



## Networks of Inquiry and Innovation Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network

### 2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

**School Name:** Gabriola Elementary School

**School District:** SD#68 Nanaimo-Ladysmith

**Inquiry Team Members:** Andrea Doak, Miranda Culbertson, Catherine Gilroy, Tom Bradbrooke, Sooz Svensson, Kate Reynolds, Alix Hodson, Kathy Gurr, Jane Tufnail, Laura Boulton, and Dave Travers

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**Type of inquiry:** NOII

**Grade levels:** Primary (K - 3), Intermediate (4 - 7)

**Curricular area(s):** Applied Design, Skills & Technology, Arts Education, Career Education, Language Arts - Literacy, Language Arts - Oral Language, Language Arts - Reading, Language Arts - Writing, Mathematics / Numeracy, Physical & Health Education, Science, Social Studies, cross-curricular place-based

**Focus area(s):** Community-based learning, Core competencies (for example, critical thinking, communication, problem solving), Experiential learning, Land, Nature or Place-based learning

#### **In one sentence, what was your focus for the year?**

We focused on developing our school-wide commitment to providing Place-Based Learning to increase engagement, build skills and improve connections to curricular content, core competencies and the community.

**Scanning:** Briefly summarize your scanning process. How did you use the four key questions as part of the scanning process? What did you notice about the experiences of your learners that were most important to your team?

Our scanning process was a continuation of our previous inquiries, school goals and visioning processes which extended to involve our broader community. We took part in facilitated vision development and are involved in ongoing exploration of collaboration with a faculty from Simon Fraser University who have experience supporting the development of Place-Based Education in BC Public Schools.



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As a school community, we have been working together to build skills essential to communication and collaboration, to develop a shared understanding of our most vulnerable learners and to actively pursue a new approach to learning and teaching practices with ongoing embedded outdoor and community based experiences.

Use of the four questions was undertaken this year with the senior class in the school to examine the outcome of learner awareness at the end of the elementary experience. Students participated in this process in an anonymous and collaborative online environment in which teaching and explanation of the questions was supported by the Inquiry and Innovation teacher and students were able to see one another's responses.

The responses clearly showed that students are making connections to our ongoing focus areas for inquiry including: aboriginal learning, research through books and technology, following our interests, and environmental awareness/action. Students continue to have difficulty differentiating between subjects and specific content learning, particularly when discussing their progress as learners.

It was remarkable to note the high level of awareness about the next steps involving our change in curriculum. Once again, when asked to identify the adults who believe in them, students tended to focus on their current or most recent teachers. We want to build more connections across the learning community with adults in the school and beyond our doors. While many big ideas were noted, none of them were aligned with the big ideas expressed in the new curriculum which leads to curiosity about whether this will improve over the year after more explicit engagement with the content and competencies is explored by all learners.

In addition, teacher learners engaged in a strategy introduced to the Inquiry and Innovation teachers during a project with our local community planners. This strategy (SWOT) asked participants to consider Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats to a proposed plan, or in this case, our inquiry. In our Professional Learning Community, educators openly discussed and later contributed ideas anonymously about what experiences help and hinder our ability to collaborate, inquire and innovate together at the school. This information was used to help shape the inquiry and to guide future reflection on how to meet the needs of all learners in the school.

**Focus:** In a few sentences, explain why you selected this area. What changes were you hoping to obtain for your learners?



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Our NOII inquiry was determined through Professional Learning Community (PLC) discussions and exploration in which we agreed it was important to align our school goals with our inquiry practices within the learning framework provided by the district in order to support the strategic goals and district vision while maintaining the integrity and specificity of the vision we are developing for our school.

The NLPS vision of “Success For All” is broad, where our school vision seeks to provide that in a community context rich in experiential learning and connection with environment and people. Our school goal “to support the development of students’ literacy, numeracy and social skills through place based, environmentally focused learning across the curriculum” guided the use of our PLC collaboration and professional development endeavors. In addition, we worked extensively with community partners to expand our ability to meet the unique needs of every students through continuous improvement of instruction and assessment. We collaborated in a variety of ways to apply the new curriculum through inquiry and project based approaches to instruction. The change we have an ongoing hope to observe in all learners is for them to be increasingly engaged and for the learning to become more meaningful and connected.

Collaboration between our teacher librarian, I&I teacher and classroom teachers was focused on supporting our professional inquiry process and enabling conversations that help us regularly visit the first OECD principle of learning: Learners at the Centre. Our school goal is ultimately about meaningful engagement, and it helps us to remember that: The learning environment recognizes the learners as its core participants, encourages their active engagement and develops in them an understanding of their own activity as learners.

**Hunch:** Describe your hunches about the ways in which practices at the school may have been contributing to the experiences of your learners that were of concern to you.

Limited time, multiple goals and diverging interests have challenged us in the past and may have reduced our ability to support all learners. We have traditionally engaged in at least two or three professional learning inquiries each year which have not always connected directly to the school and district goals. This year, we worked together to determine how to fit these practices and interests together in a way that supports growth and connection. Our PLC structure and Professional Learning Group (Local Pro-D supported collaboration) in addition to our commitment to learning together in a variety of ways with our community helped us to prioritize our goals, our time and our interests as



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individuals and members of an educational team.

