Building A Personal Learner’s Manual:

Students Knowing Themselves as Learners

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Abstract

In this research, I explore the ways in which student reflections about themselves as learners grow in depth and in complexity, as they are encouraged to identify and articulate skills and characteristics that make up their “Personal Learner’s Manual.” The purpose of this action research was to gain a better understanding of ways to support students in their development of a strong learner identity. The narratives were collected from monthly student reflections, weekly goal setting reflections and observations done by the researcher. This project involved 18 Grade 6/7 English students in a dual track English/French Immersion Elementary School in Northwestern British Columbia. Students were asked to set weekly goals and reflect on where their learning was going, how it was going, and where to next in their learning. Students were given the tool of eight characteristic traits and criterion to help them describe who they were as learners in different learning situations. The importance of being confident, industrious and risk taking were the most referred to by the students and what they felt they possessed or needed to acquire in becoming successful learners. Being compassionate and thoughtful were the least referred to in the students’ goal setting and reflections. Building a common language of characteristic traits and giving opportunities for students to explore these traits in different learning environments and reflect on their learning increased their ability to articulate and expand their repertoire of characteristics and skills as a learner over time.
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Chapter One: Background and Purpose of Study

“No matter what your ability is, effort is what ignites that ability and turns it into accomplishment.”

(Dweck, 2008, p. 41)

Research Beliefs

I believe that as teachers/facilitators it is our role as educators to empower our students to become life long learners who own their learning. Teachers need to have many tools in their ‘tool kit’ in order to meet the dimensions that Willms, Friesen and Milton (2009) describe in their report, What Did You Do in School Today? They identified these areas as the social, academic and intellectual engagement of students. These dimensions do not stand on their own; they are intertwined and are dependent on each other. It’s the question of what are the best strategies we need to use in order to help students understand how they learn in connection to these areas of their learning and engagement?

For a student to move forward in their learning they first need to know themselves as learners. What is their learner identity and how do they make it fit and connect to their learning environment? All learners deserve the opportunity to see themselves as learners and not be expected to learn in the same way as others in the classroom. As students move through elementary school their different learning characteristics are formed and shaped. By the time they are ready to transition into high school, students should have a good understanding of how they learn best and be able to use these skills in adapting to their new environment academically, socially and intellectually.

Transitioning to a new environment, such as a new grade, a different school or into the high school can be difficult for some students. The dynamics of new social groups, academic
requirements and different physical learning environments can be stressful on the learner. Not all students are self confident in this transition and struggle to meet the demands of this change and become disengaged, unmotivated and their academic achievement levels start to decrease.

What can we do as educators to help support this transition and provide our students with a ‘personal learner’s manual’ where, having a strong sense of their learner identity will help them navigate a new or different learning environment? Hopefully, students will leave elementary school with confidence and a sense of who they are as learners. Gaining this knowledge about themselves and having opportunities to reflect on this will help them to take responsibility for owning their learning and transfer their characteristic traits as learners into a new environment, such as high school.

The area of focus for my research is looking at the intrinsic motivation of students in owning their learning with respect to being able to articulate who they are as learners. I would like to help students understand themselves as learners and how they best learn. I feel it is important that they understand their attitudes and capabilities in learning and how these affect the areas of work avoidance, learned helplessness and boredom that might pertain to them. I have valued the people that have facilitated my learning and who found ways to encourage me and helped me to recognize the ways I learn best. This helped me to see the benefits from the intrinsic motivation I gained to challenge myself and take risks in my learning. I value the idea that the desire to learn and aspire to higher levels of thinking needs to come from within the person. Knowing how one learns will help in this process. I feel students benefit from external motivators to help them push the boundaries of their learning and achievement levels. What that looks like can affect how successful the student can be or not. I believe students are able to be
motivated to learn and depending on the learning environment and the strength of their self-efficacy, they will intrinsically see the benefits of taking risks in their learning.

**Background**

I have lived in the northern town of Smithers, BC for the past 12 years and I am in my 8th year of working at Ecole Muheim Memorial Elementary School. This is one of many Aboriginal-rich communities I have had the privilege of teaching in. I also have lived and taught in Yellowknife, N.W.T., Queen Charlotte City, Haida Gwaii, and Terrace, BC.

In all my teaching situations there have been a percentage of students that are less motivated and engaged in their learning compared to others. These are the students that I tend to root for and want to find ways to support. I call them the ‘underdogs’ much like sports teams where people perceive a team as the underdogs because they have not been as successful at winning games as other teams in their league. These can be the teams that put incredible effort into their practice and training, yet still struggle to experience success in the skills they have gained. I see my learning as a child in a similar light. I had to work hard at learning new things and often did not meet what I considered to be the same level of academic and social achievements as others. I often fell short of the peak on the “bell curve” compared to my peers. I wouldn’t say I was a vulnerable student, yet sometimes that struggle caused me to become disengaged and it was a combination of what my teachers, parents and peers did that supported me in having the resilience to keep moving forward.

At the same time I am mindful of the fact that high achievers can also become disengaged in their learning. Different learning environments can have different effects on different types of learners both positive and negative. In looking back I am not sure I always saw myself as an advocate for my learning in going through elementary school and then into high
school. What was happening for me? How was I supported and was I supported in a way that I learned best? Were there better strategies that would have helped me to challenge myself more? Were there ways that would have facilitated me in sharing my learning in a different way or sharing of my ideas more freely and with confidence in class discussions? Based on the literature I have reviewed about learner identity, self-efficacy, student self-regulation and the effects of meta-cognition on learner success I am interested to see what the impact and influence the strategies I employ will have in helping students to better understand themselves as learners. As well, I would like to better understand and be mindful of what supports are most effective for me to provide my students in developing their repertoire of characteristics and skills as a learner.

**The Context and the Problem**

Ecole Muheim Elementary School is a dual track English/French immersion school that enrolls students from Kindergarten to grade 7. We are situated near the downtown core of Smithers. We have 274 students; 100 of which are in our English track and 174 students are in the French Immersion track. Both programs have mainly combined class configurations. Students come to our school from the downtown area of Smithers. In addition, many of our students bus in from all parts of the district because we are the only French immersion school in the district. We also have students bussing in from Moricetown reserve just outside of Smithers. Aboriginal students make up approximately 30% of our school population and not all live in Moricetown.

There are 11 full-time teachers, five part-time teachers, an Aboriginal ASSET worker and an Aboriginal Literacy Educational assistant and five Educational assistants. We have one full-time secretary, one half-time secretary and a Strong Start program for preschoolers. This program runs four days a week in our building.
The school community promotes the learning and appreciation for a variety of cultures. We have a strong First Nation’s Drumming program and a First Nation’s seventh generation activity group. The Canadians for French parent group and the Parent Advisory Council work together to support various experiences for both French and English students. They also have various performers come into our school to promote the French language in their presentations and workshops.

We promote healthy eating and with parent participation we built a school community garden to help us learn about the importance of growing our own food. Our school promotes exercise through sports teams, cross-country running and skiing as well as downhill skiing for our older students. We have a strong music program and encourage our older students to join the elementary band program as an extra-curricular activity.

In our school growth plan we have set goals for ourselves to work towards building a learning environment that encourages critical thinking on the part of all learners. We promote the use of the SMART Learning process (Connect, Process, Transform and Reflect) in order to help learners go deeper with their thinking in all aspects of their learning. To varying degrees teachers are using project based learning, universal design and formative assessment strategies to help our learners understand where they are in their learning and where they need to go next.

With a rich learning environment and many opportunities for students to be involved in our school we do have many of our students taking advantage of what our school offers. However, there are still a number of students in both the French Immersion and English tracks that have difficulties fully taking advantage of the dimensions of social, academic and intellectual (Willms, Friesen & Milton, 2009) engagement in learning.
The situation I see in my classroom setting and hear from other teachers in the school that I would like to see change in, is students taking more ownership of their learning. Many of our students are not seeing themselves as successful learners, risk takers or challenging themselves as learners at varying levels. We hear “I can’t do it, so I won’t”, “Do I have to do more?” and “What’s the minimum I have to do?” Teaching grade 6/7, I see that some of my students have lost their way in being curious about learning and do not have a good way of articulating how they learn best as individuals. I have noticed that more students have a fixed mindset of learned helplessness and a dependency of not being able to take risks on their own. This lack of understanding of how they see themselves as learners leads me to the purpose of my research. What strategies or learning environments would best support these learners, especially in the transition year from grade seven to high school?

**Research Question**

In what ways will student reflections about themselves as learners grow in depth and in complexity, as they are encouraged to identify skills and characteristics that make up their “Personal Learner’s Manual”?

**Why is this Study Important?**

My goal in researching the depth and complexity of how students articulate who they are as learners will help me to better understand and support my students in developing a strong learner identity. I will be basing my definition of learner identity on the 40 years of research Kolb & Kolb have done on experiential learning theory and their idea of the learning way, which “requires deliberate effort to create new knowledge in the face of uncertainty and failure; but opens the way to new, broader and deeper horizons of experience. Learning is intrinsically rewarding and empowering, bringing new avenues of experience and new realms of mastery”
Having learning identity is when a person see themselves as a learner, seeking and engaging in life experiences with a positive attitude towards their learning and see themselves as having the ability to learn (Kolb & Kolb, 2009).

In the research done on the transition of students from elementary grades to high school and its impact on student social, academic and intellectual engagement Willms, Friesen and Milton (2009) suggest that there is a growing concern for students’ ability to function effectively in their new environment and that learner engagement for some is decreasing over time in high school. Bouffard, Boileau and Vezeau (2001) as well as other studies describe the transition of students from elementary to secondary school as time when students often are unsure of their competencies.

Monique Boekaerts, a prominent researcher in the field of self-regulated learning, has summarized the role of motivation and emotion in classroom learning. She asserts that, “students are more motivated to engage in learning when: they feel competent to do what is expected of them and perceive stable links between actions and achievement” (2010, p. 91). She also adds that, “they experience positive emotions towards learning activities and contrariwise, turn away from learning when they experience negative emotions” (p. 91). From gaining a better understanding of how students articulate who they are as learners and providing different learning situations for students to reflect on, my hope is to provide some insight and recommendations for strategies that will support and strengthen students’ learner identity so they become confident self-regulated learners that are motivated and socially engaged in different learning environments.
Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

There is a great deal of research that supports the idea of having a growth mindset towards self-regulated learning and its relationship to enhancing self-efficacy, motivation and the social emotional state in learners. Can identifying who you are as a learner and how you learn best enhance ones growth mindset and eagerness to learn?

Growth mindset versus fixed mindset.

Carol Dweck, a well respected, leading psychologist/researcher at Stanford University has been researching the topics of student success and achievement. In her book, Mindset: The New Psychology of Success (2008), Dweck talks about the influence and the effects that a growth mindset or a fixed mindset can have on our achievement and success. Her definition of a growth mindset is that it is “based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts” unlike a fixed mindset that hinders achievement (p. 7). A fixed mindset “fills people’s minds with interfering thoughts, it makes effort disagreeable, and it leads to inferior learning strategies” (p. 67). Albert Bandura (1993) has a similar view of children with a growth mindset as children who, “regard ability as an acquirable skill that can be increased by gaining knowledge and competencies… They judge their capabilities more in terms of personal improvement than by comparison against the achievement of others” (p.120). He describes fix-minded children viewing their ability, “as an inherent capacity” (p. 120). These learners prefer tasks that do not involve risk taking and do not result in a decrease in making errors. This is at “the expense of expanding their knowledge and competencies,”(Bandura, 1993, p. 120). In order for a student to overcome obstacles and frustration in their learning, Kolb & Kolb (2009) believe students who demonstrate the ability to use positive self-talk, being able to say, “I can do this” rather than saying, “I am stupid” or “I am no good at…” is important in enhancing what they
consider a positive learning identity (p. 8). Albert Bandura (1993) echoes the ideas of Dweck, Kolb and Kolb about growth mindset and learner identity when he states, “People with high efficacy approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided. Such an efficacious outlook fosters interest and deep engrossment in activities.

