



GEORGE PEARSON

Imaginative Education Engages Aboriginal Learners in Prince Rupert

PRINCE RUPERT STUDENTS HEAD OUT TO A GRIZZLY BEAR SANCTUARY.
PHOTO COURTESY OF PRINCE RUPERT SCHOOL DISTRICT 52.

You are free to reproduce, distribute and transmit this article, provided you attribute the author(s), Education Canada Vol. 49 (5), and a link to the Canadian Education Association (www.cea-ace.ca) 2010. You may not use this work for commercial purposes. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. Publication ISSN 0013-1253.

**LUCID EXPANDS TEACHERS' REPERTOIRE BY
INCORPORATING "A DIVERSITY OF CULTURAL AND
PERSONAL HISTORIES AND KNOWLEDGE" AND
BY ENGAGING STUDENTS' IMAGINATIONS.**

THE GRADE 6 TEACHER holds up a box for all in the class to see.

"What's inside?" she asks.

"Nothing!" shouts one student.

"Dust!" says another.

"It's empty," observes a third student.

"But it's not empty," replies the teacher. "It's full of air."

But air doesn't seem to hold much interest for the students until she gets them to start thinking about just what air consists of.

"Air is full of invisible particles that have been around forever," says the teacher, "so we are breathing dinosaur breath. Air is full of dust, and dust is mainly small flakes from humans, so we are breathing Esther and Timothy and Alice. And, by the way, where do insects go to the bathroom?" Now the students are engaged. Suddenly air is something, not nothing.

By the time the unit on air is ending, students are acting as air particles, working on art about air, dancing as air. From now on, when these kids think about air, there will be an emotional spark. Air has captured their imagination.

And imagination is what teachers in Prince Rupert, B.C., are using as a foundation for engaging the hearts and minds of their students, nearly 60 percent of whom are Aboriginal. Between 55 and 60 percent of these Aboriginal students will graduate from high school, much better than the 25 percent who graduated 10 years ago, says Debbie Leighton-Stephens, district principal, Aboriginal Education Services, but not nearly enough. "We have a long way to go," she says.

Across B.C., only 47 percent of the Aboriginal students who entered Grade 8 in 2003 have since completed high school, compared to 79 percent for all students in the province, an inequity that has been recognized and deplored for years. Governments and non-government organizations, schools, and education organizations have poured money and ideas into projects aimed at closing the graduation gap and improving the quality of education for Aboriginal students. Many of the projects have established touch points with Aboriginal culture but haven't built a culturally inclusive, pedagogically sound curriculum to engage Aboriginal students throughout an entire year and from one year to the next.

EN BREF Il y a dix ans, seulement 10 pour cent des élèves autochtones fréquentant les écoles publiques de Prince Rupert, en Colombie-Britannique, décrochaient leur diplôme d'études secondaires. Aujourd'hui, entre 55 et 60 pour cent des élèves autochtones sont diplômés, mais Debbie Leighton-Stephens, directrice de district, Services d'éducation aux Autochtones, Prince Rupert School District 52, ne se repose pas sur ses lauriers. « Il reste encore beaucoup à faire », dit-elle. Elle est toutefois encouragée par la façon dont les élèves ont réagi au programme LUCID (Learning for Understanding through Culturally Inclusive Imaginative Development), une approche d'apprentissage qui attise l'imagination des jeunes et qui s'adresse à la collectivité pour intégrer la culture et l'expérience autochtones au curriculum. LUCID a été créé par un partenariat entre la commission scolaire, le Conseil autochtone de l'enseignement et la faculté d'éducation de l'Université Simon Fraser.

IMAGINATION, CULTURAL INCLUSION ARE AT THE HEART OF LUCID

Prince Rupert is addressing that shortcoming with LUCID (Learning for Understanding through Culturally inclusive Imaginative Development), in partnership with the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University (SFU) and the Prince Rupert Aboriginal Education Council. LUCID expands teachers' repertoire, says Mark Fettes, Project Director, by incorporating "a diversity of cultural and personal histories and knowledge" and by engaging students' imaginations.

Typically these things are viewed as tangential to the core business of schools, Dr. Fettes says. "Imagination is something you might associate with an occasional art activity or theatre performance. Cultural inclusion might happen in a special day or week, or involve someone from outside the school coming to give a lesson involving storytelling or arts or crafts."

LUCID turns this upside down. "For us," Dr. Fettes says, "it's when the child's whole spirit is engaged that the serious learning gets done. So we try to build classroom experiences that make that more likely to happen for a wider range of kids. That doesn't mean that you never use textbooks or worksheets or pencil-and-paper tests, but you certainly don't rely on them to do most of the work of teaching."

The LUCID approach is based on the work of an SFU education professor, Kieran Egan, who has developed teaching strategies to frame a child's cognitive development using imaginative engagement. The children's lives and their communities become part of the curriculum because of the cognitive tools they acquire in learning a language, learning to collaborate, and learning the stories and images of their culture and place.

