First Nations Language and Culture in Classroom Settings:
Ways to Implement Nuu-chah-nulth Language and Culture

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Introduction

First Nations education is assessed in our British Columbian school system. This assessment is focused on how well First Nations students fair in the public school system. For example, in our school, Wickaninnish Elementary located in Tofino British Columbia, Canada, and in every school in BC, we have school growth plans. These school growth plans have goals that each school is working towards. Within these goals, there is a sub-goal that expects that First Nations students’ progress will be tracked.

At Wickaninnish Elementary, I am actively involved with the writing of our school growth plan and with analyzing and sharing the data of students’ progress with our staff. Each year we have seen growth across our school of all students in their reading and writing scores. However, our First Nations students still lag behind in these scores. Even though they have growth in these areas, they are still not at the levels that we hoped.

If you were to type in “Graduation Rates of First Nation Students in British Columbia” into a Google search, you will come up with thousands of articles talking about how First Nation students are not graduating at the same rate as the rest of the students in our public schooling systems. Why is that the case? Where are we losing or failing these students in our education system?

In this paper, I will review some of the factors that contribute to First Nations students’ lack of academic progress. My goals for this paper is to develop some sensible applications for my school to assist First Nations students achieve academic success. First, I will develop a culture class for our school. This culture class would be tied to curriculum outcomes so it links to what students are already learning in class. Second, I will begin to develop a language class that the entire school would participate in from kindergarten to grade seven. Third, I would like to incorporate outdoor education into our learning where possible. We would include the local First Nations territory to explore the concepts of science and social studies that are in the British Columbia Ministry of Education mandated curriculum for Kindergarten to Grade 12. Finally, I would like to build a stronger relationship with our First Nation parents. I would like to create a First Nation parents club where we could discuss concerns for students in our school.

History

Residential schools and social divisions

First Nations peoples’ experiences in school settings, historically, have not been positive. Residential schools tried to assimilate First Nations students into the dominant culture by trying to make them forget their culture, beliefs and language at any cost. Children were taken from their homes to attend schools where they were treated as second-class citizens or worse. They received beatings for trying to speak their language, sing their songs or run away back home. They were taught a new religion and told that their way of living was barbaric. (personal communication with B. Hansen and K. Frank, December 2009)

In our local area, the residential school closed in 1983. I remember the students were bused in from the Christie Residential School to our public school. I was friends with many of these students and often paired with them in class. I could easily float between the First Nations and non-First Nations groups, as my mother is First Nations, and my father belongs to one of the families that settled Tofino when it was first established. I remember there being a social divide
between the two groups, but I did not know why. I played with friends on “both sides” but not too often as they did not intermix. I remember being paired with First Nation boys to dance with because the other girls made a fuss having to dance with them. It was not that bad for me, but some of my “other” friends would giggle because of whom I had to dance with.

My grandmother and mother, who both attended residential schools, shared their stories with me. They would not speak of their experiences as being terrible as other have. They feel that they learned something from their experience even though I am appalled at their treatment as I am sure others would be. They were beaten for speaking their language; my grandmother more so than my mother. This also led to my mother only being spoken to in English when she turned five years of age to make it easier when she went to school. For both my grandmother and mother, there was limited contact with their parents. They were allowed to go home for Christmas, Easter and summer holidays. They had to work for things that their parents bought and sent them. My mother recalls this happened quite often at the school she had to attend. She worked to pay for the clothes that her parents had already paid for. My mother would also tell stories of her and her friends stealing food from the teachers’ lounge which had fresh fruit. She often did not like the meals that were served. She would talk about shoving their dinner of tough liver in their milk so it looked like they ate it.

It is fair to say that in our town with the local residential school closing within the last 25 years that the treatment experienced by the First Nations students and their parents has not been positive. The relationship between First Nations people and non-First Nations groups has not been one of trust or equality. There have been many years of being told that First Nations peoples “don’t belong,” or “you don’t fit because you are different” or “the language you speak is different.” Also, unfortunately, First Nations people are often told that “what you believe and the culture you follow is primitive.” All of these factors create feelings of distrust and demoralization. Many of the above examples describe the experiences of the students’ parents who I am teaching.

Parental doubt, school goals, and cultural conflicts

How are parents made to feel comfortable in a place where many experienced very little success? Many would dare not speak against teachers or principals because of a fear based on negative past experiences. Educators are also made to be the “bad person”, and that “they are racist.” Many educators simply do not understand what First Nations have been through.

If you look at the report created by the BC Ministry of Education called “Aboriginal Report 2003/04-2007/08 How Are We Doing?” (2009) there is some interesting information presented. For instance, First Nations students and non-First Nations students are asked the question “do you like school?” In grade four, the response between groups is fairly close, a five percent difference with 61-66% of students liking school. However, when students are asked this question in grade seven the difference drops drastically from 61% down to 43%, and then again, a further decrease from grade seven to grade 10 again from 43% to 37%. Both First Nations and non-First Nations students experienced decreased enjoyment with school over the years. There is a difference of about 10% difference between the two groups. What is it that First Nation students dislike about school the further they go on?

In the next section of the paper, I review 10 articles. My goal in reviewing past literature was to develop some answers about why First Nations students dislike school and to develop
some new practices at Wickaninnish Elementary to establish trusting relationships among the teachers and First Nations parents and students.

Hope from other successes

Although there is much doubt from our parents of First Nations students there are success that need to be reported. In Manitoba there are several examples of Aboriginal language and culture being supported in schools that have improved First Nations students’ scores and confidence in school.

The Globe and Mail on March 8, 2008 had an article about First Nations Education in Winnipeg. The school is a First Nations culturally focused school called Children of Earth High School. This school is so popular for First Nation students that they line up to register and some are turned away because they have reached capacity. The school has incorporated First Nation culture and practices into daily routine. First Nation language must be learned by all students in this school including the non-First Nations students. The graduation rate for First Nation students at this school is 70% compared to 50% for the rest of the province.

