliation – of BC educators that has allowed NOIE to be sustained for so many years.

Shared Frameworks and Simple Structures

One of the unifying features of the networks in BC and beyond is the use of the Spiral of Inquiry as a framework for collaborative inquiry. Having a common language, and sharing the expectation that listening to learners is the starting point for every inquiry, makes it much easier for schools to learn from each other.

A shared framework for making decisions, as outlined in the *Decision Playbook*, has increased the capacity of school teams to not only make better decisions throughout the Spiral but to also learn more effectively and efficiently from each other. The recent publication of the *Spiral Notebook for Student Changemakers* illustrates the impact that students can have when they work with both the Spiral and the decision frameworks.

From the beginning, we have worked to keep the structure of the network simple. Initially, we asked schools to meet in person three times a year, to

submit the focus for their inquiries in the fall, and to share their learning in person and through their case studies at the end of the year. We know that travel in many parts of BC can be an obstacle for schools to meet in person. Try driving from Squamish to Surrey one day after school, and you will appreciate that these challenges are not limited to remote communities in mid-winter!

So where are we now, in 2024? Every school in BC is welcome to submit a proposal for their inquiry in the fall of each year. These are all available on the website, and we encourage school teams to reach out to others with a similar focus. Throughout the year, we offer a series of short after school online Learning Bursts featuring the work in network schools. Each May, we organize a two-day symposium that is designed to celebrate learning in NOIE schools, and to provide an infusion of new learning from local and international perspectives. The symposium is open to anyone willing to enter with a spirit of inquiry and curiosity. Finally, network teams that submit the focus for their inquiry in the fall are asked to complete a short case study at the end of the year.

We have learned the importance of saying thank you to educators who make their learning public, and for years we have been able to provide a small grant to recognize their contributions. This leads us to the idea of generosity.

Generosity

At an airport several years ago, Linda bumped into a respected Indigenous leader from the BC Interior. He told her that wherever he travelled, he brought something that had personal meaning and value that he could give away. He reminded her that the Chief should be the poorest person in the village because, “you show your influence by what you give away.”

Incenting schools to join networks with an infusion of cash does not work. Saying thank you at the end



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of a year's work is more helpful. We hope school teams use their grants to buy a few resources, enjoy a great meal together, or maybe help subsidize attendance at the symposium.

One of the main ways that we have raised money for the grants has been through selling resources. We are very grateful to the BCPVPA for their support in this regard. By selling the original *Spirals of Inquiry* and the *Spiral Playbook*, we have been able to provide grants to hundreds of schools. This teamwork with the BCPVPA has made a big difference.

Perseverance

It hasn't always been easy supporting the network. Funding support has ebbed and flowed. Job action made some years very difficult. COVID-19 struck. Demands on schools sometimes seemed endless. And yet years later, here we are more committed than ever to the network and to our shared goals.

A few years ago, NOIIE was identified by the Big Change organization in Great Britain as a pioneer in system transformation. In the OECD Handbook for Innovative Learning Environments, the Spiral of Inquiry was listed as one of the most useful tools for system change. In 2019, NOIIE was awarded

the Cmolik Prize for the enhancement of public education in BC. This kind of recognition feels great, but it is not what keeps us going.

What keeps us motivated and energized – and what we believe works for countless educators – is to see the difference that we can make when we work together. Hearing the voices of young people who are on track to a better life because of their experiences in school, and seeing the impact on teachers when they no longer feel isolated or lonely, has its own magic.

Limitless Possibilities

The roots of the network are grounded in that fateful phone call on a dark wintry night. Not long after that call, we went to hear a Buddhist teacher at the Hyatt Hotel downtown. It was another dark and stormy November night, and the city was filled with electric energy. The APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) gathering was taking place in Vancouver. Protestors were vocal, and there was heightened security everywhere. It felt surreal to walk through armed security so that we could hear the gentle chime of bells and listen to the wisdom of the teacher. Even though it was Friday night, and the chimes were lulling us to sleep, some key messages penetrated and have stuck with us ever since. One concept that is central to our belief in the power of networks is the idea of 'limitless possibilities'.

Early on, when we were looking for an image to represent NOIIE, we came across the work of Martin Hill and his image of Floating Stones. Creating the foundations for teams to do good work and being open to where that might lead just felt right, and we appreciated Martin giving us permission to use the image.

Being open to new possibilities and taking the stance of 'saying yes' has taken NOIIE from a group of Lower Mainland and Fraser Valley schools meeting at the Surrey curriculum centre to a global



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network with connections in Australia, Aotearoa (New Zealand), Rarotonga / Cook Islands, Hawaii, Catalonia, Sweden, Germany, Wales, England, Manitoba, the Yukon Territory, the Northwest Territories, Singapore, Lebanon and Canadian International schools in Asia.

'Saying yes' has also created opportunities for BC educators that we would never have imagined. In 2009, we were asked to host the ICSEI congress, a major international conference linking policy makers, practitioners, and researchers. This led to an invitation to be part of the OECD research study on innovative learning environments. Since then, NOIE educators have participated in ICSEI conferences all over the world, most recently in Dublin in January 2024. Another outcome of 'saying yes' is that this year, eight BC schools are participating in the OECD Schools + Network, a major initiative involving 40 countries and 140 schools. This work is impressive, and we are proud that there are more schools from Canada than from any other country (and that they are all from BC).

We have hosted many study tours over the years, and the new Global Spiral Student Network led by Oskar Prato and Anna Fahlin from Utbildningsförvaltningen Skönstaholmsskolan School in Stockholm is a result of their visit to schools in Richmond and Delta in May 2023. When educators with a passion for quality work and a commitment to equity come together, the possibilities really are limitless.

Turning to One Another

In the conclusion of the study on innovative learning environments, David Istance observed that lasting change does not come exclusively from the top down or from the bottom up. Rather, he said that real transformation comes through the rich web of networks and relationships that provide the space for change to take hold.

Margaret Wheatley in her book *Turning to One Another* said that she believed we can change the world if we start listening to each other. She said that change happens when we look to each other and say, "I have an idea, what if?" The network started with that one good idea, and it has taken us to places we never imagined. Thank you for being part of this adventure.

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