

Integrating and celebrating culture

Students and staff at a school in Haida Gwaii integrate and celebrate the Haida language and culture into the curriculum to create a sense of place and pride — a thriving community to call home.

by Leslie Dyson

The staff and students of Sk'aadga Naay Elementary School in Skidegate on Haida Gwaii have a clear sense of place. "As much as possible, the Haida language and culture are integrated into the regular curriculum," said Principal Vicki Ives. Actually, the school has a trilingual focus. French immersion is also offered.

The school building won an architectural award and, although it's built in a rain-forest, it has few gutters so that children can enjoy the sense of standing behind a waterfall when it rains. Teachers take their classes outdoors regularly for exercise and learning on the land.

Classroom topics revolve around what's happening in the environment with the change in seasons. Students get excited about the arrival of the salmon berry season in June. The fall brings salmon and tsiljii (jerky), one



of the favourite treats of students.

Field trips to the ocean side are arranged so that students can gather and dry seaweed to be used as salty flavouring in their halibut jum (stew). One class has built a trail with wooden bridges to a large old growth cedar that is home to eaglets living in two nests.

In June, the school celebrated Aboriginal Day by having staff, students and parents congregate at the beach to play Haida games, create rock art, sing, drum and dance. Parents made Haida vests with the school crest for all the graduating students. The school song has been written in Haida.

Ives, a teacher at the school for 18 years, vice-principal for three and now the principal, said the school has always been culturally responsive. However, as the principal, she wanted to encourage more integration and parental involvement.

The past year also saw family activities like a pancake breakfast, Friday evening barbecue and potluck turkey dinner.

Sk'aadga Naay is a public school located on the Skidegate reserve. About 70 percent of students are Aboriginal. Ives, other school principals,

education coordinators and members of the village attend the Haida Education Council meetings every two months to share ideas and plan Haida language and cultural initiatives on the island.

Monday morning staff meetings include learning how to say phrases like “dream big,” “never give up” and “walk, don’t run in the hall” in Haida. Teachers join their classes twice a week to learn the Haida language from Joan Moody, the Haida language teacher. Then they look for ways to bring what they’ve learned into the classroom.

Moody, a member of the Haida, has been teaching for 20 years. “That was my language, but when I started, I knew none of it.” Moody’s mother didn’t know the language because her parents didn’t speak it, nor did her father use it very often. That reflects the students’ experiences as well.

The school has taken on a significant challenge. Haida is an isolate language with no genetic relationship to any other. The number of fluent Haida speakers is dropping significantly.

Diane Brown, an elder and fluent speaker, said, the school’s language emphasis is “a start.” She is concerned that it won’t be enough to preserve the language. There are just 24 fluent speakers in Skidegate, she said, and even fewer in Masset.

Moody said all of the Haida language speakers are in their 80s. Many of them are working hard to develop curriculum and record all the songs and stories that they can. She is working with these elders and, even though she’s not a fluent speaker, she is pleased that she understands what they are saying.

Grade 4/5 teacher Vanessa Wahl said she is concerned that the Haida language could be dying. She weaves Haida words into her science, lan-

guage arts, math and art classes. “But there needs to be more money put into it. We have just one teacher who’s teaching Kindergarten to Grade 7 and she’s part time. It’s pretty challenging for one teacher. She needs a lot more support.”

Shyanna, Grade 7, said, “When it’s spoken it’s really pretty. It’s rhythmic and song-like.”

Cassandra, also in Grade 7, said the language sounds “so interesting.” She’s picked up the phrase *gum gee slee* and uses it in her conversations with her friends because “it’s a fun thing to say.” It means “not likely.”

The language includes glotal sounds and ticks and the younger children pick it up quickly. It’s a challenge for others. “Some of the words are a bit difficult,” Cassandra admitted, “but I’m getting better at it.”

Moody has taught the students the traditional greeting offered on special occasions and the students take delight in repeating it. Translated, it means “Chiefs, ladies held in high esteem, my precious friends, I thank you all. Today Skidegate is proud, today Haidas are proud and I am proud.” It takes several seconds longer to say in Haida.

Shyanna and Cassandra were keen to recite it together.

Shyanna, a Haida member, said she wishes she could carry on a conversation with the elders but is confident she could understand them. Her father uses the language occasionally at home, but she’s also teaching him what she’s learned at school.

She said she also appreciates learning the history of her culture. “You

feel more connected to nature. The first people started with just nature. They didn’t have TV and electronics.”

Kostan, Grade 7, is Haida and said he likes learning about Haida art and the language. “It’s a really cool thing. It goes back hundreds of years ... It’s pretty important to me.”



His mother is from Masset and some of the words are pronounced differently in Skidegate. Even so, he said, “I say things to my mom and she’s saying more to me. The population of Haida speakers is going down,” he added. “It would be cool to be one of them.”

The high value that the school




in such a project and then made 18-inch models. After painting on designs, they led a pole raising ceremony for the school in which they gave a speech in Haida, handed out gifts and shared traditional food.

Wahl's class did a unit on traditional food gathering and taught the students the English and the Haida words for each item. The students then made little booklets and passed along what they'd learned to the younger children.

It's important for students to understand the Haida culture, Wahl said. "This is where we live." She also talks to her students about the similarities of the cultures that call Haida Gwaii home. "There are a lot of commonalities even though some people weren't born here. All cultures are reliant on the ocean.

The students are reminded of this as they look out the windows at the unimpeded view of the water.

"We are an island," she said. "BC Ferries' costs are going up and only come once a week. We talk about things that we can grow to be more self-sufficient." Wahl said her students come to school already very knowledgeable. They know about a local company that is harvesting chanterelle mushrooms and selling them at Granville Island in Vancouver. They've also discussed community concerns like fish farms and oil pipelines and tankers going down the coast. "It's all part of being socially responsible," Wahl said.

"The school is hopeful that helping to instill this sense of place and pride in Haida culture will ensure that the students always have a healthy and thriving community to call home," said Ives. 

places on Haida language, culture and history is good for the students' self-esteem, said Grade 1/2 teacher Marcie Watkins. All but one of the students in her class are Haida.

"It's really incumbent on us to use the language because it's so tied to the land and the culture," Watkins said. "Otherwise, you're only looking at things with 'English' eyes.

"I've lived here for a long time [23 years] and I'm in the same community that the kids live in." Like all the school staff, she said, "I know what's going on seasonally, what people are fishing for and the traditional food gathering cycle."

It may be difficult for people living in large urban settings outside of Haida Gwaii to understand the importance of this. Mandarin oranges, strawberries and tomatoes lose their element of delight when they're available year round.

However, in May, the Skidegate

community prepares for the harvest of k'aaw (herring roe on kelp), a highly prized food item globally. It is never taken for granted.

Brown, also a grandmother at the school, explained that everything has to be in place. The last two years have seen only small harvests and arriving weeks later than usual. In the years before that, over fishing of the spawning herring prevented any harvest at all. Herring fishing in the inlet is now sharply curtailed.

This year, the temperature of the water was just right, the kelp had not yet rotted and the herring showed up in time. The k'aaw was collected and dried. It will be eaten like salty chips over the winter.

Last spring, Watkins' class did a unit on totem poles. The students learned the protocol, went out to the forest to see what trees would have been used

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