ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE CLASSROOM: A JOURNEY TO HEALING

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Abstract

Aboriginal perspectives are a very important topic in today’s educational system. There is an urgent need for educators to infuse these perspectives in classrooms and school culture, ultimately benefiting communities. However, in doing so, there are several challenges, including how to infuse these perspectives respectfully while embracing the seven teachings of the good life. A variety of resources is available to help educators do this challenging, but rewarding work. Once the educational system as a whole embraces the truth of our Canadian history, faces the challenges, and celebrates diversity, true infusion will happen and the journey to healing will begin.

The inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom is a very prevalent and important topic in today’s schools. In light of the report given by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, changes to the Manitoba curriculum, and the desire that educators are demonstrating to learn and understand more, a real shift is starting to take place in this area of education. In order for Aboriginal perspectives to be successfully infused within the classrooms of schools, it is important to look at three areas: the importance of infusing Aboriginal perspectives into the classrooms of today, the challenges faced in doing so, and how to infuse these perspectives while honouring the seven teachings of the good life (Toulouse, 2008). Our history as Canadians has been responsible for wounding the spirit of the Aboriginal peoples across this country. There is a great hope that the educational system can set us on the journey to healing that wound, and to creating a new way of thinking (Battiste, 2010).

The Importance of Infusing Aboriginal Perspectives in the Classroom

In order to begin the process of infusing Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom, educators must first look at the reasons it is important, and at our own values, beliefs, and knowledge of the topic. First, teachers must look at the single perspective narration that many of the dominant culture have to come to understand about Canadian history, and in turn how to change that story. Second, teachers have to look at the achievement gap that exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners within classrooms. Last, it has to be considered how education can begin to “revitalize the learning spirit” of many Aboriginal learners and begin the healing journey (Battiste, 2010, p. 16).

Historically, a single story has been presented to learners and to educators in the field about Aboriginal peoples and their relationship with Canada. The way that story has been told has influenced how people see themselves in the world, and how they form relationships with the “other.” This single story limits learners and educators from seeing other stories or perspectives (Scott, 2013). In many cases, knowledge taught in schools holds the values of the dominant group. Educators need to make that shift in perspective so that learners do not miss out on valuable cultural knowledge, and the opportunity to know more than one story about Canada’s history (Kanu, 2011). Citizens in the world all have different views, and their views can create issues when they become judgmental and interpret another culture as “less” or “different” (Lindsay, Nuri Robins, & Terrell, 2009, p. 57). It is vital that educators expose students to new ways of knowing cultural traditions. When this exposure happens, new doors can open (Scott, 2013). It is also important to help our learners understand the relationship between Canada and Aboriginal peoples in relation to creating stronger, more respectful relationships, and pursuing
success for all learners, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike (Blimkie, Vetter, & Haig-Brown, 2014).

Re-telling, and looking at the relationships between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians through a different lens, will “disrupt colonialism” and heal the relationships among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners and educators (Tupper, 2014, p. 474). When people choose to be open-minded, instead of judgmental, and examine their own personal beliefs and values as well as how these impact their work, then a shift will happen in the educational system (Lindsay et al., 2009). Educators can also influence change by reflecting on school culture and beliefs, recognizing the barriers that exist, and embracing diversity. As a result, all students will begin to see themselves as valued members of a community and partners in education. Presenting multiple perspectives to learners is vital in order for students to become transformative citizens in the world. This approach strongly validates why Aboriginal perspectives have a place in classrooms.

Academic achievement for Aboriginal youth needs to be considered when contemplating the infusion of Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom. The academic achievement of many Aboriginal learners is much lower than that of non-Aboriginal learners (Ledoux, 2006). Many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators attribute this achievement gap to the lack of relevant curriculum that reflects Aboriginal cultures. Curriculum should connect with the daily lives and experiences of Aboriginal learners. When Aboriginal learners find a sense of belonging within school systems, educators will then see achievement levels improve. The achievement gap that presently exists is a major concern for educators, and infusing Aboriginal perspectives within the classroom needs to be seriously considered for the success of all learners (Kanu, 2011).

Finally, the “learning spirit” of Aboriginal youth has been damaged through the intergenerational trauma that learners have suffered (Battiste, 2010, p. 16). Infusing and normalizing Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum will create a better cultural understanding among all students, cultivate better relationships, and develop stronger communities (Battiste, 2010). A better school climate will result, ultimately benefitting both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners (Kanu, 2011). An educator’s role is to help students “re-imagine” the role of Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal cultures, and their communities (Scott, 2013, p. 41). Once this shift happens, healing can begin, bringing back the spirit in which relationships were once built. Achieving this type of healing will take practice, positivity, perseverance, and love. This is hard work; however, once all stakeholders are engaged, learners’ spirits will begin to heal (Battiste, 2010).

