



2012-2013 AESN Inquiry Case Study

School Name: George M. Dawson Secondary School

District: #50 Haida Gwaii

Inquiry Team Members: Lorrie Joron, Warren McIntyre,
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AEEA Goal Area: #1 - That students develop a strong sense of belonging to their learning environment and community.

Question/Focus:

Will learning about residential schools and recognizing those who attended help students develop a clearer picture of the past, the present, and possibly their own future?

Scanning:

'Students have a negative attitude towards school. Teachers are often viewed as opposition rather than resources.'

This year's grade 8 class brought with it a group of students who are especially challenging, they have not 'bought into' the educational system as it is and many seemed to view school as something being done to them as opposed to something they are actively engaged in. The wave of negativity was hard to dismiss and our scanning picked up other similar attitudes, one student was overheard comparing our current system to residential school.

Focus:

'Will learning about the past, honouring those who attended residential schools, and connecting with community survivors help students to understand the lasting impact of residential schools and facilitate healing.'

Our hope was that in addressing some of the mistakes of the past students would see that there has been change and that non-Aboriginal staff recognizes those wrongs too and want a better system for our students. Beyond looking at the past

we are also attempting to be open to the issues of the present and have a desire to address them too.

Hunch:

'Students have role models who have not succeeded in the school system. Students hear negative views on schools and education and they internalize what they hear.' As we endeavour to improve our school students recognize that we are doing some things that they like but often this creates a paradoxical situation where our efforts lead to more student frustration because our periodic events and outings are not seen as a systemic change. Change is slow and comes with both failures and successes and patience is even harder to come by than change.

New professional learning:

'We will be spending time during pro-d days developing our school wide residential school projects. Our plans also increase collaboration amongst staff and with community members. Staff have been reading materials that increase our understanding of the residential school system and First Nations history.' Professional reading and our residential school project enhanced awareness but the richest learning perhaps came from a Change Committee that gave us opportunities to hear from some community members, and gave us time to talk as a staff about the directions we want to go in coming years.

Taking action:

'Our first steps have been meeting together to propose action, next is to invite community members to participate and seek guidance from them. We hope to dedicate 2 or 3 afternoons (in addition to class time) to learning about residential schools, their legacy, and the healing that needs to take place. One session will be information, one creation, one a celebration.'

As the year progressed our focus shifted to the Change Committee, the Residential School project was a great experience but it turned out to be a one afternoon event that was in some cases a springboard, in some a culmination of classroom learning. The action for this year turned into a closer look at how we organize our day to day and discussions about how we can make change to work towards learning beyond

the walls of the classroom. Next years schedule addresses ability grouping, academic subjects are strategically placed and time is being made available in the schedule to do things outside the box.

Checking:

'We hope that learning about residential schools will help students to understand that healing is on-going, that change has occurred and that we can move forward together. Checking the impact of what we propose to do is difficult but if we don't have students comparing our school to residential school we will know that they have learned to respect what survivors went through, and perhaps have a different take on the education they receive.'

One of the community members who became a member of our Change Committee is a community youth worker who was instrumental in organizing a highly successful Youth Assembly, it was during this assembly that one of our students noticed her fellow students, ones who did not succeed in school, excelling and achieving in their areas of interest, areas we don't always address in school. What we need to check into is how we can bring events such as the Youth Assembly into the school, bringing opportunities for students to feel positive towards school the way they felt positive about the Youth Assembly.

Reflections/Advice:

Sometimes I feel defeated by negativity (often my own), I can see where we should be going, I can see possibilities, but we can't seem to get there, or the progress is slow. Years go by and I wonder if we are any closer to where we want to be, are we any better at respecting diversity in learners today than we ever were? Are we respecting Aboriginal ways of knowing or do we keep playing the same tune with a bit of a re-mix to throw people off the scent. Deep learning takes time, so too do relationships and collaborations. We will get there if we keep moving forward, one inquiry at a time.

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