The work and insights of Social Cognitive Psychologists Bandura (1993) and Zimmerman (1989) believe that the areas critical for students, in developing a growth mindset in relation to life-long learning and academic achievement are: their ability to be self-regulated learners, the beliefs students have about their abilities as learners and being motivated to learn, as well as, how learners perceive their “social efficacy” (Bandura, 1993). Adding to these ideas, that in developing a growth mindset it is critical for students to have a positive emotional engagement in the social process of learning with others by building and sustaining productive relationships with teachers and peers (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). The way we can help students develop their learner identity and evaluate how they are progressing in their self-efficacy, motivation and social relationships in relation to learning is through metacognitive strategies.

Self-Regulated Learning

My goal as a teacher is to help students understand themselves as learners and to equip them with strategies to help them become confident life-long learners (Bandura, 1993). It becomes difficult to engage students in these learning strategies when they do not have a positive mindset towards learning, are not prepared to take risks in their learning, make mistakes, self-reflect on their performance and set goals for themselves. A student who has a strong belief in him/herself as a learner, referred to by Kolb & Kolb (2009) as “learning identity” has a better chance of experiencing academic success at school. Many researchers in the area of Social Cognitive Theory and the topic of self-regulation refer to this as learner “self-efficacy”
(Zimmerman, 1989; Bandura, 1993; Parjares, 1997; Schunk & Mullen, 2012). The Webster’s English Dictionary (2007) defines efficacy as “achieving the desired results” (p. 90). A definition of self-efficacy as defined in a cognitive nature by Albert Bandura is “about one’s perceived capability to perform a certain task in a very specific domain” (Bandura, 1997 cited in Mercer, 2008, p. 182). Nurturing strong self-efficacy in learners and giving them the opportunity to articulate whom they are as learners and advocate for how they learn best will hopefully enhance their motivation, engagement and resiliency to learn within the context of a growth mindset.

Self-efficacy

The research on self-regulated learning is vast and diverse in its content. In this section the review of literature will be focused on self-regulated learning and its relationship to self-efficacy beliefs and motivation in enhancing engagement toward academic achievement in students. From a social cognitive approach to academic learning, Barry Zimmerman (1989) defines self-regulated learners as those that are, “metacognitively, motivationally and behaviorally active participants in their own learning process” (p. 2). He further qualifies specifically in his definition that self-regulated learners “… must involve the use of specified strategies to achieve academic goals on the basis of self-efficacy perceptions” (p. 2). A large body of research has been done in the area of self-regulated learning and its connection to student self-efficacy, motivation and metacognition. Many of the models that have been created to describe the process of self-regulated learning indicate learner belief and self-efficacy as the starting point or the center of the various interaction between goal initiation, motivation, engagement, internal and external feedback and metacognition that help develop an effective self-regulated learner (Bandura, 2010; Butler, 2002; Zimmerman, 1989; Ames, 1992). How
learners perceive themselves as competent learners can effect the amount of effort they apply to an activity and their length of persistence and resilience when dealing with obstacles and setbacks in learning situations (Pajares, 1997). This leads to the topic of motivation, the engagement of learners and the processes of self-efficacy, goals and self-evaluations of goal progress that are significant in enhancing our students perseverance and resiliency toward their learning (Schunk & Mullen, 2012).

**Motivation**

Bandura (2010) acknowledges Zimmerman’s and Martinez-Pons 1986 work showing good self-regulators perform well academically compared to poor self-regulators. He also stresses that self-regulatory skill alone will not be effective “if the students cannot get themselves to apply them persistently in the face of difficulties, stressors, and competing attractions” (pp. 136 & 137). Further, Boekaerts (2010) shares Bandura’s view that ‘motivation regulation strategies’ may not always be enough in helping the student accomplish their goals when stating that, “Even if the students are led on a mastery pathway initially – many obstacles might occur on route to the learning goal” (p.75). Through the lens of a social cognitive perspective, B. J. Zimmerman, A. Bandura and Martinez-Pons did a study in 1992 with high school social studies classes, who were mainly of a minority group. A self-efficacy and goal-setting scale was given to students as part of a questionnaire for setting grade goals. These questionnaires were administered just after the start of the semester and at the end of the semester a final grade was given. The students evaluated their perceived level of self-efficacy in establishing an environment that promoted learning, being responsible for planning their academic activities, to use thinking strategies that increased understanding, seeking help when needed, and being motivated to persevere in doing their work and meeting deadlines. They found
that the higher students’ self-regulatory efficacy was, the more confident the students were in mastering academic tasks in different subject areas (Bandura, 2010). Schunk and Mullen (2012) share the same opinion that self-efficacy is “a critical personal factor that can affect motivation, engagement, learning, and achievement” (p. 232). They go further to say that “personal, cultural, and social factors” can also shape a learners’ self-efficacy.

**Social Relationships**

Kolb & Kolb (2009) point out that,

Learning identity is determined not by past learning successes and failures alone but by the self attributions about these successes and failures that a person makes. These attributions are strongly influenced by important relationships. Evaluations by others can also influence learning identity, sometimes in unexpected and subtle ways. (p. 3)

Finding ways to build learner skills and self-efficacy will aid more learners to be more motivated and engaged in their learning (Schunk & Mullen, 2012). When classroom instruction is designed and in support of a *mastery goal orientation* and not strictly focused on a *performance goal orientation* (Hattie, 2013; Wiliam, 2011; Ames, 1992) effort towards learning is enhanced. A deeper understanding of learning is achieved by learners when they are put at the centre of their learning in a effort-based learning environment (Kaser & Halbert, 2009) and are supported in their goal setting, learning how to reason and think and are given opportunities to be accountable for their learning through talking with others (pp. 89-90). If learners are motivated to engage and gain a deeper understanding of how they learn then they are more likely to engage in metacognition strategies.
Metacognition

Both Dr. Dylan Wiliam (2011) and Stuart Shanker (2013) are proponents of renowned developmental psychologist John Flavell’s definition of metacognition. In Dr. Shanker’s words, metacognition “is the awareness and understanding of one’s own thinking or cognitive processes – in simple terms, it is ‘thinking about thinking’ (p. 46). Dylan Wiliam (2011) summarizes metacognition as including, “ knowing what one knows (metacognitive knowledge), what one can do (metacognitive skills), and what one knows about one’s own cognitive abilities (metacognitive experience)” (p. 148). All these skills play a role in the academic achievements of learners especially those students that are self-regulating (Butler & Winne, 1995) and are motivated to access them (Wiliam, 2011).

In his book, Schools That Learn, Peter Senge (2000) talks about seven intellectual behaviours and how some students are not able to describe how they solved a problem or have the ability to make plans, reflect on or assess the quality of their personal thinking skills and strategies used in learning a new concept. Senge shares a similar belief as other key researchers in this area (Wiliam, 2011; Shanker, 2013; Butler & Winne, 1995) with respect to students implementing metacognitive strategies to enhance achievement in learning when he states,

When students become more aware of their own thinking, they can describe what goes on in their heads, what they already know versus what they need to know, what data are lacking and their plans for producing those data. Before they begin to solve a problem, they can describe their plan of action, list the steps, and tell where they are in the sequence. (p. 199)

As we teach learners to think, Senge (2000) and Boekaerts (2010) articulate the same view that learners need to gain the ability to be persistent and resilient when strategies for
problem solving do not work. Students need to be able to try a different strategy in order to solve the problem. But they caution that not all learners have the “conditional knowledge” (Boekaerts, p. 75) or in other words, the ability to draw on “past knowledge and experience” (Senge, p. 200) in order to overcome hurdles in their learning. Learners will need the teacher to support them in choosing self-regulation strategies that are appropriate for the context of the learning so, “not to undermine adaptive functioning in the future” (Boekaerts, p. 75).

When the learner has the ability to understand and articulate how they learn and reflect on their experiences in the process of their learning, their motivation is the outcome. The match between challenge and the capabilities of the learner is just right. The motivation that comes from this experience is the “consequence of the achievement” and not the cause of it (Wiliam, 2011, p. 149). Paris & Winograd (1990) talk about the role of teachers in helping develop metacognitive strategies in the learners that we teach. They propose that, “Instruction that promotes awareness and optimism can promote metacognition in students and teachers” (p. 13). They offer four ways of instruction that promote students’ ability to learn to think, “metacognitive explanation, scaffolding instruction, cognitive coaching and cooperative learning” (p.13). These types of instruction in combination will enhance the intrinsic motivation and the thinking skills of learners.

In reviewing the diverse research done in the area of metacognition I was drawn to two studies that exemplify the role of the teacher in promoting intrinsic motivation and supporting metacognition strategies in their students. In a study done by Lam, Cheng, and Ma (2007) on teacher and student intrinsic motivation in project-based learning involving 126 high school teachers and 631 students they found that there was a direct relationship in predicting teacher intrinsic motivation and student intrinsic motivation, as well as indirectly the instructional
support that was given to the students by the teachers. When teachers reported (method used was a questionnaire) intrinsic motivation in the program then the students felt they were being more supported by their teachers and their intrinsic motivation increased.

A study done by Cordova & Lepper (1996) on the beneficial effects of contextualization, personalization and choice on intrinsic motivation and the process of learning with elementary school students, computer activities were used to teach arithmetical order-of-operations rules. The researchers found that in the classrooms where the learning activities were presented in a “meaningful and appealing learning context” (p. 715) either with personalization or not and where choice was given, the intrinsic motivation in students drastically increased compared to the control group where the material was presented abstractly. The students’ depth of engagement, amount learned, level of competency and aspiration for the topic also increased. When students are given meaningful instruction and support within diverse teaching environments students become empowered to take ownership of their thinking and willingness to “risk failure to achieve greater understanding” (Paris & Winogard, 1990, p. 13).

In conclusion, my review of the literature spanned the relationship between learners’ self-regulated learning with respect to students’ self-efficacy, motivation, and relationships with others. The review of the literature also, focused on the strategy of metacognition with respect to students’ learning and the student’s ability to be engaged in the process of life-long learning. Research involving learners’ self-belief or self-efficacy has shown that how a learner perceives his/her abilities or capabilities in completing a certain task is a pivotal component in a learners’ motivation and learning (Schunk and Mullen, 2012). The research shows that for learners to be motivated and engaged in the understanding of their learning we need to put the learner at the centre, giving choice and using a variety of instructional strategies that promote effort and
resiliency on the part of the learner (Ames, 1992; Paris & Winograd, 1990). When learners are resilient, resourceful, reflective, learning from others (Halbert & Kaser, 2009) and engaging in thinking about their thinking they increase their potential for academic success (Shanker, 2013, p. 46).

