



2015-2016 NOII Case Study

School: Nisga'a Elementary Secondary & Gitwinksilkhw Elementary School

District: #92 Nisga'a

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Our focus for this year: Does providing physical support tools (like fidgets, leg bands, lap pads) and/or changes to the physical learning environment improve students' ability to attain and maintain focus, and thereby improve communication?

Scanning: At both the elementary and secondary levels we noticed that restless energy often leads to social behavioral conflicts: fighting, pushing, fidgeting, verbal barbs and an inability to pay attention to lessons or work. In observing elementary classrooms, the teacher's communication is sometimes lost when students are not focused and not listening. We noticed that some students with special physical supports, such as an elastic band on their chair legs, are better able to manage their restless energy. We noticed that the addition of a special calming zone in one class seemed helpful for some students. At the secondary level, we also noticed in previous years that providing students with a home-like environment helped to improve concentration and to reduce physical conflicts. We also attended an Education Symposium hosted by Nisga'a Lisims Government in spring 2015 where students and community members spoke about what they wanted for education in the Nass Valley.

Three of the four key questions were addressed at the Education Symposium in the spring of 2015. The responses to these concerns were a cornerstone of our inquiry project regarding changes to the physical environment at NESS and how these changes would impact climate and culture. These concerns also led us to consider how to use physical supports to relieve restless energy. The first question, "Can you name two adults in this building who believe you will be a success in life?" was addressed through Positive Behaviour Support assemblies with the elementary students, as well as conferences/interviews with individual students. The entire student population was not surveyed at the beginning of our study. We did, however, conduct a post study survey using the four questions to determine if our efforts had made a difference. While 100% of the staff returned the survey, the student returns were minimal. We intend to follow up that survey in a few months (October) to (a) improve upon our collection methods and (b) determine whether our gains have maintained into the school year.

Students who participated in the project were enthusiastic about the physical supports and changes to the physical environment. Students demonstrated their interest by asking for supports, using the supports and making suggestions for further changes. In the secondary school, the most noticeable changes were in the care that students took with maintaining the

building and taking ownership of the new equipment. In addition, students were observed seeking the comfort of the couches when they were feeling down, reading books when they wanted to be alone, and hanging out around the pool table at lunch rather than merely sitting in the halls and gaming on their devices.

We considered the idea that learning is holistic, relational and rooted in a sense of place. A second First Peoples Principles of Learning considered was the fact that learning requires exploration of one's identity. Although the study focuses on space and manipulatives, a constant thread was the conversation with all students that learners learn in different ways. In order to know more about how we learn, we must also know more about ourselves. The two OECD learning principles most relevant to our study were the two that focus on the facts that learners are different, and that learners also have to be at the center of what happens in the classroom/school.

Focus: Through reflection we accepted that we couldn't change many outside aspects in our students' lives. However, we could change certain physical settings in our classes, support rooms, office and foyer to try to improve learning outcomes. We noticed many students struggled to focus, across many grades. We had seen some improvement in a small number of students who have had access to different types of physical supports or environmental changes.

We were hoping to see an improvement in focus, but also a change in students' feelings about learning. At a school level, we wanted to change the climate of the school to one of motivation/enthusiasm/care so that we could continue to build a culture of learning.

Hunch: Our hunch was that sometimes the current learning environment actually contributes to students feeling restless. Sitting for too long without chances to release energy leads some students to have behavior issues or to lose their learning focus. Some students need a variety of physical support tools or environmental changes to better release their energy, to reduce their anxiety, and to better maintain focus. We believed that the broad use of these tools may improve student focus/learning as well as communication skills.

New professional learning: Our school leader explored elements of the Reggio Emilia classrooms. Through her ESL parts 2 & 3 courses, she discussed the different ways that classroom and school environments could support students and parents. In particular, she discussed the effects of environment on ESL learners. For her, the resources that were most helpful were her ESL colleagues (an unexpected network of experts), discussions with fellow AESN partners and the students she conferenced with on a regular basis in the office.

We initiated three formal meetings throughout the year to discuss the project and to touch base. As we spanned two different schools and levels, a natural divide occurred amongst the participants. The GES team worked together; the secondary team conferred often about changes in the general school environment and Martha's classroom; the elementary team also met often to discuss strategies to implement in their classrooms. The Learning Resource Teacher (LRT) at NESS was beneficial because he could share the strategies and results at both the secondary and elementary levels. The district counselor provided a thread of communication between GES, NESS and the other schools in the district as she could share observations about what the other teachers/schools were doing and give advice.

Taking action: The school leader redesigned the office space so that it was more kid friendly. for younger students visiting the office, she provided a lower coffee table and beanbag chair to

sit in so that the environment was less intimidating. In her own office, she provided a shelf of interesting books to read, a desk to work at and an exercise ball for students to release some energy. In the main foyer of the secondary school, she created a student lounge with couches, pool table, foosball table, plants, and bookracks to provide students with a sense of place. The seating in her classroom was arranged in a U-shape to promote better conversation, exercise balls were provided for students to sit on if needed and the amount of “stuff” in the room was minimized. A larger table with adjustable legs to fit the wheelchair of one of her students was provided.

The LRT and the counselor worked with other teachers to bring fidgets, quiet zones, and an exercise station into the daily routine. One example of an amendment to classroom furniture is the wobble chair that students can use when they need the extra stimulation. The classroom teacher noted that the chair was highly sought after by some of her more active students. Exercise stations were set up in the halls outside the primary and the elementary classrooms. Students tracked their own exercise goals and brought their passports to the LRT on a regular basis. The stations were utilized by teachers who recognized when their students needed the break from classroom routine.

Teachers and Education Assistants (EA) at both NESS and GES were acquainted with different types of fidgets, kinetic sand, and reflective exercises to help students learn to self regulate their actions.

Checking: The baseline – and change – evidence is mostly anecdotal since the return rate of the student surveys was minimal. We began with the statements made at the Education Symposium in spring 2015 made by students, parents, Elders and other community members. One key concern was about the school culture and the overwhelming sense of anxiety, depression, bullying, and lack of options. Students, in particular, were unhappy that there was nothing to make them want to be at school, and that when they did go to school it felt like their individual needs were being ignored. After initiating our inquiry, we observed (or others commented to us) that the school was cleaner; students were using the fidgets and asking for more; students reported other students for not taking care of equipment; visitors to the school said that it felt happier and more welcoming when they walked in. Some students in secondary school openly cried on the couches and, instead of being singled out, were supported by staff and other students. In summary, our changes have made a difference to our school, but we can continue to develop our ideas and strategies.

Reflections/Advice: We learned that small changes can have large impacts. By changing one student’s experience, you can affect an entire classroom or school. Paying attention to students’ emotional climates and providing a supportive environment created sustaining relationships that kept students in school and improved their willingness to try. We plan to expand upon our selection of manipulatives; breathe some life into our library; and continue to promote social emotional learning amongst our colleagues. Our advice to other schools is to start with an inquiry that is interesting, (small) and attainable then allow it to grow as you learn more about it. Any spot is a good place to start.