

Educational Leadership: Adaptation and Kuwegānh

By Tracey MacMillan and Brian Manning, SD87 (Stikine)

One day, some 20 years ago, in conversation with a respected Elder from a remote northern community, we posed the question: “What do we have to do to be successful educators in this community and culture?” He paused for a moment and answered: “If I visited you at your home in your community, I would not change the channel on your TV; I would not rearrange the furniture; I would not put different food on your table; I would adapt. If you want to be successful, you need to adapt.”

In essence, he was a forerunner of what we now refer to as contextual literacy. Contextual literacy is known as finding within yourself the ability to adapt, read the land,

and respect the local customs, traditions, and practices.¹

This Elder provided us with sound advice that has grounded our approach to leadership in First Nations communities and in schools that are predominantly populated by First Nations learners. We have worked to have schools reflect the communities in which their students live. We are not here to “fix” communities, but rather to embrace them and adopt an educational approach that benefits all. This approach must honour the history, value the culture, build on existing strengths, celebrate the positives, and continuously advocate for equity.

Presently, we both work for School District 87 Stikine (SD87). We would like to acknowledge that the lands on which we live, work, and learn are the unceded traditional

territories of the Tāltān, Kaska and Taku River Tlingit First Nations. It is a rich, vibrant, and diverse setting. It is the smallest district in British Columbia but encompasses 188,034 square kilometres. SD87, with its’ stunning landscapes, boreal climate, and isolated communities – separated by large distances – is, geographically, one of the largest school districts in British Columbia and spans two time zones.

Our rationale reflects a learner centered and inclusive approach to education; a commitment to improve teaching methods and a collaborative approach that encourages involvement from the school community. We believe that culturally sensitive leadership, education, communication, participation, community outreach, and mutual respect are the keys to successful and positive school



Older students learn how to harvest a wolf according to local traditions and customs.



Students learn traditional ways of life – like harvesting moose meat – from community members, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers.



Knowledge Keeper Curtis Rattray with Superintendent Tracey MacMillan during an on-the-land outing.



A Tahltan Knowledge Keeper teaches kindergarten students land survival skills.

experiences for our learners and staff. These elements aid us in the promotion of the “whole child” concept and the movement towards self-actualized personnel.

The Three Nations (Tāitān, Kaska, and Taku River Tlingit First Nations) and SD87 have established an Education Partnership Agreement (3-N Agreement). It is a wholistic and community-based approach that requires full commitment and accountability by all partners for all children to realize their potential and have the success they deserve. It supports the wellness of the whole child by providing a learning environment that is culturally relevant; values First Nations’ ways of knowing; incorporates ancestral languages; is respectful; and integrates the three Nations’ values and knowledge into all curricular areas.

It is, therefore, imperative that we strive to create an environment that promotes the safety and emotional needs of the learners and the school personnel. As educational leaders, we must be sensitive to the tone that we establish. We can be either the sunshine or the rain in any setting. We must be cognizant and practitioners of Trauma Informed Practice. This will be beneficial for our learners.

However, as Curtis Rattray (Indigenous Curriculum Advisor / SD87) regularly reminds us, “We must be aware of teacher trauma that often migrates to the classroom.” In other words, we must be willing to look past the face to the point of pain in all those involved

in the education milieu. We must model the positive behaviours we seek in learners and staff.

A development of a sense of belonging is essential in our district. We want all to build competence and capability so that learners and personnel feel that they are empowered and have control over themselves. Through meaningful relationships, self-esteem will grow. This sense of community can only take root through genuine engagement with learners, parents / guardians, and stakeholders.

For example, before the school year begins, we hold a Cultural Orientation in each of our school communities for all staff, including teachers, school support staff, board office staff, etc. and members of the local Nation. The orientation takes place on-the-land, or at a place chosen by the Knowledge Keepers. It is a time to renew, rebuild, and strengthen relationships. This sets a positive tone where local Elders and Knowledge Keepers collaborate with staff in the drafting of their annual and long-range plans. The importance of ensuring Tāitān, Tlingit, and Kaska ways of knowing, being, and doing are emphasized and staff learn more about how to include the seasonal rounds in their plans, daily practices, classrooms, and on-the-land initiatives.

