



2012-2013 AESN Inquiry Case Study

School Name: Bayview Elementary

District: #68 Nanaimo-Ladysmith Public Schools

Question/Focus:

Our overall inquiry was: Will a focus on oral language connected to meaningful Aboriginal contexts increase student engagement and written output?

Each teacher then developed their own inquiry question that fit under our school's question. Four of the questions related to the use of talking circles. Two of the questions related to the use of visual media. The rest of the questions were in other areas.

Scanning

Many of our learners lack the vocabulary/language necessary for communicating and learning in a variety of contexts. In previous years when we interviewed the students about an experience (e.g. field trip) and had them write about it, the students who were better able to share their ideas, knowledge and connections orally also performed higher on the school wide writes. This is our third year working towards the development of oral language in connection to written output. This is the first year we added the engagement piece.

Focus

Our key area of focus concerned oral language connected to meaningful Aboriginal contexts, increasing student engagement and written output. By including Aboriginal content and ways of sharing knowledge, we were hoping our students would make meaningful connections between their daily life and experiences and their new learning. These connections would then increase student engagement and be demonstrated through oral language first and then in their written work.

We believe it matters because students need to know that their experiences and background and what they have to share are of value.

Hunch

Maybe we as adults need to learn more first hand about Talking Circles.

New professional learning

The main new area of learning that we explored was the use of talking circles. The opportunity to work with a mentor, Susan Leslie, through the VIU Education Research Partnership was invaluable in supporting us on both that project and our AESN inquiry, as was the continuing support of our on-site Aboriginal staff. Susan led our staff in a talking circle which was a very powerful experience that brought the staff closer together. By

participating in talking circles ourselves, we were able to experience how it would feel for the students. Susan also led talking circles in classrooms to teach the protocol and help teachers feel comfortable using them. Our Aboriginal staff members helped to support the use of talking circles throughout the year.

Staff had discussions at staff meetings, PLC and book club meetings, and in the staffroom and hallways about the use of talking circles and the use of visual media.

Taking action

We started the year by trying talking circles in all of the classrooms. Some teachers used them daily or twice a day, some weekly on their own, and some weekly with support. Three classroom teachers and two school support teachers found the talking circles a very valuable way of encouraging oral language development. Our two Grade 6/7 classes had very challenging class compositions which made talking circles very difficult, even with the support of our on-site Aboriginal staff. One class ended up with more success when there was a boy's and a girl's talking circle.

Here is what some of our staff had to say about using talking circles:

- some of the students who rarely participate during whole class discussions or brainstorming sessions will participate in Talking Circles
- three students with many behaviour issues usually listen attentively and participate fully and appropriately
- the circles help develop self regulation skills and listening skills
- students have more empathy for each other when they know how their classmates are feeling and why
- Talking Circles help to develop language including communicating in full sentences
- As a teacher I began with circle at the beginning of the year. I noticed the students who had difficulty with self-regulation were very distractable. Part way through the year I presented "Minds up" to the students, so they could learn to feel what a calm body and mind feel like, then they were able to use that when we are in circle.
- From the student comments, I found that talking circles and their knowledge of "Minds up" is a positive part of their learning. Those students with the most difficulty self-regulating had the most positive comments about talking circles and the impact it has on their learning and emotional well-being.
- Greater respect for listening to other people's ideas
- Taking turns to speak
- Students putting a great deal of thought into what they would like to express
- Patience as students wait for the speaker to express themselves
- Students who aren't sharing ideas in academic subjects often have a great deal to share about themselves, family, feelings, and our classroom community
- Talking circles were also a way to build on the sense of community in the classroom

Here is what one teacher had to say about the use of visual media and learning circles to increase students' oral language, engagement, and written output:

This year, I have made a conscious effort to increase the amount of video clips and discussion in the classroom. New technology in our school has made showing video clips easy and efficient, and as a result, I am much more likely to use video clips in lessons. What I have discovered is that the use of video clips (five to seven minutes) greatly enhances the learning experience. Many students that I teach have little background knowledge and so the visual presentation of a bit of information is a great "leveler." It quickly provides a common experience that we can discuss. I found the most success by combining video with discussion and written output. In the past, I tended to use video as the "grand finale" of the unit, perhaps showing a movie of a book.

Checking

We used the performance standards to assess students' writing and an engagement continuum that we are using as part of our Vancouver Island University's initiative: *Increasing Literacy Outcomes and Learner Confidence in Schools in British Columbia* to assess students' level of engagement. We assessed our students on these tools in October and late May to help determine what difference our inquiry focus has made. We also collected anecdotal comments from students and staff.

