



2014-2015 NOII Inquiry Case Study

School: Stawamus Elementary and Mamquam Elementary

District: #48 Sea to Sky

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Our focus area: Who am I? The Building of Identity and Agency Within Classroom Communities

Scanning: “Inquiry demands that educators actively scan their environments, generate questions, try new approaches, observe and collect evidence, synthesize information from a variety of sources, draw conclusions and generate new questions” (Halbert & Kaser, 2013). As I began the scanning process this year I paid close attention to students’ self-perception and how mindset was impacting their learning. I noticed that students who demonstrated self-regulation skills, a growth mindset, positive self-perception, and strong character traits were happier, more connected to the classroom community and more successful academically.

I also began to think about the impact that my behavior has on student’s self-perception and how teachers may help or hinder the self-discovery process. As students seek to answer the question "Who am I?" I wonder how my words impact their ability to see themselves through a growth mindset lens? How can I help students develop character traits, powerful thinking brains and awareness of self, so that they can grow up to be successful, positive, and purposeful citizens in today’s society?

Focus: What is my ultimate role as a teacher? What is the purpose of education? If I am asking students to discover themselves, then I need to first be aware of my own constructs about who I am. Constructs influence our well being, the way we see ourselves and others, and how we make sense of the world (Shenk, 2010). I need to be aware of how my beliefs about well-being and self-perception shape the student’s discovery process. My vulnerability and awareness helps me to experience the self-discovery process alongside my students. A focus for this inquiry was not only to help students see themselves in a different light, develop strong character traits and create a connected community, but also to discover more about myself. I wanted students to know that self-discovery is a lifelong process and even adults learn new things about themselves through their experiences.

The next step was to begin thinking about how teachers play an important role in challenging students to move from understanding and ownership, to agency. As students discover *who they*

are, they may find themselves asking “What are we here for?” or “What can we do?” Then they become agents of change who progress from a focus on self, to a focus on others asking, “How can we contribute?”

Hunch: If we are not aware of ourselves, and our own patterns of behavior, then we may miss out on helping students authentically connect with who they are. We may also miss out on understanding how to support students, as well as anticipate reactions to our messages.

Do our words, tone, and body language consistently reflect and communicate our beliefs regarding which traits and values to nurture within each of our students? Are we helping students develop into young innovators, creators, and critical thinkers by modeling a growth mindset? I believe that students often receive mixed messages about intelligence, character, and their strengths/weaknesses. It is easy to put people in a box and give them labels (e.g., “You are smart,” or “You are good at...”). Every time they hear the words “You *are*...” they may take these words as the solid unchanging truth about who they are.

I began to think more about the feedback I was giving my students and how my messages contribute to their sense of self and internal narrative. Once we have begun the process of self-discovery ourselves, we can then begin to think of ways to guide students in developing personal and social identities.

New Professional Learning and Taking Action: The following factors help students answer the question “Who am I?” and contribute to the healthy development of strong learners/individuals. Each of these headings represent key learning that I experienced this year while reading, conversing with others, and taking action with my students: 1) Stories, History and Culture, 2) The Building of Character Traits, 3) Community Building and Attachment, 4) Moving to Student Agency, and 5) Malleability and Growth Mindset.

Stories, History and Culture

First, it is important that we understand and make sense of our personal stories, as “Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story” (First Peoples Principles of Learning). Along with promoting critical thinking and communication skills, storytelling greatly influences students’ positive personal and cultural identity. A focus on memory, history and story, builds “...the awareness, understanding, and appreciation of all the facets that contribute to a healthy sense of oneself. It includes awareness and understanding of one’s family background, heritage(s), language(s), beliefs and perspective, and sense of place” (Chrona, 2014).

The tradition of storytelling helps to create learners’ concept of the world. Through the sharing of stories in a trusting classroom environment, students can better understand who they are and where they come from. Then they have the power to take ownership over shaping their future by becoming their best self. Accepting personal stories and learning from history and culture will help students become resilient individuals with a heightened sense of agency.

Community circles in my classroom provided opportunities for students to share their stories. We talked about how we have the power to shape our lives and create new stories that align with personal and cultural values. Stories help others understand why we are the way we are today, but they don't define who we will always be. Students enjoyed telling personal stories and discovering more about themselves through the process.

The Building of Character Traits

As I encourage students to explore their identity, it is important that I think about what *character* means to me. Am I promoting a mixture of moral traits such as empathy and kindness, and performance traits like perseverance? Or, am I encouraging traits valued by traditional schooling such as compliance, reliability, and punctuality?

Similar to intelligence, character is not an unchanging part of who we are, but instead should be considered as “a set of abilities or strengths that are very much changeable – entirely malleable, in fact” (Tough, 2012, p. 59). Character traits can be modeled, practiced and developed. Some people may be naturally more *gritty* or *empathetic* than others, but we can all develop performance or moral traits that we determine as valuable. Students need to understand that they possess many traits and realize their role in developing those traits within the context of a supportive learning environment.

In my classroom this year we used animal puppets to symbolically represent learner traits (e.g. Beaver is industrious, Wolf is compassionate). For example, using the puppets in community circle to reflect on their learning and set goals proved to be more effective than just talking about *respect*. We connected the learning to First Nations culture and traditional legends where animals represent important traits and values. Students were aware that our animal puppets were symbolic representations of real life traits, and that development of these traits is ongoing. At the end of the year we worked together to choose new animals local to the Squamish Territory, found out their *Sḵwxwú7mesh* (Squamish) name, and assigned new competencies/traits for each animal. Being involved in this process gave the learners a powerful sense of ownership over the animals because they had created them.