The students of this school like the school’s atmosphere. There is a larger understanding of First Nations way of life. First Nation students that have come to this school have tried to convince other First Nation students to join. Other students who had behavioral issues at other schools have now made it on the honour roll and are successful.

The Canadian Council on Learning has many reports about First Nations Education. A case study of schools in Saskatchewan that implemented language and culture into their schools in various ways is of particular interest. Schools that have focused on language and culture have shown direct correlation to higher academic achievement. Terry Clarke, Onion Lake’s Director of Education states “We are giving back a sense of identity to our young people through language and culture, and identity is the key to success”. (Canadian Council of Learning, 2009)

It is through these success stories that we should begin to see that a difference can be made for First Nations students. We need to give back to First Nations students a sense of pride about whom they are and where they come from. It is important for their overall success culturally and academically.

Literature Review

Shahjahan (2005) makes it clear how Indigenous people can feel inferior in their academic surroundings. He was a minority student in a doctoral program in the western education system. He was taking a social theory course and felt suppressed because the viewpoints of the course were from Europe and North America. This was quite shocking when the course is about human interactions and it is a large world out there. His search then started with looking for non-Western theorists where he ended up in the anti-colonial thought and Indigenous knowledges field. Here he felt like his entire sense of who he was finally was recognized. The importance of his article is in the very beginning. As a student in the greater society, he did not feel welcome or feel all of his needs were being met. If this is what an adult feels like in an educational setting that they choose to put themselves into, what are we doing to First Nations students who must attend public schools? How are teachers meeting their feelings of belonging and feelings of being a whole person who belongs in this system? As a system that
purports to value the greater society’s beliefs and teachings, why would First Nation students not feel like they would belong?

On the British Columbia Ministry of Education website (2009) and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) website (2005) both talk about the importance of education. There is the realization that First Nations students lag behind the other students in the province and the trend is across Canada. There is a recognition that something needs to be done to help First Nations students become more successful in the education system.

In a report in response to the Auditor General’s observations and recommendations, INAC came up with the Education Action Plan (April 2005). This report stated how INAC could work together with First Nations’ to be part of and take control of First Nations education in their communities. There is very little said of how to make First Nations’ students become successful in the actual education system. The report is very focused on how they will put together an action plan, support First Nations communities through funding and finally how they will be accountable and measure outcomes. The one good thing that this report does offer is the recognition that with a large population of First Nation students coming up into our school systems; if we do not start meeting their needs, we will lose a great human resource. This loss will perpetuate the low socio-economic standing of First Nations people. It also recognizes the importance of having education that focuses on First Nations culture, language and values, safe learning environments, and relevant curricula. Once again what lacks in this report is what this looks like in a classroom setting.

Upon looking at the British Columbia Ministry of Education Website (2009), there is a page dedicated to Aboriginal Education. It shows the many school districts that have Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements between local First Nations bands and local school districts. Many focus on having an increase of First Nations students graduate and trying to incorporate First Nations culture and language into their schools as well as increase the reading, writing and math scores of these students in their districts. Once again there is the lack of resources or how to make this happen in the school setting.

On the British Columbia Ministry of Education website there is one entire lesson for First Nations integration through storytelling and legends. There are other links for the grade 12 BC First Nations course and English 12 BC First Peoples and approved First Nation Language Individual Resource Packages (IRP). Again the lack of resources makes it difficult to know how teachers are to help First Nations students be successful. There is little access for resources but if teachers feel like creating some resources there is a template to help them through the process. Perhaps there are many resources out there that have been created and are very successful, but when many beginning teachers rely on the IRP’s to make this happen or go to the ministry website, they have very little to use and really no sense of where teachers could begin to access this information. In addition, this website provides a direct link to the success of First Nations students’ progress compared to other students in the province. It is good to see that the First Nations students are starting to increase (in the measurement of success as deemed worthy by the Ministry of Education); however they still are behind other students by 10% or more. Little is said by the BC government about of how to increase these numbers more dramatically. They still collect the data on reading, writing and math to measure the success of these students. There seems to be no mention of any other kinds of success or other ways to measure those successes.

Lambe (2003) offers another perspective of Indigenous ways of knowing and the education system. He describes how in educational learning that there is no competitiveness. There is a relationship built between the learner and the teacher, which in traditional ways would
have been between a younger person and an Elder. This was a relationship that was built on the willingness to learn and not being forced to learn something that they might have no desire to learn. People gravitated toward what they wanted to learn. There was no competitive nature in the learning and general acceptance that everyone was different and this was all right. Trying to dovetail the two different cultures in a school setting can have its challenges but there must be a reflection of assumptions and expectations by learner and teacher, Indigenous peoples, and the greater society. This creates an equal balance of both sides and leaves room for improvement.

Even though First Nations have been seen as being a part of greater society, these two groups still do not quite meet eye to eye. First Nations children are coming into our school systems with a different set of beliefs about education. It is not that they do not want to do well, but the ways they learn may be different, which is true for all children. The importance of making a connection to these students is not only important for them (as I have learned through my own experiences and teaching career), it is also important for parents. When I have had parent-teacher interviews, the parents want to know how their child is doing, but this is more on an emotional level, and that they are fitting in the class and not causing any problems or being bothered by others. Compared to non First Nation parents who want to know how well their child is doing academically. With creating a culture and language program, what better way to say that we care about who you are, culturally, socially and emotionally! It is important to learn about the child, who they are and where they come from and acknowledge what they have to offer to our educational setting.