School Wide Write Data - Whole School Population

	Not yet meeting (1)	Minimally meeting (2)	Fully meeting (3)	Exceeding (4)
Fall 2012	46/120 30%	55/120 46%	14/120 12%	5/120 4%
Spring 2013	24/125 19%	50/125 40%	44/125 35%	7/125 6%

School Wide Write Data - Aboriginal Students

	Not yet meeting (1)	Minimally meeting (2)	Fully meeting (3)	Exceeding (4)
Fall 2012	30/81 37%	36/81 44%	11/81 14%	4/81 5%
Spring 2013	18/84 21%	34/84 41%	27/84 32%	5/84 6%

Engagement Data - Whole School Population

	Moving Toward the Water - Emerging (1)	Boarding the Canoe - Developing (2)	Raising Your Paddle - Applying (3)	Journey into Deeper Water - Extending (4)
Fall 2012	64/150 43%	70/150 47%	11/150 7%	5/150 3%
Spring 2013	32/148 22%	65/148 44%	47/148 32%	4/148 3%

Engagement Data - Aboriginal Students

	Moving Toward the Water - Emerging (1)	Boarding the Canoe - Developing (2)	Raising Your Paddle - Applying (3)	Journey into Deeper Water - Extending (4)
Fall 2012	40/97 41%	49/97 51%	5/97 5%	3/97 3%
Spring 2013	26/100 26%	42/100 42%	30/100 30%	2/100 2%

What this data shows us is that our efforts made a difference in both writing and the engagement level of our students. The gains were similar for both our whole school population and our Aboriginal students. The data also shows us that we have continued room for improvement.

One question the data brings forward is 'how does our transiency rate affect the data?' We have a population of about 150 students and had 50 new students come into the school this year and 37 leave. In the future, it would be beneficial to segregate the data for students who had been at our school the entire year.

Here is what some of our students had to say about using talking circles:

- I like sharing how I feel and the numbers (five point scale) because it makes it more interesting. It helps me share how I feel and I calm down a bit. (K/1)
- When it is my turn, I like to talk to the class. (K/1)
- When it is my turn, I can talk. I like to share how I am feeling. (K/1)
- It makes me feel happy. There's interesting stuff when other kids are talking. (K/1)
- When we say what we feel like, every time it makes me feel good. It helps me not to talk so I can be a better listener. (K/1)
- I like to get to say what I feel like. It helps me be a listener and calm my body. (K/1)
- I like when we get to do know just how we feel. We get to say why we feel that way. I like the end of the day circle too because we get to talk about other things. (K/1)
- I like it because we get to say Hay'cha (sp) and say how I feel. It helps me learn. (K/1)
- I really like it because everyone is so quiet and people speak. It makes me feel happy. (Gr. 1)
- I like it when I get to talk. (Gr. 1)
- I like it when everyone listens to me. (Gr. 1)
- I like talking circles because I get to know what everyone feels like. (Gr. 1)
- I like it because when I feel sad, people can help me because they know how I feel. (Gr. 2)
- I think we should have talking circle more because it's calm and people talk from their heart. (Gr. 3/4)
- I like talking circle because it's peaceful and quiet. (Gr. 3/4)
- I think talking circle is good because we're kind to each other. (Gr. 3/4)
- Respect, feelings, quiet (Gr. 3/4)
- Well I like it when it's quiet and calm and so people can think of stuff. (Gr. 3/4)
- I like talking circle because it's quiet and you get to explain your emotions. (Gr. 3/4)
- I like talking circles because you get to know people's feelings. Second because you get to share your own ideas from your heart, and I know that when people are quiet the person with the rock concentrates and speaks more but when people are not quiet the person who is talking doesn't speak that much. (Gr. 3/4)

And about the use of visual media a student said, "I really love video clips. I find getting information from a video easier than from reading a textbook. When I read about

something AFTER I see a video, it makes more sense. Plus then I'm way more motivated to read about it and talk about it."

Reflections/Advice

We have learned that talking circles can be very effective in promoting oral language, especially in students who don't tend to participate in whole class discussions as well as students who need to develop self regulation skills. We plan to continue to use talking circles as a way to promote oral language and expand the use of talking circles further in our school.

If a school is going to try talking circles, we would recommend having staff experience talking circles, learning about the protocol, and accessing Aboriginal mentors and/or staff for support.

We will also continue to use visual media to increase students' engagement and giving them something to talk about by making connections and asking questions.

EVERY learner crossing the stage with dignity, purpose and options.