Community Building and Attachment

Teacher-student rapport and community connectedness are essential to the development of healthy, happy students. Sharing stories and developing character traits not only supported students' sense of self, but also built community, as we were able to find commonalities and differences amongst the group. Through community building, we are helping students develop “personal and social identities – uniqueness's and affiliations that define the people they see themselves becoming” (Johnston, 2004, p. 22). How children perceive themselves within a community will determine their contributions and impact their sense of agency.

To help students feel connected to myself and to the group, I tried to make them feel understood and known. With a good attachment, I believe that teachers are more likely to influence their students toward productive identities, a positive self-perception, and a desire to

learn. Once the teacher-student rapport is strong and the community is connected, then the teacher is able to give up more control, and students can take ownership over their learning. I discovered that community building and attachment take time, and that we must always focus on collecting and connecting before learning can take place.

One of my goals as a teacher is to create “learning environments in which students and teachers are truly interdependent, in which the motivation for the group to succeed is as strong as the interest in individual success” (Paxton, 2011). Community building not only helps us build character and discover/become who we are, but is also one of the most important factors that impact student engagement, motivation and learning.

Moving to Student Agency: Next Steps Beyond Social and Emotional Learning, Ownership, and Positive Self-Perception

Social and emotional learning helps students in, “recognizing and managing their own emotions, establishing positive relationships, and handling challenging situations constructively” (Ostinelli, 2012, p. 5). Students will benefit from understanding the importance of emotions and how their emotions impact behavior. Social and emotional learning builds resiliency, as students are able to handle both stresses and daily tasks more successfully. It also greatly influences conflict resolution and community connectedness. Their current ability to self-regulate, listen, understand emotions, and feel empathy for others plays a large role in how successful they are as a learner. As I focused on self-regulation with my students, I urged them to look within rather than at others to make change happen. I realized that self-discovery needs to come first before students are able to truly empathize with others.

When students are leaders of their own learning they know that they are valued and cared for. Throughout this inquiry I thought of connecting with students and promoting ownership as two separate entities, but they are very much interconnected. By encouraging them to be leaders of their learning, the teacher-student rapport is simultaneously being strengthened and developed. Providing choice allows the students to take control, and the role of the teacher shifts from leader to consultant. My goal was to provide discovery time and some structure, but also enable them to take control over their learning and own it. An emphasis on the greater purpose will emerge naturally if students are intrinsically motivated in the learning. Giving control to the student not only increases engagement and agency, but also impacts their self-perception in a positive way.

Character, personality, and talents can be interpreted in numerous ways (Mlodinow, 2012). As teachers, we are just one interpreter. Who are we to judge a student by saying “you are” this or “you are” that? We need to encourage students to explore their personal constructs (interpretations) and how those constructs might be hindering a positive self-image. If children have a limited view of themselves they are more likely to let those few constructs define who they are. In a sense, what you believe often lives out to be true, and you become who you think you are. That is why helping students build a positive self-perception and develop a growth mindset is one of the most important aspects of our role as teachers.

My goal as an educator is to help students transform their thinking from self-awareness and understanding, to *agency*. “If nothing else, children should leave school with a sense that if they act, and act strategically, they can accomplish their goals. I call this feeling a sense of agency” (Johnson, 2004, p. 29). Resiliency no longer determines just how students and teachers cope with challenges, but impacts the actions we take to create change and transform the world around us.

“Children with strong belief in their own agency work harder, focus their attention better, are more interested in their studies, and are less likely to give up when they encounter difficulties than children with a weaker sense of agency” (Johnson, 2004, p. 40). As I noticed the connectedness between themes in my inquiry I realized that they all pointed in the same direction. Knowing your personal story, developing character traits, understanding and regulating emotions, ownership, and self-perception all contribute to a sense of *agency*. We are creating learning communities of students who are no longer asking, “What do I have to do to pass this test?” but instead are saying, “How can we contribute?”

Malleability and Growth Mindset

With all of this in mind, I kept coming back to the concept of malleability. Character traits, strengths and weaknesses, our thinking, what we do, and what we say are things that will never be fixed. These things are not concrete entities that are unchanging throughout our lives. Everyday experiences shape how we perceive ourselves, how we think, and how we act. Certain aspects of our personality may remain similar over the years, but students must understand that *who we are* changes as we learn and grow. No one is born with a predetermined amount of intelligence. Similarly, our identity is continuously changing along with our perception of self.

Checking

Has building identity and agency within my classroom made enough of a difference for my learners? Yes, I believe that the transformation has begun. Students in my classroom are beginning to see themselves through a different lens - as agents of change. They are becoming more confident, and take risks more often with their learning. Students are able to reflect and set goals for their learning using animal puppets. A new dialogue is starting to occur where they are able to share more about their history, culture, and family background, as well as their strongest personal characteristics. They have begun to view themselves as individuals who possess the ability to follow their passions, create purposeful change, and contribute to today’s society and future generations to come. Most importantly, students feel understood and known by others, and are proud of *who they are*.