Ray Barnhardt and Angayuqqa Oscar Kawagly (2000) have written several articles on the subject of Indigenous Ways of Knowing. In one article, “Cultural Standards and Test Scores” (2000) they talk about the harm of only looking at the test scores and the detrimental effect that this narrow view can have: not only on First Nation students but on teachers and schools. They talk about the testing and how it is done in the most cost effective way, which are often multiple choice and short answer questions. This testing style leaves out any room for culturally adapted testing which would cost more money. These tests also cause problems for teachers in what they should teach because they get caught between the many outcomes they have to teach and the few that that the test focuses.

They also talk about how in Alaska they have formed the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative (ARKI) to include Indigenous knowledge systems in their school systems. They integrate Western and Indigenous knowledge together. In this program the First Nations students are given a strong foundation in their culture. Through this initiative the schools involved with ARKI have seen positive outcomes including closing the gap between those schools who do well from the measured standardized government tests, lower drop out rates, and parent involvement, to name a few. The authors state that “when we make a diligent and persistent effort to forge a strong cultural fit between what we teach, how we teach, and the context in which we teach, we can produce successful, well-rounded graduates who are also capable of producing satisfactory test scores.” (Barnhardt & Kwagaley, 2000, p.6)

In their second paper, “Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Alaska Native Ways of Knowing”, Barnhardt and Kwagaley (2005) speak about the importance of using Indigenous knowledge within the education system. Indigenous knowledges around the world have existed for thousands of years and have ensured the survival of the people who employed them. These knowledges are now being pushed aside as they do not fit in the dominant societies’ way of thinking, where everything is compartmentalized and broken apart. The authors create a Venn diagram to demonstrate how Traditional Native Knowledge Systems and Western Sciences have
common ground and how this ground can meld the two systems together. They list emerging research that is associated with Indigenous Knowledge systems, such as language and ethnomathematics, cross-generational learning, the ARKI program and roles of the Elders. The potential of these studies can have huge implications on melding the two ways of thinking, learning and teaching together and having First Nation people achieving success and being successful.

Barnhardt and Kawagly (2005) talk about the importance of having a mix of both Western and Indigenous knowledges in school settings. Not only do the First Nations students feel proud of whom they are, they feel recognized; they belong in the school setting and are on equal ground with everyone. It also ties back to the previous article by Barnhardt & Kwagaley (2000) by empowering First Nations in their culture and language. It helps to make them more successful, not only in school but in society as well. So in implementing a program that teaches culture and language we have nothing to lose! Again, what is missing in the article is how to get this done.

Ball and Simpkins (2004) discuss the success of learning culture and language in the First Nations' community preschools. The authors again stress that learning about oneself and where one comes from has a major impact, not only on children but on the community as well. It is a cyclical process that keeps improving. With young children learning from everyone in the community is important, because everyone has something to share. They in turn take this knowledge home and tell their parents, who then come to learn something or become interested in learning themselves, and they seek out the other educators to learn more. Again Ball and Simpkins stress that knowing your culture and language gives one strength, and this continues into the community to enable members feel good about their heritage.

The sense of being proud about oneself and a sense of belonging somewhere is very important for First Nations school children. I remember, in my own experience as a First Nations person in the education system, other students making such derogatory comments about First Nations people; how dirty they were, they were drunks, and who would want to admit that they were First Nations? The more I learn about my culture and ways of knowing, the more proud I am about who I am and where I come from. I still hear some of these comments or get pigeon-holed myself because someone has run into a drunken person on the street who happens to be First Nations; but because I know the truth, it does not make me embarrassed.

Summary and Implications

What this does say though is what are the implications of these kind of derogatory remarks for those students who are not in tune with their culture? When they hear these comments their self worth goes down. And why would anyone want to place themselves in a setting with those who do not really value the perspective from where they come? Especially when you look at the text books and books that we use in classrooms; who is represented in these books? Very minimally are First Nations students represented in these books, nor are any other minorities for that fact. Why would you want to strive to do well in school when you do not feel that you belong?

For teachers in our schools, even though there are few resources to tell us how to implement a culture and language program, the literature states that it is such a huge benefit that it seems ridiculous not to do it. It may take a few years to see the benefits, but we have to start somewhere. Also incorporating Western and Indigenous ways of knowing into a curriculum is
easier than not doing it. By doing this we are creating opportunities for other students to show success. Feeling valued through this other way of knowing will hopefully increase all students’ desire to do well in all aspects of their education. Valuing culture and language in our school will also give students a sense of belonging, and we create another way for them to be successful that cannot really be measured by numbers. In turn this creates success in what the government values as success, learning to read, write, and do math.

**Program Development: New Possibilities**

Needless to say our school and education system need to repair the broken relationships with our First Nation communities. We need to build relationships of trust and respect with our First Nation families and show them that we care about who they are, where they come from, and that we can exist in a relationship that is equal. One way to do this is to work with the local First Nation, Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation, and create a program for language and culture that celebrates who they are. Also, we need to look at different programs that we could create to have our First Nation students experience success in different ways.

I would like to take a closer look at the success of First Nations students and see if implementing a few different factors would have some impact on their reading and writing scores. I would also like to take a look at how the parents of these students measure success and how parents impact their child’s successes at school.

The first thing that I would like to do in our school is have a culture class that deals with the culture of the local First Nations students and have it in every class twice a week for 40 minutes. The focus will be on who the students are, where they come from, and trying to build a sense of pride. I would also like to try and encourage more family members and community members to come in and share their cultural expertise with the students. I would like to create a list of “experts” that could come in and speak or demonstrate what is being learned about. Having an Elder come and be in the school would also be another aspect of the culture that I would like to see happen. Having an Elder would create a safe and familiar face that could help deal with issues in a more cultural manner would be helpful and hopefully less threatening for some parents and students.

