

An artistic illustration of three otters floating in water during a golden sunset. The otters are looking towards the viewer with calm expressions. The water is dark blue with shimmering golden reflections from the low sun. The background is a warm, hazy orange and yellow, suggesting a peaceful evening scene.

by
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“It was just fun to have a Raft of people my own age, and to get used to high school.”

CONNECTIONS BEFORE CONTENT

Prioritizing Relationships in a Secondary School Setting

“Before we can learn, we need a connection.”

This simple, yet profound statement was made by a student in May of 2022, and it sparked a multi-year journey of reflection and inquiry that has resulted in an initiative with a single focus: building relationships.

The importance of relationships between students and a trusted adult in a school community is not a new concept. Strong relationships, and the resulting increased sense of belonging in educational settings, are positively related to good academic performance¹, prosocial behaviours², and psychological well-being.³

A study in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*⁴ showed that strong teacher-student relationships significantly enhance student motivation and achievement. Numerous other studies point to the power of relationships not only as a foundation for academic success, but as an essential component for a student's social-emotional well-being. These foundational relationships contribute to a student's sense of safety and belonging – ultimately, a student who feels *connected and safe* is a student who is *better equipped and motivated to learn*.

But although there is ample evidence, finding the time (and energy!) to build intentional relationships in the midst of busy days can be a challenge for educators. Specifically, at the secondary school level, teachers can feel pressured to cover curriculum, provide accurate and timely assessment, and prepare students for potential post-secondary pursuits. With increasingly complex demands on their time, relationship-building can sometimes be viewed as something that is less valuable or worthy.

So, how do we help educators to see the value – the ‘payoff’ – of putting *connections* before *curriculum*?

How do we shift the perception of relationship-building as an *extra*, to relationship-building as an *essential component* of instruction?

It was with these questions in mind that a team from Esquimalt High School in School District No. 61 (Greater Victoria) embarked on a Networks of Inquiry and Indigenous Education (NOIE) project in 2021. In partnership with Judy Halbert and Linda Kaser, NOIE is a voluntary network of inquiry-based schools and school districts in British Columbia. In addition to providing a framework for inquiry and a supportive network of educators and coaches, teams also receive grants that can be used for release time, resources, and professional development to support initiatives. Judy and Linda's book, *Leading Through Spirals of Inquiry For Equity and Equality*, provided our team with a structure that helped us move from speculation and “hunches” into action.

In conversation with students and school-based teams, our “hunch” was that focusing on the transition of our Grade 9 students into high school would have the greatest impact on long-term success. Initially, our focus was on prioritizing and improving transitions for our Indigenous students, with the ultimate long-term goal of improving graduation rates.

From the outset, we agreed that if we were going to prioritize the building of relationships, connection, and belonging, we first needed to build this time into our bell schedule. We determined that this focused time would occur once a week, between our two afternoon blocks. As an otter is our school mascot, this period of time soon became known as Raft, the collective noun for otters. The image of these fuzzy creatures connected and floating together became a great metaphor for the relationships that we were striving to form with students.

1 Sari 2012

2 Demanet and Van Houtte 2012; Lonczak et al. 2002

3 Jose et al. 2012

4 Wentzel, K.R., 1998

As we moved through our preliminary planning meetings with students and staff, we began to envision what our Raft classes would look like, and we worked together to identify a list of priorities. These included:

- Small class sizes to foster a sense of safety and connection
- A balance of prepared activities to maintain a consistent focus, combined with flexible impromptu options to allow Raft teachers to respond to the needs of the students
- Activities that focused on connection and team building, designed to be fun, relevant and inclusive

Not surprisingly, food was a recurring theme in conversations with both students and staff. We recognized the central role of sharing food in creating a sense of community.

In addition to establishing a clear focus for Raft classes, we also determined our indicators of “success”. While the collection of quantitative data was relatively straightforward – tracking attendance rates, class completion, numbers of conduct concerns – we also understood that the collection of qualitative data and anecdotal evidence was equally important.