Everyone wants to feel respected and valued and to feel important. Therefore, we

must be willing to be vulnerable and in doing so, “make people of the persons we meet.” We can do this by being truly invested in capacity building and shared leadership within our communities. We participate in cultural initiatives and community events. It is important that staff and learners see their senior leaders at local fundraisers, engaging in on-the-land initiatives, or learning a new skill.

We have been told by Elders that working outside of our comfort zones and showing our vulnerabilities goes a long way in demonstrating a genuine investment in the place that we are. Sharing a meal with parents and Elders at a community event builds trust and strengthens relationships. Trust leads to partnerships that help us provide more of a responsive educational environment that is culturally relevant to all children in our schools.

The strengthening of relationships with local Nations has led to benefits for our learners. For example, the creation of a partnership with the Tāitān Guardians resulted in students accompanying the Guardians in a helicopter for the purpose of spotting and counting wildlife as well as to set trap lines for wolves. Partnering with Tlingit Elders has resulted in an enhanced on-the-land program for students and the creation of a new outdoor cultural space. Through these partnerships, staff are learning how to supplement and enhance curricular content with local First Nations knowledge and

perspectives. In School District 87 Stikine, we appreciate staff and are proud of their efforts to embrace new ways of decolonizing educational practices.

Recently, David Rattray (Tāitān Elder / Educator/ Counsellor) presented a workshop on the Four Goals of Tāitān Education and Kuwegānh. David shared, “The first goal is acknowledging emotional pain / safety (many Aboriginal youth come to school with trauma and ‘mixed-up’ worldviews they need help sorting out). The second goal is creating belonging environments (students need to feel they belong, and relational teachers help (since the 1970s research says the highest correlation for success in school is a good relationship with the teacher, i.e., the teacher likes me). The third goal is the infusion of cultural programming (we live in a multicultural society, and there is a need to understand similarities and differences, as well as give Aboriginal students a sense of pride in who they are). The fourth goal is academics. Once the first three goals are operational, the fourth goal excels.”

One of the approaches we use to engender empathy in the school setting is Kuwegānh. This is the Tāitān’s traditional way of restoring damaged relationships in a culturally appropriate way. As David Rattray says, “It’s about healing damaged relationships; using community to help; conflicts are seen as growth opportunities; it’s not about finding blame, or consequences. It’s a major paradigm shift to how schools deal with discipline.”

In essence, it is about developing and maintaining a respectful environment where all feel they have a voice, both inside the building and outside from the communities. Kuwegānh is a process used to deal with conflict between learners, between learner and teacher, and between colleagues. It can include administrators, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, counsellors, etc. Its focus is to rebuild and renew. At the end of the process all participants are meant to leave with their dignity intact.

In School District 87 Stikine, we have worked hard to develop positive and mutually beneficial partnerships with our stakeholders. This has resulted in the generation of projects that have enhanced and enriched the school environment for learners and staff. It has also established an atmosphere where different groups are willing to take risks because a misstep is not going to be career defining. This low-risk environment allows people to take ownership and grow as learners, professionals, and partners.

As a result, strong bonds have been established with the Tāitān Central Government (TCG); Taku River Tlingit First Nation (TRTFN) in Atlin; Daylu Dena Council (DDC) in Lower Post; Tahltan Band in Telegraph Creek; Iskut Band in Iskut; and The People’s Haven in Dease Lake. This outreach has produced a welcoming environment and allowed the school system to open the doors and windows to our communities and agencies. By prioritizing collaboration and communication with our stakeholders, we were able to generate trust and, thereby, safety, risk-taking and equity.

School District 87 Stikine is reflective of a welcoming school community which acknowledges the uniqueness of the individual. Learners, parents, Elders,

Guardians, and professional and support staff seek to create a climate where all can experience success. We must always promote the positives and celebrate successes. We believe that a school or system should never be satisfied with the status quo. We must grow. We must continually strive to develop the “whole person” as a productive member to serve our communities. Our quest for excellence encompasses all aspects of the principles of Tāitān, Kaska, and Taku River Tlingit First Nations culture and academic life. We build on strengths in a caring and inclusive nature as we adapt to our surroundings. 🌈

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Reference:

1. *CASSA Conversation Starters: Contextual Literacy*. Retrieved February 18, 2022: <https://www.cassa-acgcs.ca/cms/lib/ON01929128/Centricity/Domain/8/CASSA%20Conversation%20Starters%201.%20Contextual%20Literacy.pdf>

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