I would also like to include a component of the local language in these classes as only 3% of the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nations group speaks their language. This language is still used in ceremonies and public events which many of our students attend, but most probably do not fully understand what is being said. Our school district is currently working with the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council to finalize a language integrated resource package for our local area. I would like our First Nation students to have the option of taking French or Nuu-chah-nulth when they reach grade 5. I feel that when parents have a choice of which language they would like to have their child learn, they will feel like they have some power over their child’s education, and that they can be involved in the decision making. Also students will have the opportunity to choose to be successful at something that they would be proud to learn instead of being forced to learn.

The second component is implementing a leadership program through an outdoor education program. Will this help our students build confidence in themselves by being able to demonstrate a different kind of learning that they can be successful in, transfer into increased reading and writing scores? First Nations students also have different life experiences that they are not always given the opportunity to share. If they could feel comfortable demonstrating or
sharing these in another setting would this help them be more successful in the education system?

Thirdly, I would like to involve First Nations parents and get their point of view of how they measure success and compare it to the goals that are tracked in the school. I would like to try and start a First Nation Parents Club on the reserves that allows parents to raise concerns about the school and share thoughts and ideas. It would have to be started on the reserves because this is their homes and space. Coming into a school where parents have never felt comfortable would not create a feeling of being equal. Also, I would take a look at how much these parents play a role in their child’s education and whether their involvement makes an impact on the final results of the First Nations students.

The impact of this would hopefully help our First Nations students have more success in their classes. Hopefully something as simple as recognizing the culture and celebrating it with the students on a daily or weekly basis will help them feel like they belong in our system and that we want them to do well. Also the opportunity to allow and encourage our First Nations students demonstrate their different ways of knowing through an outdoor education program will let them demonstrate their strengths, which may transfer over to their other areas of studies. Finally, we could see if the role of the parents and their ideas of success and their interaction with their child’s learning have an impact on students’ overall learning.

Detailed Action Plan

At my school I am very fortunate to have the support of teachers and support staff who strongly endorse the movement to incorporate more First Nation culture and language into the school. Our school is very fortunate as we are the only school in our district that has a First Nation Educational Assistant, and we also have a Nuu-chah-nulth Education Worker who helps facilitate implementing language and culture. I am the only First Nation person who is a teacher in our school. The three of us meet as a team to try and bring language and culture into our school.

This year is the first year that we have tried to set up a regular culture program in our school. Unfortunately many conflicts have come up which have not led to success. It is with great fortune that I can use my final paper for my Master of Education degree to help guide us and create an outline which will help us establish a successful language and culture program in our school. We will aim for two 20-30 minute sessions for Kindergarten to grade 3 and two 30-40 minute sessions for grades 4-7. This section describes the overall curricular themes of Language, Culture, and Outdoor Education for grades K-7. Several sections describe how we will implement these curricular themes. Please note that any references made to science and social studies curriculum are from British Columbia Ministry Science and Social Studies Integrated Resource Packages (IRP) for Kindergarten to Grade 7.

Step 1: Building a Tla-o-qui-aht/Nuu-chah-nulth Literacy Curriculum

Our First Nation team will need to meet on a more regular basis especially in the first year. We will need to establish our goals for our language and culture this year and begin setting curriculum for next year. Next year we will have to meet regularly to reflect upon our experiences and refine our curriculum. As we set up our culture program we need to be very sensitive to the fact that we live in Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation territory. We have many students from Tla-o-qui-aht in our school. We need to incorporate as much of their culture as we can into
the curriculum out of respect for their people and to show that we care and are interested in learning about the people of our local area. This would be the main culture that we would study; however, it would not be exclusive to only their culture. We would include other Nuu-chah-nulth groups as well.

We have decided already this year that we need to become the language experts at our school. The school has had many unsuccessful attempts at having Nuu-chah-nulth language spoken and studied in the curriculum over many years, even before I came back to work in the school. We have been very grateful for the opportunity of having local Tla-o-qui-aht speakers come into the school. However, not being educators in the sense of a European traditional setting they did not understand the importance of showing up when they said they would. The importance of consistency and repetition helps the children keep interest and retain what they have learned.

In order to avoid this we have decided that we will become the learners in the community and then bring what we have learned into the classes. Upon speaking to a language and culture teacher from an independent First Nation school, she said that there are language classes that are held at the community college in Port Alberni two nights a week. Even though the dialect of the language is not exact it is very similar to the language spoken in our community. We will look at this as an opportunity to add to our resources.

Our educational assistant has already begun to speak to Elders in the community. She is having these people using a language master program and recording words onto magnetic strip cards. At present, the words on these cards are of everyday vocabulary. We hope to build upon these cards to include everyday phrases. We hope to bring this language master into the primary classes. Students will be able to use this as a centre at first and then for practice as we begin to acquire the language more regularly.

We need to begin speaking consistently with Elders and the Hereditary Chiefs of the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation. We need to ask for permission to use some of the fun dances as part of our culture learning. This is a sensitive issue as songs belong to individual people and often chiefs. Just singing those songs and dances without permission would be the equivalent of stealing someone's personal belongings, like a car or very personal property, in today's world. That is why we ask for permission to use them. We would also need to build a list of resource people that we could access to come into the school until we have a consistent group of us who are capable of teaching these songs to the students.

We also need to start building our resource library. This is something that you can spend an entire year on. In the new Nuu-chah-nulth language Integrated Resource Package there are several resources that have already been put together for language and culture. Some of the books that are suggested are recently out of print, but we have had the great fortune of finding these books and adding them to our collection. Having many different resources both local and historical, will be an asset to our school.

We also need to build a library of First Nation books and novels in classes. We tend to have many books about all other subjects that may interest students. We seem to miss the student population; therefore it is important to ensure that the students are represented fairly in the books they themselves read, and these books are ultimately placed into classroom libraries. This is also a school goal; to increase literacy of all students across the grades. Many teachers have invested greatly in building their classroom libraries to encourage reading.

