



2012-2013 AESN Inquiry Case Study

School Name: Gitwinksihlkw Elementary School

District: #92 Nisga'a

Inquiry Team Members: Tanya Adams, Cecilia Azak,
Samantha Lambright, Naomi Radawiec, Steve Riley

Question/Focus:

"Will a focus on storytelling embedded in self and peer-assessment improve student learning in connection to experiences and feelings through the meaning strand of writing?"

Scanning: After surveying our fall reading and writing assessments, and our observations of students' oral language and overall literacy levels, we noticed that there was a consistent weakness at all grade levels in the Meaning category of the BC Writing Performance Standards.

Focus: We decided to try to ground our writing assignments in oral stories shared by local Elders, in an intimate, whole-school story time.

Hunch: We wonder if our classrooms have an imbalance of emphasis on reading skills over writing skills slowing our progress at increasing the number of students who fully meet grade level expectations for the Language Arts.

We also wonder if the residual wounds from the Residential Schools legacy combined with the Western traditions in our schools are still putting up barriers to our students' success at literacy.

We want to move our approach to schooling and teaching ever closer to a model that has a better fit for Aboriginal learners. We feel that we can do so by moving away from a traditional teacher-directed classroom to one that is more student-directed as guided by the *FNESC First Peoples' Principles of Learning*, specifically, learning that is "holistic, reflexive, reflective, experimental, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)."

New professional learning: We used new lesson strategies from two professional books in particular to help us incorporate explicit learning intentions and criteria into our lessons: *What's Next for this Beginning Writer*, by Janine Reid, and *Writing Anchors*, by Jan Wells and Janine Reid.

We also aligned our pedagogical approach with the *FNESC First Peoples' Principles of Learning*.

Taking action: Most significant and transformative for us all was starting our writing units with an oral story shared with the entire school by a local elder. This practice proved to be very powerful for grounding students and helping them to make personal connections to their learning. It has also changed our pedagogical foundation and renewed our creativity: now we begin lesson planning from an oral story, working with the curriculum that stems from it, rather than starting with the curriculum, and fitting the Nisga'a culture to Western learning traditions.

We struggled through our first attempts at teaching self- and peer-assessment with the BC Performance Standards rubrics because of the quantity of feedback, despite the fact that we saw the value in using these tools to encourage self-directed learning, engagement, and goal setting. To make reflection less cumbersome for students, we refined how we use the Performance Standards with ideas generated through networking and collaboration with each other and with other NOII teachers over the year: reducing the number of criteria per assignment, generating "Pre-flight Checklists," and adding a "Show Me the Proof" section to our reflection tools.

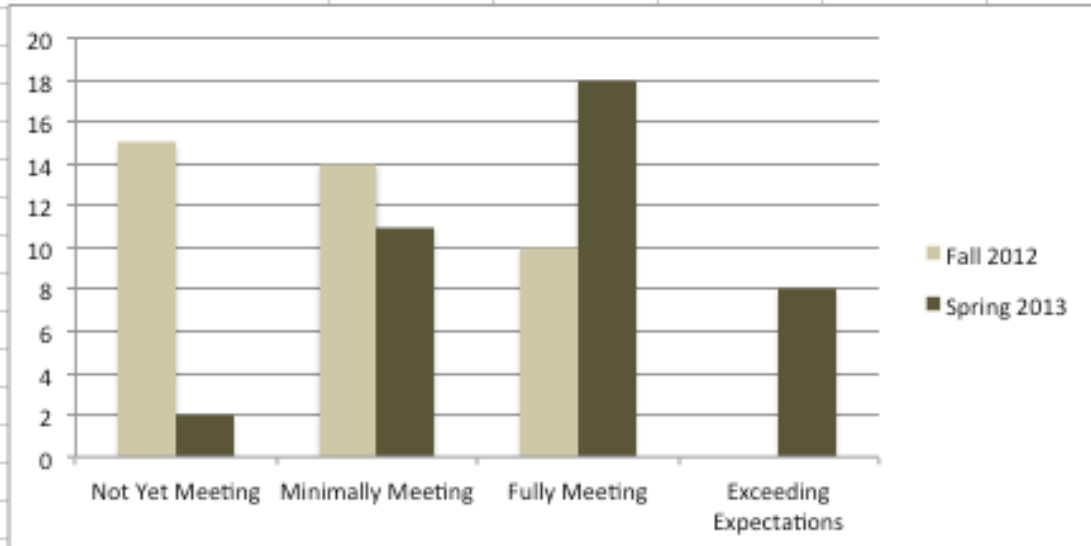
Checking:

