



Networks of Inquiry and Innovation Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network

2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

School Name: Smithers Secondary School

School District: SD#54 Bulkley Valley

Inquiry Team Members: Jaksun Grice – Principal, Cindy Miller – VP, Teresa Monkman, Jana Fox, Niki Robichaud, Catherine Quanstrom, Shirley White, Natasha Luca, Trina Zubek, Jody Garcia

Inquiry Team Contact Email: jfox@sd54.bc.ca

Type of inquiry: AESN Transitions

Grade levels: Secondary (8 - 12)

Curricular area(s): Not applicable

Focus area(s): Transitions

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

Our inquiry focused on developing trusting relationships and having deep conversations with Aboriginal students to gain insight into their experiences, connectedness, and expectations of the school to inform our actions as an inquiry group and a school-wide staff.

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?

A student survey from the previous year indicated that Aboriginal students did not feel a sense of belonging at SSS, some could not identify 2 adults that believed they would be successful, and a significant number did not like school. We also reviewed attendance rates and transition rates. From this information, we inferred that a large proportion of SSS Aboriginal students do not feel connected to the school. The way Aboriginal students



Networks of Inquiry and Innovation Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network

2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

perceive and reflect on their own learning journey, the steps to improve their learning journey, and their plans to accomplish their future endeavours were unclear as it was not explicit in the data, nor was it being articulated by the students. This also indicates that the school was not hearing the individual Aboriginal learner voice.

The First Peoples Principles of Learning are evident in our scanning as we found that the student's learning was not completely supporting their well-being, their whole spirit, or in assisting in the development of their identity. The students were struggling to develop a sense of place and connectedness to the school as part of their learning experiences. We also recognized that some students were not reflecting on their actions and learning deeply to draw connections to the consequences they were experiencing.

In our scanning, the data and anecdotal stories of SSS educator's perspectives of Aboriginal student compelled us to ask if the learning environment at SSS placed all learners at the centre, which addresses first OECD Learning Principle. Are we adequately constructing learning environments with responsive pedagogies to meet the learners' needs? Are we truly recognizing the student's individual differences to accommodate a variety of learning styles, beliefs, and motivations, or were some of us still adhering to the 'one size fits all' model of teaching?

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

The learner voice was missing from the scanning and data to truly inform our inquiry's direction in the next step. By focusing on relationship building on a one to one basis between the educator and student, we had hoped to obtain information about improving Aboriginal student belonging and success in the school, thus improving transitions. We had intended to use the information as evidence to inform our entire staff of how our school-wide and individual perspectives, mindsets, and pedagogies positively and negatively affect SSS Aboriginal students. From this, we hope to take action in which both students and staff will be active participants and leaders.

Hunch: Describe your hunches about the ways in which practices at the school may have



Networks of Inquiry and Innovation Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network

2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

been contributing to the experiences of your learners that were of concern to you.

There are aspects of SSS that is neither welcoming nor inclusive, and the reasons were unclear for why Aboriginal students feel this way. We had a hunch that by developing trusting relationships with Aboriginal students and engaging in deep conversations, we may be able to access new information that can help guide our learning as a staff to increase Aboriginal student engagement and belonging in the school. By having our learning and action be driven by feedback from multiple meaningful conversations with Aboriginal students, the staff will more likely take responsibility for finding solutions to make SSS a more inclusive system.

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?

Relationship Building & Reflecting Deeply of Practice:

As an inquiry group, we had to learn how to engage in meaningful conversations with our Aboriginal students. What would this look like? How would it be structured? What topics did we need to engage in to make it effective?

We've discovered that the Changing Results for Young Readers (CR4YR) template for a student case study could become the framework to guide our conversations. The framework allows us to focus on highlighting the student's strengths, belonging, and learning progression. Our inquiry group modified the CR4YR framework to allow our conversations to become more flexible, allowing room for more student voice, but continuing to revisit the following questions: Can you name 2 adults at SSS that believe you'll be successful? Where are you going with your learning? How are you doing? Where to next?

