



2015-2016 NOII Case Study

School: Nechako Valley Middle School **District:** #91 Nechako Lakes

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Our focus for this year: Implementing student-led inquiry as a way for us to better meet the needs of our learners through developing skill competencies and address the issues of decreasing student engagement.

Scanning: Truly all of the OECD principles of learning were integral to our inquiry work. The First Nations Principles of exploring one's identity and recognizing that patience and time are essential for deep learning informed our self-regulation work.

Learners at the centre; Emotions are integral to learning:

Students were disconnected from learning. Last year we followed 'the book' for science and used a very traditional model. We needed that guidance to learn the curriculum but it didn't allow for creativity or promote student engagement.

Students had rigid beliefs about themselves as learners, and what learning was...with scores, grades, not getting feedback, "I just want to get it done." There are also rigid ideas about how to do things...for example take notes, instead of knowing key ideas behind a skill and then being able to choose the method that works for a learner for a given task, strategies are often taught in isolation so learners can't transfer them to other areas.

We recognized that students didn't have an opportunity in their schedule to explore a personal learning interest through self-directed inquiry outside of the framework of traditional academic, content-based learning. Even within our population of "academic learners," we noticed that our students are not often motivated by learning itself but by the grades they wish to achieve (i.e. "Is this for marks?"). We were not addressing the needs of learners who are not "text-book learners."

Focus: We wanted them to make better connections to the world around them by presenting their learning in ways that were not 'test oriented' or 'product focused'. We needed to move from teaching a strategy for the sake of a strategy, to a place where learners are strategic in the skills or methods they choose for a variety of learning tasks. We wanted to help develop learners to a point where they could apply the knowledge and skills they learned in novel settings/new ways and leave behind the idea that learning is all about the 'pretty project' at the end.

Hunch: The culture of 'you've got to get this done or you won't pass', term deadlines was fueling the rigid views that the learners were developing. They were stressed by the deadlines but were also stressed when there was flexibility with deadlines.

Anxiety is on the rise in our culture and maybe we also have anxiety ridden classrooms. There is pressure on teachers to get students ready for the next and future years and they feel pressure to 'present/cover the entire curriculum'. Doing so created the sense of disconnection because students were not going deep into learning.

We ask students to 'take notes' or 'do research' and then we are frustrated when they don't know how. We don't teach them and somehow expect them to know how to do it. We may teach it in one area but then stop referring to the skills in other areas of learning.

The continued compartmentalization of subjects also contributed to some of the challenges in engaging our learners.

New professional learning: Our professional learning was multifaceted, built upon the learning we began in 2014-15, and evolved a little bit differently for each of us, depending on our students and our own needs. We continued our learning about 'middle years' youth with the support of an expert teacher and consultant (supported by our district office). We extended our thinking and practices in student led inquiry with help from Debbie Koehn. We also used the revised BC curriculum in our application of backwards design (UDL), formative and developing growth mindsets and healthy self-regulation skills.

Some of us began to adjust our feedback/feedforward structures so they reflected the continuums of learning more effectively, and thus became more effective in supporting student growth.

Taking action:

Start with social-emotional learning:

Emotions are integral to learning; Learning requires exploration of one's identity.

- Making the classroom environment safe for learning –collect and connect
- Infusing self-regulation skills in the everyday life of a classroom. Using crew time to engage in social emotional learning.
- fostering the understanding that 'the adults believe in you'.
-changing the language and the body language I present as a teacher to ensure the environment is safe...the words I use impact every learner in the room.

Strategies and systems to support executive functioning

- developed systems of organization and support to ensure learners can develop their own systems for success in organization
- habits of mind

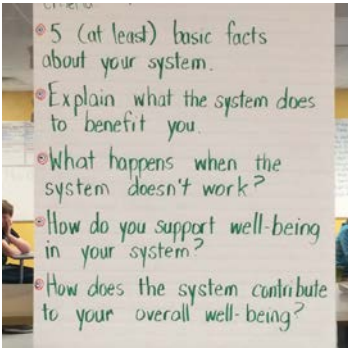
Inquiry based learning:

We engaged an outside expert, Debbie Koehn to develop an inquiry path that included formative assessment practices, modeling of lessons, conferencing with students.

