

Infusing Indigenous Perspectives in our Teaching and Learning

by Joel Krentz

“We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal peoples, and educators, to: make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples’ historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students.”

~ Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action # 62(a)

Across Canada, schools and school boards are responding in a variety of positive ways to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action*. A number of these are addressed directly to education with some specifically focused on the K-12 education setting. The teacher-librarian and the school library learning commons are uniquely positioned to respond to the *Calls to Action* and provide meaningful, collaborative teaching and learning opportunities for all staff and students.

In early Spring of 2016, I asked myself, “What role can the library learning commons have in responding to the TRC’s *Calls to Action* and what role can the teacher-librarian play in their successful, school wide implementation?”

As the teacher-librarian in a diverse K-6 school of 500 students in the east end of Toronto, I am fortunate to have excellent working relationships with the staff and administration in my building. Half of my day is spent in the library delivering prep coverage and the other half is open for inquiry support and collaborative partnerships. Through the spring of 2016, I spoke with staff, on several occasions, about the idea of intentionally infusing Indigenous perspectives in our teaching and learning. Connected to this, I wanted to revive our “Character Education” program, which had been neglected for a number of years, and use the “Seven Grandfather Teachings” as a way to deliver character education. The “Seven Grandfather Teachings of Truth, Love, Humility, Courage, Honesty, Respect and Wisdom” are universal traits that are shared and understood by every culture. They would also be beneficial in addressing some of the issues our staff has seen in levels of student responsibility, collaboration, and self-regulation, particularly amongst our younger K-2 students.

Beginnings

At our first meetings (primary and junior division meetings), I explained the idea, shared the reasons and provided rationale for staff to take on this focus. Teachers were receptive to the idea and a few were even enthusiastic. We recognized and agreed that we needed to do more teaching and learning around our understanding of a) the historic wrong doings suffered by many First Nations, Metis and Inuit people, including the shameful legacy of residential schools and, b) the ways in which Indigenous culture and ways of knowing influence our lives and society today.

A number of staff members had some legitimate concerns; a) they did not want to **offend** and b) they did not want to **appropriate**. Outside of the curriculum, they felt that they did not know enough about Indigenous culture and history to be able to effectively share these perspectives.

They wanted to know what activities and teaching approaches were culturally sensitive and appropriate and which were not. I acknowledged these concerns and agreed to learn more myself and share what I learned at the next division meetings in June. I had homework to do.

Research: Getting Prepared

As I started to research some of these concerns I discovered a wealth of relevant, informative and supportive sites related to infusing Indigenous perspectives into teaching and learning. Although the answers were not neatly laid out, a few key resources were instrumental to me and the teachers I work with in gaining a broad perspective on how to approach our concerns. I was particularly influenced by the work of Ontario educator Deborah McCallum, Jean-Paul Restoule of the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education's "Deepening Knowledge Project", Rachel Mishenene at the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, and the incredible team at the Toronto District School Board's Aboriginal Education Centre. The AEC's *Knowledge Building Education: K-12 Curriculum Connections* publication released in the fall of 2016 has proven to be invaluable as it provides protocols for best practice as well as a tool for measuring our own in-school climate regarding the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives.

I reported back to staff with these findings and protocols. I also curated in the form of a website shared with staff, a selection of key resources (websites, articles and books) to support the infusion of Indigenous perspectives in our teaching and learning. In the end, we agreed that if schools and educators are not engaging in this teaching, there would be another generation of students who knew little or nothing about the First Peoples of this land. We felt a collective sense of duty and sitting idly by was not going to be an option. With an acknowledgement that we can not be experts on FNMI issues, we would use the resources available to us teach and learn along side our students.

Resources

Before the start of the school year, I wanted to ensure that we had a stronger collection of books representing First Nations, Metis and Inuit perspectives and culture. I had historically earmarked a portion of the annual library budget for these purchases but I wanted to ensure that the collection was as current as possible and that there were multiple copies of key titles, including those relating to the "Seven Grandfather Teachings", residential schools and treaties. I have been a regular customer of Good Minds, an Indigenous bookseller in Brantford, Ontario, but I decided that a trip - my first - to their retail warehouse was the best way to meet my purchasing goals. Good Minds owner Jeff Burnham is a wealth of information and after describing what we were embarking upon, he and his staff helped me select new and relevant titles to support our school-wide teaching and learning.

These new books were appreciated additions to our already significant collection of books with Indigenous themes and perspectives. To help staff find the resources they needed for teaching and learning, I created themed book lists on some of the more common topics such as residential schools, treaties as well as booklists relating to each of the "Seven Teachings". To further support teachers, the [Wilkinson Library Google](#) site is host to a number of web pages with some key online resources and videos.

The Teaching Carpet

As the school year began, our plan to acknowledge the traditional territories was also taken up by all schools within the Toronto District School Board. This immediately set the tone for the year and started a conversation in classrooms about the land upon which we live, work and learn.

One of my primary roles at the beginning of the school year was to collaborate with teachers to deliver character education lessons using the “Seven Grandfather Teachings”. Our approach, and the resources we used, differed for each grade range. The one main constant was a teaching carpet; a new space in the learning commons to gather, share and learn. The teaching carpet is a large 13’ round carpet with the four directions and the “Seven Teachings” embedded into it. This carpet quickly became, and continues to be, a focal point of class discussions and sharing. It has also opened up new opportunities for teachers to use the library learning commons space in different and engaging ways.



