Transactional Text Regarding Indigenous Literacy

Caia Chiverton

University of Regina

13- 15 Centennial Street
Regina, SK, S4S 6K7
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Ms. Parveena Smetna
Happy Valley School
25 Acorn Rd.
Regina, SK, S4S 0A2.

Re: Indigenous Literacy

Dear Ms. Smetna,

I would like to begin by offering you congratulations on your recent acceptance as a teacher in the city of Regina, Saskatchewan. I am contacting you to discuss how important classroom diversity is and how to incorporate Indigenous Literacy into your classroom. As a fellow educator, I can imagine the excitement and pride you must be feeling as you embark on this new and challenging journey. Literacy in Saskatchewan has begun to move towards celebrating diversity in the classroom and as new teacher in Saskatchewan it is critical that you make this a priority in your classroom as well. An exciting component that comes with you being a recent immigrant to Canada is your different experiences and cultural background that will add an element of uniqueness and ultimately be an asset in creating an ideal and richly diverse classroom; I am sure you will have plenty of knowledge to share with your fellow colleagues.

Because you are new to Canada and to Saskatchewan specifically, I am sure you have plenty of questions regarding this province, the people residing here and our history. Understanding who your learners are and what the province’s curriculum is based upon will help you become an effective teacher in any classroom you are put into. I encourage you to familiarize yourself with the Saskatchewan Curriculum and really challenge yourself to become comfortable with what this province places emphasis on in our education system. You will notice that one component in the Saskatchewan Curriculum is Treaty Education, it is crucial that you make this a focus in your lessons and incorporate into outcomes. One good resource you can refer to, to gain insight about literacy in Saskatchewan and what the expectation are in this province is the *Saskatchewan Reads* document. The students in Saskatchewan classrooms are quite diverse and will require you to become resourceful in how you effectively manage and teach your learners. Because Saskatchewan has a high population of First Nations Peoples, there is a great likelihood that some of your learners will be Indigenous peoples. As a new Canadian citizen it is important for you to understand the history of this country and of this province to learn why Indigenous Literacy is something that I have contacted you about.

Although Canada is often thought of as a peaceful country, our complicated history between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people has not always proven this to be true. European settlers arrived on this land and discovered Indigenous people who survived and prospered by living a life that is deeply connected to and reliant on the land, the animals and the water systems. The different Indigenous nations taught the settlers how to survive on this unfamiliar and harsh land, giving them the skills they needed to hunt, farm and thrive in payment for goods brought over from European countries. This relationship was one that initially benefitted both parties, however the greed and desire for power of the European settlers conflicted this relationship and lead to horrible methods of assimilation.

One horrific method of assimilation used that has had lasting multigenerational effects and has damaged so many Indigenous families, effects that are still being felt and problematic today, was the implementation of Residential Schools. The idea behind Residential Schools was to “civilize” Aboriginal children by indoctrinating a Euro-Canadian and Christian way of life and assimilating them into what was perceived as the dominant culture. Children were taken from their homes, forced to only speak English/French and taught to forget their own beliefs and replace them with Christianity. Not only were children forced to forget their culture, while attending these schools many suffered from physical, mental, emotional and sexual abuse. Many Indigenous children died while attending school, and the ones who did survive suffered in so many other ways; Indigenous people struggled with their self-identity, turning to substance abuse as method of coping, losing trust in government and therefore education and lack the proper social support they need. Residential Schools are a dark period in Canadian history, it may shock you to know that the last Canadian Residential School to close was in 1996, here in Saskatchewan.

I’ve shared this brief history of Canadian First Nations people because getting to know your learners is important as a teacher.  It is also extremely necessary to get to know your learners’ cultures and I encourage you to continue to learn more about Indigenous people and their cultures because it will help you become a better teacher.  Jessica Ball stated, “Cultural sensitivity, cultural competence, cultural safety, and cultural knowledge are prerequisites for the development of culturally meaningful and relevant pedagogies and curriculum content” (2010, p. 17). By understanding what is important in your students’ cultures, you will be able to implement content and methods of teaching literacy that will be much more effective. Knowing the importance of land, respect and community to Indigenous culture will allow you to create meaningful lessons for your students.

One method of Indigenous Literacy is the use of oral language and the practice of storytelling. Within the Ball article it is noted that Indigenous education focuses on orality, saying “Emergent literacy programs can build upon the oral tradition of Indigenous Peoples using stories that reflect children’s family, community relationships, environments, and culture” (2010, p. 25). Students can easily be exposed to this type of literacy every day in a classroom by a teacher simply telling stories, having students tell each other stories or listening to recordings of stories and then get students to practice retelling the stories they have been told. Regina is a city that fortunately is quite close to the community of Fort Qu’Appelle, where Treaty 4 was signed in 1874. The community is full of different Indigenous resources you as a teacher can incorporate into your classroom; make connections and ask questions about how your classroom can be one that excels in Indigenous Literacy. There are Elders and Knowledge Keepers who are available to join your class if you respectfully ask them to and using these community members as a resource can bring an authentic experience of Indigenous storytelling into your classroom for your students.

Like all children, Indigenous children too have individual strengths and weaknesses, these children can not all be simply clumped into one category and literacy educational methods can not be approached in one unilateral way. Ball explains this when she says “Indigenous children should not be ‘painted with the same brush’ just because Canadian data show persisting inequities in educational attainment among Indigenous children as a group” (2010, p. 8). The best way to look at Indigenous literacy is to remember the idea of multiliteracies and how people can be literate in many different ways, it does not only just encompass reading and writing. Some of the multiliteracies Indigenous children learn in their cultures include being able to read the land, the changing seasons and how to participate in their community are explained by Ball when she says “The literacies that Indigenous children develop in their families and communities are important not only because these forms of literacy embody certain kinds of cultural knowledge, but also because their literacies can reveal their ways of thinking and understanding the world.”