The steps we took in teaching how to engage in inquiry:

- The grade 8 groups had a science focus and the grade 7's focused on Socials Studies curriculum and big ideas.
- We began by having students engage in a team based building project where they constructed a tower and reflected on the process. This launched the guided inquiry in science.
- Grade 8 students were asked to choose a body system to learn about that they also had a strong personal connection with...a personal reason for wanting to know more about that body system so it would propel them more deeply into their inquiry.

- Grade 7 students focused on how geography influences civilizations.
- In grade 7 one to one conferring about progress, learning goals and reflective thinking became a core piece of the structure that kept learners moving forward.
- We provided a framework/expectations and frequent check ins to ensure learners were on track. The framework included a limited number of criteria they had to meet



- Sharing circles involved learners reflecting on their learning processes and problem solving they were having to use as they faced challenges.
- Sharing out of student learning involved gallery walks. The emphasis was on the process, the learning and the thinking. The 'prettiness' of the product was not purposefully de-emphasized.



It was critical that we provide training for what effective inquiry can look like, that we build in accountability, and give students the opportunities to practice questioning.

Checking: Even though the focus was not on a 'pretty' end product, many went back to make revisions to ensure their product was something they could be proud of. Lots of pride. For many students who could not function in the traditional mode of learning because of anxiety, significant learning needs that differed from the mainstream, they could enter this type of learning and engage deeply, with pride and retain the information.

Attendance Rates of Vulnerable Learners

Two examples

- Student A - Grade 7 (41 absences, 16 lates) - Grade 8 (2 absences, 4 lates)
- Student B - Grade 7 (55 absences, 6 lates) - Grade 8 (17 absences, 4 lates)

Student Voices:

- "One on one conferences about learning help you get feedback. Feedback about my learning helps us get better marks."
- "Choosing what you want to learn makes you engaged in learning because it's what you want to learn about."
- "Usually at school we're told what to do and it gets really boring. But when you're doing something you want to do, you don't get bored."
- "Choice is important in learning because choice itself has to be learnt and used in a productive way. (...) The reason why I chose to work on 'Internal combustion engines' is

because the topic sparks interest in my brain and is part of the job field I want to go into.”

- “The Explore block can help us students to learn more about what we want to do in the future.”
- “The Explore block is helpful because I get to do things my way.”
- “Inquiry/Explore gives us time to think all by ourselves and not to be told every five seconds what to do. I love doing this block and I HOPE we keep doing it.”
- “Sharing our learning is great because we get to see and hear what other students think more, not teachers.”

Teacher Voices:

“When it came to writing report cards I realized when I was looking through all their work that everyone, every single person had been engaged in their learning. It was such a difference from other times when we’ve had whole class instruction. I just felt such gratitude and I was amazed at all the information the students had been able to retrieve and find and put together. It was just joyful.”

Explore Block Inquiry:

Students were given more freedom to inquire about personal passions and interests, but this has not been as successful. Students who are not naturally driven to do this kind of learning yet need more structure and training to make it more purposeful. Many students use it as free time and are engaged in only surface level learning.

For students who are successful in this less structured format refer to the value of choice and the opportunity to lead themselves.

Reflections/Advice: A few key aspects were critical in supporting student success and improved learning for all. Clear criteria kept to a small number helped learners know what was expected. Inquiry with a personal connection kept students engaged longer and going deeper. Regular check ins in the form of learning logs and one to one conferring helped learners develop greater self-awareness of their own progress and shifted the focus from “a task that the teacher wants me to do, to the next step for my learning”.

Emotions are integral for learning. It is about the safe environment, regulating, self-starters so they can be independent and the teacher can confer, facilitate and guide learning more effectively.

Having a team to work with was critical in moving our thinking forward.