I see hope and want to be a part of that hope

James’s inquiry began with, “How does what I believe and who I am inhibit my ability in the classroom?” but decided not to pursue this because he believed it to be too broad to get a handle on. He brainstormed two pages of “amazing questions,” but James came to his inquiry topic from a reading in another class within the Indigenous Institute in which he was enrolled. The reading struck a chord with some of the discontent he experienced during his practicum after seeing students who continued to struggle. He wrote how “the school system is still, for all the talk, a European model steeped in capitalism and repressive pedagogies.” His question became, “In what ways does the public education system benefit Indigenous children?” His original question was not lost however, and wove in and out as a subtle undercurrent to his inquiry.

James had a sense that there was no conclusive answer to his question. Instead, he was looking for understanding from multiple perspectives. As he wrote, “I feel like I’m pursuing ideas, not answers.” He first thought he might look at his topic through photography, but early on decided that he wanted to be able to explore his inquiry through structures he was more familiar with, so he spent a lot of time writing and also had conversations with numerous people including an addictions counselor, teachers, and a ten-year-old girl to hear diverse perspectives. The conversations he had were rich with ideas; he asked only a few questions. The quieter he was, the more these people shared.

As his inquiry progressed, James own disenchantment with the school system began to surface. He questioned the authenticity of teaching within a system that he could not relate to “ideologically, intellectually, or spiritually.” In his writing, he spent much time exploring and defining social constructs such as equality, multiculturalism, homogenization, and advantage.

James introduced the class to the term “Socratic Buddy” as opposed to “critical” or “thinking” friend because he believed in a dialogic process of discovering one’s deep-seated beliefs. Interestingly, it was his Socratic buddy who suggested that it might be useful for James to ask himself where his own assumptions might come from around his topic. This was a significant turning point in his inquiry leading to a self-study that became woven into his mélange of understanding. In his final sharing with the class, James described the formation of some of his own assumptions as a way of demonstrating that every child has a story worth listening to.

Alongside of his self-study process, James continued his interviews. A former elementary teacher got him thinking about how the current education system might affect any student. He began to see dominant ideology as “a force, which is given the opportunity to influence beyond race.” This discovery paralleled a belief that teachers often were not going deep enough into what he saw as important questions. “I don’t think [they] are understanding the privilege of their birth, the ideology we are about to become a complicit partner with, and the influence we can
have.” He wondered how this attitude might affect change possibilities within schools.

As James moved his inquiry beyond Indigenous children to include all children, he also began to move it towards questions around community. This led him to speculate about how policy seemed to be driven more by external world forces (e.g. economic) rather than what was best for children and communities. Despite the rather dismal picture that his inquiry was painting, James was inspired by the “brave” efforts being made by Indigenous peoples to heal. He wrote, “I see hope and I want to be part of that hope.”

Towards the end of his inquiry, James revisited his last practicum experience and realized that he had unknowingly been trying to engage his students in a transformative inquiry process, albeit under the guise of questioning strategies such as “what do you think... how do you feel about...” He was excited that the inquiry showed him new possibilities and validated alternate ways of knowing. “We tend to equate wisdom with knowing...but perhaps wisdom is the opposite of knowing, of mastery, of insight and understanding, and is nothing more than an awareness of the journey, the path.” James wrote of wanting to develop inquiry across subjects, ages and grades, and wondered what an inquiry based school might look like. James also questioned whether or not teaching was the right profession for him, stating that counseling might be a better fit. It is here that his original inquiry question comes back to the surface most clearly.

A final thought from James speaks to the challenges he encountered and overcame by engaging in transformative inquiry:

I remember how frustrated I was when you first told us about the inquiry because I felt you changed it every time you talked about it. And, of course, you did - because an inquiry is shifting. The questions shift, the process shifts, the intent shifts. It’s a fluid ecology of meaning, creation, interpretations and evaluation. By the end I was very comfortable with this shifting about. In fact, it becomes a very liberating place to be. I won’t say there isn’t any expectation (we are still in the Academy after all), but the parameters of that expectation are malleable, relieving a lot of pressure. I would say that inquiry is about freedom.