



## 2015-2016 NOII Case Study

**School:** Gabriola Elementary

**District:** #68 Nanaimo Ladysmith

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**Our focus for this year:** Our staff and students worked on cooperative inquiry-based learning using non-fiction texts and technologies in order to support the growth of developmentally appropriate reading for information and discovery literacy skills across the grades.

**Scanning:** Our scanning evolved over a long period of time and continues to evolve. The focus on non-fiction reading skills was initiated at the end of the 2013-2014 school year through professional development and reflection about our learners in the school goal planning process. Staff and students had been engaging in a school-wide Learning in Depth project (<http://ierg.ca/LID/>) which drew our attention to the need to improve our ability to support all learners to effectively use non-fiction texts to enhance inquiry. It was fortunate that this project combined a Professional Learning Group (PLG) staff inquiry with students' use of inquiry as an approach to personal engagement with learning for the love of learning. This resulted in two consecutive years with a school goal to support students to develop non-fiction reading skills. In the fall of 2015, use of the newly provided School District 68 Formative Reading Assessment in the intermediate grades revealed significant disparity in our students' reading for information skill areas and abilities.

To learn in greater detail about our learners, two intermediate students in each division were interviewed using the four key questions. These interviews highlighted our students focus on improving themselves as learners. The area of greatest concern expressed by our students was developing their reading ability. Another theme that emerged was a desire for independence as learners, and several expressed an interest in the use of technology to enhance learning opportunities.

We recognized in the thoughts expressed by our students and the OECD principles of learning that we have a responsibility to design our learning environments and approach to instruction based on the most current research. Educational practices should assist students to develop skills that they can utilize in a world in which our interactions are increasingly information and knowledge based. This means that we need to enable all students to become increasingly self-directing and adaptive. Exploration of non-fiction reading and research skills using text and technology was a logical next step in our learning.

**Focus:** Our approach to this inquiry process was small scale and specifically targeted because we were already engaged in a school-wide Aboriginal focused inquiry for the AESN. While the students primarily involved in the learning process of this inquiry were in three of our six classes, all students and staff were engaged in non-fiction reading enhancement strategies to address our school goal and investigation as part of our Professional Learning Group study of

place-based and environmental learning practices. In addition, all six classes were engaged in individual student-driven Learning in Depth inquiries for the third consecutive year.

Years of participation in school-wide inquiry encouraged us to continue to explore our focus in greater detail using intermediate students to support early literacy skills development in the primary grades. We have repeatedly found that this format enables us to build lagging skills at the intermediate level through co-developed teacher led step-by-step buddy activities in which students are guided to assist one another. This assistance produces two results for all students, for it provides essential skills development and it deepens purpose and access to information. Our goal was to enable students in all grade levels to see the value of accessing information for personal exploration and to build a set of text and technology tools and strategies for acquiring, storing and sharing new knowledge.

**Hunch:** We identified three primary factors contributing to the need for our students to address this focus.

- It is not easy to know what school wide reading materials exist. Non-fiction resources purchased or acquired over the years are often organized by “reading level” and stored in a variety of places in the school. Not all teachers know what is available or where to find it, and there is very little organization according to curriculum or subject matter.
- We do not have an easy system for accessing and sharing uncatalogued school materials. Once knowledge of the materials is shared, the way they are grouped does not make it easy to support inquiry into specific topic areas for a range of reading levels. Teachers need to have the opportunity and inclination to work together to discover and support these connections for one another.
- The new curriculum is encouraging teachers to explore alternative sources of curricular content and methods of teaching. It is becoming increasingly apparent that our need to use text resources in new ways is essential to meaningful engagement with the new curriculum. This increases teacher need to use the resources, but places pressure on certain items for use at the same time by multiple grade levels. Therefore, additional coordination and cooperation will be required as we move forward.

A fourth factor emerged and shifted the focus of our inquiry over the year. It was:

- There is great variety in teachers’ inclination and technical knowledge to explore the use of technology as a resource to support non-fiction reading and research. We have many technology tools to use and there is shared recognition of our need to use those tools to enhance learning opportunities, but it is simply challenging for many of us to do so. Additionally, students benefit from a strong set of paper-based learning experiences and intentions to guide the effective use of technology. As educators, we can support one another to build these skills meaningfully in conjunction with hands-on curiosity based investigation.

**New professional learning:** Our entire staff engaged in a Professional Learning Group focused on place-based environmental education. This provided a foundation for discussions about how and why we need to explore alternative approaches to instruction. Through a small portion of Library time, one teacher was able to share and apply lessons in New Media and New Technology in the School Library Program to develop a student led Technology Team which explored and shared her discoveries with students throughout the school. A blog documenting the teacher’s academic learning process can be viewed at: <http://madaboutlearning.weebly.com/library-studies-blog>

As a school, our professional growth with the use of technology as a tool for developing non-fiction connections was also supported through the recent acquisition of new classroom-based laptops, projectors and ELMOs. The use of these tools to support non-fiction literacy was enhanced by informal cooperative teaching practices and collaborative exploration alongside our students. In particular, planning and implementation of Buddy class activities focused on how to engage learners to capture their existing knowledge and curiosity in order to strategically develop meaningful questions and drive further learning.