Gaining an understanding of the influence student self-efficacy, motivation, relationships and metacognition have on student learning has helped me see the major role students have in developing a strong sense of who they are as learners. Unless the students are able to understand how they learn and are able to confidently articulate this, how do teachers effectively know how their students learn best and decide what learning strategies work best for them in achieving their goals? By engaging in this action research, I plan to put this body of knowledge into action by providing strong learner tools and strategies. It will help me to examine the impact that goal setting, reflecting and opportunities to engage in different learning environments have on the students’ ability to articulate who they are as learners.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Research Question
In what ways will student reflections about themselves as learners grow in depth and in complexity, as they are encouraged to identify skills and characteristics that make up their personal learner’s manual?

Purpose Statement
The purpose of this research is to help students better understand themselves as learners and for them to be able to identify and describe what characteristics and skills they possess. My hope is that this will help them to stay more engaged and become advocates for themselves as learners. I also feel the purpose of this research is to help me to understand the influence and impact of the variety of strategies that I employ to help my students to understand themselves as learners.

Methodology
The design of my project is one of action research. Action research is defined by Geoffrey Mills (2014), as “any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researcher, principals, school counselors, or other stake holders in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn” (pg. 8). This method engages the researcher in the following four-step framework:

1. Identifying an area of focus.
2. Collecting data.
3. Analyzing and interpreting data.
4. Developing an action plan.

This project is based on the reflections and artifacts of grade 6 & 7 students and my observations as a researcher. I felt action research best suited my study since it involved the
process of “… gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environments (and educational practices in general) and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved” (Mills, 2014, p. 8). My goal is to help my students improve their identity as successful learners and their ability to effectively articulate whom they are as learners and how they learn best.

The approach to my research is qualitative, which as stated by Mills (2014), “uses narrative, descriptive approaches to data collection to understand the way things are and what the research means from the perspectives of the participants in the study” (p. 20) to view the students’ thoughts and experiences throughout the activities and their reflections. This is a basis of my data collection and analysis process.

I have also framed this action research through the lens of appreciative inquiry. Barrett, Cooperrider & Ludema’s (2012) definition of appreciative inquiry is that it “distinguishes itself from critical modes of action research by its deliberately affirmative assumptions about people, organizations, and relationships. It focuses on asking the unconditional positive question to ignite transformative dialogue and action within human systems” (p.1). The students and I used this lens of appreciation in order to view the growth and transformation that occurred as they built a repertoire of strong characteristics and skills as successful learners. It is a “strength-based, capacity building approach to changing human systems through developing a shared image of potential by first discovering the best in shared experiences” (Kaser & Halbert, 2009, p. 66). In addition to an appreciative inquiry approach, there are elements of narrative inquiry woven into this research. For example, the students’ reflections have been constructed as qualitative data in the form of narratives.
In doing action research I was hoping to help make a change in how my students see themselves as learners by understanding the characteristics they possess in different learning situations. By having students assess the positive aspects of themselves as learners in an appreciative inquiry approach hopefully it will give students a springboard on which to start building new characteristics and skills; adding to their existing repertoire of learner traits. I chose to use narrative inquiry as a way to show the students’ thinking. It is their voice that I want to hear as the result of my research. I hoped to hear and see the impact the opportunities and different strategies I used in my research positively or negatively influence how they identify with any, some or all of the following types of learners: industrious, risk taking, creative, strategic, thoughtful, compassionate, confident and enthusiastic.

Method

Participants

The participants involved in my research come from a small rural town called Smithers in Northwestern British Columbia. They attend Ecole Muheim Elementary with a population of 280 students. The participants for this research were the 18 English Grade 6/7 students with whom I worked 70% of the school week in a dual track English/French Immersion School. There were 9 girls and 9 boys. Of the 18 students 12 were Aboriginal and no student was identified in this study. The focus of this study was on how students were able to identify personal skills and characteristics as a learner in different learning situations.

Procedure

1. Before initiating my research we established a safe and caring environment for the students to engage in learning for all the English grade 6/7 students, building a community of learners through social responsibility and team-building activities.
2. All students worked in teams to brainstorm what the qualities and skills that a successful learner would have to possess to help him/her be a confident learner. Sue Bannister is a teacher in the Comox School District #71 who holds a MA in student assessment and language arts and developed under the mentorship of Dr. Terry Johnson a “Successful Learners Framework” which consists of eight traits that are critical to being successful. (Bannister, 2013, p. 5) From our inquiry the students came up with qualities and skills that correspond to the eight characteristic traits of a successful learner (see Figure 1) she has developed into resource posters for teachers to use in their classrooms.

![Figure 1. Samples of group work showing ideas of the qualities and skills of a successful learner.](image)

3. I introduced the set of eight posters of the Successful Learner Traits (Bannister, 2006) and displayed them in the classroom for students to use as a tool in helping them write their reflections and their weekly goals (see Figure 2).
4. In order for the students to get an appreciation for how they learn I had the students write about a time in their life where they learned to do something new. This included discussing how they learned to do it, what strengths did they bring to the learning and who helped them if anyone.

5. I guided students through a discussion of an independent appreciative inquiry creating a profile of what type of learner they thought they were and what skills they possessed as a successful learner. We discussed the strengths they had as a learner and areas they needed to work on as a learner. Students used the characteristics and skills they developed from their group brainstorming session and from the characteristic charts mentioned above, to help build their own profile. This involved a discussion on abilities in different subject areas, such as, Math, Writing, Reading as well as, activities in the
school (sports teams, cultural activities) and different learning environments (in class, library, computer use, independent or group work).

6. Students then were asked to reflect on three questions about their learning. This was to give me a baseline in their reflecting as a learner.

   a. *Where are you going with your learning?*

   b. *How is your learning going?*

   c. *Where to next in your learning?* (Knowing now what you know about yourself as a learner)

7. From January to the end of May students were involved in a variety of activities and projects-based learning across the curriculum. Strategies were woven throughout teaching and learning activities. For example, differentiated learning strategies were used to help build the self-efficacy in students. Giving choice in how they do and show their learning was used to promote engagement. A variety of different learning environments were incorporated to help students explore working with others and explore project based learning and inquiry. Students reflected on how they perceived that their learning was going while working in these environments and engaging in different activities. At the end of January, February, March and May students chose an artifact from the various academic areas that they thought best represented who they were as a learner and how they learned best. Some examples of the activities students engaged in and chose to talk about in their artifacts were,
• Designing a snowboard where the task was for students to be involved in cutting out a snowboard and designing an art piece for the surface of their board. Students worked along side students from the grade 6/7 French Immersion class. Students were given a choice of mediums that could be used in applying their designs to their boards.

• Independently developing and designing a game board for practicing their words in their word work. The theme was downhill skiing/snowboarding, which they had been doing for Physical Education class.

• A study about Residential Schools involving literacy based activities, in group and independent settings. This study incorporated whole class discussions, literature circles, guest speakers, and choice of how student could reflect on their learning and in their presentation of their final project.

• Some students chose concepts they had learned in Math and talked about the type of learner they demonstrated when learning a new math skill.

8. From these artifacts the students reflected on what characteristics of a learner they showed and the skills they demonstrated as a learner. For example, a student may have written, “I am a Risk Taker in Math and I know this because I was putting up my hand to share my answers even if they might be wrong” (see Figure 3)
Figure 3. Shapes used in Personal Learner’s Manuals for students to use in reflecting about artifacts or skills they have learned.

9. At the end of January, February, March, April and May students did a written reflection answering the three questions mentioned in #5 about how they view themselves as a learner using the eight characteristics and skills that they applied to the activities or projects.

10. In addition to their written reflections I had the students verbally articulate who they were as a learner to their parents at their Student-Led conferences in April using examples of their work to support their ideas. I recorded their interviews with their parents so they could have feedback on how they articulated who they were as a learner.

11. As of June 13, 2014 students had completed their final written reflection; a letter they wrote to themselves articulating who they are as a learner in certain learning environments and their reflection on their artifact. In my research journal I made general observations from the data collected. From the reflections that students and parents had given consent for me to use I analyzed the data for common themes that surfaced.
12. From a first, general review of student reflections and my ongoing observations and from a first analysis of the students’ reflections and from their weekly goal setting, a set of common themes emerged. This is in reference to the way students approached their learning, took ownership of and were motivated to be successful learners independently and/or working with others.

13. When analyzing the students’ reflections I color-coded their statements in relation to the themes that had emerged, abilities, motivation, attitude and relationships. I focused on the diversity of the characteristics described by the student and the depth to which the students articulated the skills used in their learning to being successful.

14. From analyzing the students’ responses based on the themes that emerged, I then color-coded the students’ their responses (see Table 1) based on the successful learner traits.

Table 1

| Colour Coding Used to Identify Characteristics and Skills Articulated by the Students |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| **Student Monthly Responses**   | **January Reflection**          | **February Reflection**         | **April Reflection**            |
| R: “I need to be more enthusiastic and not have such a bad attitude.” | “Once I ace all of my goals I think I will try to be more confident because when I’m not I get nervous and its hard to work like in basketball I wasn’t confident and I was nervous. I will also try to be compassionate in my work and other activities. I want to be more industrious in homework and be more sportsmanship like and not get mad when the rules are broken.” | “I want to be more confident and enthusiastic in math and gym and other projects. And stop arguing with students and teachers. I want to be more risk taking because I won’t learn as much if I’m in a shell then if I’m open to new things and different things.” | “I think that I need to work on being enthusiastic. And I need to be more risk taking and not stay in a shell and be open to things. Like in gym or class activities I need to be more open and not argue with things. I need to be more creative so I can learn new things.” |
15. I paired the traits that I felt went together based on student responses and the descriptions of the traits in the posters with the themes of abilities, motivation, attitude and relationship (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Characteristic Traits Attached to Identified Themes for Coding*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes and Characteristic Traits</th>
<th>Abilities</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Attitude</th>
<th>Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>Industrious</td>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>Thoughtful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traits</td>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>Risk Taking</td>
<td>Enthusiastic</td>
<td>Compassionate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By focusing on the students’ own language and the language they used from the posters in describing themselves as learners, I was able to capture their voice and not just mine through my observations as their teacher. The narratives were created from the natural tendency of the students to refer to the traits in pairs. Hence, this helped me to structure the way I colour coded their reflections and allowed me to gather numerical data of the most articulated traits compared to the least referred to over time.

From the coding I was able to focus on areas of development in the students use of the learner traits and how they viewed their learning. I was able to track how consistently students referred to each trait and how and to what depth in their explanations they expanded their number of learner traits over the time of the project.

In addition to an appreciative inquiry approach, there are elements of narrative inquiry woven into this research. For example, the students’ reflections have been constructed as qualitative data in the form of narratives. I feel that this combination of action research, appreciative inquiry and narrative inquiry is an appropriate set of methods for this study. Each method helped to initiate my research with the students and give them a positive connection to
their learning as they began their journey of understanding the characteristics and skills they have as successful learners and being able to articulate these traits.
Chapter Four: Findings and Results

In this chapter, I will discuss the data analysis under the following sub headings: General Observations, Making Connections: The ‘Eight Successful Learner Traits’, How did I learn something new? Processing: How Do The Students Talk About Themselves as Learners, The Links Between Behaviour and Learning, Analysis of Weekly Goal Reflections, The Learning Environment and Activities. Transforming: Have the Students Developed a Sense of Who They are as Learners? My analysis is the result of my general observations of how students responded to different learning situations and environments, looking at the students’ monthly responses to three questions: Where are you going with your learning? How is your learning going? Where to next in your learning? Along with student reflections, I analyzed student responses to their weekly goal setting and chosen artifacts. I will talk about the strongest themes that I felt came from my analysis in the final section of this chapter.