Colleen Pudsey, an experienced Grade 7 teacher and part-time coordinator of the LUCID project, describes an activity in which students become tour guides for tourists coming off cruise ships that now stop at Prince Rupert, which is on the north coast of B.C. and has been inhabited by First Nations for an estimated 10,000 years. (Prince Rupert is located within the traditional territory of the Ts'msyen Nation and that culture is woven throughout the LUCID curriculum.)

Students photograph Aboriginal art throughout the city, then delve into the meaning of the art "so that they can become expert tour guides, able to represent their community confidently," explains Ms. Pudsey. "When you understand the art and design as it relates to the culture, then you can gather stories into the overall narrative of the unit, bringing in oral language."

SFU'S \$1 MILLION GRANT IS CATALYST

LUCID grew from an ongoing relationship with SFU, which had been involved in a number of Aboriginal education projects and had carried on a dialogue with Prince Rupert schools and the Aboriginal Education Council for about 20 years, according to Ms. Leighton-Stephens. Dr. Fettes invited Prince Rupert School District 52 to participate in a five-year (2004-2008) \$1 million research project that would be funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) through its Community-University Research Alliances program. He also invited two other B.C. school districts, Chilliwack District 33 (Stó:lō Nation) and Haida Gwaii District 50 (Haida Nation) to participate. These two districts played an active part in the research project, but have not found the resources to continue developing the LUCID approach as Prince Rupert has.

The Prince Rupert District and the Aboriginal Education Council discussed the proposed project for about a year and a half before committing to it, says Ms. Leighton-Stephens. What intrigued the Council most was that the imaginative education approach would incorporate culturally relevant Aboriginal content.

Teacher and school participation in LUCID is voluntary. In the beginning, the project focused on the elementary level, Grades 4-7, and included cohorts in several schools, desirable for comparative research purposes. Imaginative education was new to most of the teachers who volunteered to work with the LUCID approach, and planning involved dimensions (tapping community resources, marshaling cultural history and detail, inventing activities that would engage an entire class, and linking these dimensions with learning goals) that took teachers beyond more conventional, comfortable approaches.

"It takes people just a little while to wrap their heads around [LUCID]," says Raegan Sawka, a Prince Rupert high school teacher who was hired as a researcher to document outcomes from the project. "It's going to be different for every teacher. It's not a carbon-copy kind of system where you just take a book off a shelf and use it. You're really creating your own lessons, and using your own knowledge and angles to make it happen."



IN SPITE OF THE SLOW START, PROJECT

SUPPORTERS SEE ENCOURAGING SIGNS THAT

THIS CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE ADAPTATION OF

IMAGINATIVE EDUCATION IS GRADUALLY BECOMING

A RECOGNIZED APPROACH TO TEACHING THE

PRINCE RUPERT CURRICULUM.

For example, Ms. Sawka and Ms. Pudsey designed a year-long curriculum that meshes the province's Grade 7 curriculum with First Nations cross-curricular materials. Named "A Time For...Ha'li," it reflects the Ts'mysen sense of time and calendar, using the phases of the moon as the guiding metaphor. The curriculum framework outlines heroic qualities that students are encouraged to aspire to, such as self, community, and cultural survival.

High school teachers, especially, Ms. Sawka says, are concerned that it appears time-consuming, and that they may not be able to fit in all the provincially required curriculum pieces. LUCID teachers do put considerable time and effort into their planning, Ms. Sawka concedes, but they see that "it pays off in the end because the kids are quite engaged, or they have less trouble motivating students. So there's a tradeoff in terms of time commitment." And she is encouraged by the enthusiasm of "a strong group" of secondary teachers generated by Ms. Pudsey.

PATIENCE, PERSISTENCE REQUIRED AS PROJECT LAGS

Bringing teachers into the LUCID fold is taking longer than the project organizers anticipated. The SSHRC-funded portion of the project ended in 2008, the year when LUCID penetration should have reached 70 percent of the total curricular experience of students in the Prince Rupert School District, according to the original project proposal. Ms. Sawka estimates that about 10 to 15 percent of Prince Rupert faculty are committed to LUCID and imaginative education.

Because the process of getting comfortable with the LUCID approach takes time, as well as the support and encouragement of like-minded colleagues, the project can lose momentum when its practitioners move to another school or leave the district. This loss of kindred spirits clearly hindered progress in the early years of the program, particularly in the small, isolated community of Haida Gwaii, and delayed plans to intensively develop LUCID in several schools, and in consecutive grade levels in the other districts.

In spite of the slow start, project supporters see encouraging signs that this culturally inclusive adaptation of imaginative education is gradually becoming a recognized approach to teaching the Prince Rupert curriculum. One is the widespread interest generated by a master's degree program SFU developed specifically to support LUCID teachers. Another is the support and encouragement of the Aboriginal Education Council. A third is the positive results that supporters see coming from the program.



HEROIC STORIES DERIVED FROM THE STUDY OF LOCAL PLANTS AND THEIR TRADITIONAL USES.
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PRINCE RUPERT SCHOOL DISTRICT 52.

