



2015-2016 NOII Case Study

School: Vancouver Island West School District #84

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Our focus for this year: How will the use of inquiry in professional learning groups create a culture of collaboration for responsive, reflective practice in School District 84?

Scanning: For our inquiry we considered our "learners" to be the educators in our school district. Educators in School District 84 work in largely isolated teaching environments due to our small, geographically isolated schools located in the traditional territories of four bands of the Nuu-chah-nulth peoples. There is high vulnerability amongst both students and staff (many new teachers, as well as experienced teachers feeling disconnected or uncomfortable with change). However, we have had positive responses to collaborative inquiry groups in recent years (for example, the Changing Results for Young Readers project) and believe that opening up the opportunity to engage in collaborative inquiry will allow more educators in the district to become connected and reflective practitioners.

Focus: We sought to use a model that provides educators with a safe, supportive environment in which to experiment and make changes in practice. We chose collaborative inquiry as a structure because it is learner-driven, relevant to each teacher's practice and experience, is based on reciprocal relationships, and builds a team approach with an equal voice for all members of the team. In each of the two main inquiry groups (JOLT and New Teacher Mentorship) we began by agreeing on the protocols we would follow to ensure an environment where each participant would feel safe to be vulnerable and share. These protocols were reviewed at the beginning of each subsequent meeting.

Hunch: Some of the factors contributing to the need for change include:

- Geographical dispersion and isolation of our small schools
- Due to low and declining enrolment all teachers teach combined multi-grade classes in both the elementary and secondary.
- Community vulnerability and high level of student need. Many of our students come from families suffering from the effects of generational trauma (Residential Schools), economical challenges or uncertain domestic situations. Added to these challenges is the fact that, like many rural communities, steady, well-paying industry jobs are decreasing or gone. This has led to families being separated while one parent is away at work for large chunks of time.
- Isolated schools and classrooms
- Fewer staff doing more jobs (everyone wears many hats) - need for distributed leadership capacity. An example of this is the fact that as the district budget has declined we now have our Superintendent also operating as the Secretary-Treasurer and the Operations Supervisor. We have many examples of one person doing many jobs that in the past had been spread out among more people.

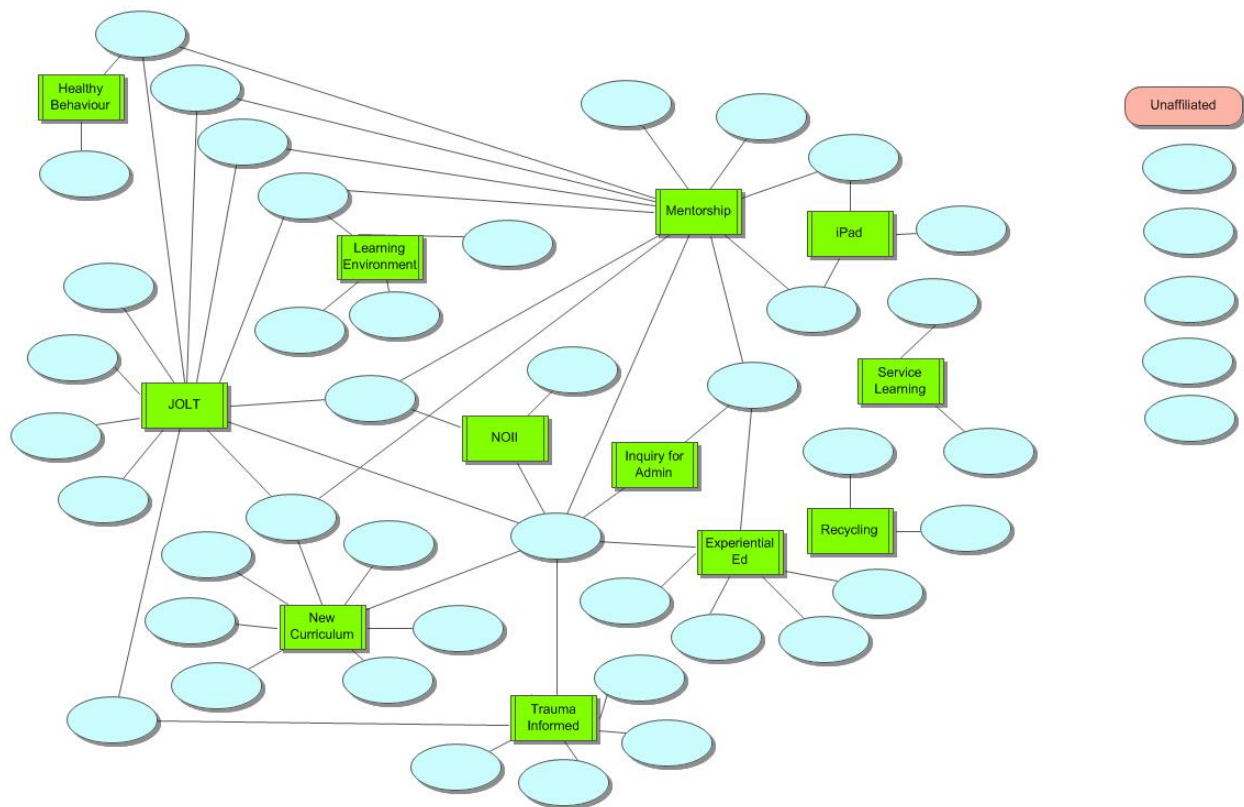
- Educators want to feel connected to something bigger than ourselves. They want to feel more connected to the district as a whole and to education BC; to feel less alone in their practice and less alone in their classrooms.
- Need for school and district cohesiveness

