

Aboriginal Education

Politics, Authenticity & Moving Forward

Brad Baker writes about the politics of Aboriginal education and how, despite the strides forward, there are still endless opportunities to integrate Aboriginal education into BC's curriculum.

When I started my teaching career 20 years ago, I was the first Squamish or Tseil Waututh Nation member hired by the North Vancouver School District. I had no idea of this at the time and I was actually surprised. To say the least, for 20 years Aboriginal Education consisted of a classroom in the corner of the school where no one visited and it was viewed as a program only for students of Aboriginal ancestry. British Columbia has come a long way since the mid-1990s, but there are still endless opportunities for us, as leaders, to make Aboriginal Education an integral component of the education system.

I believe the politics of Aboriginal Education must be recognized and discussed at the table. An open discussion of the hardships that many Aboriginal people faced in British Columbia must be talked about: the history is important for educators to understand. This must include the impact the Indian Residential Schools still have on today's education system. We can no longer shy away from this topic and make statements like this *'The Aboriginal people need to quit talking about the effects of the Residential School system; it was a long time ago and has no impact today.'* Ignorance can no longer be a cop out for educators; the history needs to be part of the classroom.

Once an educator has gained the understanding of the history, the next step in the process is for us, as leaders, to validate Aboriginal education as an important cog in the wheel for all learners. This can only be done by using authentic resources in the classroom. Authentic resources, written by Aboriginal people, will allow the Aboriginal perspectives or *ways of knowing* to be embedded into the curriculum.

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making this statement, but how can a non-Aboriginal person provide an authentic Aboriginal resource? For example, when the Ministry of Education announced several years ago the history and legacy of the Indian Residential School system would be taught in all schools, my school district was approached by a publisher who wanted to sell material that was written in the Euro-Centric viewpoint. As the child of an Indian Residential School survivor I was appalled by this. I could only imagine

that the difficulties that my father faced at school would have been downplayed once again. I believe that the validation through authentic resources will lead to a stronger understanding of Aboriginal perspectives and ways of knowing.

The final step for leaders to undertake to raise the profile of Aboriginal ways of knowing is by valuing these perspectives as best practices. This step encompasses the belief that Aboriginal perspectives are not only beneficial for students of Aboriginal ancestry, but for all students. The value piece will allow us to continue to move forward in providing a learning environment that engages all learners in the Aboriginal ways of knowing. Moving forward allows the recognition of the strong local and place history that we have in British Columbia, a piece of history that all of us need to know and be willing to talk about. The Indian Residential School system was

a fact of life for BC and through education we can bring our students to understand the value of knowing where we live and what can be done in the future.

In the end, we are at a great fork in road. I am confident that we will take the right path, which will lead to Aboriginal ways of knowing being in every class for every student. We owe the past generations of Aboriginal people to take this path as we want to enrich all classrooms for all learners with the perspectives of our local people.

I always remind myself it was education that got us in this mess, and it will be education that will get us out of this mess. Go forward with courage. 

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