Another practice which may have contributed to a need for change has been familiarity with the old curriculum and traditional ways of teaching and learning. We do not think we need to discard all past practice, but we are engaged in an ongoing process of exploring the most effective practices together. We also share an interest in discovering how to fit best past practices with the new curricular expectations. It has been rewarding to find and share ways to integrate new and innovative approaches to learning. Collectively we recognized that our most vulnerable learners in particular deserve our focused attention and continuous collaborative dedication to providing learning opportunities that engage all learners and meet diverse learner needs.

**New professional learning:** What new areas of professional learning did you explore? What resources were most helpful? What specific designs did you use to support the learning of your colleagues?

Our professional learning this year looked at how to develop a place-based approach to instruction, engagement and assessment that enables all learners to develop skills and connection to content and competencies. We also worked together to learn how to integrate environmental consciousness into all that we do, and how to learn from our environment as well as within it in a deliberate and hands-on approach. We shared resources, developed new collaborative units, and experimented with the use of the community and the natural environment as our teachers and our classrooms.

By connecting our goals, vision and inquiries, we were able to deepen and extend ongoing commitment to all learning that helped us develop and enhance our school community and purpose. To start the year, we engaged in Pro-D with a local DFO representative and Project WILD instructor. We also used valuable time provided for curriculum implementation to explore how the curriculum aligns with our collaborative interests and community opportunities. Two classes were supported to learn about town planning in our community by our local Islands Trust planners. We are fortunate to have a supportive network of community members and organizations who are integral to our professional learning and the education of all of our students. We have also supported through partnership with local and Vancouver based university professors to examine our practice and what matters to us and learners here. In addition, our District Virtual Library Coordinator has supported staff learning and cooperative student learning initiatives. Throughout the year, professional learning helped us expand our understanding of place-based learning and develop our individual and collective experiences with making



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curriculum connect to our context.

**Taking action:** Describe strategies you and your team decided on and how your actions worked out.

The entire staff collaborated as a team throughout the year to bring our learning to life in a number of ways. We aligned inquiry and school goal planning. We had purposeful vision focused professional development. We dedicated time in our Professional Learning Community and Professional Learning Group to sharing resources, asking questions, making observations and exploring interests. We collaborated to co-plan and co-teach units that supported our goals. We also kicked off the year with a presentation to the School Board of what learning looks like at our school. We participated in facilitated discussions and planning with local community groups and university representatives. Highlights of the development of place-based experiential learning opportunities to support learners' engagement include:

- Local Museum Lessons and Visits
- Field Trips to Local Businesses and Farms
- Visits to the Islands' Trust Planning Office and a Local Planning Meeting
- Beach Lessons and Clean-up
- Gabriola Commons Gardening and Food Preparation
- Walking tour to Local Sites with Qwam Qwum school
- Island Circle Tour to Compare Sites and Ecosystems
- Yoga Lessons in the Community Yurt
- Learning in the Outdoor Classroom
- 12 Stations Permaculture Lessons (3 day event)
- Local Traditional Medicinal Plant Bed Cultivation
- School Garden Planting and Care

**Checking:** Summarize the differences you made. Were they enough? Were you satisfied?

We checked in on our learning through two formal processes, but much of our checking was on an ongoing observational basis. The evidence that encouraged and motivated us was learner enthusiasm. It was clear that the richly place-based learning opportunities reached the greatest number of students and evoked engagement on an exciting level. Touching base formally, using the four questions with the senior class demonstrated the following:



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- Strong, lasting connection to the teacher whose informal leadership led our school toward this initiative
- Students inspired to be leaders who share and live by the motto, "Be the Change you Wish to See"
- Awareness has been growing of the significance of context to learning
- Interest in how school activities can be related to life endeavours
- Continued need for explicit use of big ideas and connection to curricular expectations and relevance (core competencies and content)
- The importance of supporting our learners' ability to describe their progress and place in learning and their purpose as learners on a regular basis

When we revisited our school NOII inquiry focus through the SWOT process introduced in the fall, staff provided compelling anecdotal evidence that change was happening. Through discussion and anonymous written descriptions of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats to this inquiry, it was consistently expressed that change was improving both teachers' and learners' experience of education at our school. Results observed included:

- Staff worked well as team and focused together on our vision.
- We had meaningful engagement with our community.
- Pro-D supported learning and kept focus in an ongoing cooperative way.
- Access to the exploration of local habitats supported learning.
- Students were more connected to place, and curriculum was more relevant.
- Activities built on success and promoted citizenship.
- Project-based and integrated curriculum was helpful.

**Reflections/Advice:** Finish by sharing what you learned from this inquiry, where you plan to go next, and what advice you would offer other schools with a similar interest.

We are experiencing a significant change of staff in the upcoming year. The work and learning that informed this inquiry is only the beginning of an ongoing process to improve our understanding of our learners and develop a school culture that supports continued growth as a place-based learning community. One activity that will help bring this work forward was the development of Guiding Principles for our school. In addition, our school code of conduct is being re-written to represent the importance of relationships and restorative practices that are essential to a culture of kindness and connection. We benefited from bringing together goals, visions and inquiry initiatives this year. While there is value in exploring many areas of interest, having a central focus on learners and



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practice through the place-based lens gave greater meaning and longevity to the activities that we undertook. It may sound simple, but truly working together as a team was a key ingredient to shaping this learning process. Deliberately celebrating the strengths, curiosity, knowledge and resources of individual educators and members of our community has added to our passion and purpose. We will continue to be explicit about including and valuing every member of our learning team in the next steps of our learning journey. This collaborative inquiry focus will shape and reshape our place-based approach to education at Gabriola Elementary School.