As I discussed in the introduction, as I came into this work I was feeling that many of my students were becoming more disengaged from their learning, giving up easily or working at a minimal level of effort. I felt that by accessing the students’ prior knowledge of what they thought a successful learner looked and sounded like, I would see a relationship between their disengagement and their level of understanding or awareness of learner traits and skills that they may possess.

Having the students describe a time when they learned a new skill I was hoping to gain insight into how the students perceived themselves as learners and what characteristics and skills they already bring to learning something new. By having students reflect each month on what they had learned and their experience of learning I was, curious about the way they talk about themselves as learners and if they knew where their learning was going with respect to their
abilities, and what helped them stay engaged and motivated to be successful in completing their tasks. Would they be able to explain how their learning was going with respect to gaining new knowledge, abilities and behaviours as learners? Would they know where they wanted to go next in their learning? Would they know what they still needed to work on?

Goal setting at the beginning of every week allowed the students to choose one of the learner traits and focus on the skills involved in demonstrating that characteristic. The analysis is based on the students’ responses of when or how they were successful in achieving their goal and when they had more difficulty. They also had to give evidence to help justify why they thought this.

From analyzing the students’ responses with respect to giving choice and opportunities to explore the learner traits in different learning situations I was curious to know what traits were most recognized in the different settings and if the traits were transferred from one setting to another. Certain themes began to develop from my general observations and the data collected from the students’ voices in their reflections and goal setting responses.

**General Observations**

From my general observations and analyzing the students’ reflections and their weekly goal-setting activity, the following common themes emerged.

Students’ sense of themselves as learners

- Mindset
- Ownership of their learning

Self-regulated learners

- Self-efficacy and learned-helplessness
- Engagement
• Motivation/Effort

Learning as a social process

• Students’ relationship with teachers and peers

Learning About The Eight Successful Learner Traits

In order to learn about the eight Successful Learner traits students participated in a brainstorming activity describing what they thought each trait looked like/sounded like with respect to the behaviour a learner would demonstrate. Using a carousel strategy for gathering information, in groups of two or three, students rotated through each characteristic trait writing their ideas on the poster paper. Each group was assigned one of the traits and asked to choose three of the comments recorded by their classmates that best represented the characteristic trait. We discussed their responses to gain knowledge of the meaning of each trait and compared their similarities and differences. We then compared their responses to the posters that were developed by Sue Bannister (Bannister, 2006). The students used this tool to help them have a visual reference and common language to use when describing who they were as learners in their weekly goal setting (Appendix A), reflections (Appendix B) and personal learner’s manual (Appendix C). The students’ understanding of the Successful Learner traits are represented by the words they chose to describe them, as follows:

Creative: “imagination”, “finds own ideas”, “inventive”, “takes risks”

Strategic: “organized”, “takes it slow”, “finds new ways to do things”

Confident: “has a good attitude”, “takes risks”, “know what they are doing”

Enthusiastic: “ready to learn”, “lots of energy”, “has lots of ideas”

Industrious: “hard working”, “doesn’t give up”, “sets goals”

Risk Taker: “not afraid to fail”, “just do it, no holding back”, “challenge yourself”
Thoughtful: “thinks it through”, “shares good ideas”, “help others with ideas”

Compassionate: “they love doing their work”, “believe in their work”, “support others”

I noticed when the students were working in their groups some were more engaged than others and needed support in contributing to the exercise. It did not surprise me that some students relied on the voice of others in their group to come up with ideas, even when each had to add their own idea to the papers. I often had to design groupings so that there was a heterogeneous combination of ability to ensure that more vulnerable students were supported and I would receive results from each group. It did surprise me that the language the students used to describe each characteristic was comparable to the language used on the Successful Learner posters I was using as part of the research. I also found it interesting that although the students generally had a good understanding of what a learner should look like they had difficulty describing themselves using the descriptors in a later learning activity.

How Did I Learn Something New?

I gave my students the task of reflecting about how they learned something new, something as simple as tying ones shoe. My intent is to find ways to support them in building a repertoire of learner traits to better understand themselves as learners and articulate that understanding. The students’ approach to this task was of mixed enthusiasm and confidence.

At first, I was met with students voicing that they couldn’t do the task. They didn’t have anything to write about that would be good, that fit the criteria. Some students struggled to begin even after we had brainstormed commonplace ideas, such as learning to ride a bike, learning to ice skate or learning to play an instrument to help jumpstart their thinking. For many of the students it seemed that they had not previously thought about how they learned new things. I
noted in my journal, “some of the students definitely do not identify with themselves as a learner and what a learner does to take risks, be motivated and engaged in the task.” For these students they avoided writing as if it was a test and they didn’t know the answer. For them, it was easier to just shut down and avoid the learning situation.

This was not apparent for all the students. I noticed that the student responses ranged from a few sentences from some to very detailed accounts by others. Some went so far as to include, their motivation for learning it, the steps taken to learn the activity and who helped them and how they persevered when overcoming obstacles in their way of being successful. I noted in my journal that some students were able to connect to a topic quickly where others needed support to connect to personal events. Students Q and O both struggled with giving detail in their verbal and written responses. Student Q, a learner that needs support in the class was only able to identify the event and who helped. He wrote, “I learned how to skate at the Smithers’ arena. My uncle taught me how to skate.” Interestingly, Student O is a confident learner in most subjects, also struggled to complete the task. He wrote, “The thing I learned to do was operate a ride on lawn-mower.” Their strategies for being industrious, focusing on the task and being confident, taking pride and thinking positively towards their work, was minimal, if not lacking during this activity.

From my observations and analysis, I was surprised at how little the two students wrote in 45 minutes even when support was given to each of them. There was almost immediate disengagement on the part of these two students. Their responses showed limited insight into how they identify with learning something new. There was no indication of steps taken in learning the activity or the amount of passion, practice and perseverance they demonstrate in their learning. I realized and was concerned that these students did not have the awareness,
language and skills to identify with how they learn, causing a level of frustration and ultimately a
decrease in confidence and motivation to complete the task.

I noticed that after brainstorming and conferencing with students who were struggling, they eventually all had something they could relate to, yet some students were still hindered by the task of expressing themselves both orally and/or in written form without continual support and encouragement. After a lot of coaxing and modeling of possible responses I began to see some more detailed responses emerge.

Student D wrote:

“I learned how to hunt with my grandpa. My first hunting trip was when I was 5 I went grouse hunting. But I lost the clip. But I also scared the moose away by singing.”

Student A wrote:

How I learned to draw. I asked my dad how to draw and how my dad taught me how to draw he told me art takes time and to be focused and be creative and to draw what’s easy for me. How I learned to draw Animie (sic). I learned from a Manga art book and the internet. How I learned was from the instructions.

These students struggled with accessing the language to describe their learning. Their writing is minimal and contains general statements about learning the activity without elaborating on how they contribute to the process of learning. There is minimal connection to the learner traits they demonstrate in learning the task. Risk taking was not very evident in my students with respect to this task. I did not see many students independently empowered to put their thoughts onto the paper without the help of Educational Assistants or myself. In many of the students I did not see ownership of their learning or intrinsic motivation for completing the task.
One student was hesitant to write about her learning experience and choose to use images rather than give a written account of learning to ride a bike (see Figure 4).

![Figure 4](image)

*Figure 4. Learning how to ride a bike: A student’s visual representation*

Her choice to capture the event visually indicated to me that this student was aware of how she could best articulate her learning in relation to her abilities and was not willing to take the risk of using a form that she was not confident engaging in. The picture still expresses the details and emotions she experienced and the person that encouraged her in achieving her goal of riding a bike.

During this activity, there was a definite range of student engagement and effort put into the writing task. A response from another student who also struggles to synthesize his ideas onto paper is provided support and is able to capture the basic ideas of how he learned to swim. He wrote:

*I taught myself how to swim by going in Tyhee (local lake) by myself without a life jacket. I kept trying and trying and trying until I got it. The way I knew how was because the other kids were swimming and stuff. I just didn’t know how to float but I learned after my mom taught me. She just yelled from the shore and then I got it.*
It took perseverance on his part to keep working at it with his mom’s help. He did not go into much detail about each of those areas but he did have an understanding of what he needed to do to learn by observing, being motivated by others and to keep trying.

Another student’s account of how she learned to play the trumpet is not detailed in her writing, yet she did tell me that taking it slowly and processing step by step she was able to learn. She wrote:

> The thing I learned about was how to play the trumpet. I learned this by listening to my teacher and took a small step one at a time. ...I took things slowly and did my best carefully. I watched others and asked questions. And practiced, practiced, practiced! ...

> When I could not get something right, I ask questions and didn’t give up. When I would ask questions some times I am shy because I think people expect me to be something I’m not. ... Bottom line is, don’t give up and don’t be shy to ask questions. And be yourself!

Again, like the first student she also watches others and knows that practice and not giving up is an important component in mastering the skill. I noticed she articulates the importance of valuing herself as a learner to mention and not to be influenced by others.

The third example is more detailed in how the student accomplished her goal of learning to skate. She highlights the importance of having a critical partner to help support and motivate her to keep trying. This student wrote:

> When I first learned how to skate it looked hard...I looked everyone around me once more then I took a deep breath and go for it. I started slow I spread my arms out for balance. But sometimes I fell onto the ice. I kept at it. I lost my balance a few times, ___helped me get up. I told her my legs were getting tired, but I know I will learn how to skate. “You can do it, ‘C’! I know you can. ___cheered for me, I felt a bit confident
“Okay, once more.” I said aloud. Again I took a deep breath and went for it, my arms were out, I looked up, ____ kind of guided me. I couldn’t believe my eyes! I did it! I was so happy and I know mom was happy too. I turned to her and waved while I smiled then I went back skating with my friends.

She has similar elements in how she learns (going slowly, perseverance, awareness and relationship to others) to those of the other two students, as do other students in the class. The one difference I noticed about this student is the importance she places on the relationship and confirmation of her mom seeing her being able to skate on her own. This student sets a high standard for herself and positive acknowledgement and approval is important to her as a learner.

**My Learning.**

I had made an assumption that talking about oneself with respect to a personal experience would have been an easy task to engage my students in and would be a positive appreciative inquiry approach to the start of my research. I quickly found out that this was not the case. Moving forward, I hoped that using the strategy of weekly goal setting and self-reflection would help them to connect more clearly and articulate their personal learning characteristics and skills as learners.

**How Do The Students Talk About Themselves as Learners?**

For the next five months, at the end of each month, I gave students the reflection questions: Where are you going with your learning? How is it going? Where to next with your learning? Upon writing their baseline reflections at the end of the first month, I noticed that some students struggled to understand the three questions they were to respond to. I found that the questions required repeated modeling for some students over the whole five months in order for them to fully understand what they were to reflect on. In my analysis of the data I looked at each
question separately across the five months and will report my findings in that way, starting with the first question.

**Where are you going with your learning?**

In the first of four reflections I, found the first question to be the most difficult for students to reflect on. Some of the students’ responses were vague and lacked detail. I noticed that some students focused on a particular area of learning and did not describe where they were going with respect to their overall learning characteristics and skills as I had asked them to do.

For example:

Student A wrote, “Not far.”

Student C wrote, “In math I am doing fractions, I’m learning a new and faster way how to do fractions.”

Student R wrote, “I’m slowly getting more enthusiastic in work but I need to improve more in everything.”