Our goal would be to build a positive self-esteem for First Nation students. We also want to instill within our students a sense of belonging and value. By studying First Nation language
and culture we are saying: We are proud of whom we are, and they are by taking the time to recognize this in our school setting.

**Step 2: Implementing a Literacy Curriculum**

Our next step is looking at implementing the language and program. Within the last two years there has been a Nuu-chah-nulth language Integrated Resource Package developed. It has recently been posted on our school district website. We have decided that even though this language program does not begin until grade five (according to the IRP) we are going to begin language instruction in kindergarten. The instruction will focus on geography and family lineage. Below is an example:

*In "Tsawalk, A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview", Umeek, E. Richard Atleo (2204) touches upon how First Nations people identify themselves and each other. When I became a you man and was able to go off by myself in the great world, my grandmother Margaret would always say to me as I left: “Tloo-utl-ee-sum.” ... remember me; don’t forget where you came from; remember your roots; your rich heritage. p. 95

“Uh-chuck [who are you]? “ an elder asked me on the Tofino wharf one day during the mid 1950’s. “Richard Atleo,” I responded. “No, no” he replied in English, “Who do you belong to, who is [sic] you father and mother? p. 95

Had I told the elder that I was the great-grandson of Keesta or the grandson of Ahinchat, he would have instantly been able to place me within my own community and its history and would have recognized my relationship to himself and his community. p. 95

As you can see from the quote, much is explained about who you are and where you come from. You are associated with where you come from geographically but also with your family lineage. This is where we will begin with our language and culture program.

Around the school we will have a bulletin board for First Nation language. On this board we will have a theme each month. We would have the actual spelling of the words, phonetic sounds of the words, and then the English of the words. We will also start incorporating First Nation language into our morning messages, for example talking about the weather and everyday phrases.

It would be understood that the language learned the year before would be reviewed for the beginning of the school year for the first couple of weeks in the class before introducing anything new. Where possible, we would create songs and games to help make learning words fun and interesting. It has been suggested to me that working with the music teacher would be the best help in this department.

**Kindergarten**

Next September our school will have an all day kindergarten class. We have an opportunity to include our kindergarten class on a more regular basis that has not been there before because of time constraints. In this class we would begin with basic vocabulary. We will introduce vocabulary by teaching students to say who they are and where they are from geographically. We would also introduce them to the 14 tribes that make up the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council. Nuu-chah-nulth stands for “all along the mountains and sea”.

We would also include other vocabulary like basic greeting, colours, numbers 1-20, body parts and animals. We would introduce immediate family members, like mother, father, brother
and sister. We would also include the listening of the Nuu-chah-nulth alphabet song. This would help students to start learning the sounds for the vocabulary that they would be using.

**Grade 1**

In grade one; we would begin the year as a review of kindergarten basics but begin to expand on what has already been learned. We would extend the number vocabulary; begin to extend the students' vocabulary on who they are to include their family lineage, like grandparents and aunts and uncles. We would combine vocabulary, using colours with animals and start incorporating objects from our surroundings in the classroom. We would start incorporating words into the science program that have to do with the seasons and different activities that are done around the seasons (grade 1 BC Science IRP).

**Grade 2**

The grade two curriculum for language would include words representing animals of our surrounding area and how they are/were used in the culture. This would tie with the curricular outcomes for the grade two science IRP. We would also have to look at tools that the First Nations used in their everyday lives historically to help make their lives easy.

We would also begin to use language more fluently. We would converse in Nuu-chah-nulth specifically during the language portion of the class. The introduction of books that have both Nuu-chah-nulth and English in them would be read to the students. Books could be read in both of languages. This would be the introduction of the Nuu-chah-nulth alphabet in written form. Students could start looking at what the sounds represent.

**Grade 3**

The grade three curriculum would continue with the language alphabet. The students should begin to recognize words written in Nuu-chah-nulth font. They should to be able to sing the alphabet fluently and recognize what each letter or symbol sounds like. The students should be able to read some of the books with both languages and recognize some of the words in written form and pronounce them. The students could also attempt writing words as they are being spoken to them.

The students should be able to confidently say who they are and where they come from. They should be able to confidently speak of their family lineage going back to their grandparents. Vocabulary would include numbers 0 to 100, expressions of feeling, action words and traditional plants used by First Nation people of the area. They would also learn vocabulary about the moon, stars and planets. This would relate to the months of the calendar as well. (These are directly linked to the grade three science units on space and life science and identity, society and culture in British Columbia Science and Social Studies IRPs.)

**Grade 4**

We would continue to use the books that have the dual language in them, expecting the students to understand most of the story even when it is only read in Nuu-chah-nulth. We would encourage students to be the ones reading the stories to the class in both languages using the Nuu-chah-nulth words where appropriate.

The students would learn words that deal with the environment in which they live. They would begin to understand the deeper meanings associated with animals. They would be able to
learn different traditional names for the different areas that surround the area that Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation live in. These names are tied to the area for a specific reason or use of the area.

**Grade 5**

Grade five students should be able to recognize and pronounce each letter of the Nuu-chah-nulth alphabet. They should be able to start formulating simple sentences, such as things that they like or dislike. They should be able to respond to simple requests and questions. They should be able to exchange simple greetings. They should also be comfortable reading an entire children’s story in Nuu-chah-nulth language. The grade five students should be able to begin writing simple sentences.

The vocabulary building would include revisiting the simple machines used by First Nation people. There would be more words introduced for the actions around the uses of these tools. There would also be a review of the calendar year and more language around what would happen during these months of the year. There could be an introduction of the Chinook language that was created from the trading with European traders and First Nations people. There are still words that are used today from this language.