In *Street Data: A Next Generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy and School Transformation*, Shane Safir and Jamila Dugan remind us that, “what is *measurable* is not the same as what is *valuable*.”⁵ Street data is the “qualitative and experiential data that emerges at eye level and on the frequencies when we train our brains to discern it. [It is] asset based, building on the tenets of culturally responsive education by helping educators look for what’s right in our students, schools and communities instead of seeking out what’s wrong.”⁶ As such, impromptu conversations with students, informal observations

5 Street Data, 12

6 Street Data, 2



Circles

**Visits from
"Alumni"**

**Class Coat
of Arms**

**Gratitude
Board**

**Raft
Challenges**

**Board
Games**

**Team
Teaching**

**"Make
Fast
Friends"
Activity**

**Class
Field Trips**

**Team
Building**

**School
"Behind
the
Scenes"**

Raft Letter to My Grade 12 Self



It's May of 2028. You are in your final months of your Grade 12 graduating year. You open a letter that you wrote in 2024...

What would you tell your Grade 12 self?

What is happening in your life right now? Who are your friends, what are your interests (music, sports)?

What current events (news stories) are happening now that you think your Grade 12 self would be interested in?

What are some goals/dreams/hopes that you hope you will achieve over the next four years (personal, academic)?

What advice would you give to your Grade 12 self as they embark on the next stage of their life?

GRADE 9 RAFT THEMES AND TOPICS

September: Self-Discovery + Reflection

Purpose of Advisory - Rationale

Circle

Survey

Goal Setting (Definition of Success)

Letters to Grade 12 Self

Study, Organizational Skills

October: Relationships, Community and Connection

Team Building - Advisory Challenge

Identifying Trusted Adults

Truth and Reconciliation, Orange Shirt Day

November: Social- Emotional, Mindfulness, Mental Health & Resilience

Resources and Supports at Esquimalt

December: Winter Celebrations

Cultural Exploration

January: New Year!

Guest Speaker (Alumni ?)

Goal Setting Reflection

Survey

February: Gratitude & Community Project

Black History Month

Pink Shirt Day - Spread the Love!

Charity Raft Community Project

March: No Raft

April: Community Project Continued

Charity Raft Community Project

May: Inclusion and Diversity

Rainbow Week

June: Celebrating Success

Survey

Goal Setting Reflection

Celebration of Success



Above: Raft Connection and Community Day

Right: School Mascot, Ollie the Otter, with Sarah Garr



of behaviours in classrooms and hallways, and input from staff regarding the overall “feeling” of our school community were noted.

And so, in the Fall of 2022, we launched our first Raft classes with a Grade 9 “Community and Connection” day. We took students off-site to a local park to participate in team building activities led by staff and leadership students. The intention was to provide an environment in which both students and Raft teachers had the opportunity to step outside of their comfort zones, to take risks, and – importantly – to have *fun*. Throughout the year, we continued to provide opportunities for a balance of more formal learning along with less structured exploration, creativity, and fun.

Now in our second year with Raft classes, our model has continued to grow and evolve. We find that each Raft class evolves into its own unique identity, a perfect blend of student personalities and interests combined with the skill sets and qualifications of

each Raft teacher. Some Raft classes are boisterous and revel in inter-Raft competitions and physical activities, while others are more reserved, choosing to spend time on crafts, personal reflection, and goal setting. Raft teachers continue to meet throughout the year to plan and provide support to their colleagues

Looking ahead, we will track our Raft cohorts as they make their way from Grade 9 through to graduation, gathering data as indicators of success. Preliminary data gathered through student surveys has already suggested that students are feeling more connected to the adults in our building, and experiencing an increased sense of safety and belonging.

As we share the data with our wider school community, our hope is that teachers will continue to see value in investing the time in relationships, and in placing connections before curriculum. Our hope is that our students will view school not only as a space to receive an education, but as a space where they feel *seen, safe, and respected*.



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