Our hunch was that by engaging educators in collaborative inquiry we would be able to mitigate some of the challenges listed above. Ultimately, we would help staff develop the tools and mindsets to enable every learner to cross the stage with dignity, purpose, and options; ensuring that all learners leave our schools more curious than they arrive; and that all learners gain an understanding of, and respect for, Aboriginal knowledge and cultures.

New Professional Learning: We sought to foster a culture of collaboration for responsive and reflective practice by facilitating professional inquiry groups. These groups included our Joyful Opportunities for Learning Team (JOLT) and Teacher Mentorship Project. We facilitated participants in exploring the Spirals of Inquiry. As facilitators, we developed our own understanding of inquiry through support from the VIU / NOII Rural Leadership Capacity Project team. Two members of the team participated in the NOII Symposium as well as the Helen Timperley session that focused on increasing understanding of working with the Spiral.

Taking Action: Throughout the year, members of the NOII team took action to help create a culture of collaborative inquiry in the district. The primary means of creating this culture has been the facilitation of the two largest collaborative inquiry groups - the Joyful Opportunities for Learning Team (JOLT) and the New Teacher Mentorship Project. The planned Diversity Series was postponed to a later date. Throughout the year, the educators in these groups met together to form individual inquiry questions based on the Spirals of Inquiry, then took action in their classrooms before meeting together again to discuss their actions. This process was repeated multiple times throughout the school year. For the NOII facilitators, a major focus in facilitation was laying the foundation for trusting, reciprocal and respectful professional conversations. We were also involved in assisting one of our schools in developing its Mission, Vision, and Values through a process of appreciative inquiry.

Checking: One way to examine how educators in S.D.84 are connecting to one another through professional learning is to create a visual map of our various collaborative professional learning groups. In the diagram below, educators are represented by blue ovals, and the topics for collaborative professional learning are represented by green rectangles:



This diagram shows how well educators in S.D.84 are connecting to collaborative professional learning. Approximately 90% of the educators in the district are connected in some way to collaborative professional learning opportunities. This shows that the district has created opportunities for educators to work with one another, and that most educators find the opportunities engaging.

It is also interesting to note the educators who are connected to multiple collaborative learning teams. There are ten educators who are connected to multiple projects, and present the opportunity to connect the learning that takes place in various groups. Also of note are two projects (both conducted in pairs) that are not connected in any other way to other projects within the district.

Future Directions: Having learned that so many of our educators are engaging in collaborative professional learning, we believe that our next steps are to find ways to connect the learning that takes place within the various groups. Currently, there is not much opportunity for the learning that takes place within inquiry groups to be shared outside of the group.

As a next step in our inquiry we would like to explore the creation of opportunities for members of various professional learning groups to meet and share their learning so that the knowledge can spread to colleagues. One group member suggested the creation of t-shirts with phrases such as “Ask me about JOLT” or “Ask me about Mentorship” to wear at an upcoming district gathering; this idea seemed to generate energy and enthusiasm as an easy way to start a conversation about our learning. Other possibilities include:

- Creating leads in each group to come together to share one or two key aspects on which their professional learning group is focusing. Ideally they would meet every two months. We think this would highlight our focus question’s intention of reflective practice. It also can ensure the accountability of each team (identified in some of the team literature as important).

- Publishing on a blog, or a website what each group is working on, how to access their information or study, who to connect with to get more information. We think it could be another avenue for encouraging reflective practice.

Reflections and Advice: The following quotations from teachers who participated in one of the facilitated collaborative inquiry groups (JOLT) help illustrate the value of collaborative inquiry for educators in S.D.84:

"The way that [inquiry] has been broken down in this group has been really useful and has laid out the steps and process ... I have a better idea of what inquiry actually is for me and what it looks like for the students."

"Having that time to sit down together separate from our school demands ... has been useful."

"Getting feedback from other people ... is really helpful."

"It's amazing to be able to sit down with colleagues and reflect and learn from them."

"The ability to connect the schools and the communities [across the district] ... is so incredibly useful."

"It's pretty exciting because it can go so wide, far, and deep."

"Getting together, trusting each other with our fears and worries and joyful bits and pieces..."

"Having the spiral and breaking it down into manageable chunks gives my inquiry purpose and focus."

"It allows us to slow down and have that time for deeper learning."

"Helped me to stay focused ... and be more purposeful."

"There's action associated with it - it's not a stagnant thing."

"It's really exciting and I've really enjoyed it."

"It gave me some insight for what I can change for next year and following years."

"I would absolutely be in inquiry projects again."

"It's really helped my learning this year for sure."