**Grade 6**

The grade 6 students would be able to ask and respond to questions. They would also be able to talk about their day to day activities. They would be able to read simple sentences competently. They would also use the vocabulary that they learned in everyday speaking not just during language class. They should also be able to understand basic classroom instructions. The entire class should be taught strictly in Nuu-chah-nulth language with very little English being used unless it is needed for clarification of new ideas. Students could start to translate simple English books into Nuu-chah-nulth language and then read them to the younger students.

**Grade 7**

Students should be able to fluently engage in a conversation about day to day things, and they should be able to ask about family. For example students should be able to ask about other families, where they come from and tell who they are related to, both their immediate and extended families. They should also be able to write full sentences in Nuu-chah-nulth using the font appropriately and correctly. The sentences should also be complete thoughts and ideas as they would in Language Arts class. They should be able to give instructions and respond to questions appropriately. The students should be able to write and read shorter pieces of writing that tell about various subjects. Students should be able to create their own stories using the words that they have learned and then share them with younger classes.

**Culture**

One of the major goals that I would like to accomplish in setting up a culture program is setting up our own special classroom to establish a sense of pride in our culture. This would be a room that will not be part of the regular classroom. It will not be part of the regular classroom because there are many activities that take place in a classroom where there can be a lot of energy that may not be conducive to learning the culture of First Nation people. In this classroom we will establish how children will behave in this classroom, it is a place for learning what we are fighting to keep alive and with that brings some seriousness when learning about culture.
I take this advice from my friend who I mentioned earlier when I spoke of teaching language and culture. She says that learning can be fun but to understand why we are doing this is twofold. We do this because we are keeping our culture alive so we do not lose it. Also, we are doing this so we can show children that our culture is something to be valued and respected. It is not something we should shy away from.

Our culture program will attempt and complement the learning outcomes based on all Aboriginal Learning Outcomes from all Integrated Resource Packages from the British Columbia Ministry of Education. This will help teachers because instead of being another add on to fit into the day it will be an addition to what the students are learning already. There are always time constraints to try and fit one more thing into a day. As a group we will work closely with a teacher to help and come up with relevant curriculum that also helps reach goals; whether it be in science, social studies or language arts.

There is another aspect of culture that will take time to build and that is singing and dance. We hope to get the permission to use fun dances in our school. We would like to teach the students the importance of the songs and dances, teach them who owns these songs and dances and what they are used for. This is a part of culture that is taught for all traditional songs and dances. There is a seriousness that comes with performing and that is something we will have to speak to Elders and Hereditary Chiefs about. We will have to set up a trust with the people who lend us these songs and demonstrate how we appreciate them letting us use their songs.

**Kindergarten**

In the social studies curriculum for kindergarten students are to identify groups and places that are part of their lives. We could create picture books that have simple sentences with pictures of the two Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation reserves. We could also begin creating simple books with Nuu-chah-nulth language and English language of their immediate family. We could ask families to send in photographs of people who the children live with and create simple one word books that the students could keep and take home with them.

**Grade 1**

In grade one, we could have many outdoor hands on activities that ties in with the science curriculum. It is looking at First Nation people in seasonal activities. We could explore different activities throughout the seasons, like collecting different species of berries that are available at different times, playing games and potlatches in the winter, and getting ready for hunting in fall. Learning about these things could be the beginning of respecting our surroundings and how we are a part of everything. Teaching students that when we harvest foods, it is important to take only what we need and use everything that we take.

**Grade 2**

In grade two science, we could develop activities around life cycles of animals that we use traditionally. How these animals were used in everyday life from food to other basic necessities like clothing. We would teach students about the salmon life cycles for the different types of salmon that are in our area. Tla-o-qui-aht First Nations have their own fish hatchery. They are willing to bring salmon in that they have harvested the eggs from and fertilized. In the classroom we could watch how the salmon grow. We could discuss this by incorporating how
many things in our world work in cycle. We could then link this to what they learned about the seasons in grade one.

Our school is currently involved in restoring a local stream. Being involved in projects like this also helps students see how the impact of our actions as human beings can destroy habitats. But if we work together, we can rebuild these habitats and feel very good about being part of this process. This stream was once a salmon habitat so it would be exciting to see if the fish would come back. As this stream is very close to our school it would provide a perfect place to see salmon in their natural habitat.

We would also bring in some simple and compound machines that First Nations use and used in daily living. We could bring in examples of these tools and perhaps try to make some of our own. This would give students the opportunity to get hands on experience using the tools. Looking at cedar would be a perfect opportunity. Local First Nations built some of their tools from cedar. Cedar is all around the students which makes it more accessible and meaningful to them.

Grade 3

In grade three we can start teaching students about the lunar calendar that First Nations people once used. The months were named for things that happened during that month. This would tie into the earth and space science. We could gather stories that talk about the moon, stars and celestial events, and students would learn how these stories explain how things came to be or happened.

We could again harvest traditional plants throughout the year. We would show the uses of different plants; not only those plants used for food but also plants used as medicines and other things for daily living. Perhaps giving students the opportunity to harvest and share at a gathering would be a good tie into the importance of feeding others and sharing which is very strong in the culture. We could also teach the students again about not taking more than we need. What we need to ensure is that we always have the plants grow back for years to come. Also, we would look at other animals that may share this food source with us and the impact that it would have on them if we took it all.

For social studies we would look at how long First Nation people have lived in Canada. We could use traditional stories to explain how long we have been here and compare that with other stories with similar themes around the world. The students could also do a project about what it means to be who they are. This would be a great multicultural piece that would make everyone feel included and that their own cultures are important. Knowing who you are and where you come from is very grounding.

Grade 4

Grade four is a very focused year for First Nation studies. In social studies almost the entire social studies curriculum is based on looking at and comparing First Nation people in many different ways. In science the focus is on how First Nation people were/are stewards of the land in which they live/d.

