

Why Taking your Seat at the Fire?

By Leona Prince

Fire can represent many things, but in some Indigenous cultures it has very specific meaning. As a part of the medicine wheel, in my teachings from Elder and Sweat Lodge holder Harold Isaac from the Nak'azdli Band in Fort St. James, British Columbia (BC), who was mentored by Cree Elder Joe Cardinal, it is about rebirth, regeneration and renewal. Fire is placed within the eastern quarter of the medicine wheel representing spring, renewal and the beginning of a new year. As Canadians, we all connect to sitting around a campfire telling stories, sharing ideas and being in each other's presence. This simple cross-cultural act of communication has been experienced throughout the ages. It is in this spirit that we are continuing to do our work in supporting culturally responsive education.

I was asked, "Why taking your seat at the fire?" recently and my response was, "When thinking about the journey of Aboriginal Education in the province of BC, we are starting to understand the importance of collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Aboriginal culture is polyphonic, meaning that it requires many voices to sustain it, and therefore so does Aboriginal Education. These voices need to be a network of diverse narratives if we are going to truly begin the work of reconciliation. 'Taking our Seat at the Fire' is a vision of all of us taking our seats together and being inspired by our similarities and differences. It is a call for all of us to take ownership of the responsibility of contributing equally to our future in education."

The new BC curriculum reflects the broader societal growing awareness of the rich history, traditions and cultural practices of Aboriginal people and their role in Canada. Curriculum and student understanding is a bridge to bring broader awareness and understanding to the future. Through the process of reviewing the Ministry of Education document *Aboriginal Worldviews and Perspectives* (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015) and staying true to the framework of the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) guidelines for the *First Peoples' Principles of Learning* (First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC), 2008), we were able to find a way to contribute to BC educators in a meaningful way.

Five years ago, as colleagues in School District No. 57, Monica Berra and I began a journey that has included a continuous growth of the circle around the fire. As our conversation grew beyond our district, BC ERAC (ERAC, 2017) drew us into the conversation for the need to support evaluated resources to support culturally authentic and relevant resources. Culturally authentic and relevant resources was first defined by FNESC in the 2008 publication *English 12 First Peoples* (First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC), 2008). In response to the growing focus in 2014, BC ERAC redefined and restructured the process of how Aboriginal resources were evaluated. At the ERAC "IT4K12" conference of 2015, Monica and I presented *Culturally Authentic and Relevant Resources* (Berra and Price, 2015), which highlighted the work done to date. As momentum grew within the 60 school district consortium to support Aboriginal Education, the ERAC Aboriginal education support site was created. (ERAC, 2017)

The BC ERAC Aboriginal education support site framework of the natural elements, although grounded in the ideals of the Medicine Wheel, was chosen because of the inclusive nature of fire, water, earth and air. We all have our own personal connections to each of these, especially in BC where we have these in abundance. It really emphasized the privileges as residents of BC and Canada to have such beautiful natural surroundings, but also our collective responsibility to the land.

The idea for the presentation “Taking Your Seat at the Fire” is rooted in both Monica and my connections to our personal histories, families and the lands that we both grew up on. Every detail in the presentation speaks to the importance of connection and collaboration. The photos of my two daughters on the lake side home where Monica spent most of her life highlights the importance of shared knowledge and collaboration. The picture of my two girls is also a nod to the cover of *They Called Me Number One* (Sellars, 2012), a story of personal significance to Monica.

Like all educators, both Monica and I are storytellers and as we weave our ideas and understandings, we invite you to come and sit and share. For two years, we have been interacting with the educators at our presentations and this has truly added to our understanding of the cross section of educators across BC and Canada and the challenges they face. It is humbling to be part of this conversation. For us to change our practice, we need to change the way we think and close the mental gap that is difficult to see and harder to overcome, but I believe we are well on our way. It is important for us to give, all those that are interested, an entry point into imbedding Aboriginal ways of knowing and being. To begin your journey in Aboriginal learning, we encourage educators to find someone that complements them so that they can

learn from each other. Monica agrees, noting that her practice has moved forward through conversations and learning alongside others as they share their experiences and questions. It is when we all engage with each other in a meaningful and purposeful way that we will begin to achieve reconciliation. Our role in 'Truth and Reconciliation' as people who are promoting the use of culturally responsive resources and practices is to:

7. Enhance opportunities for Indigenous library, archival and information professionals as well as the inclusion of Indigenous epistemologies in the Canadian library and archives profession through culturally appropriate pedagogy, recruitment practices, professional and continuing education and cross-cultural training in collaboration with local Indigenous stakeholders and partners; (Callison, 2017, p. 6).

This will be achieved when we create opportunities for dialogue and professional growth, understand our individual and collective responsibilities and create change that is both sustainable and rooted in best practice and Indigenous knowledge. Seek opportunities that challenge your practice and achieve the goal of weaving a single Canadian narrative that is free of bias and honours the collective history of our nation. We can all contribute in small ways to affect change on a meaningful level. This is our contribution to that effort. Mesiy.

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