Challenges That Educators Face

Infusing Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom can present many challenges for educators today, three of which are paramount. First, educators often believe that there is a lack of time and resources. Next, there is lack of knowledge among educators on the topic of Aboriginal perspectives. This lack of knowledge can create a fear of offending others, taking risks, and making mistakes. Finally, when educators are forced to face their own reality or attitudes, a real challenge can emerge. Looking within is very difficult for humans in general. It means exposing ourselves to the idea that maybe the values, beliefs, and perceptions that we once had about Aboriginal peoples and their cultures were wrong. It is important to look at each of these challenges very carefully, and confront them. When educators confront these issues, we open the door to new and exciting learning opportunities for all learners, and for ourselves.

Educators feel that there is a lack of time to teach the perspectives, and a lack of relevant resources. While these issues are improving, they continue to be concerns for educators. Some educators feel that Aboriginal perspectives are an “add-on” or just another thing on their list to teach, which then creates a time issue. Ultimately, educators need to infuse perspectives within the day-to-day curriculum. Infusion is about transformation, not including a “token amount”
There can also be a lack of compatibility between our school system and Aboriginal cultural values (Deer, 2013). Due to this disconnect, educators face the challenge of finding relevant content that honours Aboriginal cultural values, goes beyond the curriculum, and relates to Aboriginal learners and their daily experiences (Deer, 2013; Kanu, 2011). When educators cannot find resources or time, we often fall back on the norm because it is comfortable, which does not always meet the needs of all learners. With proper education, training, and support in finding materials, this challenge can be overcome.

Lack of knowledge leads to misunderstandings, fear, and discomfort. Educators today can bring a very “uni-cultural” view to our work, and this lack of knowledge of Aboriginal perspectives creates a fear amongst educators to take a risk, because we “may not do it right” (Deer, 2013, pp. 184-187). Many teachers struggle to admit to making mistakes or not having all the answers, which results in a fear to teach beyond the curriculum, and provide different views on Aboriginal cultures (Blimkie et al., 2014). Many educators felt that we could teach Aboriginal perspectives only in relation to a historical item or event, and not within the curriculum (Scott, 2013). This lack of knowledge and discomfort about Aboriginal cultures, values, beliefs, and struggles that Aboriginals faced every day leads to a weak relationship, and results in little or no participation from Aboriginal learners (Deer, 2013; Silver & Mallett, 2002). Lack of knowledge creates a gap between the school and the beliefs of the Aboriginal families whom we serve (Deer, 2013). Knowledge is power; in order to overcome this challenge, there is a need to educate teachers and administrators, and close the gap so that the schools and families are serving children together to the best of their ability.

One of the most difficult challenges facing educators is the necessity to confront our own attitudes about infusing Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum and our own personal views on Aboriginal cultures. In some cases, educators feel uncomfortable integrating, teaching, or discussing Aboriginal perspectives because it may appear unfair to other ethnicities in the classroom, and these feelings result in educators only adding some Aboriginal content to the already existing curriculum, which can often be Eurocentric (Kanu, 2011). Some educators have a difficult time seeing the historical story any other way than how it has conventionally been presented. We can sometimes “retreat behind a wall of ignorance” when it comes to seeing history a different way (Scott, 2013, pp. 34-35). At times, how we see our relationships with Aboriginal peoples can directly affect the way that we teach Aboriginal perspectives within the classroom (Scott, 2013). When a movement toward infusion begins, educators have to reflect on our own culture and potentially let go of parts of it in order to create a new norm. Educators are not always aware of how we see the students in our classrooms, so we may treat them differently. We must look at our own biases so that we can better serve our students (Silver & Mallett, 2002, pp. 49-50). Looking within can be one of the most challenging things we face as human beings. However, as educators we must start by looking inside at our own biases, values, and beliefs before trying to teach and infuse those of other cultures.

Infusing Aboriginal Perspectives in the Classroom by Using the Seven Good Life Teachings

When infusing Aboriginal perspectives, the challenges can seem daunting. However, there is a way to do it. One way to infuse these perspectives, making them a part of everyday teaching, is to examine at the Ojibwa seven good life teachings: respect, love, bravery, wisdom, humility, honesty, and truth (Toulouse, 2008). Each of these teachings is a pathway to infusing Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom. Each teaching provides a different theory and set of strategies that can help educators do what may feel overwhelming. Ultimately, the goal is the good life for educators, students, and families.

The first teaching is respect. It is vital that Aboriginal students and teachers feel they have a place in school. Educators must ensure that we have high expectations of Aboriginal learners, thus showing a strong belief in them. One way is simply by ensuring that the Aboriginal cultures
of the area are represented within the school, classroom, and activities. The cultures can be represented through celebrations, school programs, and the literature available, and by making sure that the Aboriginal territory is represented somewhere in the school (Toulouse, 2008). Educators should use a variety of culturally sanctioned symbols in the classrooms so that Aboriginal students feel a sense of value, identity, and place. Those symbols should not only be displayed, but also infused within everyday teaching (Dragonfly Consulting Services Canada, 2012). The school system must also be prepared to support adult and pre-school learners. Many Aboriginal students have returned to finish school, and they need the commitment to success from educators. Pre-school learners deserve the best start possible to their educational career, through either Head Start or pre-school involvement. Some of the high school Aboriginal learners struggle to work within the prescribed workday, therefore requiring a different school day that accommodates education and part-time work (Silver & Mallett, 2002). In order for Aboriginal students of all ages to feel successful, valued, and respected, the educational system needs to “re-think” how things are being done (Silver & Mallett, 2002, p. 51).