There are many projects that can be done for this class. There should be a good review of what has been learned the previous year. To begin with we would have to establish what does it mean to be a Tla-o-qui-aht person. From a historical perspective, we would look at daily living, education, food, religion, art and government. This would be a prime opportunity to have members from the community come in and share their knowledge with the students. When
students complete their learning about this, they could then choose another group of First Nations from British Columbia or Canada and compare that with Tla-o-qui-aht. The students could then move onto the impact of trading with Europeans and how it changed First Nations life. Students could look at what the two groups traded for. They could also look at the technology that First Nation people had and how it helped the traders or settlers. The students could also look at the impact that settlers had on the First Nation communities specifically moving First Nations to reserves, and the impact of residential schools on families and communities. The novels "My Name is Seepetza" by Shirley Sterling (1999) or "No Time Say Goodbye" by Sylvia Olsen (2001) would be appropriate novels for this grade level. These novels have aspects of all residential school and life after contact but is told from children’s’ perspectives so it is less horrific.

These teachings would be related to how the First Nations people took care of the world around them. This is a tough idea to teach as it is a part of everyday life; a concept that is within all that is learned. It is like trying to separate the heart from a person and still expect them to live.

Grade 5

In grade five we would begin to look at machines that First Nation people used to help with everyday living. It would again be a great opportunity for students to have hands on experience with these tools and possibly use them to create a project, depending on the types of tools that were used. This would be a good grade to start looking at Hilary Stewart’s books, “Cedar” (1984) and “Indian Fishing” (1977). These two books have many examples of tools that First Nations of our local area used. It also gives a step by step process for making some of these tools and the process for gathering material from praying to the cedar tree to final product, whether it is a cedar basket, cedar bowl or canoe.

This ties in nicely with the science perspective again of First Nation people being stewards of the land. We have several people in our community that gather cedar. It would be great to set up project from gathering cedar to making a finished product. In social studies we can look at First Nation people who have had made contributions to Canada. This is really appropriate right now as Shawn Atleo is the First Nation Assembly Chief. Shawn Atleo is from Ahousaht which many of our students have ties to. We also have other people within the Nuu-chah-nulth area that have contributed in many ways to our communities which have made an impact at a provincial level. For example, the local people who were involved with saving Meares Island from being logged (the island where Opitsaht a Tla-o-qui-aht reserve is located) and those currently involved with treaty negotiations. We could create posters about these people in our communities.

Grade 6

In social studies we would explore the many different cultures that make up Canada. Students could research their family origins and what life is like in that country. Our First Nation students could research their own lives and communities. They could share with the group what makes them unique such as things like living on a reserve or taking a boat everyday to get to school. They could also demystify those stereotypes that others have of First Nation people. For the science unit of earth and space, we would look at the current issues of drilling for oil on the Queen Charlotte Islands and the stance of First Nation people in that community. We
could also look at the positive initiatives of the Nuu-chah-nulth area, like electricity generating
dams that have very little environmental impact especially on fish.

Grade 7

Our grade seven students would learn about ancient civilizations. Students would begin
by looking at the definition of “ancient civilization”. What is it and how is it defined? Would
our local First Nation group fit or not fit into this category. It would be a critical thinking project
where the students would look at other ancient civilizations and then make comparisons with the
local culture to see if it could be classified as an ancient civilization.

As the grade seven teacher, I try to include novels in our shared readings that have First
Nations themes. There are several that I have come across that many of my students enjoy.
“Walk Two Moons” by Sharon Creech (2003) is one of my favourites as it reminded me of my
own grandparents as I grew up. “Touching Spirit Bear” (Mikaelsen, 2001) is a story about a
young man who is a bully and does tribal justice as an “easy” way out of the justice system.
There are several other novels that have come to my attention which we have just purchased
through our school. I will read these and begin to add them to my collection or pass them on to
grade appropriate levels.

I have also worked with the grade one teacher with a Big Buddy system with our two
classes. Together we try and plan projects that teach about our local areas. Last year we did a
mudflats project where we also looked at how First Nation people used the mudflats. This year
we are hoping to do salmon unit and explore the ways they were used by First Nation people.
This fits in with grade seven science which looks at the sustaining of ecosystems.

Step 3

Interacting with parents is important in helping children achieve success. Many First
Nation parents who I have interviewed want to know about how I (the teacher) care about their
child. They want to know how their child is behaving. When it comes to the academic portion
of the interview, parents tend to shy away. They say that they have difficulty with the school
work that their children bring home. They do the best that they can but often tell the children to
ask for help when they return to school.

We need to make parents feel more comfortable in the school setting. I would like
address this by having a First Nation Parents group. I would like to establish these in the two
First Nation communities, Esowista and Opitsaht. I have already signed up our school as part of
the First Nation Education Steering Committee’s Parents Clubs (FNESC).

Through this we can access many resources for First Nation parents. These resources are
for the schools that are run by First Nation bands, but many can be used in the public school
settings. For example they have created a booklet for parents whose child is on an Individual
Education Plan or IEP. This booklet will provide guidance to parents about why it is important
to attend meetings regarding their child and will also include important questions they should ask
about IEP’s. FNESC also create a calendar. In this calendar there are alternate days with
suggestions on how to incorporate culture and language into daily life at home. It also offers
ideas for activities, games and recipes that the family can experience together.

FNESC also has quarterly newsletters that they send out. These newsletters offer advice
on eating healthy and staying active. They also offer advice on literacy and numeracy and things
that you can do at home with your child to help them be successful in these areas. These
newsletters will also include questions to ask teachers during parent/teacher interviews. They
also include what other First Nation Parent Groups are doing. We have tried to include some of these ideas in our current school newsletters.

