

A New Journey of Leadership

My given name at birth is Rosetta Doolan. My Nisga'a name is Simgit Hitkws (Standing Strong). I am Ksim Giska'ast (killer whale clan) of the Nisga'a nation. I belong to Wilps (House) Niisyuus. I come from the Nisga'a community of Gingolx. I began my leadership journey back in 2022 as Vice-Principal with our School District No. 92 (Nisga'a) at Nathan Barton Elementary School. I then became Co-Principal in 2023, and Principal in September 2024.

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the people of the Musqueam (xʷməθkʷəy̓əm), Squamish (Skwxwú7mesh), and Tsleil-Waututh (səlilwətaɣ) Nations for allowing myself and many other leaders to attend the BCPVPA's Foundations for New School Leaders. This opportunity has enabled us to grow and learn together as we embark on our new journey of leadership.

I arrived at Foundations not knowing what to expect, and feeling a bit nervous around people I didn't know. I found my table – number 4 – and noticed a little moose stuffed animal in the centre of the table. Before the first guest speaker was to start, our table team leader said that we needed to come up with a name for our moose, and this suggestion was in my mind as the program began.

I really enjoyed listening to the speakers who addressed decolonization and reconciliation. Carolyn Roberts shared a quote by Jackie Ottmann, "Indigenizing/Decolonizing education is about transformational but sustainable change that requires strong enduring leadership". To me, this signifies that we, as Indigenous people, must share our historical narratives to foster enduring changes that will strengthen our Indigenous identities and enable us to live in greater harmony within society.

After listening to Carolyn speak, I told our team leader that we shouldn't give the moose stuffed animal a name. Moose's name should remain unchanged. To me, renaming Moose exemplifies how colonization altered our traditional names, and how our names were taken away. I explained to my table group that our Indigenous ancestors experienced forced name changes with the arrival of the Europeans and, as part of reconciliation, we need to honour Moose and not give him a western name. Let Moose be Moose. At the end of the week, Moose came home with me and his Nisga'a name is Xadaa, which means Moose.

This little Moose story has reminded me once again of the importance of reconciliation and how we can decolonize for the benefit of our Indigenous identities. For many years, I have wanted to legally change my given name at birth, Rosetta, to my first Nisga'a name, Yuuhadaax, which means, "Taking the Lead." I never did change my given name legally; little did I know that one day I would be taking a name that has become very important to me.

During the week I attended Foundations, I had my last week with the name, Yuuhadaax, as it was passed down to one of my nieces at my late mother's Stone Moving Feast on the Saturday following Foundations. There, my late father's brother, Niis Naganuus, blessed me with my late mother's second Nisga'a name, Simgit Hitkws, with its meaning of "Standing Strong". Although receiving my late mother's name was bittersweet, I felt deeply honoured, especially as I was embarking on a new leadership role that perfectly aligns with my name.

"Standing Strong" reminds me of how far I have come and the importance of carrying the strength of my mother's love and guidance. My late mother

by
Simgit Hitkws
(Rosetta Doolan)
Principal
SD 92 (Nisga'a)



always provided us with encouragement. During her Stone Moving Feast, I gifted out memorial cups bearing a cherished message of hers: *“Be calm, be at peace with one another. Be strong, be respectful at all times.”* I carry her words of encouragement with me always. I now use my name, Simgit Hitkws, daily; by doing so, I am reclaiming my Indigenous identity and strengthening my true self.

I also appreciated a slide that Carolyn shared, highlighting four key aspects of Decolonizing Leadership:

- **Relational accountability:** holding ourselves accountable for building strong relationships and allowing the relationships to guide the work we do as leaders.
- **Restoring capacity:** understanding that we come with our own lived experiences, and that counts for our own understanding of what leadership means from our own worldview.
- **Reimaging:** understanding that the colonial hierarchy of leadership isn't made with relationships in mind, so where are the points where we can disrupt and dismantle the system and create a system of care?
- **Humanizing:** connecting with people, honouring people, and treating people in a human centered way.