Following Professional Learning Community (PLC) discussions and our district led Curriculum implementation days, our staff invited our Virtual Library Coordinator to lead our final PLC session of the year. Her presentation on physical and virtual resources available to support the redesigned curriculum enabled all teachers to walk away with knowledge of an extensive set of resources at our finger tips. More importantly, she demonstrated and passed on the necessary skills required to access these resources as we prepare to engage with new curriculum in the upcoming school year.

**Taking action:** At the start of the school year, a District Assessment Coordinator team visited our school during our PLC time to introduce and give context to the new District formative assessment tools for primary and intermediate. Evaluation of the results of that assessment at the intermediate level confirmed our school goal planning that students required our focused attention and explicit instruction to develop reading for information skills. Gaps evident at the intermediate levels led us to infer that our primary students also required our strategic support. This became a priority which teachers undertook primarily through classroom instruction using the practices individuals had developed through previous professional development. Two of the instructional formats used most frequently were the Daily Five and Reading Power.

As a staff team, we initiated a Professional Learning Group to expand our knowledge of place-based and environmentally focused approaches to learning with the use of our new Outdoor classroom. This built upon years of inquiry into imaginative learning, play-based curricular exploration and Learning in Depth. However, the focus of our PLG shifted to support our collaborative professional growth through development of communication skills to facilitate meaningful conversations about learning. Similarly, our staff decided that the overarching goal for our PLC sessions over the year should be to support one another to address the needs of vulnerable learners in our classrooms. These changes altered the nature of this inquiry process, yet this year has provided a foundation for whole school collaborative work that merges personal and professional interests and skills with what we learned through shared investigation of the students' responses to the four key questions and the District formative assessment.

Due to the fact that our school already was engaged in a number of school-wide inquiry processes, this inquiry took place in a less formal, minimally structured format. Our teamwork took shape primarily through a job share partnership (Grade 5/6) which shared connections with a Buddy class (Grade 1/2). Additional collaboration took place school wide to support the Learning in Depth (LiD) inquiries using the Technology Team. Because one teacher has been instrumental to inspiring and supporting the Learning in Depth process, her class (Grade 2/3) worked with the intermediate class (Grade 5/6) and the Technology Team to showcase their LiD using PhotoStorys at a school assembly. Throughout the school use of technology and texts to dig deeply into areas of interest has been a focus and an area of successful learner growth. Key to this inquiry was ongoing teacher cooperation to share resources, enhance instructional practices and highlight teacher learner strengths.

It is important to recognize that both our District and our Union provide support for the collaborative work that drives our inquiry. PLC time was formally introduced by the District in the 2014-2015 school year and PLGs have been supported through the Professional Development Committee for many years.

**Checking:** Students and teachers in the school grew increasingly comfortable and effective using both texts and technology to access information in a personally meaningful way. The focus on use of technology may have received more emphasis than the use of paper-based text due to its newness and ever changing challenges and benefits. The greatest strengths were shown by students who could move between paper-based learning and the use of technology to enhance and demonstrate their understanding. Although evidence of improvement was achieved, ongoing support for this process is necessary and the need to balance instruction in all areas was apparent.

In addition, we undertook assessment of intermediate students reading for information skills in the spring of 2016 using the RAD, a diagnostic reading assessment closely aligned to our School District 68 Formative Reading Assessment tool. This demonstrated significant growth in non-fiction reading skills, particularly in the intermediate class which was the focus of this inquiry. Nearly all students progressed in every category demonstrating a reduction in the disparity between skill areas and abilities. Review of the evidence of learner needs revealed particular strength with making connections and inferencing and the need to continue building students' strategies for access and representing main ideas and supporting details. Students showed a wide range of knowledge about text features and how to use them to enhance comprehension.

The self-assessment reflections which students shared emphasized the ongoing need for educators to be explicit about how all learning is connected. In a highly information focused world, students benefit from seeing how their strengths, particularly when using technology as a tool, can help them to overcome what they find most challenging. Buddy class involvement allowed learners to see themselves in new ways. Both older and younger students had opportunities to be the teachers and were valued as the sources of knowledge and the creative forces in their own learning. Work between the classes also enriched learners' connections to multiple adults in the school including teachers, education assistants and parent volunteers. In school-wide consultation about our library program and the primary Teacher Librarian who is moving to another school, it seemed that our focus on a reading goal also enhanced learner appreciation for the role of Teacher Librarians in their growth as readers and lovers of books.

**Reflections/Advice:** This inquiry leads us to suggest that used creatively and with explicit intentions, books and technology combine to greatly improve our ability to prepare learners for their future in our ever changing world. In addition, we believe that working collaboratively as educators is essential to helping us engage with the new BC curriculum in ways that are personally and professionally exciting and rewarding. The informal process through which this inquiry unfolded was unconventional and authentic. It leads us to encourage others to take similar steps to connect when and where it is convenient, based on shared interests and the desire to learn together. A shift in roles in the schools is enabling us to make significant changes as a result of this inquiry.

Where we plan to go next is still a work in progress, and requires ongoing consultation and revision based on our school needs.