As I compared the reflections over time, I noticed that most students’ articulation of how they saw where they were going in their learning was changing in their reflections. This was not only the ‘confident’ students but also students I felt had difficulties focusing on tasks or I considered to be hesitant writers. As I analyzed the difference in their responses from the first to the fifth one, I noticed that many students commented on more than one area of learning. Some students also gave justification in support of their statements to help them communicate the characteristics they were demonstrating in different learning situations. Student N’s responses in Table 3 are an example of the shift in her use of language to describe her learning over time.
Table 3

Student N’s Responses to: Where Are You Going with Your Learning?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Responses</th>
<th>End of January</th>
<th>End of February</th>
<th>Beginning of April</th>
<th>End of May</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I try not to get frustrated on things I don’t get.</td>
<td>“I have been working on trying to add a lot of detail to send a really clear</td>
<td>“I’m trying to be more industrious because sometimes I give up.”</td>
<td>“I am becoming more confident. Because usually in gym I would sit out because I</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes I get frustrated because I don’t want to</td>
<td>picture to the reader by thinking about what we are writing about so I can</td>
<td></td>
<td>couldn’t do something now I am in the game giving my best. In Science and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ask questions and I start to quit.”</td>
<td>dig down deep.”</td>
<td></td>
<td>Integrated Studies I’m more confident because I speak out and share my ideas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>more.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

She moved from commenting on frustration with respect to her learning to attaching subject areas and successful learner traits to the areas where she was overcoming her frustrations and the behaviour of quitting when learning got hard. Student R is another example of a student who added more details over time:

Table 4

Student R’s Responses to: Where Are You Going with Your Learning?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Responses</th>
<th>End of January</th>
<th>End of February</th>
<th>Beginning of April</th>
<th>End of May</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I’m slowly getting more enthusiastic in work but I</td>
<td>“I’ve been trying to connect with things in books story real life things. But</td>
<td>“I’m slowly getting better at Math. I still argue sometimes in Math but its</td>
<td>“I think that I’m becoming a industrious learner in certain things because I can</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to improve more in everything.”</td>
<td>I can’t try and try and try but I just can’t. I want to be able to so I can</td>
<td>slowly stopping.”</td>
<td>keep up with the work and home work. I’m working on being more enthusiastic in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>connect the big idea and get it better. I’m also trying to learn more in math</td>
<td></td>
<td>math and other things. And I am improving in being confident in reading. I</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>but its hard because its hard work and me and Mister C don’t petuclarly get</td>
<td></td>
<td>thought I couldn’t do it but I finished a lot more than I expected.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>along very well and argue. And I need to work on my times tables also the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>class sometimes slows my learning down because there’s so much bad behavior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and questions. Sometimes the bad behavior is from me. In wrighting I need to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>be more neat and spell words right.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In his second reflection, he added a comment about reading, which he also referred to in his final reflection. Through his second and third reflections I noticed that his comments about attitude and abilities were changing from a negative view to a more positive outlook towards the work
and the subjects he talked about. I noticed that this transition from negative thinking to more positive statements was a natural progression for most of the students. I had noted in my research journal that, "There is a change in perception of abilities from, 'I can't' to 'I can' statements from some students – making more proactive statements in their reflections. Connecting their success to the transition of their abilities." As well, I was hearing less negative self-talk from students in reference to their abilities while working on their tasks in the classroom.

Looking at the progression of the students’ ability to describe where they were going with their learning I found that there was a definite distinction between students who described having a feeling of being confident in their abilities compared to students who indicated that they were not. I noticed that students who were hesitant to write their reflections or were more unfocused during the task took longer to develop their awareness of the learner traits they possessed or did not seem to develop the awareness at all.

Student Q (see Table 5) is an example of someone who needed constant reinforcing, prompting and encouragement to get started in their work and consistent redirection in staying focused on their tasks at the beginning of the year. Student Q wrote:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5</th>
<th>Student Q’s Responses to: Where Are You Going with Your Learning?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Student Responses</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>End of January</strong></td>
<td><strong>End of February</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q: No Response</strong></td>
<td>&quot;I am becoming a better reader by chunking and thinking more about the big idea in my reading.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Student Q was not able to articulate where his learning was going in the first reflection and he gave a minimal response in his second. I noticed that student Q articulated more about his learning over time. He was willing to take more risks in using the successful learner traits to help him articulate who he was a learner. He didn’t take this risk until the end of the third month.

Even though he was using the descriptors at this point, he still did not give examples to support the characteristics he chose as traits he possessed. At the end of May he was able to articulate a connection of being confident in his reading as well as make reference to his ability to make connections and predictions when he read.

I also noticed in the final reflection he did not talk about all the areas that he reflected on in the third reflection. He only talked about his reading, which he referred to in his second and third reflections. His connection to where he was going in his learning was with his abilities in the activities that were most recent.

Student F in contrast, is an example of a student I consider to be confident in her approach to learning (see Table 6). From early on, she was able to articulate where she was going in her learning even without using the successful learner traits:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>End of January</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F: “I’m trying to put more detail into my writing instead of putting ideas that I don’t need and getting off topic.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>End of February</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“In my reading I have been working on going deeper by when I read something important to stop and think about it. In math I am working on being more persistent and actually trying to get the problem so that I can fully put down my thinking. In I.S.R. (Independent Smart Reading) I have been working on writing clearly and putting tons of feeling by picking out the big ideas.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Beginning of April</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“One of my goals is to be strategic in Math and Industrious in subjects I don’t understand because I usually get stuck or frustrated. Also making good use of time in changing into gym strip because I am slow. Also being more of a sportsmanship like player.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>End of May</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“In our Residential School unit I am working on going deeper with my book …and my thinking like being confident on understanding the whole thing and applying that to my life. In Math I am being strategic … I know that all angles add up to 180 degrees so I can never get a question wrong if I make sure they all add up to 180 degrees…. In Science I am trying to be more thoughtful in applying the info to my brain and thinking of ways to apply it to my life.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I noticed that over time, she began to inject some of the terminology used in the posters and attached them to subject areas she reflected on. She was able to associate the traits with application to her life.

What I found surprising was students similar in abilities and work habits to student F also started using the successful learner traits in the third reflection like student Q, but, many of them were able to go deeper in their explanations for statements without the use of the labels. By the final reflection student F gave examples for a variety of learning situations by attaching more of the characteristic traits to her examples, as did other students with similar responses.

In all examples presented in this section, I noticed that the students attached their connection of articulating where their learning was going to their confidence in their abilities in doing tasks or in certain learning situations. In analyzing the responses to the first question, being confident, enthusiastic and industrious were the three most chosen successful learner traits students identified.

My learning.

My interpretation of these findings is that I noticed the students had, to varying degrees, the ability to talk constructively about themselves as learners. Giving them the opportunity to reflect and talk about where they were going in their learning helped establish language for students to use when they talked about how they approached their learning in general, or within certain subjects. I feel that using the traits in a variety of ways; weekly goal setting, when building criteria for tasks, when conferencing with students, and with the ongoing opportunities to reflect, led them to be able to recognize themselves at certain times as effective learners.
How is your learning going?

With respect to the second question, I noticed this was an easier question for the students to answer. Their responses generally, related to what was recently covered in a subject or related to a particular learning environment. As in the responses to the first question the early reflections did not contain a great deal of detail or reference to the successful learner traits, which became more prominent in the third and fourth reflections.

However, even students who didn’t use the characteristic traits were able to talk about how their learning was going. Some of the students used their own words to describe how they were doing in the different subject areas or learning situations. Student F (see Table 7) relates her reflections mainly to ability, what she needs to do to get better and her level of engagement in the learning.

Table 7
Student F’s Responses to: How is Your Learning Going?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>End of January</th>
<th>End of February</th>
<th>Beginning of April</th>
<th>End of May</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Responses</td>
<td>“I’m trying to put more detail into my writing but I get carried away with what’s happening.”</td>
<td>“My reading is going well because in I.S.R. it helps me achieve my goal since I can set that as my goal. In math I still have trouble figuring out the concept in some questions. …In I.S.R. the class has been working on writing in role so that helps as well as the goal to go deeper in my reading.”</td>
<td>“In Math I need to show my thinking because I usually just answer the question using my head rather than showing how I solve it. In reading I am always prepared and always on task because reading is a subject I enjoy. In writing my strengths are writing in role and getting my ideas on paper. I need to work on punctuation and sentence structure.”</td>
<td>“Even after reading a lot (Residential School Unit) I need to speed up on the process of my reading yet still going just as deep with it like transferring all the information to my brain and putting it on paper.” “It makes me enthusiastic when I know I can do grade 7-8 math and succeed to understand it.” “So far it (being thoughtful) it is working nicely because I am focusing on how the info (Earth’s Crust Unit) will affect the future and it is helping me understand.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This example shows a connection between doing well and their ability to understand and complete tasks. Motivation and enthusiasm towards the subject or activity were also a factor in
many of the responses. The following excerpts in Table 8 are from the reflections of Students R, C and O. What is interesting about these reflections is that these students, like others, tended to become easily frustrated in their learning and in doing their work. They wrote:

Table 8  

**Students R, C, & Os’ Responses to: How is Your Learning Going?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>End of January</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**R:** "I’m not to enthusiastic but I’m getting way better in most subjects."

- "I think I’m slowly progressing in my learning because I’m learning more in math writing and connecting. I’m trying to be enthusiastic in doing snowboards was working hard and almost gave up but because I’m learning how to be more enthusiastic I didn’t. In Math I’ve tried to stop fighting with Mr. C and I’m more enthusiastic in math and more hard working. Getting more neat in writing and spelling words right. I’m not progressing as much as I would like in connecting."

- "In Math it depends on the mood I’m in. In reading I need to improve on pacing myself and listening to the teacher. When I’m up into my book I zone out."

- "I’m industrious I am improving drastically am getting every thing done and working hard on being faster. In math and things I like doing I’m slowly getting better at excepting them and having a positive attitude in math. I don’t argue anymore I do what I’m told. I’m really improving on being confident now I know that I can do things. Its helped me be more open and enthusiastic so they kind of go together."

**C:** "My learning is going well because I learned something new everyday and that I keep a positive attitude even though it’s something I don’t like. But, sometimes I am not in a positive attitude and all I just need to do is remind myself what zone I’m in, I need to be in the green zone."

- "My reading is going well because in ISR it helps me achieve my goal since I can set that as my goal. In Math, I still have trouble figuring out the concept in some questions. This doesn’t surprise me because the work is for FSA specifically ment for grade seven, but I have been trying harder. In ISR the class has been working on writing in role so that helps as well as the goal to go deeper in my reading."

- "I have been participating in gym playing the games, but I want to improve how hard I work and not standing around. I want to believe in myself but to do that I will have to work at it taking a risk, go for it!"

- "In my work I try to be an industrious learner, a confident learner. Right now I’m working on math at home. I feel like I’m pressured and that’s what make me hesitate. Now that I’m working at school I noticed I don’t pause often but at home it seems like I still feel pressured."

**O:** No response

- No response

- "In Math some of the work is fun and I get it right away. Like the integers and equations we are working on."

- "My learning is going good. I’m doing better in Math than last year. I can also be more engaged like when division 2 comes over. I’m also doing good in my reading, I’m almost on my third book. I’m also becoming more of a confident learner by doing my best and having a great attitude."
Over time, Students R, C and O who easily became frustrated when faced with obstacles in their learning, were able to change their articulation of negative comments about their abilities to a more positive outlook of how they learn. With each reflection the students’ statements and the evidence they gave reflected a more proactive lens of how they viewed their progress in their learning and abilities. I also noticed that Student R connected to the successful learning traits early on. He indicated that being confident and enthusiastic were overlapping factors in how he learned.

