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Children's literature as a vehicle for indigenous diversity awareness and inclusion in the classroom

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Abstract

The notable trauma experienced by Indigenous Canadian peoples at residential schools is only now, in the last few decades, being addressed. How we non-Indigenous Canadians view our history of colonialism and western hegemony, has come under question. It has been noted that some educators are hesitant to teach about these subjects, as they have not been adequately prepared. This paper addresses one phase of a three-year study concerning the use of multimodal teaching methods with an emphasis on the literature and illustrations in Canadian Indigenous picture books. Educators are at the forefront of changing negative stereotypes and attitudes concerning First Nation peoples and educating the young to recognize the power of mutual respect and collaboration concerning cultures different from their own. Through the use of critical classroom dialogues and children's literature, students in our study were able to come to a greater understanding of indigenous culture and the loss of Indigenous identity.

Keywords: Children's literature, early education, indigenous identity, residential schools, picture books, deep learning, diversity.

Introduction

The importance of cultural identity has become a predominate focus in both the academy and popular media in today's world. Students, with their constant exposure to electronic media, are frequently exposed to the globalization of culture (Maguth, 2012). The proliferation of mass media has given them the ability to acquire instant access to other populations and cultures; subsequently, however, it can be argued that engaging in a more global cultural identity can lead to a loss of historical distinctiveness. In Canadian society there is a longstanding concern that young people are losing a sense and understanding of Canada's unique cultural diversity – the “fear that the multiculturalism policy is promoting too much diversity at the expense of unity” (Leman, 1999). To answer this concern, students are encouraged to develop an understanding of their own cultural uniqueness, as well as constructing an appreciation and understanding of other individual's ethnic identities and how they differ from their own. And in order for students to develop an understanding of ethnic pluralism in Canadian society, it is important that they critically reflect on the historical development of the country, and its relationship to its Indigenous peoples. This was the intention of this phase of a pan-Canadian research study examining the use of post-colonial literature in the classroom, that focused on using pedagogies of discomfort (Boler & Zembylas, 2003) to engage children in critical classroom dialogues. These studies are built around case studies of individual teachers, with this particular phase looking at the historical roots of Canadian Indigenous people, and how their experiences recounted through the lens of children's literature in a year six classroom in the province of Newfoundland & Labrador. Teachers worked in teacher-inquiry groups, researching how post-colonial children's literature could help children understand the historical struggles of Indigenous peoples, and in particular the removal of Indigenous children's cultural identity through government enforced residential schooling. The data shared in this paper is from year two of a three- year study.

Background

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) released their report on the impact of residential schools in Canada on Indigenous peoples, after speaking with more than 6750 witnesses and survivors of Canada's residential school system (Schwartz 2015). The report outlined Canada's history of removing Indigenous children from their parents in order to break Indigenous children's link with their culture, identity, and language (2015):

The intent of the government's policy, which was firmly established in legislation at the time that the treaties had been negotiated, was to assimilate Aboriginal people into broader Canadian society. At the end of this process, aboriginal people were expected to have ceased to exist as a distinct people with their own government, cultures, and identities (p.57).

In 1876, the residential school system was created as a result of an aggressive government assimilation policy. Entitled, “The Indian Act,” this policy eradicated indigenous government and established treaties,

causing them to “cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada” (TRC, 2015, p. 1). These policies were developed to assimilate the indigenous peoples and did so through residential schools and legislation, which prohibited indigenous ceremonies and gatherings, language, and the wearing of traditional clothing (Moore et al., 2019, p.25). Residential schools separated siblings, took away their belongings, forced them to wear uniforms, and required them to speak only English or French. Conditions in the schools were often horrific, and children were subject to neglect and abuse (p. 26). These schools existed not only in Canadian provinces but also in the independent dominion of Newfoundland & Labrador (NL), which until confederation in 1949, was an independent country. The schools in NL not only committed the same atrocities as the Canadian residential schools but also practiced “forced invisibility” by denying the existence of the Mi’kmaq people (Hanrahan and Anderson, 2013).