The second teaching is love. Educators can fulfill the teaching of love by supporting Aboriginal students’ learning styles within the classroom through a variety of strategies. Educators need to teach the whole child from a holistic viewpoint, use a kinesthetic approach, give time to process and reflect, and use collaboration in their teaching (Toulouse, 2008). Aboriginal learners may also have a preference for oral stories, and for showing their learning through art or demonstration. Reviewing material extensively is also important (Kanu, 2011). It is an educator’s job to teach individual students at their level and by whichever method is best suited to their needs. This is a way to ensure that the teaching of love is part of everyday practice.

The teachings of bravery and humility go hand in hand in the educational system. They are two of the most important teachings that should be considered. Teaching and infusing Aboriginal perspectives is challenging, and educators need to have the bravery and humility to rely on other experts and methods to help us do it. It is important to find the right resources, create relationships with Aboriginal communities, and bring in resource people to support the curriculum (Toulouse, 2008). These endeavours can be accomplished by discussing the difficult topics of residential schools and survivors of the cultural genocide, engaging in talking circles, examining the Indian Act, listening to oral traditions, discussing realities of Aboriginal peoples today, and bringing in speakers with different cultural views and perspectives (Silver & Mallett, 2002). Land-based learning is also very important for Aboriginal students (Delta School District #37, n.d.). Knowing where they come from, who the Elders are in their community, and what their different traditions are in relation to celebrating the land is very important to infusing Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom. One way to celebrate the land is through treaty education. Treaty education is an opportunity for peace building and awareness of history in classrooms, which encourages educators and learners to look at the relationships between settlers and First Peoples of Canada (Tupper, 2014). This can be challenging and uncomfortable, but it necessary for us to move forward.

Another resource that can support the infusing of Aboriginal perspectives is the Project of Heart program (Tupper, 2014). This program encourages students to create art, talk to residential school survivors, and participate in smudging together. Learners reflect on the past and how it influences present day. Reaching out to Aboriginal parents and families is also important. Reaching out can be done through feasts or other involvement with community events (Silver & Mallett, 2002). These strategies are all wonderful opportunities to engage Aboriginal learners and infuse cultural perspectives in the classroom. When educators use the teachings of bravery and humility to create partnerships and bring different tools and viewpoints into our teaching, infusing Aboriginal perspectives is not as much of a challenge as many may have thought.
The teaching of wisdom is a reminder that educators are lifelong learners along with their students. It is important to share our knowledge, what works, what does not work, and what else needs to be discovered in order to support learners in and out of the classroom (Toulouse, 2008). It is important to take a “whole child method” and teach the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual child through a variety of methods, including oral history and language (Ledoux, 2006, p. 1). The professional development of educators is key in this teaching. Educators must realize that continuing our own learning benefits not only ourselves, but also our students as well (Toulouse, 2008). There is wisdom in knowing what we already know, but also in knowing that there is much more learning that needs to happen. Being open to this process is key.

The teachings of honesty and truth can be partnered, as well. Truth is knowing the reality of the present-day situation. Honesty is understanding the gap that exists between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal learners, and that there has not been a significant change in the last decade (Toulouse, 2008). It is understanding that there is a crisis, and that a real change needs to happen in order for Aboriginal learners to be successful. Educators and the educational system as a whole are accountable for this change. Educators today are open and “thirsty” for this change. While it is frightening to be honest and face the truth of the Aboriginal student success gaps, there is excitement as well in working to close those gaps.

**Conclusion**

The arguments for infusing Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom are strong. Educators face several challenges while starting the journey of infusing those perspectives. However, there are also a variety of strategies, programs, resources, and teachings for the good life available for our educators, youth, and communities to infuse these perspectives successfully. The integration of Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom will benefit all learners. Aboriginal history and cultures are Canadian history and culture (Kanu, 2011). When infusing Aboriginal perspectives and cultures into classrooms, the journey to healing will truly begin. There will be a healing to all the injustice that came before us, and opportunities created for Aboriginal learners to be successful and live the good life. During this process, the lives of non-Aboriginal educators and learners will become enriched as well. It is important for all educators to rise to the challenge, understand the importance of infusing Aboriginal perspectives in the classroom, take the risk to overcome the challenges, and embrace a new way of thinking. Only then the journey of healing truly begins.

Whether we are young or old, whether our skin is light or dark, whether we are man or woman, we share a common humanity and are headed for a common destiny. That should bind us together more strongly than divisions can push us apart. So long as anything other than love governs our relationship with others, we have work to do. (Kinew, 2015, p. 268)

**References**


**About the Author**

*Laurie Bachewich is the principal of Erickson Elementary, a K-6 school in Erickson, Manitoba. She has been an administrator for the last seventeen years, classroom teacher for twenty years, and has taught all grade levels from K to grade 11. She is presently in the graduate program in the area of educational administration. Her main goal while in this program is to broaden her personal learning journey.*