Assessment Tools:

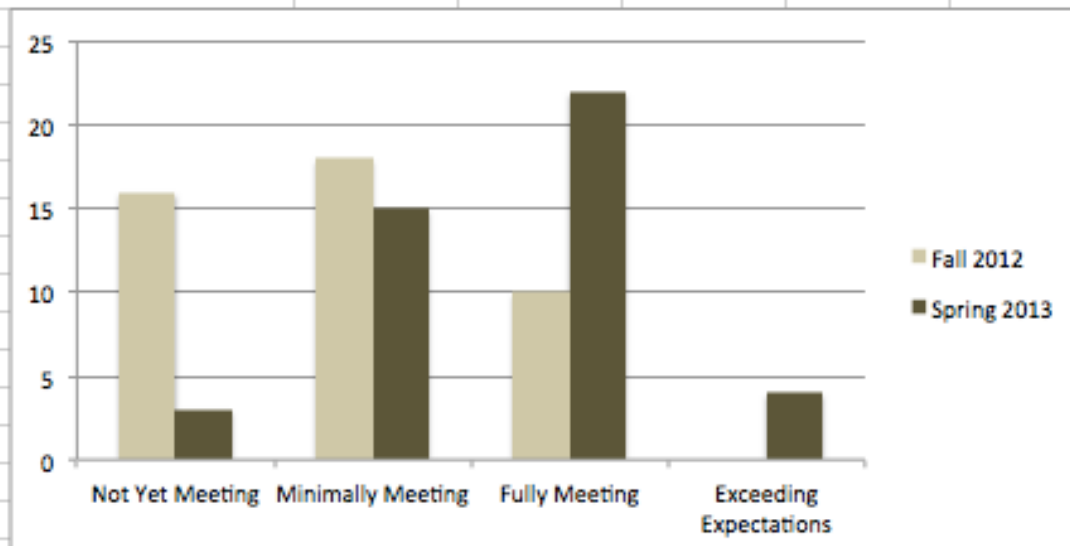
- School Wide Write, assessed with the BC Performance Standards,
- District Assessment Reading Team (DART), Grades 3-
- running records and interviews for primary reading assessment.
- Vancouver Island University Rural Literacy Project Rainbow for Oral language,
- VIU Engagement Continuum

Primarily, we used the writing results to gauge our students' success, but were equally ecstatic about the reading scores. While we have had good growth in past years, the level of growth this year is unprecedented, as is evident in the following graphs:

Writing		
	Fall 2012	Spring 2013
Not Yet Meeting	15	2
Minimally Meeting	14	11
Fully Meeting	10	18
Exceeding Expectations	0	8



Reading		
	Fall 2012	Spring 2013
Not Yet Meeting	16	3
Minimally Meeting	18	15
Fully Meeting	10	22
Exceeding Expectations	0	4



Reflections/Advice:

We learned many new strategies for teaching the act of writing and the artistry of adding thoughts, feelings, and personal and descriptive detail through our professional reading.

We also learned a great deal about engaging our students by grounding the curriculum in the Nisga'a culture and empowering the students with *Assessment for Learning* strategies like explicit learning criteria, reflection, and goal setting. Lastly, we gained a tremendous sense of energy, creativity, and collaboration by committing to this inquiry as a team.

We are VERY excited about continuing to teach through oral story experiences next year, because we feel like we've really hit on a meaningful way to teach and learn from an Aboriginal perspective. As one of our elders said eagerly once we shared our inquiry question with him: "You want to teach the OLD way?!"

We're also excited to add a student inquiry project about their sense of identity and culture to help deepen our connection to Nisga'a and other cultures from our student body.

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