There are also grants available to hire speakers or create sessions on topics that the parents are interested in. FNESC also supplies games and books to lend from the parents group. There are also gifts that can be used as prizes to get members involved in the parents club. We are basically set up to go; it is just setting up dates and creating interest.

I have already spoken to Tla-o-qui-aht’s Family Care worker. We have had a great history of working together in the past. She is interested in working together to get this parent group rolling. She has ideas regarding setting up groups around culture. She will have set themes where parents can learn about traditional foods, for example, where they will learn about it then get time to learn how to collect ingredients and prepare them. These ideas would tie directly with what we are trying to teach the students in school.

After building a rapport with these parents we could then start talking about school. We could have teachers come out and be part of these groups as learners themselves or to offer help where parents may have concerns. It could also be an opportunity to recruit parents to come in and share their expertise in our classrooms and schools.

Here we could discuss what it is parents think success is for their children. Is it to be able to read and write? Graduate? Or be successful all around? This would be important as we could begin to respond better to what it is exactly the parents want for their children in our school. Also by building these relationships, we would hope to see parents coming into our school more often either to help or see what is happening.

Outdoor Education

At every opportunity, we will try and provide the students with the experience of being in traditional areas. Field trips such as these that are easy and not costly; they are a huge benefit to the students. It can also put into perspective the names of places that the local First Nations have given to them and how they are used. We are very fortunate to live in a small community that we can easily access.

Here many hands on learning activities can take place. For example we have already brought our grade sevens on a trip to a local island. On this island the students learned about the environment. They went on a hike and learned about many plants. They also came across a place where wolves come through on a regular basis; they looked at the wolf scat and discussed what the wolf ate. It was quite exciting for our students who learned a lot without realizing it because they were having so much fun.

One of our staff members and I have been discussing a camping trip that happens in the local Tla-o-qui-aht First Nations traditional territory. We have previously gone to Hesquiaht which is a little over an hour long boat ride away. It is costly to get there. By staying in the local area we can provide the same experience and have the opportunity to bring in locals from the communities. They can talk about traditional fishing, canoe making, food cultivation and storytelling. This is a great opportunity that we need to approach Tla-o-qui-aht First Nations about and work together to make this a successful venture.

Conclusion

As I reflect back on my schooling, I am beginning to realize how not studying my own culture and language has had a major impact on me growing up. Not really understanding where I fit in and having a sense that I was different but not understanding why I was difficult. There
was a sense of others being better than First Nation people. There were many stereotypes that painted many First Nation people with one broad brush. Having the ability to float between First Nations and non-First Nations has shielded me somewhat. Knowing how I felt, I could not imagine what others felt not being able to do as I did.

We now live in a time where acceptance is the law of the land. We study other cultures to understand their way of life and to come to accept their way of thinking. We value the diversity that has come to exist in our country. This is exactly what we need to do with First Nation people. These were the first people of the land, and yet they are the last to be accepted in our country. Now is the time to change that.

Creating a program for our school has been a long time coming. We have had full support of our entire staff. They believe that incorporating this as a regular program into the school would do nothing but good for our First Nation students. They believe it will give them a sense of belonging and a sense of pride. For the students it would teach them the importance role that First Nation people played in creating our country, and the role that they continue to play as we go through treaty negotiations today.

Now being older and understanding and accepting my culture, has made me very proud of who I am. I introduce myself as Jaime Hansen from Ahousaht. My grandparents are Cosmos and Catherine Frank. I am proud of myself and confident to do what I set out to do because of this. If we can create the same feeling for students that I have been able to create for myself by attending culture with my girls and trying to learn language, we would build a group of First Nation students who would not be afraid to do anything. They could gain strength from the history of First Nation people; gaining strength by understanding that despite and perhaps because of the many trials First Nations have been through, they have been able to carry on.

Through learning about First Nation people in our local area who had a great impact on our communities and country we would gain courage to try new things and try to better our homes and society. This is exactly how I feel right now trying to create this paper. I have gained so much strength and courage from people in my community. They believe in me, and they are proud of me coming back to work in our local school. This encourages me to do my best and continue to help our First Nation students do their best and be successful in their own right.

Although the British Columbia Ministry of Education states that it is important to have First Nation education, culture and language in the education system, it does not offer many suggestions on how to do this. Using all the prescribed learning outcomes and resources that we already have at hand, we can create a program that works for our school. Having a dedicated group of people willing to make this happen will lead to a very successful program.

With the limited culture class that is happening in our school, we have students always asking when it will happen if it has been missed. Also with the limited language program that we ran last year I have had many students ask if we are going to start again this year. We have students both First Nation and non First Nation who are willing to learn songs and dances and represent our school and local First Nation. If we are having this much willingness with limited time this year, the impact should be greater when we build this into being regular curriculum.

Having our curriculum tie directly into learning makes sense. It is something that we will teach regardless, but it will be enriched. This supports the reports from Ray Barnhardt and Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagly (2000), that there are direct ties to incorporating culture into everyday teaching. This then has direct ties to student doing better in school.

Having built ties within the local community there is a great opportunity to work with parents as well. Working with the Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation Family Care Worker will be a great
asset to building relationship with parents. We have worked together before and had much success as a team. We both are willing to work with parents to help understand what it is they would like for their children. Creating programs in the community around parenting and learning culture, leads to a kind of cyclical learning. By learning culture themselves, parents may encourage their children to do the same, and they may also begin to learn together. It is a benefit to all concerned; just as it has been pointed out in Ball and Simpkins (2004).

As I have progressed through this study, I feel that a great benefit will come to our school. We have wanted a program to incorporate First Nation language and culture in our school for years. Creating the program to work as a support to curriculum instead of another content subject that has to be covered will also make our program more successful. I have a huge sense of accomplishment typing these last few words. If we can make more First Nations students feel this same way, we would see more students graduating and being successful in the greater population.
References