Simgit Hitkws with Simoogit Niis Naganuus

These four aspects collectively define what decolonizing leadership should embody. I find these aspects valuable because I believe they can guide me in my leadership role as I learn to unlearn and learn.

I am inspired to keep finding ways to strengthen myself first, so that I can share my growth with my learners. This led me to write my own version of a poem called, “Where I am From”. The inspiration comes from George Ella Lyon, who wrote the original poem. This is a meaningful way to connect with my own roots and express my own identity of who I am, and where I come from.

*I am from where the river meets the ocean,
I am from the boat that leaves early in the morning and
returns late at night filled with food for the winter,
I am from the cockle beds and clam tides that gravitate to the surface
as the ring around the moon shines its brightest
I am from a hard-working fisherman who runs along the beaches with
burning lanterns, rakes and buckets, digging with the tide
I am from a forest filled with medicine and food
the aromas of the plants and the sweet taste of berries come to me
I am from where cedar is harvested and transformed to tell our story
through totems, carvings, rattles and drums
I am from grandmothers and aunties who teach me to sit quietly and gather
I am from where driftwood is collected along the beaches
I am from smoke houses that are lit day and night
where the lightness of the smoke penetrates the season's catch
I am from fishing camps that sit along the river
where seagulls and sea lion gather also waiting for the gold to arrive
I am from elders who share stories of the past
They have songs and stories to share, and I sit and listen
I am from hard working hands guiding me
I am from the ancestors who inspired me to carry on.
I am Simgit Hitkw̓s*

“Where I am From” is a widely taught poem in classrooms around the globe. It focuses on personal identity, using a template that highlights our unique qualities. This poem encourages a deep exploration of one's background, home, childhood, upbringing, and family culture, celebrating what makes each of us special. By strengthening my own identity through sharing grounding activities, such as this poem, I am holding myself accountable to decolonizing leadership practices. I hope that this poem activity will inspire others to do the same.

Taking the Foundations course has encouraged me to delve deeper into my own Nisga'a culture, strengthening my identity and inspiring others to do the same. Through the week of this course, I learned of the importance of

decolonizing my leadership practices. True leadership in education involves not only mastering technical skills but also fostering inclusive and equitable environments that honour and respect diverse ways of knowing and being.

Decolonizing is about reclaiming our heritage, strengthening our communities, and ensuring that future generations can deeply connect with our culture. If we, as Indigenous educators, don't work to decolonize our formal western education curriculum, we risk continuing to colonize future generations and perpetuating the cycle. By learning to decolonize, we honour our ancestors and empower our people to thrive.

I feel encouraged by the leadership opportunities I have encountered, which motivates me to continue learning my Nisga'a language and culture so that I can become a Nisga'a knowledge keeper. Our future's prosperity lies in our past. We must always remember who we are and where we come from to build a future with a strong sense of belonging. As we strive to move past the challenges faced by our parents and grandparents, we must remember our duty to uphold the cultural traditions that have made us resilient Indigenous people.

I encourage everyone to join me in this journey of cultural reclamation and learning. Together, we can honour our ancestors, strengthen our communities, and ensure that future generations thrive with a deep connection to our heritage. Let's work collectively to decolonize our education systems and celebrate the diverse ways of knowing and being that define us.

My son, Jean-Paul, is my guiding inspiration in my leadership journey. His Nisga'a name, Hli Oots'in Gibuu, (Spirit of the Wolf), was lovingly created by my late mother a few months before her passing. As his mother, I aspire to instill in him a deep sense of belonging to his Nisga'a heritage and to pass on the legacy that I carry.

I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to the organizers of the Foundations for New School Leaders course, the inspiring speakers, and everyone at table number 4. Your contributions have provided me with a wonderful learning experience that has set me on a strong path in my journey.