The ten Prince Rupert teachers who have graduated from a two-year master's degree program now form the backbone of the LUCID teaching staff. Ms. Sawka, one of those teachers, says the program kindled her enthusiasm and elevated her understanding of the theory behind LUCID. It gave her "a new lens," she says. "What the master's helps you do is process [LUCID and imaginative education] so that you're able to see your teaching that way and it becomes more natural and more effortless, and I think that's when it really takes off." SFU is currently accepting applications for a second cohort of up to 24 teachers, to begin in September 2010.

The Aboriginal Education Council, which has worked side-by-side with the school district throughout the planning and implementation of LUCID, is impressed with the program's impact on students, particularly Aboriginal students. Marlene Clifton represents Aboriginal Family Resource Workers on the Council, and has been a member of the Prince Rupert Board of Education as well. LUCID teaching, she says, "has brought out qualities that we often overlook by teaching the same way forever. I have witnessed the interaction of students and the excitement projected by their engagement in subject areas that are usually difficult for most."

Louisa Sanchez, who represents the Prince Rupert Board of Education on the Council, calls LUCID "a tremendous success." In visits to classrooms, she has seen "enthusiasm and self-confidence that I have not seen in years. I witnessed Aboriginal students who were quite shy in the classroom become alive. ... It was awesome to see students doing research not only with books, but with actual observations and hands-on experiments, [making] videos and being able to analyze for themselves the outcomes of their projects."

COMMUNITY, ABORIGINAL COUNCIL PROVIDE WEALTH OF RESOURCES

The Council also provides a wealth of resources including locally developed books and CDs on Ts'mysen history and culture, as well as "role models," community members who visit classes or host field trips, bringing the Aboriginal perspective and life experience into the classroom. The Council's depth of organization, including background checks on all prospective speakers, "has made it easy for teachers to get access to knowledge and information and bring it into classrooms," says Ms. Sawka. "I think that really made a difference for LUCID, because I know that other districts [may not have this level of support]. If you're trying to do it all from scratch, it can be quite difficult."

The increase in student engagement noted by Ms. Clifton was documented by Ms. Sawka, who was contracted as a researcher in the fifth year of the project to collect data on outcomes on four classes totaling about 90 students. She interviewed students, parents and teachers at the beginning and end of the year,

combing through the students' academic histories as well. She also administered student surveys designed to gauge changes in their attitudes toward a range of learning activities.

"One thing we noticed was a slight improvement in academic performance," says Ms. Sawka. Project supporters were hoping to see a more pronounced increase, but noted the period studied was only one year and they were encouraged that this still represented "a positive trend." Much more evident were signs of increased energy and excitement. "The parents all commented on how their children were coming home and talking about what they were doing," reports Ms. Sawka. "The parents said they had never seen their kids doing so much homework. Kids would want to take stuff home so they could continue to work on it.

"In one of the classrooms we saw a huge change in attendance. When we looked at their [previous] attendance, we knew we could make a difference. One group that had missed an average of 20 days in previous years showed a 32 percent improvement. ... They just wanted to be there; they didn't want to miss any of it. ... They were definitely the students I'd say were most at-risk coming into [the LUCID program]; this really turned them on to school."

Ms. Sawka also noted a contrast in teacher comments from the beginning to the end of the year. At the beginning of the year, teachers often noted students who seemed capable of better work than they were producing. There were few such comments at the end of the year; more often teachers described students as being "really engaged."

To Ms. Leighton-Stephens, "There's a connection between the heart and the mind here. If you don't have the heart connected to what you're learning, it's not going to go as far as you want it to go. That's the foundation piece, and that's where the cultural relevancy fits in, as well as the cognitive tools."

Though the SSHRC grant for LUCID has expired, the Prince Rupert school district and the Aboriginal Education Council continue to fund the part-time LUCID coordinator position that Ms. Pudsey holds in addition to her teaching position. Having local and district leadership is crucial to the future of the program, says

Dr. Fettes. Other critical elements include:

- a good working relationship between the school district and the local First Nation/Aboriginal community;
- access to cultural expertise and resources from that community;
- an external source of expertise in imaginative education that provides some extra incentive and insight for change, and preferably also some resources for curriculum development;
- the right mix of teachers (and possibly others, e.g. language teachers, resources workers, etc.), so that they create a self-sustaining professional learning community that is genuinely rewarding for those involved.

"If one can get all these things in place, Dr. Fettes says, "the reward is that teachers start to expand their teaching repertoire, they get excited by what they see in the classroom, they start to seek out more Aboriginal resources, they come up with more elaborate and adventurous teaching plans, and the whole thing snowballs." |

GEORGE PEARSON is guest editor for this issue of *Education Canada*.

Link to LUCID Project website: www.ierg.net/LUCID/front-page

Link to Imaginative Education Research Group website: www.ierg.net

ELMER'S

Helping Children Succeed

Generations of school children have grown up with Elmer's #1 brand school glue. It's safe, non-toxic and washable, so accidental messes mean easy clean-up.

Join the online **Elmer's Teacher's Club** for project ideas, tips & more!
<http://www.elmers.com/teachers/>