In addition, Student N’s reflections for the second question (see Table 9), is a good representation of how the students were attaching the characteristic traits to subjects or areas of learning. She wrote:

Table 9

Student N’s Responses to: How is your learning going?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>End of January</th>
<th>End of February</th>
<th>Beginning of April</th>
<th>End of May</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>“I try to think more and not get distracted or be a distraction. I try not to get frustrated by asking questions.”</td>
<td>“So far in my learning with long projects like the snowboards I am more enthusiastic and strategic. But with short assignments I am really very creative and industrious but not always enthusiastic.”</td>
<td>“I am good at being creative in most subjects.”</td>
<td>“So far I am being really good at being strategic because that was my main goal and with track and field I really am good at strategic because I got to hurry from track then go into new thinking mode for math.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What stood out in student N’s reflections was the pairing of traits in reference to particular learning situations and that she was articulating this early in her reflections.
My learning.

From the analysis of how their learning was going, I found in many of the reflections there was an importance placed on motivation and attitude solely on the part of the individual student. Only a few students made reference to relationships with peers, teachers, friends or family as a factor in how their learning was going. There was more reoccurring references made to specific learning situations such as Math, P.E. and working with a larger group of students. Overall, their understanding of needing to be industrious and confident was most talked about in the relationship to how their learning was going. Creating opportunities to practice these characteristics and skills and reflect on them, I feel that students were naturally starting to become more aware of the codependency of the learner traits with respect to different learning situations.

Where to next in your learning?

When analyzing the last question students reflected on over the five months, I was surprised to see that there was much less written by the students. There were more incomplete reflections in this section than in the other two questions. It may be possible that the students had less understanding of how they think through the idea of ‘what next?’ and this needed to be modeled more for them. It is possible the time allotted for the reflection writing was not enough for students to respond fully to all three questions. The students’ ability to stay focused on the task and manage their time effectively may also have hindered their success in fully completing the reflection. For the students who did respond to where they were going to next in their learning, it was interesting to see how they were starting to use the successful learner traits in conjunction with each other (see Table 10). Student N wrote:
Table 10

*Student N’s Responses to: Where to next in your learning?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>End of January</th>
<th>End of February</th>
<th>Beginning of April</th>
<th>End of May</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>N:</strong></td>
<td>“I really want to work on my attitude towards things I get frustrated on and not giving up by asking more questions.”</td>
<td>“I think I would like to be more strategic and confident in my subjects because when I am strategic I can add more detail by making mind maps somewhere. If I were a little more confident I think I wouldn’t give up to soon because sometimes mostly in math when I don’t get something I start to give up and I let others do the work for me because I am not confident. I think I could be more strategic and confident by having a better attitude towards my work and being more organized.”</td>
<td>“I would like to be more strategic so I have everything ready to learn.”</td>
<td>“In my learning next I would choose to do thoughtful because I kind of have to be thoughtful to be strategic so I would work on that to make my strategic ness by asking deep thinking questions and making connections.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

She was connecting her confidence and being thoughtful in her learning to being strategic in the way she approached her work with a better attitude. When analyzing this question I also noticed that the students used the traits more and earlier on compared to the first two questions.

**A Link: between students’ behaviour and learning.**

The students’ reflections on all three questions showed evidence of their behaviour being a large factor in their learning. This was most evident in the reflections to question three. Most students talked about being more industrious and engaged by taking more risks in their learning (see Table 11). Student F and R wrote:
### Table 11

**Student F and Rs’ Responses to: Where to Next in Your Learning?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>End of January</th>
<th>End of February</th>
<th>Beginning of April</th>
<th>End of May</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>F:</strong></td>
<td>“I’m going to be persistent and not give up on my goal to put more detail (in her writing) without getting carried away in it all.”</td>
<td>No response</td>
<td>“I want to be more industrious, risk taking. I want to be industrious because when I can’t do the work I just give up… I want to be more strategic because I wouldn’t be stuck if I found more ways to solve the problem. I want to be more risk taking because I stick to easy stuff.”</td>
<td>“In integrated Studies I am going to read more and still put detail. I am going to focus on my book and only this one so I don’t get distracted with other books and being an industrious worker.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R:</strong></td>
<td>“I need to be more enthusiastic and not have such a bad attitude.”</td>
<td>“Once I ace all of my goals I think I will try to be more confident because when I’m not I get nervous and its hard to work like in basketball I wasn’t confident and I was nervous. I will also try to be compassionate in my work and other activities. I want to be more industrious in homework and be more sportsmanship like and not get mad when the rules are broken.”</td>
<td>“I want to be more confident and enthusiastic in math and gym and other projects. And stop arguing with students and teachers. I want to be more risk taking because I won’t learn as much if I’m in a shell then if I’m open to new things and different things.”</td>
<td>“I think that I need to work on being enthusiastic. And I need to be more risk taking and not stay in a shell and be open to things. Like in gym or class activities I need to be more open and not argue with things. I need to be more creative so I can learn new things.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Along with being more engaged and taking risks, both students F and R represented students who in the third question brought new characteristic traits into their reflections. They were identifying traits that they wanted to strive to be in relation to specific behaviour such as, how they approach their learning and work in the classroom. It was interesting to see that both students referred to being creative as a way to transform their thinking and learn new things.

In contrast, analyzing student O and Q’s reflections I noticed that their connection to understanding where they were going in their learning was difficult for them to articulate early.
on in the research (see Table 12) as was also evident in the first two questions students O and Q responded to. This pattern of responding was noticed in other students’ responses that are hesitant or are not engaged in the process of writing. Student O and Q wrote:

Table 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Responses to: Where to Next in Your Learning?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the fourth reflection both students O and Q were able to describe how they wanted to change their behaviour in order to complete their work. One student referred to wanting to change his behaviour in different subjects and the other student referred to his change in behaviour in a general way. Both students talk about how their attitude towards learning needs to become more positive and being industrious and not giving up in order for them to feel confident in their abilities. Interestingly, these two students are not similar in their confidence level or performance level in the classroom.
My learning.

Overall, in question three the students appeared to connect where they were going in their learning to ways a change in their behaviour would help them become more successful in their abilities and overcoming the hurdles in their learning. The students appear to understand what type of learner they need to demonstrate in order to be independently successful in a task, yet often have difficulties executing it on their own without guidance or reminders. Those students that had difficulties in understanding and focusing on their work may have found it difficult to articulate where they are going in their learning when they may not have seen themselves as successful learners. It might be that using the learner trait posters and reflecting on where and how their learning was going in different learning environments, eventually helped these students identify success and they began to notice what they needed to do to continue to make progress. For many of the students their ability to stay focused and to understand the material that is presented to them is an important link to being successful.

Student Success in Relation to Learning Environments and Subject Areas

When the students were asked to reflect on the three questions: Where are you going with your learning? How is your learning going? Where to next in your learning?, I noticed students making reference to the different learning environments and situations they participated in and how they positively or negatively affected their success as a learner. Students did make references to working with other students and in collaboration with other classes, working on different types of projects and working with other teachers in different subject areas. At first, in some of the students’ reflections their references to learning environments and activities related mostly to whether the working environment was quiet or not. Over time, the students began to
reference their learning environments and activities more in relation to their performance and abilities.

Both the Residential School Unit and the Art project designing snowboards were done in collaboration with the French Immersion Grade 6/7 class. I noticed a stark difference in some of the students’ engagement when working in the classroom on our own compared to when we worked with the other class. In my journal I wrote,

*Having more students in the class I noticed my students engaged more in discussions and seat work. Monsieur _____ taking lead on lessons/discussions - students responded well to him. Sitting with the French Immersion students seems to spark/motivate some of my students.*

I noticed that students seemed to be more motivated to participate in discussions and activities within the larger group than I had observed with just our class, yet only a couple of the students referenced this in their reflections.

The students may not have spoke directly about the learning environment, but many of them did make reference to their abilities in doing the projects. Student N talked about how she approached a longer project (snowboards) in comparison to a short assignment. She wrote, “*So far in my learning with long projects like the snowboards I am more enthusiastic and strategic. But with short assignments I am really very creative and industrious but not always enthusiastic. *” She did not give reasons why this was so in her reflection. Like some other students, she was beginning to categorize her traits depending on the environment or subject she was working in. Student R, also talked about being enthusiastic in doing the snowboard project. He wrote, “*I’m trying to be enthusiastic in doing snow boards, was working hard and almost
gave up but because I’m learning how to be more enthusiastic I didn’t.” In his final letter to himself he stated,

I can’t work in partners very well because I argue a lot, that needs to stop. I think I need to sit away from certain people. I don’t mind sharing out and I like bigger groups and more perspectives on things...

Even when students were focusing more on describing their abilities in doing their work, they were aware to some degree of how the different environments shaped who they were as learner and how it affected how they learned.

I also observed that working with the other class gave opportunity for some of my more vulnerable or non-risk takers to let the more confident students stand out. In my journal I wrote: “...observing some students, they have more opportunity to fade into the larger numbers of students in the room.” Student L felt working with another class was stressful since she was shy and not a risk taker in sharing her ideas. She wrote,

...I need to start being proud of my work and start speaking out. I’m afraid of doing it with (the other class) because I’m afraid I’m going to mess up and say something dumb and be embarrassed in front of everybody.

Surprisingly, at the same time, students similar to student L were generally more engaged and willing to work along side the other students to complete the given tasks at their level with minimal support. Student O reflected, “I can also be more engaged like when division 2 comes over... I’m also becoming more of a confident learner by doing my best and having a great attitude.”

I noticed when students were confident with the criteria and how to do the task their motivation and engagement increased and was generally sustained with minimal support. In my
journal I made the observation, “*Students have commented that when working with the other class they gain more information, confidence and engagement in the topic and the work.*” When other students around them were engaged it appeared to help others to self-regulate and work through frustration and be able to seek out help when needed.

This was not always the case. From my observations the students struggled more with keeping motivated and engaged with open-ended activities or transforming activities compared to ones directed and guided by me. Half way in the research, students were working on designing and creating a game board and in my observations of some of the students I noted:

*Initially students very engaged. Those falling behind do not show initiative to stay in or take project home to catch up. I find non-risk takers having the most difficulty in staying engaged. They are showing signs of 'learned helplessness', always wanting someone to do it for them. They keep restarting project and easily become dissatisfied with their work. Do not take feedback very well...*

I noticed that only some students made reference to the learning environments and its effect on their learning. Their reflections related more to the particular activity or subject, their confidence and ability in being successful and engaging in their work or activity.

This was particularly noticeable in the students’ reflections about their progress in their Math and Physical Education classes. This surprised me at first because these two subjects are areas that my teaching partner covered and my teaching partner was not an active participant in the research. I was mainly observing the times that I was teaching or co-teaching with the teacher from the other class. In my general observations of the class reflections, the areas of Math and P.E. were just as important for students to talk about in their responses as the other areas of learning they were involved in. Both Math and P.E. were subjects that I noticed
students moving from negative comments about how they learn in these areas to more proactive comments over time. References to these two subjects were mentioned in all three questions given to the students. I found it interesting that the students were able to transfer their understanding of the characteristic traits we have practiced in class to other areas of their learning that I was not involved in over the time of the research.

