2017-2018 Yukon Education Learning Networks:
Empowering and Engaging Others in an Inquiry-Based Professional Learning Network
ADST Learning Network

School Name: Chief Zzeh Gittlit School, Old Crow

School District: Yukon Education

Inquiry Team Members: Nicole Birkeland, Aaron Bailey

Grade Levels: 4-5-6

Curricular Areas: Applied Design, Skills, and Technology (ADST), Social Studies, Science, Language Arts, Art Education

Focus Areas: Design Process, Gwich'in Understandings (Traditional Knowledge and Skills, Language, Oral History, Place Names, Land-Based Learning)

Your focus for this year: Students will practice the design process that is connected to traditional Gwich'in ways to increase motivation and become confident, independent learners.

Scanning: The team at Chief Zzeh Gittlit School have noticed that students are, overall, disinterested in their learning. They struggle to articulate what they are learning and are unable to set goals for themselves; it is difficult for them to identify their emotions, and to problem solve with peers; any academic work, even basic tasks, requires heavy support to be completed by the students; they lack the confidence to try new things–especially when these things require creative or "outside of the box" thinking. There is a desire to better integrate traditional Gwich'in knowledge and skills into the school on a more daily basis.

Focus: After scanning, my goal was to use the design process in order to motivate students and engage them more deeply in learning tasks and activities. I also wanted to make stronger connections to Gwich'in practices during school. I wanted to see if the thought processes and skills involved in the design process, within both traditional skills and within ADST activities, could transfer to other areas of learning. My hope was that students would increase their confidence and develop resiliency, which would then be applied to all areas of learning. Furthermore, I wanted to see if increased confidence would in turn help students connect more with their learning and in turn increase the number of conversations regarding what they are learning, where they are at, and what goals they would like to achieve in the future.

Hunch: There are a number of reasons why students may be experiencing the challenges that they are. Perhaps the most important, is the breakdown of colonial influence in Vuntut Gwitchin territory. Community members, and even students, may not feel comfortable in a traditional school setting due to persisting sentiments toward residential schooling. School might not be seen as a priority in the larger context of self-preservation and the wellbeing of family. Teachers who are new to the community are not provided with much cultural training prior to beginning work at the school. Additionally, many students experience trauma, and consequently are not in a mindset conducive to learning. This makes approaching new and open ended learning tasks overwhelming. Students prefer very clear, black and white learning tasks, such as worksheets.

New professional learning: This school year I was involved in the ADST Learning Network. My motivation for joining was to find alternative ways to engage students at school. After the sessions, I integrated activities we used, or ideas that were discussed, into the classroom. I was inspired by the success of other teachers, and the activities I chose were heavily influenced by these successes. Many of the activities I chose to implement were relatively short, hands-on building challenges. I felt these would be most beneficial to the goals in that they were student centered, engaging, open-ended, and cooperative. With the guidance of local Gwich'in people, the students participated in land-based learning activities with similar focuses. The staff at Chief Zzeh Gittlit are open and progressive educators who were curious to hear how these challenges would go. Many of them are implementing similar activities with the same desire: to increase student motivation and independence.

Taking action: The design process was implemented in the classroom in the following ways:
- Free Time Activities: open-ended, hands-on, problem solving tasks such as a Tinker Box (various old electronics students could take a part and put back together), Busy Boxes (puzzles, Lego, building projects, art activities), robot building, and board games.
  - Outcomes**:** students were more engaged, there was less wandering and less expression of boredom. There was more cooperation between classmates. Activities needed to be changed or modified on a weekly basis for students to gravitate to them. Students required assistance at the beginning to learn how to do a task, but then displayed more independence in how they spent their free time afterward.
- Social Studies: students went out on various land trips to learn and practice traditional Gwich'in skills. They also listened to various community members share stories and talk about the local territory. When students returned to the classroom, they used Minecraft to build Old Crow of the past, present, and future.
  - Outcomes: students were able to transfer traditional knowledge to a form that they found interesting and were very invested in. During the building in Minecraft, students conversed about what things should or should not look like. They worked collaboratively and independently. Social interactions between students were much more positive when they were working on this project. Again, after some initial guidance, students were able to work on their own and were engaged in their learning task. As a team, we noticed that it was a bit

challenging to involve community members in the building of Old Crow. In the future, it would be helpful to share how Minecraft works and why we chose to use it with community members. Even though members and elders were involved, they were not very comfortable with the building component of this activity.
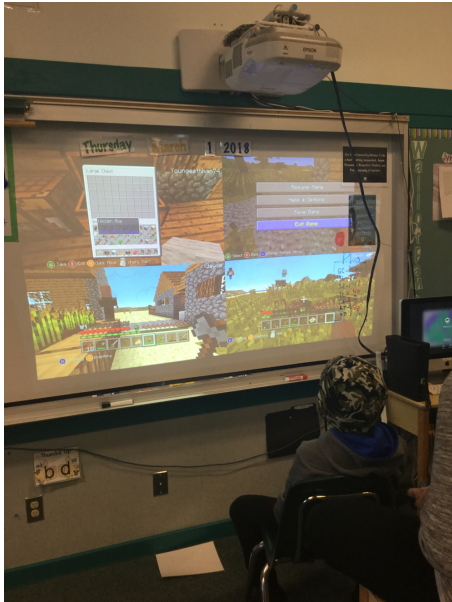

- Self-Regulation: students are using traditional materials to create fidget tools.
  - Outcomes: the goal in designing these was to make a self-regulation tool that was more personal and meaningful by incorporating traditional materials. Fidget tools have been very successful with this group of students in assisting them to attend to learning tasks better and be able to focus on their work and work more independently. Because students were involved in designing their own fidget tools, our hope was that they would use it as a meaningful tool. This is an ongoing project and we have yet to see how it will work for the students.