The First Peoples Principles of Learning will continued to guide our learning in how we interacted with students and staff and to determine our next steps.

We read the following articles/book chapters to help inform our learning:



Networks of Inquiry and Innovation **Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network**

2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

“The Ongoing Psychological Colonization of North American Indigenous People: Using Social Psychological Theories to Promote Social Justice” Fryberg, Covarrubias, & Burack (2013)

This article speaks to the cultural mismatch between schools (an independent system) and Aboriginal students (mainly from interdependent cultures). By promoting learning as a model of interacting with others, with appropriate social support, mentorship, maintaining strong connections to the community and building trusting relationships, student persistence and academic achievement can be improved. This interdependent model can also be used to develop and foster a strength-based approach to working with students and families. Endorsing growth mindset positively affected Aboriginal student engagement and achievement.

“Repositioning & Self-Determining” (Chapter 6 from “Pathologizing Practices: The Impact of Deficit Thinking on Education”) Shields, Bishop, & Mazuawi (2005)

Attending to positioning is critical for educators to achieve a socially just, inclusive, respectful, and academically excellent education for all children. By rejecting deficit thinking (fixed-mindset), educators can become more mindful of their perceptions and discourse (attitudes and actions, pertaining to Aboriginal students, they will address inequities in their schools.

Educators can make changes in the classroom to affect education achievement by repositioning themselves so that they feel they can bring about change for their students (growth mindset). Repositioning oneself can dramatically affect the quality of a teachers' relationship and classroom interactions with minoritized students.

Following the development of the four themes revealed in the conversations, we shared excerpts from the following articles:

CONNECTIONS / RELATIONSHIPS

Cultural models of education and academic performance for Native American and European American students



Networks of Inquiry and Innovation Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network

2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

Fryberg, Covarrubias, & Burack (2013)

Improving Student Engagement

Leah Taylor & Jim Parsons (2011)

CONFIDENCE / GROWTH MINDSET

“The Ongoing Psychological Colonization of North American Indigenous People: Using Social Psychological Theories to Promote Social Justice” Fryberg, Covarrubias, & Burack (2013)

CHOICE / FLEXIBILITY

Improving Student Engagement

Leah Taylor & Jim Parsons (2011)

What Research Says About . . . / Differentiated Learning

Tracy A. Huebner (2010)

Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning

John Hattie (2012)

Making Space for Indigeneity: Decolonizing Education

Tiffany Smith (2016)

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

Each member of the inquiry group participated in deep conversations with Aboriginal students we had previously developed trusting relationships with over the months and years. We used the case study approach to explore their feelings about SSS, experiences, and learning goals.

The inquiry group scheduled weekly meetings to discuss their learning from the student



2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

conversations, to share learning materials, and decide the next steps for action.

We shared our learning as an inquiry group from our student conversations and professional learning with the entire staff during staff meetings. In the first meeting, we encouraged other staff members to identify Aboriginal students they felt they could have deep conversations with as well. We also encouraged staff to share their understandings of the student's perspectives and experiences.

Our inquiry team continued to seek literature, resources, and research to assist in our understanding of how to increase Aboriginal student engagement and relationship building.

The inquiry team persisted to have conversations with students to further strengthen our relationships. An unexpected outcome was the emergence of a focus group that included three Aboriginal girls in grades 11 and 12, a slight move away from the 1:1 conversations. Three common themes surfaced from the conversations with the focus group and individual students that our school needed to address for our Aboriginal Learners: connections/relationships are critical; flexibility / choice are beneficial; and confidence / growth mindset are lacking. Some sample statements and ideas from the conversations that reflect these themes are demonstrated in the following:

Connections / Relationships (What it looks like...)

- "We always feel welcome."
- "You can be yourself."
- "Feel comfortable and safe in the classroom."
- "Being comfortable to talk without judgement."
- "Asking, 'Are you okay?' shows caring."
- Teachers always demonstrate confidence in the student's ability to be successful.

Flexibility / Choice (What does it look like?)