I noticed that the students’ language began to change in reference to these subjects much like I noticed it had in the areas that I taught. As an example, in one of Student F’s reflections she states, “In Math I am working on being more persistent and actually trying to get the problem so that I can fully put down my thinking...” and in part of her next reflection she stated she was going to set a goal of being strategic in Math. “One of my goals is to be strategic in Math and Industrious in subjects I don’t understand....” In part of her last reflection she wrote that she saw herself as a strategic learner in Math, “…In Math I am being strategic like right now we are doing angles and I know that all angles add up to 180 degrees all the time....” It appears that over time, there was a shift in her mindset as to how she perceived herself as a learner when it came to doing math.

**My learning.**

From the analysis of the students’ reflections and my observations, when the students became familiar with the language of the characteristic traits over time they were able to use the traits to characterize who they were as learners in the different learning environments. The students were beginning to evaluate themselves in areas where there was influence on the part of another teacher(s) as well as in subject areas that I was not teaching. By giving opportunities for the students to explore different learning situations it appears that the students were able to expand their repertoire of learner traits. As the students used the characteristic traits in their
language more over time to characterize who they were as learners they also were able to transform negative views about themselves in certain learning situations into more positive reflections about what type of learner they saw themselves becoming in the different environments.

**Analysis of Weekly Goal Reflections**

The appreciative inquiry approach used in the weekly goal setting was an opportunity for students to practice articulating and exploring traits that they could identify with and build upon over the course of the study. It was a strategy that was an effective catalyst for students to have a voice about who they were as learners in different learning environments.

Analyzing their weekly goal-setting reflections I first noticed that many of the justifications for students’ success were expressed in very general terms, about needing to be more focused or not getting distracted when working, without an explanation as to how their goal could be achieved. Looking at their reflections over time (see Figure 2), I noticed that these general statements were decreasing for most students and more specific examples and reasons were being expressed to explain their role as the learner in their weekly goal reflections.

![Figure 5](image_url). Sample of a student’s weekly goal reflection at the end of the week
I noticed that from tallying the total number of traits chosen by the students each week (see Figure 6), being industrious, confident and risk taking were the most chosen in that order. The least chosen was being compassionate and the other four traits fell in between, strategic being the most chosen in the remaining group of traits.

![Frequency of Characteristic Traits Students Chose For Weekly Goal Setting](image)

*Figure 6. Frequency of Characteristic Traits Chosen By Students in Weekly Goal Setting*

**My learning.**

From the results of the students’ reflections and my observations of students struggling to have a positive attitude about learning and knowing how to articulate what worked best for them in being successful was their lack of language. They had difficulties explaining why they were successful or not successful in achieving their goals. By teaching the students the terminology and criteria for each learner trait it appeared to help the students make connections and attach meaning to their learning experiences in the classroom. It could be that many of the students needed to first, feel confident in their abilities and know they could stay focused on tasks before taking risks and expanding their repertoire of learner traits. From my observations many of the students were dealing with low self-efficacy and being disengaged in doing their work. Many of the students generally struggled to stay focused, persevere and sustain a positive attitude towards
their daily activities. They would become distracted or just shut down and not complete their work. The students’ narratives in their monthly reflections reinforced these results. Being or not being industrious, confident and willing to take risks in their actions towards learning were the top three traits referred to in their monthly responses.

**Students Developing a Sense of Who They Are as Learners**

The final reflection by the students was a letter they wrote to themselves describing who they were as a learner. The letter was put in their ‘Personal Learner’s Manual’ as all the students were about to make a transition – either from grade six to seven, or from grade seven into the high school. The letter was part of their personal learner’s manual to help be a reminder for them of what characteristic traits they possess or feel they need to focus on in various learning environments. Many of the students articulated who they were as learners in relationship to characteristics and skills they acquired throughout the project with confidence. In many of the final letters the students were able to articulate a variety of situations where they used the successful learner traits to help them articulate who they were as learners. They also provided examples and made predictions of what characteristics they would need to remember to demonstrate in a new learning situation. It was interesting to notice that some of the students, such as student R referenced the fact that he was moving on to high school and felt knowing who he is now as an industrious learner, who is able to complete his work is important and would be helpful to him in high school. He starts his letter with,

“I think that I am an Industrious learner because I get everything that I’m supposed to done. I think that it’s important because in high school there’s more homework and it’s harder but with my new skill (industrious) I can get it done and not worry about it...”
I noticed that he began to have an awareness of the trait he acquired or actually already possessed but did not recognize. Student L also talks about the transitioning to high school and the need to be more confident in doing her work. She writes,

“In my learning I think I would want to put myself in the confident category. I would want to put myself in this because I’ve been wanting to take pride in my work because whenever I’m about to speak out loud I think that I’m going to mess up and fail in front of everyone and I’m really shy and I HATE speaking out loud but I think that’s the one topic I have to work on for high school.”

I noticed that she felt anxious about how she saw herself as a learner and how she would fit into the high school setting.

One of my goals as a grade 7 teacher is to ensure my students are feeling confident in their learning and are ready to transition into the high school. It concerns me when I hear students talk about the possibility of not being successful in this transition. I noticed that other students that made comments about going to the high school also focused their thoughts on their abilities or lack thereof. In their responses they reflected that it was going to be more challenging once they got into the high school so needing to practice being more industrious and confident as a learner was important to them.

**My Reflections: General Insights From the Findings**

**How students see themselves as learners.**

During five months of this study I utilized different metacognitive strategies to better understand my students as learners and determine the depth and complexity in which they could articulate how they learn. I had my students reflect on their learning experiences each month and I reflected on what I had observed. What stood out most from the students’ first reflections and
my observations was their lack of language used to express who they were as learners. The group brainstorming activity showed that the students had a good understanding of what each learner trait looked like or sounded like. However, they had difficulties formulating ideas and explaining how they personally represent these eight traits with respect to their own learning. They did not appear to have a clear learning identity. It wasn’t until we began using and reinforcing the characteristic traits and their descriptors that students’ began associating themselves to the eight traits. I interpret this enhanced ability to use the language of the successful learner traits to an enhanced learning identity.

**Self-regulated learners.**

From analyzing the students’ responses to the three questions: Where are you going with your learning? How are you doing? and Where to next in your learning? the students demonstrated the ability to reflect on their learning. They were able to varying degrees build a repertoire of learner traits that they were able to justify. It was clear from the data that the students focused mainly on their abilities in the subject areas and only when they felt confident in their abilities did they have a sense of motivation and enthusiasm to stay focused and make an effort in doing their work. Often, the students associated their behaviour to their academic abilities or performance. The two traits most frequently commented on by the students were to be industrious and confident, both in their weekly goal setting and in their reflections. Only when the student felt comfortable with their abilities did they talk about being confident, motivated and enthusiastic to learn; the amount of these traits they had, what stopped them from having them or what they needed to do to get them. Many of the students first referred to these two traits in a negative context. It wasn’t until mid-way through the study period that students began to use more proactive statements in their reflections; connecting and referencing their
success to the transition in their abilities. They began to talk more about needing to have a good attitude, feel good and take pride in their abilities and be strategic and creative in their learning. My interpretation of this is that it wasn’t until the students had established a good sense of these traits in their behaviour did they feel they could take risks in their learning.

**Learning as a social process.**

The traits least reflected upon were those of being thoughtful and compassionate. Students who felt they were confident learners or felt being thoughtful and compassionate enhanced their learning only mentioned these two traits. It may be that other students were more focused on their own abilities first and/or possibly they felt they already possessed these traits so they didn’t choose them as a goal to work on. They often worked with others in pairs and groups in the classroom and we also followed a Connect, Process, Transform and Reflect framework in accessing information, so we were already being thoughtful when learning in our class.

Only a few students referenced their relationship with others. It was addressed mainly in the context of how it affected their ability to be successful in their work. Some students felt the relationship with their teacher hindered their progress and for others, parent pressure to do well in certain subjects was something that caused frustration for them. For others the role of the teacher was one of support and encouragement.

From my observations and analysis I noticed that the students started to become aware of how their abilities, motivation, attitude and social aspects of their learning environments related to each other and were all intertwined in the understanding oneself as a learner. How the students reflected on these learner traits varied among the students. Some individualized the traits to one specific subject or area of learning. Other students generalized their traits to encompass different learning situations. For some of the students their comments transitioned
from specific circumstances to more general behaviours in their learning over the five months. For others their comments stayed specific to one or two subject areas. Over time and with more opportunities for student learning and reflecting, I felt the students’ awareness of how all the traits were interrelated would have been articulated more frequently in their responses. Student engagement in the activity of reflecting was also an indication of how students progressed in understanding themselves as learners. When students engaged in their work and completed their reflections it appeared there was more progress in developing a repertoire of learner characteristics that they could relate to and talk about in more depth. In comparison, students who did not consistently engage in the learning situations tended to not provide detail and justification for how they learn in their reflections.

From analyzing the student reflections there was a consistent theme of the how students perceived their abilities as learners, their motivation and ownership of their learning and how they related to the social aspects of their learning; the environment and others involved. The link between the students’ attitude and behaviour and being a successful learner was also established early on in the students’ responses.

As the statements of ‘I don’t know who I am as a learner’ transformed into ‘I know that I am a _______ learner when/because... ’ I began to feel that the strategies I was using to better support my students in understanding who they were as learners were effective. The power of creating different learning opportunities and giving the students common language to use in their reflecting had a noticeable impact on my students’ ability to articulate who they were becoming or were as learners. From these findings and results, I can only hope my students have gained a better sense of who they are as a learner and feel confident in advocating for their learning in new and different learning situations.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

Summary

Having students take the time to articulate who they are as learners using the metacognitive strategy of self-reflection, I am now more aware of the impact that self-reflection has on students abilities to talk about their characteristics and skills as a learner. Using this metacognitive strategy was an effective means in knowing the students better, understanding their learner traits and how they viewed themselves as learners. This strategy supports students in being able to understand how they learn in connection to the social, academic and intellectual engagement of their learning (Willm, Friesen and Milton, 2009). For some students, the opportunity to self-reflect and set weekly goals for learning was a difficult task. The students’ lack of self-efficacy or as Kolb & Kolb (2009) refers, as ‘learning identity’ was a major stumbling block when trying to describe themselves as capable learners. They did not have a positive perception of their abilities and often this was a negative factor in their motivation and engagement in doing their work. It is clear that these students needed the support, tools and effective strategies to help them change their “I can’t do…” attitude into an “I can…” attitude.

My goal in this research was to find effective tools and strategies that would support the students in articulating and building a repertoire of learner traits that would help them develop a strong learner identity and growth mindset. This is where the use of eight successful learner traits (Bannister, 2006) was an effective tool to use in the students’ goal setting and self-reflecting. It helped students connect to the characteristics of being industrious, risk taking, strategic, creative, confident, enthusiastic, thoughtful and compassionate. The criterion for each learner trait gave the students language that provided a platform for students to articulate how they learn best. The students monthly reflections became more than just writing a journal piece about what they did
in their day or in their work. It became a building block for the students to gauge where and how their learning capabilities were going and in nurturing a more positive self-efficacy.

It was my intention that by giving my students these tools and opportunities to explore their learning through a range of activities and learning environments they would develop a deeper sense of themselves as learners. It was only over time that students became comfortable with the process of self-reflecting, making it meaningful and establishing a repertoire of learner traits they could identify with and talk about their learning with more complexity.

