

# 2012-2013 AESN Inquiry Case Study



**School Name:** Nala'atsi

**District:** #71, Comox Valley

**Inquiry Team Members:** Toresa Crawford, Youth and Elders

**Question/Focus:** Will there be an increased level of comfort if the Nala'atsi students completed their Mask Project with positive members from the Aboriginal community? Will they be comfortable sharing their stories and learning about their culture?

## **Scanning**

As per expected, this was a very diverse group of participants this year; Elders, students and community members with a variety of interests, abilities, skills and knowledge about their Aboriginal ancestry. We started with a sharing circle and everyone introduced the person next to them. This broke the ice, and there was lots of laughter as people shared interesting facts about their neighbor. Once people felt comfortable, we watched the DVD from last year's mask project, and then they were raring to go!

## **Focus**

It is important for our students to feel that they not only belong but that they have a network of people who they can count on in the Aboriginal community. Projects like this encourage diverse groups of people (who are often in different generations) to share their stories through art in a welcoming environment. It also provides many opportunities to make connections and to form relationships with positive role models.

## **Hunch**

We try to bring as many positive Aboriginal role models into the school since most of our students are not either connected to their Aboriginal culture or do not have positive role models. Providing a network of support people for our students has led to not only better self esteem but in the case of three of our students, part-time work placements.

## **New professional learning**

Every year I am amazed and humbled by the number of Elders and community members who come into our program to help with our students. Again as in last year, I have to develop a different "timeframe" since my schedule does not always match with that of my volunteers! I have to always be conscious that for so many of our Elders, school was not a safe and/or welcoming place to be and that they need to be allowed to take their time when the activity involves being in a school building. I have also come to realize that our Elders in particular are very busy people and they have other projects and commitments that they are involved with! Overall, my biggest learning continues to be aware that although it is important to be well planned, it is equally important to be flexible. Often moments come up in the groups that change the course of how the day will go...but it is usually for the better! A case in point was when one of the women wanted to sing a song accompanied by her drum!!! This would never have happened had I been sticking to a strict schedule.

## **Taking action**

The workshop was introduced to the students and the Elders separately as I have found that the Elders often need more time to think about the project even before they ask questions. After the group got together to start the project, the circle went well with participants sharing who they were with the group. One of the Elders brought in pictures of her grandchildren and it was heartwarming to see the tears in her eyes as she spoke with pride about her love for her family. The masks were done over a two-week period with some of the Elders choosing to spend some of their afternoons working on their masks here in the school; having tea and hanging out with the students! The written pieces of the mask project always take much longer than I think they will, so I had extended the deadline so that all masks were finished on time. As usual, the written pieces ranged from poems about loved ones to laments about the unfairness of peoples' lives. We took pictures of the masks and have now put together both a poster...see attached...and a book. The final day of the project we had an afternoon tea with Elders outdoing themselves bringing delicious goodies to share. Everyone will get a copy of the poster and copies of the book will be given to the Wachiay Friendship Centre and Linda and Judy who supported us.

## Checking

Instead of a chart, I have written down quotes from a number of the participants.

### Elder and Community Member Comments

- I had no idea that my mask would come out so beautifully. Thanks Toresa for once again letting us share ourselves with your beautiful students. Elder 76 years
- I have done this project now for 3 years and I keep getting more and more ideas about what my next mask will be. We have soooo much fun working with the kids. Elder 66 years.
- I lost my husband this year and this mask is in memory of him. I put it on the wall above his chair in the kitchen where he used to sit. Elder 83 years
- This turned out to be far more fun than I thought it would be. Toresa told me that I would enjoy it...and ...she was right!! Cannot wait to do this again! Elder 68 years.
- The students are so interesting and I love coming into this building. I wish so much that I had had a chance to go to school at Nala'atsi. This place is VERY healing for me. Elder 72 years.
- I had an epiphany while doing this mask...while masks might keep us feeling safe; it is better to have a safe place where you don't have to wear masks! Community Member 54 years
- Cannot remember having so much fun! Looking forward to doing this again next year! Community Member 42
- This mask was made in memory of my mother who used to come to Nala'atsi and made a mask last year. I miss her so much. Elder 78 years
- The youth are so interesting and full of great ideas for their masks. Elders 79 years
- Let's do more projects like this...I had lots of fun. Elder 85 years

### Students Comments

- Every time I do this project (this is my second time) I feel better about myself and who I am as an Aboriginal person. It is empowering. Youth 17 years

- I didn't think that it would be so revealing about who I am. I was okay letting others know about who I am. Youth 16 years
- Fun ...Fun...Fun.... great to work with the Elders too! Youth 17 years
- I learned how to be patient with myself and to follow through. Youth 18 years
- Toresa tries to bring art into most of her projects and I love that! Youth 18 years
- Can I please do another mask...like right now...I have another idea!!! Youth 16 years
- Lots of fun and beautiful artwork...the food was appreciated too! Youth 17 years
- Good food...good company ...good times were had by all! Youth age 17
- I learned so much about what other people value from this project. Youth 18 years
- I liked being able to talk to the Elders. Youth 18 years

All of the 34 participants, who started the mask project, finished it. All of them also attended every one of the sessions. The Enhancement Agreement goals that this project addressed were:

Goal 2 Sense of Belonging

Goal 3 Awareness of Culture

All of the participants agreed that not only would they "... insist on being there for the next mask project...." (Their words!) They also all agreed that they had learned more about their culture during the painting time, different people shared stories and information about indigenous knowledge. This project has become quite popular in the district and I have had requests to do it with teachers, as well as other schools.

### **Reflections/Advice**

Plan... plan and plan again and then be prepared to be flexible and to take advantage of teachable moments. Have the room set up beforehand...both for the opening circle on the first day, and then later on for the painting of the masks. Provide lots of space...most people don't like to be crowded when they work and encourage the participants to bring in items from home that they might want to put on their masks. Provide a safe secure area for the masks to dry. Provide some

deadlines for the project but be prepared to be flexible....by allowing her extra time, I got a fantastic mask from one of the Elders. Celebrate the completion of the project with refreshments. The participants will be able to visit, see the completed masks, and in our case the poster and the book. I am going to be doing this with a group of grade 8 students in Parksville next Friday. I also plan to do this project again next year since it is becoming a tradition!!

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