



2013-2014 AESN Case Study

School: Courtenay Elementary School **District:** SD71 Comox Valley

Area of focus: Transitions

Inquiry Team Members: Heidi Jungwirth (with support from Tanya Abbot, Colleen Devlin, Sue Diederichs, Gail Martindale, Lynn Swift, Blake Tobacca)

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Focus: Our joint question was based on connections, especially intergenerational connections. We started with this focus, but in the end, the inquiry in my class morphed more into the participants (teachers and EA's included) making connections between the fragmented "selves" which exist within each person, and taking these pieces and putting them together to create a whole self. What I mean by this is the students embracing the challenges and strengths that they possessed, and began to understand how a challenge is really also a strength. This process was given a name, "Courage".

My class worked on a year long project, "My Challenge is My Strength." Integrated into this year long project, was a mask making project which we did together with Nala'atsi Alternate School, which is located directly beside Courtenay Elementary School. We incorporated Indigenous Ways of Knowing (IWK) into the inquiry at first in a very obvious, visual way. As the inquiry progressed, the IWK became more internalized and instead of doing a project (the masks), the language changed into everyday internalization of knowing ourselves. This "taking on" of knowing ourselves took a more mature form in stories that the children wrote.

Scanning:

The thing that I noticed most about the learners was that they became more confident in themselves as whole people. Our focus was on looking at the whole person, emphasizing strengths and challenges. I found that when the whole child was looked at, the children lost their "embarrassment" or "shame" about the challenges they faced, and instead looked at themselves and their peers honestly and without judgement.

New Professional Learning:

Last year, I did my master's (SFU) on the topic of courage. I was very fortunate to have a focus in my master's program on IWK. I found that this inquiry gave me the opportunity to re-examine and deepen learnings that I had been introduced to in the previous year. I have searched out articles from my masters that are especially relevant

to this inquiry, and will state the deeper learning that resulted from me taking these ideas and using them in my classroom.

1. Cajete, "*American Indian Epistemologies*" and Meyer, "*Hawaiian Epistemology and the Triangulation of Meaning*." The whole idea of there being an "American Indian" or "Hawaiian" Epistemology was a completely new idea for me - I had never even thought about it. I was fascinated by the idea, and spent the year trying to incorporate this idea into my classroom. If I was to sum up my understanding at this moment, I would say that American Indian Epistemology means that we are looking holistically at things instead of just learning about things from one perspective. The use of storytelling was a major focus for me to bring about the holistic learning. This year, I introduced the concept of "two eyed seeing" to my students.
2. Irvine, "*Exploring Links Between Language and Intersubjectivity in Arts Education - As they may Be Informed By the Writings of Mikhail Bakhtin*" and Abrams, "*The Flesh of Language*". I learned from these articles how fundamental language is to our understanding, and how important it is to choose the right words. This was incorporated into my classroom at a fundamental level, and I believe that thoughtful choices of words was fundamental to the success of what I was trying to achieve through this inquiry.
3. Bishop, "*Freeing Ourselves from Neocolonial Domination in Research*", and Starr, "*The Use of Autoethnography in Educational Research: Locating Who We Are in What We Do*". I think that for all my students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, the shift that took place in my classroom because of this article was profound. If there is not a dominant culture within a community (or to be honest and accurate, I do my best to try and create this atmosphere and talk openly about how this is an impossible task) then the playing field is levelled and all people and situations become valued. I think that this shift had a profound effect on the students as well.

Taking Action: Our original plan was to have a student from the local Aboriginal Alternative School visit my class and participate/help teach the lesson on mask making. We went ahead with this lesson and it went well. What came about from this lesson was, however, quite unexpected. The student, an 18 year old boy, connected with my class (especially the boys) in such a profound way, that both teachers felt that this relationship needed to be continued somehow. The challenge was how to do this.

The two schools are located next to one another, so this was not a problem, but I felt uncomfortable with the influence that this boy would have on my 10 and 11 year olds. I offered a position to this student to come into my class and be a mentor. If he was a mentor, then his behaviour towards the students would need to be positive and age appropriate. The challenge in this situation was that the student did not believe himself capable of being a mentor, so a major part of his learning was in fact 1) him believing himself capable of this (there was a reflective component to his time spent in my class), and 2) him practicing this behaviour (with fairly regular coaching from myself and my EA). In the end, the student ended up spending about 5 hours a week in my classroom,

and I believe that he grew in self confidence and also in his mentoring skills. The plan is for him to continue to spend the same amount of time in my classroom next year.

Checking: I believe that there were major changes in some of my students, and small to medium changes in each one of my students. I am talking about the areas of behaviour, interpersonal relationships, self-regulation, and also academic achievement. The main focus of my inquiry was about courage. Anecdotally, I can tell you that there was significant improvement in the behaviour of the students who struggle to regulate their behavior the most, and I was going to “prove” this by coding the number of reflections that students had written in each of the months of the school year (reflections are written when there has been either a conflict or a behaviour incident). All of the students who had significant behaviour challenges were writing fewer reflections in the latter part of the year.

Reflections/Advice: It really feels to me that this inquiry was a launching point for what I intend to do in the future. It is now my firm belief that the type of learning that took place in my class is fundamental to every child, every teacher, every class. I know this because of the profound changes I have seen in myself, my EA’s and especially my students. I would advise others to take on the challenge of becoming more courageous. It is work that is never done, but each step taken along the path yields tremendous benefit to everyone. I know that the paradigm shift that has taken place within me has made me a better teacher, a better parent, and a better person. This also sounds rather profound, but believe me, its true!

As for my focus in the future, I feel like the topic “my challenge is my strength” needs further work and refinement. I am now especially interested and inspired by the empowerment that comes from looking at oneself and one’s environment in an honest, reflective way. I have learned that in order to move forward, the most important step is to arrive at a mutually agreed upon definition of the truth. Once this happens, and if it happens in a safe environment where there is no shame, then people feel empowered to really tackle the challenges that they face.

For a gallery of all the students and their completed masks, please go to my blog:

<http://hjungwirth.edublogs.org!>