The strategies of metacognition used in this research is defined by Wiliam (2011) and Shanker (2013) as learners having the awareness and understanding of their own thinking or how they think and knowing their capabilities as learners. Having students talk about their strengths as learners; where they are going with their learning and how their learning is going and where to next in their learning was an effective catalyst for students to better understand how they learn and it had a positive impact on their self-efficacy, motivation and engagement. Reviewing the results of this study I realize that the increase in my students’ abilities to articulate how they learn in depth and in complexity only reinforces for me the importance of students learning to know who they are as a learner early on in their education.

The students’ reflections sparked many conversations around what is the best way for individual students to show their learning. As mentioned in the results, one of the students decided to illustrate how she learned a new skill rather than write about her experience. When the students were given choice in how they could demonstrate their learning in the different learning situations their confidence in their abilities and intrinsic motivation increased which supports the findings in the study done by Cordova & Lepper (1996). It is very clear that the learning environment and students’ self-efficacy are intertwined.
Research that supports self-regulated learning (Bandura, 2010; Butler, 2002; Zimmerman, 1989; Ames, 1992) explains that learner belief and self-efficacy are the starting point in the interaction between goal initiation, motivation, internal and external feedback and metacognition. When the students were feeling confident in their abilities and willing to take risks in doing their work their motivation and engagement increased. They had more interest in thinking about their thinking (Shanker, 2013), discussing their approach to the task and what traits as a learner they employed in being successful. It was interesting that over the time of the research students often referred to being or needing to be industrious, confident and risk taking in their reflections and weekly goal setting. It was only when the students indicated a strong self-efficacy in their approach to their learning that being compassionate and thoughtful was added to their repertoire of learner traits.

When I consider how different the students’ responses were and the traits they portrayed in different learning environments, I could see how important it was to provide choice in how students demonstrated their learning. Analyzing the narratives of my students gave me insight into how they feel about learning in the different subjects and learning environments. It reinforces for me the importance of what I need to provide in the way of a safe and caring environment. Students need to feel they have choice, support, effective feedback and opportunities to take risks, engage in meaningful learning and be able to reflect on their learning.

**Strengths and Limitations**

The framework of action research with a qualitative approach had its challenges when trying to gather data. The variability and reliability of the students’ reflections was sometimes hard to track, especially if the student’s attendance was poor or they were not motivated to participate in activities or writing their reflections. Building on an appreciative inquiry was
challenging for some of the students who didn’t understand or see themselves as learners to begin with and throughout the study. Dealing with the challenges did not out weigh the strength of these approaches. The students’ voices over the course of the study whether slight or significant showed that using all three approaches: qualitative, appreciative and narrative approaches were powerful tools to use in understanding the influence the strategies I used had in supporting students in articulating who they were as learners in different learning situations.

Using action research can be challenging when working with students in a learning environment. The variables that come into play can be numerous. This made it difficult to know for sure if my students were responding to their learning accurately or just responding to what they thought I might want to hear. I was also limited by the amount of effort and detail my students’ wrote in their reflections. My sense is that students responded in varying levels depending on their engagement and motivation over the five months. Many other factors could have been at play here such as; their experiences outside of school, social interactions with other students and their general well-being may have made it difficult to get an accurate perspective from students in their reflections.

Even though I met with different levels of student engagement, I felt that the diversity of opportunities and consistency of students self-reflecting during their learning, at the end of each week, month, as well as my observations was a strength in my research. It was an effective way to gain many perspectives from the students at different times and in different activities and ultimately helped me gain a better understanding of how they saw themselves as learners over time.

The use of the three questions at the end of the month was possibly a limiting factor in gaining accurate responses from the students. Only after a lot of modeling did the students
understand the meaning of each question. It is possible that rewording of the questions to meet their level of understanding might have benefited them in writing more detailed reflections. The strength in using the questions was in their consistency and familiarity. The students became comfortable with seeing the questions each month and developed their own language around answering them, which was the ultimate goal in doing this research. A strong component of my research was using the eight ‘Successful Learner Traits’ as a tool in writing their reflections. Not only did it allow students to develop a language for articulating who they were as learners, it also allowed me to numerically represent the traits students referred to for analysis. In turn, this helped me to better understand how my students and the class as a whole characterized themselves in their learning.

At first, I worried that working with the students only 70% out of each week would limit my ability to observe the students in all aspects of their learning. However, the strength I found in this situation showed that the students were able to transfer their abilities as learners to areas of learning that I did not take part in.

Another limitation in this study was the size of my research sample. Having only 18 students in the class to begin with made my sample size small. Of the 18 students I had permission to use 13 of the students reflections and artifacts. Of these students, 7 were girls and 6 were boys. In my class I had 10 First Nation students and only 6 gave permission to use their responses. Only one out of the three First Nation students from outside the Smithers community gave permission for me to use their material. Without these First Nation students’ narratives as part of my story it is possible that the diverse perspectives and dynamics of the learners in my classroom were not thoroughly represented. I do feel that I have enough student voices to get a sense of where one could go further in this research.
Implications

The implication of this research on my perspective as a teacher and formal leader in our school has been influential in how I see my role as a leader, teacher, model and coach in helping students meet their potential to develop, as Jos Beishuizen (2008) states, “a self-conscious attitude and acquire enough confidence in their own capacities to become real independent and self-regulated learners” (p.192). From the research, I am encouraged by the results that this is both attainable and necessary if we are to see our students become independent life long learners who know themselves and are able to self-monitor their learning outcomes.

To better understand the students needs and abilities I need to provide many meaningful opportunities and different environments where they can develop their capacity for learning. I know that giving time for students to reflect on what and how they learned is a vital strategy in helping them develop a strong learning identity and a strong self-efficacy.

Implications for students

The implications for students that came from this research relates to the students’ ability to articulate the characteristics and skills they have as learners. Given the effective metacognitive strategies, the tools and opportunity to experience different environments the students developed a repertoire of learner traits that they could bring to their learning situations. Reading their own reflections was like looking in the mirror for my students. It helped them begin to own their learning and strive to develop positive characteristics and skills of self-efficacy. From doing this project my goal was for students to be able to acknowledge and build on their learner traits. The students were able to identify and build a repertoire of learner traits in relation to how they learn best and what they needed to do in order to be successful learners. It is important for students to invest in understanding who they are as learners, taking advantage of the opportunities to
practice taking risks and reflecting on their progress. As they learn and establish a growth mindset, hopefully students will transition smoothly and with confidence from grade to grade or from elementary school to high school. This tells me that we still have lots of work to do in providing opportunities for our students to find success in ways they can show what they’ve learned and how they learn. They need to have a good understanding of who they are as a learner and not just knowing that they need to be a certain type of learner for a particular environment. They need to know that they can adapt in different learning situations knowing how they learn best.

**Implications for teachers**

The implications of this research for teachers is that I hope they recognize as I have the impact and power of metacognitive strategies and self-reflection has on students’ growth as learners. It is so important that we start using these strategies when our students are young; establishing a foundation of understanding on which they can build a repertoire of learner characteristics and skills that will develop and grow deeper as they transition from one grade to the next. Building a common language with in the school that students consistently hear and use in articulating whom they are as learners would help build a school wide community of learners who can support and encourage each other in their abilities as life long learners.

Schunk and Mullen (2012) stated, “Self-efficacy is a critical personal factor that can affect motivation, engagement, learning, and achievement. Self-efficacy is shaped by personal, cultural, and social factors, making learning and achievement complex sociocultural phenomena” (p. 232). From the results of this research, I agree that these are important elements that I need to be aware of when planning the learning activities for the students. It is important as educators to be cognizant of students’ abilities, cultural influences and motivations when
planning our units of study. As teachers, we need to be aware of giving effective feedback that promotes learning by our students and doesn’t diminish their learning identity. We need to ensure we have clear, meaningful learning intentions in our lessons, providing different learning environments in which students can work, and include choice where students can articulate the ways that work best for them in demonstrating and being accountable for their learning.

**Further Research**

In doing this research I have learned that students’ self-efficacy, motivation, engagement and how they relate to others can be affected by how they perceive their abilities and know themselves as learners. Along with these elements the learning environment also was a determining factor in how students engaged and were motivated to learn. Further research with respect to the relationship of how students articulate who they are as learners in specific learning environments, be it in the classroom or outdoors or in the another learning space would maybe give us more insight into determining what environments have a significant effect on how a student articulates their characteristics and skills as a learner.

Some of the grade seven students talked about the transition to high school and what they felt they needed to do and the types of learner they needed to be in order to be successful in this transition. I believe further investigation into the transition of students at crucial times in their learning would help us better understand the various elements that affect the self-efficacy of our students both in a positive and negative way. This would be valuable information that would help educators know the supports, effective learning activities, strategies and learning environments that would help students be successful throughout the different stages in their learning. Would we see older students more engaged and willing to take risks to learn new things if they had the opportunity to understand how they learn at a younger age?
From this research I have learned the importance of a learning identity in relationship to a student’s intrinsic motivation, engagement and knowing their abilities as a learner. It is very easy to make the assumption and have the expectations that students come to us with the same package of learner characteristics and skills as others and that they learn in the same way. From reviewing the reflections of my students, it helped me realize the importance for educators to keep researching ways to help educators improve how we teach our students. It would help us be better informed about the use of our learning environments, teaching strategies, systematic approaches to learning, our learning activities and meta-cognitive strategies that support the students. In turn, we gain the tools and strategies that we can model in order to support our students with understanding themselves as learners so they will to be confident in their capabilities and potential as risk takers in being successful life long learners.

Conclusion

This research has indicated that students who have the opportunity to reflect on their learning play a crucial role in the development of a strong learner identity. With the use of metacognitive strategies, such as self-reflection students are able to talk about and assess their abilities as learners, with respect to where they are going, how they are doing and where they are going next in their learning. This needs to start at a young age where a common language can be established for students to build upon in developing a strong self-efficacy as a learner.

As educators we need to be aware that students see and approach their learning in different ways. We need to provide safe and meaningful learning environments that include choice, support and effective feedback, where students can be advocates for their learning by developing and growing their repertoire of characteristic and skills as a learner in depth and in complexity. This will help them to be confident in their abilities and in taking risks when
dealing with learning new things in different settings. It is important that we understand the impact transitioning from one learning situation to another, such as elementary school to high school has on a learners’ self-efficacy. One way to ensure students feel confident in their abilities and understanding of how they learn is through the use of metacognitive strategies, where students can continually monitor their growth as a learner and continue to be motivated and engaged in life-long learning.
References


Appendix A

Template For Weekly Goal Setting and Reflections
Appendix B

Template for Monthly Student Reflections

Name: ___________________ Date: ___________________

**Student Reflections on their Learning**

1. Where are you going with your learning?
2. How is your learning going?
3. Where to next in your learning?

We just started since I like it a lot and I am very enthusiastic about it, I'm also enthusiastic about the hands on stuff like yesterday when we did the tacks. I'm also getting better at reading, last year I never would of thought I could read 3 books in seven weeks and I'm about to read my third.

My learning is going good I'm doing better in math than last year. I can also be more engaged like when division 3 comes over. I'm also doing good in my reading I'm almost on my third book. I'm also becoming more of a consistent learner by doing my best and having a great attitude.

I'm hoping to be a more enthusiastic by thinking more positive like in math when it gets hard instead of giving up keep trying. I also would like to be more engaged in stuff & instead of just daydreaming. I would like to be happy about new things like this here when im doing instead of being negative and giving up. And that is were my learners going and its going and were next in my learning.
Appendix C

Student Sample of Personal Learner’s Manual