- ADST Challenges: students participated in a series of design challenges in the classroom. Over the course of the year, the students have completed a variety of challenges, independently, in pairs, and in groups. These included: tower building challenges with various materials, a parachute challenge, a weight bearing bridge challenge.
    - Outcomes: as a team, we found there were many benefits from introducing students to these kinds of student-centered, hands-on, and engaging activities. Students were able to experience the design process in a safe and fun way. In the past, students were very quick to quit when things were challenging for them. During these challenges, they were able to experience some failure (i.e., their tower collapsing) and were able to re-design and continue the challenge. After these challenges, we were very explicit about the design process and how it was seen in these challenges and within traditional activities. We looked for opportunities to point out the design process in traditional activities and in other learning tasks at school. We encouraged the students in their ability to fail and try again. When students were frustrated or stuck we reminded them of their success in the design challenges. We noticed after a few challenges, a couple of months of encouragement, and being explicit about the design process, students began to articulate links themselves. For instance, when we went to type a science project, students initially became quite frustrated because they assumed it would be quicker than it was. One student commented on how it was hard, but that he knew he would be able to "get it" and made direct reference to a tower building challenge. Students were able to try new things in math, reading, and writing that I don't think they would have been able to do before. They had developed confidence to try some new things and to experience a bit of failure. Failure is beginning to be seen as learning within the classroom. Furthermore, when it came time to complete a student self-assessment before parent conferences, students were much more aware of the things they do well and the things they would like to work on.
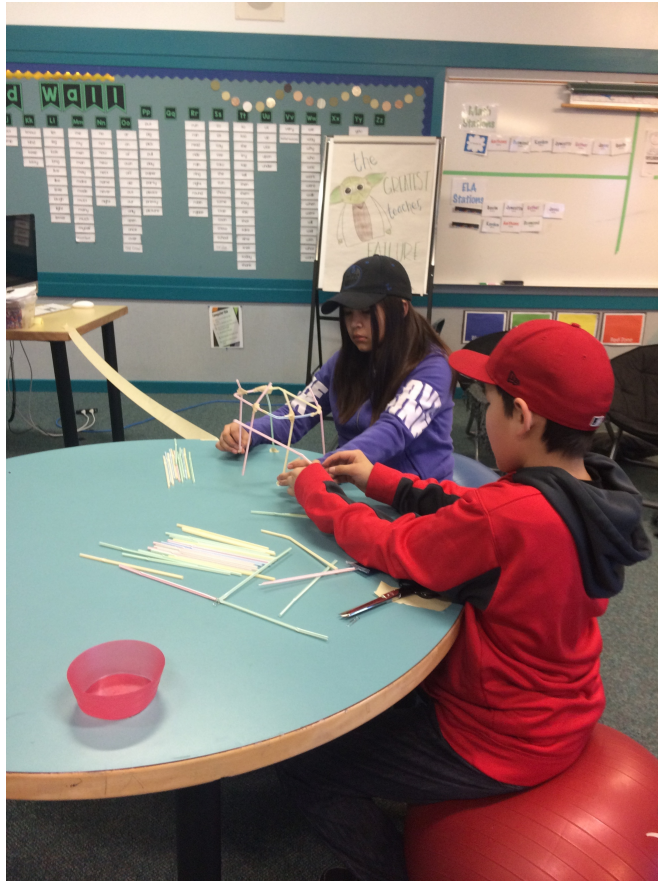
Checking: there have been many positive changes from implementing the design process. Students are working more collaboratively, are more positive, have more confidence and self-awareness, and have more opportunities to see Gwich'in ways of doing and knowing in the school. Much more needs to be done for students at Chief Zzeh Gittlit to be motivated and independent. Elders and community members need to feel more welcome and comfortable at the school. Furthermore, they need to be more involved in what is taught and how it is taught. Students need to be out on the land more and engaged more in learning about their traditions and their language. Teachers need much more training regarding their role in the community and about Gwich'in ways. Resources need to be better organized and made readily available to teachers. Teachers and community members need time to collaborate and develop goals and learning activities. Students need more opportunities to practice the design process in a safe and fun way to become comfortable with the idea of failing and trying again. They need to be explicitly taught how to assess their learning and how to set goals. They also would benefit from a continued emphasis on self-regulation and problem solving with peers.

Reflections/Advice: the most significant thing I learned in this process was that although the students at Chief Zzeh Gittlit may not be in the "ideal" state to practice inquiry, it is crucial to give them opportunities to do so. It took the team a lot longer to implement activities and a

design mentality due to students experiencing trauma. However, the students greatly benefited from these opportunities. The activities had to be simplified and slowly introduced to have success, but they did change the students' abilities to approach learning with resiliency and to be more positive and independent. After seeing the success of using the design process we would like to introduce the Growth Mindset in the next school year.

When trying to make better links between Gwich'in thinking and doing, it becomes clear that reconciliation is a long and complex process. While community members want their children to do well and to experience success, they are not always comfortable in the school or even with teaching staff. Furthermore, there is no real training for teachers or a compiled list of resources and resource people. While teachers are committed to decolonizing the school by making space for greater integration of Gwich'in ways, there isn't a clear path towards this. In the future, it would be beneficial to have more collaboration time between teachers and community members to decide on school goals and look for practical and concrete ways to go about achieving them. In the future, I want to be asking on a more daily basis how I can decolonize education. I want to be looking for ways to bring Gwich'in traditions to the forefront and make sure students feel proud of who they are and what they can do.

NOII is dedicated to:
EVERY learner crossing the stage with dignity, purpose and options.
ALL learners leaving our settings more curious than when they arrive.
ALL learners gaining an understanding of and respect for Yukon First Nations ways of knowing and doing.