



2013-2014 AESN Case Study

School: Gitwinksihlkw Elementary School **District:** SD92 Nisga'a

Area of Focus: Student Level

Inquiry Team Members: Tanya Adams, Cecilia Azak, Naomi Radawiec

Contact Information: Phone # 250-633-2688

Question / focus area: Will framing all student learning around one personal question: "Who Am I?" improve student's social and emotional well-being? Will connecting all new learning to themselves and their traditional culture help students develop a strong sense of individuality, and strengthen their empathy for others from their own community, and outside of the Nisga'a world?

Scanning: After focusing on Nisga'a oral story telling and experiencing a cultural awakening last school year (2012/2013), we decided to help facilitate deeper learning for each of our students with their own inquiry into their identity and culture, mostly based on Nisga'a language and culture, but enhanced by other cultures represented by our school's families (Ts'imshian, Haida, Japanese, European). After looking at students' self-assessments (engagement continuum) and reflecting on our observations and interactions with students, we noticed a need for continuing to strengthen their sense of self-identity.

Focus: In partnership with our Elders, school families, the CEO and education coordinator from Gitwinksihlkw Village Government, and the Youth Enrichment Worker from Nisga'a Valley Health, as well as our own Nisga'a language and culture teacher, we took the next step in matching our way of teaching and learning at the school to the *FNESC First Peoples Principles of Learning*. The assignments, events, and school traditions that we planned and facilitated were guided by the following principles in particular:

- *Learning requires the exploration of one's identity.*
- *Learning recognizes the role of indigenous knowledge.*
- *Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story.*

Will framing all student learning around one personal question: "Who Am I?" improve student's social and emotional well-being? Will connecting all new learning to themselves and their traditional culture help students develop a strong sense of individuality, and strengthen their empathy for others from their own community, and outside of the Nisga'a world?

Hunch: This year our school teaching team had an epiphany: no one at the school (adult or child) knows the story of the totem pole that stands proudly at the door of our

building. While many of our students' ancestry is told in the story of the totem pole next door to us (at the community hall) few, if any, realize it. Our school structure and pedagogy over-emphasizes its European/Western roots. We felt strongly that the "secret" to overcoming the consistent low-achievement we've struggled with was to delve more deeply into the approach we discovered through our 2012/2013 AESN/VIU teacher inquiry.

We believe that First Nations culture and schooling should not be two separate entities, and that through this inquiry, our hope was that students would gain a greater sense of their own identity and pride in who they are. Instead of students feeling disconnected from the learning and asking, "why are we doing this?" we wanted students to understand the importance of establishing a strong connection between school and their cultural identity. We wanted to fulfill one of our district founder's vision: to produce graduates that are both cultural leaders, and capable of competing internationally in their field of choice.

New professional learning: Our professional learning stemmed from three main sources: Nisga'a Language and Culture as taught to us by visiting Elders that shared oral stories, the *FNESC First Peoples Principles of Learning*, and a formative assessment recourse. Our aim was to increase students' meta-cognitive awareness as learners and community members by making the curriculum and pedagogical research fit to the ancestry and heritage of our students, rather than the other way around as we have done now for years to lesser effect.

Every time we have had an Elder in our school the students and staff have learned an incredible amount. We felt inspired and the students seemed very engaged in the learning as it was connected to their culture. During the entire inquiry process we kept the FNESC First Peoples' Principles of Learning in mind and found that focusing on three of them helped us focus our planning. We used numerous assessment strategies that proved to enhance students' understanding of self/peer assessment, choosing personal criteria and making assessment meaningful.

Taking action: We invited Elders in to share a new oral story and based our lessons and units around that learning. We also studied the story of our totem pole through various lessons. Students regularly consolidated and demonstrated their learning by writing thoughtful stories, essays, and journal entries focused on the question "Who am I?"

Students in Division Three took part in a four day Wai Wah Youth Leadership Camp (canoeing) and were immersed in self-discovery as they faced challenges, personal fears, learned about council circles and how to work together as a team. Back in the classroom students learned about mindfulness (mindful seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, movement), how the brain works, and how being mindful can positively impact our overall happiness and life experiences.

We used the following formative assessment strategies: clarifying, sharing, and understanding learning intentions and success criteria, eliciting evidence of learners' achievement, providing feedback that moves learning forward, activating students as instructional resources for one another, and activating students as owners of their own learning.

Checking: We used the *Engagement Continuum* (given to us by our VIU mentors) as a self assessment that intermediate students filled out in the beginning and end of the year. In the beginning of the year most students rated their level of engagement mainly in the "Raising your Paddle" (3) or "Boarding the Canoe" (2) categories. At the end of the year students put themselves primarily in the "Journey into Deeper Water" (4) column with some highlighted sections in the "Raising your Paddle (3) column.

This inquiry gave students such a sense of pride in who they are, where they come from, and the connections that stem from their community (Gitwinksihlkw, the school, their immediate family, and their extended family). They are starting to realize that they are connected, they do have roots, and those roots are very important. They are starting to understand how those connections apply to their lives. When the students watched "Dancing in Both Worlds" in Nisga'a Culture class, the teacher asked them if they had heard about it before. She explained about how some people have survived living in the traditional First Nations world and contemporary western society at the same time. It helped the students to see things differently.

When we did our school wide write they wrote about their community and what it means to them. You could tell that they understood the connection between the various communities they come from, and how that connects with their education and learning. They wrote about how their community helped them, and how their identity derives from their community. Their community helps define who they are. With this "Who am I?" inquiry, kids could really gain a stronger sense of where they come from and how their communities have helped shaped them into the people they are today. The students could tell you their nation, tribe, wilp, chief, and more. This inquiry also helped students to think more about themselves as unique individuals within these communities and how their differences help to strengthen and contribute to the greater good of the community.

Reflections/Advice: We found that as students gained self confidence and began answering the question "who am I?" not only were they more open to learning academics, but also open to learning more about themselves. We found that through reflection and self discovery, students expressed more gratitude for their families, the community they live in, and the environment. As a future generation of strong Nisga'a leaders, being connected to "Who am I?" will have an enormous positive impact on their life experiences as they pursue their dreams and goals, and help sustain a healthy community. The teachers of GES also learned a lot about themselves and about mindfulness throughout the process of this inquiry.

Next year we aim to help students further explore this question of "Who am I?" We are hoping to welcome a puppeteer/artist and a Nisga'a artist into GES to do an intensive

two week program. Students will come to understand their personal relationship with the traditional stories of the region by working with the artists and Elders of the community. Using traditional Nisga'a family crests and archetypes, students will identify what clan they belong to and learn about the characteristics of the archetype that represents that clan, such as the killer whale clan or the wolf clan. Then, students will create original masks that blend papier-mache technique and Nisga'a design representing themselves as the archetype. Students will gain hands on experience in paper mache mask making, performing with masks, puppetry, story making, and traditional Nisga'a design. The creative process will become the content of an original performance for the local community.

We also would like to continue encouraging and facilitating self-discovery through all subject areas in a variety of ways next year. For teachers in other schools who are interested in a similar inquiry, we highly recommend collaboration with Elders and parents in the community in order to help the learning go deeper. We also recommend outdoor canoe camps, leadership and team building opportunities at the beginning of the year to help set the tone, build inclusion, makes students feel safe to share and connected to each other and the staff.