



2014 - 2015 AESN Case Study

School: Suwilaawks Community School **District:** #82 Coast Mountains

Area of Focus: Enhancement Agreement

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Focus for 2014-2015: When Aboriginal Culture is woven throughout the classroom environment and within cross curricular teaching and learning, will the ability to write a personal narrative increase?

Scanning: Coast Mountains School District #82 is located in the northwest of British Columbia. Suwilaawks Community School is on Tsimshain Territory. Our school population is 230 students, with 87% identifying as First Nations. Ms. Pigeau's grade 4 class has almost all First Nations students with only 2% of European and South Asian ancestry.

In conversation with students it became apparent that student knowledge of their own cultural identity was limited. When analyzing the results of a cold School Wide Write, and a Three Step Class wide write students had difficulty with personal narratives. There was a lack of voice and descriptive vocabulary. We needed to build in both of these areas.

Focus: Our focus was to increase the student's ability to express themselves with a sense of individuality and interconnectedness, to show awareness and interest in their own culture and the features of the various cultures represented in the classroom, and to encourage ways the students can participate in actions that improve classroom and school community. The work was linked to the First Peoples Principles of Learning – learning requires exploration of one's identity, is embedded in memory, history and story, and involves patience and time.

Hunch: If the writing was connected to the individual learner, was culturally relevant and meaningful to each student they might develop specific writing skills as they create a deeper sense of self.

New Professional Learning: Students were asked to discuss their family heritage with folks at home. The students shared these stories with us. As we listened we were able to learn a great deal about each child in this grade four class, their background, heritage, and the sources of pride within their family.

Taking Action:

Pre- Project

A “cold” School Wide in the area of Personal Narratives was conducted. The results in the areas of ideas, voice, and vocabulary were mostly in the Not Yet Meeting or Minimally Meeting Categories.

We thought if we slowed the process down, and provided a great deal of background on the topic the results would improve. We designed and conducted a Three Step Class Wide Write. We picked “Our Special Place”, as our topic. We read anchor/mentor books, modeled ways to organize our thoughts using many graphic organizers, shared think alouds as a model story was created, and discussed ways to improve this story. The results of the 3 Step Class Wide Write varied only slightly from the School Wide Write. There was an improvement in the area of ideas, but not in aspect of Voice.

Project

We established a plan to make the writing process more personally meaningful and relevant, with the hope of hearing individual voices in the writing.

- Creating a classroom totem provided the base for teaching and learning throughout the year, to explore cultural identity. With this deepened knowledge our hope is that the student's ability to share a deep personal narrative will increase.
- With the support of two First Nations Role Models/Artists the idea of a classroom Totem pole took shape. Each child was asked to self identify a symbol of their cultural identity. Discussions were held regarding the attributes of each symbol, and how to place these cultural symbols on the totem.
- The pole was designed from the bottom up, with the clan symbol defining the territory placed on top. The totem was designed and painted with the students. The placement of the symbols was done in a purposeful way, creating a visual story that flowed.
- The students would share their section of the totem orally. These individual tellings were connected to create one oral narrative. The story was told over and over, changes made along the way. The students were contributing to the editing process. They were able to share if the story sounded right, or if bland words could be replaced by “triple scoop” words. When they were pleased with the classroom oral story, they were invited to write.
- They were asked to expand on their section of the story only. This did not seem to intimidate the students, they appeared confident. They had the freedom to go as far as they wished with their own piece.
- The reluctant writers were more than willing to participate. It was their story to tell. The students who truly struggle with written output told us it this work was easier, they knew what they wanted to write.
- Individual conferences were held. The students were able to “hear” what they wanted to change as they read their stories. They added richer words, clarified meaning, and were able to expand on their ideas. The students provided a bit of a summary of the class story, but focused on their part of the whole.

Checking: We compared this work with the School Wide Write and the Three Step Class Write. The results connected to the creation of the classroom totem, indicated growth in vocabulary, editing techniques, providing detail, and developing voice. We could hear the students within their writing. The risk was low, they had many opportunities to build a story by building the totem, and then creating a classroom narrative. Each student was able to grow and develop in each aspect of the Personal Narrative because it was truly their own story.

Reflections/Advice

It dawned on us that this project seemed perfect for a formal inquiry mid way through the process. We realized we were not getting the results we hoped for, and needed to shift our approach. If we made changes would the results change? The process was a long one, but one that grew and shifted as needed.

Next year we would begin earlier in the year, to dedicate a great deal of time forming relationships that allow us to know who are learners are and what they need to move forward allowing this deeper understanding of our learners to drive the cycle of learning.

This work could be a template for many teaching/learning opportunities forming a deep personal connection with the topic is reflected in a deeper understanding.