- Negotiating deadlines for assignments
- "Teaching in more than one way"
- Having opportunities to practice before showing learning (i.e., assessment)
- "More guidance in class for understanding the subject"



Networks of Inquiry and Innovation Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network

2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

- Choice in how to show learning
- "Students learn in different ways"

Confidence / Growth Mindset

- Learning is effective when teachers are "strict in a good way" (students appreciate teachers having high expectations of them)
- Students believe in themselves when teachers highlight the student's strengths to achieve certain goals.
- "I don't want to ask questions because people will think I'm stupid."
- Believing the racist and stereotype-laden dialogue directed at Indigenous people.
- Students want to have hope. Role models are an inspiration.

The inquiry group shared their learning at our second staff meeting. We presented the student perspectives of the three themes and provided an opportunity for staff feedback. We also shared a summary of the literature and research that our inquiry group explored and agreed would support our understanding of the three themes and how to address their improved implementation in SSS. We gathered feedback from the staff meeting discussion to help inform our group with the next steps.

Utilizing the information from the student conversations and the staff meeting feedback, the inquiry group decided to narrow their focus on establishing a growth mindset within the culture of SSS. To do this, we will require further learning in how to teach and model a growth mindset in the school for both the adults and students in the school, and perhaps into the community. We also need to continue our relationship building to establish trust with students, so that they are more willing to be open to the ideas of growth mindset. We will expand our 1:1 conversations to larger focus groups and provide opportunities for older students to coach younger students.

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

In our scanning, we found that students did not have a voice that directly spoke to the adults in Smithers Secondary School. As we engaged in conversations with the students, all the while maintaining transparency about our learning intentions, we were able to provide information and take direction from the Aboriginal learner voice in the school.



Networks of Inquiry and Innovation **Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network**

2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

The staff were enthusiastic about making connections with students in the first staff meeting. Positive feedback was received for the direction the inquiry group was moving.

As our conversations with students continued, we could see that our relationships were strengthening. The students were willing to share more information about their personal lives such as goals, learning successes, and challenges. Students commented on their connection between themselves and the adult they were conversing with. They were more open to feedback and direction from their connecting adult. Some students became very reflective of their actions and how it affected their academic and social-emotional situations.

As time went on, some students took the initiative to seek out and engage with the teachers on their own time, sometimes to simply make a connection to say hello and share how their day was going. Another inquiry member found that having a trusting relationship with a student contributed to the positive manner of working through a behavioural issue. Many students expressed an appreciation and enjoyment in connecting with educators on a regular basis.

In an unprecedented situation, an inquiry member found success in engaging with a three case study students and moved to having group conversations. The members of this focus group were able to build on each other's ideas, leading to some deep discussions about school experiences.

The student conversations revealed that many students could name two adults who believe they will be successful. The student comments and opinions about learning and belonging in the school were sorted into three themes: Connections/Relationship, Confidence / Growth Mindset, and Flexibility / Choice.

The feedback from the staff meeting revealed many different mindsets among the educators in the school. The varied reactions of how to address the themes from the student conversations manifested from the staff in the form of attitudes and perspectives ranging from reluctance to enthusiasm.



Networks of Inquiry and Innovation Aboriginal Enhancement Schools Network

2016 - 2017 AESN / NOII Case Study

Upon reflection, we realized that our use of certain words and phrases could direct a conversation with staff toward an undesirable position. The staff reaction is a reminder that we need to strengthen our own trusting relationships with staff.

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.

Our inquiry group learned about the importance of being disciplined in meeting to share ideas and progress. Although it is a simple idea, scheduling weekly meetings enforced an accountability factor that propelled the movement of our inquiry.

We have also developed a respect for learner voice. It has a power to guide the moral purpose of educators and encourages critical reflection to shift practices and perspectives.

The inquiry group will continue gathering feedback from focus groups and student conversations to determine if they are adopting a growth mindset and if it is helping their growth, engagement and sense of belonging.

We want to have more community involvement in the focus groups to expand the discourse of growth mindset into the student's homes and families.

We will continue gathering feedback and information from staff to determine if they are having success with growth mindset, in their professional practice and with students.