

Indigenous Student Perspectives
School District 91
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Overview

The aim of this research is to empower Indigenous student voice and understand the myriad ways the district can shift their approach to ensure all students have equal access to a successful education. Since the research will be grounded in Indigenous methodologies (Kovach, 2009; LT Smith, 1999), we will insist upon a strengths-based approach, refusing to become mired in deficit-based mindsets. The central component of this research is the stories of high-school Indigenous students in the schools of School District 91 Nechako Lakes. Inspired by Sto:lo scholar Jo-Anne Archibald's (2008) storywork, our aim is to provide a platform for Indigenous students to share their stories of transition to high school, recommendations for school improvement, potential solutions to barriers for Indigenous students, and untapped strengths. The storywork approach will be combined with surveys to get a robust view of both qualitative and quantitative indicators of potential educational approaches.

Leadership in the district have stated that student voice is the missing element of educational transformation. Furthermore, Indigenous scholars contend that any transformational shift without student input will inevitably miss the mark (Battiste, 2015) since we are responding to perceived problems through the lens of only educators. The appreciative inquiry questions will get to the heart of Indigenous student experience and the shape they would like to see education take in the district. A specific focus on transition periods into high school will elucidate critical issues for Indigenous students at a period which has been identified as the most crucial for Indigenous students (Bell et al., 2008).

Question: What are Indigenous student's stories about their educational experience?

Sub Questions:

- **What has helped you achieve success in education?**
- **How do you feel about your potential for success in education?**
- **What has been your experience transitioning into high school?**
- **Is there anything getting in the way of reaching your potential as a student?**
- **How does your home community support your achievement in education?**

In addition to the direct responses to the question and sub-questions, the research will uncover how students' perspectives on education change as they get closer to grade 12. Our internal data suggests that our students reaching grades 11 and 12 can, year to year, have a higher graduate rate than non-Indigenous students. One of the aims of the research is to identify mechanisms for supporting more of our students reaching the senior grades and being academically successful. In this research we are not viewing the students as being the problem, it is Canadian schools that are perpetuating a racism of low expectations (Auditor General of BC, 2015).

Methods

The research will employ a mixed-methods approach that will rely on both surveys and one-on-one interviews with students. First Nation Bands, parents, and students will all be asked to give consent for the interview. Moreover, this process will be completely transparent and collaborative. We will work together with First Nations leadership on the questions we ask, the methods of data gathering, member check for trustworthiness, and continually report to stakeholders. The findings will be shared with each of the communities so they can share in the ownership of the Knowledge of their students. Our research will follow the philosophy of Maori scholar Linda Tuwhai Smith (1999), who contends that any research with Indigenous communities should be empowering in each step. Building from Smith's philosophy, we believe that working together with the communities in the design and reporting can strengthen and reimagine relationships. Since both of the scholars working on this project are Indigenous and from the communities in question, we believe we are in an excellent position to carry this forward. The strengths-based questions we will ask in the research aligns with Smith's philosophy. We believe that questions that position Indigenous students as successful and capable of success will be empowering. It is potentially the first time some of them have been identified as successful learners.

Outputs

Completion of the research will include a report with a comprehensive analysis of students' responses and recommendations. The report will have information valuable for the school district, individual schools, and First Nations community partners. The aim of the research is to impact meaningful change, not sit on a shelf. All of the findings will be accompanied with direct recommendations that are achievable in both the short and medium term. While clearly some of the findings will point to systemic barriers, our goal is to create recommendations based on student stories that can be applied tomorrow and next week in schools in the district.

Potential Impact

The areas of impact are substantial. While we do not want to overestimate the impacts of this research, we believe it has the ability to influence educational work at the governance, policy, curriculum, teaching and learning, and community level. The report alone will not create change, it is imperative that we remain champions of the students' recommendations. A strategic approach is required throughout the process to get leadership and teachers on board with student recommendations. A critical element to buy in is showing early success for students, community, teachers, and administrators.