Throughout the school year, we held four spirit assemblies, all connected to character education and the “Seven Grandfather Teachings”. The purpose of these assemblies was to celebrate our students’ achievements and successes with an overarching theme of the “Seven Teachings”. In response to what they had learned about the “Seven Teachings”, classes shared their learning through creations such as narrated tableaux, poetry recitals and digital presentations. These assemblies served to provide a consistent message to the entire school about the importance of the “Seven Teachings” for Wilkinson students and staff.

Author Visits

To further reinforce this message we invited author and illustrator Chad Solomon to share his “Seven Sacred Teachings” presentation to the entire school. Chad Solomon, who is known for his humorous graphic novels, brings life size versions of his book’s characters in puppet form to his school visits. Many students knew the *Rabbit and Bear Paws* characters from his books as junior teachers had read his series related to the “Seven Sacred Teachings”.



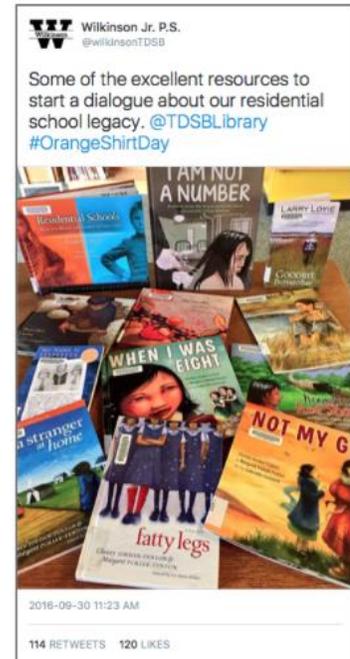
The grade 5 and 6 students had the privilege of having author Melanie Florence visit with them to discuss some of her books and writing. Melanie Florence is the author of a number of books with a First Nations and Inuit focus including the recently released *Stolen Word*, *Jordin Tootoo*, *Righting Canada’s Wrongs: Residential Schools* and *Missing Nimama*. The latter, a remarkable picture book about missing and murdered aboriginal women, won the TD Canadian Children’s Literature Award for

2016. Melanie Florence's presentation focused largely around the terrible legacy of the residential school system in Canada. Her talk was well received and students asked very thoughtful and insightful questions about this shameful past.

Orange Shirt Day

While teaching about residential schools is not new to our school, 2016 was the first year we participated in "Orange Shirt Day". The day provided teachers with a different lens to examine the legacy of the residential school system in Canada. Although it is a difficult subject to discuss with students, particularly young students, staff agreed it is an important and necessary subject to introduce and learn more about. Supported by a wealth of great print and video resources for junior and primary grades, teachers were able to share some of the stories of survivors and their hopes for a brighter and more equitable future.

How much did our youngest students understand about the day? How best do we ensure that lessons on reconciliation are delivered in a meaningful and impactful way? My hope, and the intention of "Orange Shirt Day" and associated lessons, learning and discussions, is that it will bring attention to reconciliation and that this generation of students will grow up knowing well the shameful legacy of the residential school system.



Infusing Indigenous Perspectives

Truth, reconciliation and residential schools should be topics that are revisited year after year, grade after grade, at every school. The challenge with this is there is a danger of the residential school story becoming the only lens through which students view all Indigenous people. The response to this challenge lies in ensuring that Indigenous perspectives, history and culture are included throughout the curriculum for all students at all grade levels. A commitment to learn about and infuse Indigenous perspectives is required of all staff.

Through teacher-librarian collaboration and support, teachers at my school used indigenous perspectives to teach a wide range of subjects including Social Studies, Science, sustainability, outdoor education and art. With the latter, in particular, the concern over appropriation was at the forefront of our thinking when planning our lessons. In Language, primary teachers used levelled readers with First Nations characters in contemporary situations and junior teachers planned literature circles with books with Indigenous themes and characters that were written by Indigenous authors. In Math as well, plans were as simple as comparing climate, weather, temperature and precipitation of Canadian cities in Grade 2 by using an Indigenous community as one of the examples, all the way to complex units for grade 6 classes based on breaking down the statistics and data on access to clean drinking water.

Successes, Challenges and Next Steps

By challenging ourselves as a school and pushing outside of our comfort zone, we gained a better understanding of how to infuse indigenous perspectives in our teaching and learning. I am particularly proud of our focus on the “Seven Grandfather Teachings” as a way to deliver character education. At the beginning of the current 2017-2018 school year, it was immediately clear that the classes that I have spoken with were very familiar with these teachings. I feel that, with the groundwork laid the previous school year, we can more easily build on what we have learned.

Throughout last year, all teachers gained confidence in infusing Indigenous perspectives and moved further along the continuum. Of course, not all teachers started and finished at the same spot. As a teacher-librarian who does his best to work with and support all staff, I want to spend more time this school year working with those who are less confident and more uncertain of how to infuse Indigenous perspectives. I recognize that, for a number of teachers at my school, some of this was uncomfortable work. I also know that all staff feel that it is important and necessary work.

One of our most important next steps is to invite an Elder in to the school to speak to staff and students. In terms of setting a tone for the school year, this should have been one of our first steps! However, a visit from an Elder this school year will be a good way to measure all that we have accomplished and how far we have come. We look forward to listening to an Elder’s perspective and learning more along the journey.

*Also available - slideshare from 2017 OLA Super Conference, *Infusing Aboriginal Perspectives Across the Curriculum for All Students* (Krentz, 2017) <http://bit.ly/OLA7teachings>

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