Canada was historically founded on European colonial expansion, but today Canada has a diverse population of peoples and cultures, contributing to a multicultural national identity. Since the 1970s, Canada has been striving to acknowledge the cultural diversity through such policies like the *Canadian Human Rights Act* (CHRA) (1982) and the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* (CMA). These policies recognize the diversity of the country and identify Canada as a nation that values equality and inclusion (Moore et al., 2019, p.22). The Canadian Multiculturalism Act (CMA) of 1988, intended to show Canada’s commitment to respecting equality and diversity (Moore et al., 2019, p.22).

Despite Canada’s policies of equality and inclusion, it is becoming increasingly evident that colonization had a direct impact on Indigenous peoples’ sense of cultural identity (TRC, 2015). Because of this, Indigenous peoples have generally been left out of conversations about multiculturalism in Canadian society (Moore et al., 2019). Even though the last residential school in Canada closed in 1996, the majority of Canadians have just started to grasp the immense harm done to Indigenous peoples through government policies that attempted to erase their culture and traditions (Lambert, 2016). Through the findings of the TRC, more Canadians have become informed about reconciliation, and there has been greater incentive toward addressing the needs of Indigenous students (Moore et al., 2019).

Methods and Data Sources

Our research focused on how literacy teachers in the Canadian schooling system work collaboratively, reviewing, researching, and selecting children’s literature that can advance students’ understandings of social justice in postcolonial and settler locations. Literacy scholars in this study worked closely with educators through the collection of data, such as classroom teaching observations, use of social justice children’s literature, children’s writing and drawing samples, interviews with the teachers, and focus group interviews with the participating children. The ethical review process consisted of approval by Memorial University’s Research Ethics Board and the schoolboard’s ethics review to ensure that children, parents, and teachers were aware of the parameters and timeframes, as well as the reasoning for collection of the data set and the withdrawal process. This article identifies data which was gathered

from year two of the study. This case study shares the experiences of one of our teachers, Lisa (pseudonym), a mid-career teacher whose passion for social justice was demonstrated in her numerous outside classroom activities supporting equal opportunity and access initiatives for youth through her school, and fundraising activities for new immigrants coming to the province. The researcher, Anne met with Lisa a member of the teacher inquiry group monthly during the three- year study, and was present in the classroom during the teaching of this particular unit in Year 2 for a two-week period, and observed six forty- five minute language arts classes devoted to the deeper understanding of the atrocities of residential schooling using Indigenous Children's literature as a resource. The teacher inquiry group of ten teachers which included Lisa, met bi-monthly during the year at the University to share their social justice teaching pedagogies, and Children's literature resources.

The school in the study currently has a population of 346 students aged 5-12 years. The students who attend the school are predominantly Caucasian and come from backgrounds of similar socio-economic status. Students experience very little diversity within the school that they attend. This can often make it difficult for students to engage in critical thinking opportunities, in which they must put themselves in other individual's places in order to develop a deeper understanding and empathy towards other individuals and their experiences (Park, Denson and Bowman, 2013; Stuart Wells, Fox, and Cordova-Cobo, 2016). Dwyer, Hogan, and Stewart (2014) argue that critical thinking skills need, to be, "...developed in educational settings because they allow individuals to go beyond simply retaining information, to actually gaining a more complex understanding of the information being presented to them" (p.50). Thus, it is essential for students to be involved in a critical thinking framework within the classroom as it can expand their current knowledge and understanding and allow them to appreciate the opinions and ideas of others (Dwyer et al., 2014).

For this study, implementation of critical analysis concerning colonization and cultural identity was shared in one year six class. This grade was purposefully selected because classroom curriculum focused on the exploration of social justice and global issues, with the goal of developing critical awareness and agency around key topics. The class consisted of approximately 20 students of varying academic abilities, but with similar socio-economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

Engaging students with difficult concepts such as colonization and cultural identity can be challenging for educators (Lowe, 2015; Zembylas, 2015). Nonetheless, in order for progress to be made concerning reconciliation and inclusion of Indigenous peoples, classroom teachers need to find ways to help students understand these oftentimes uncomfortable issues. As Jean-Paul Restoule, a Canadian scholar (2011) maintains:

We cannot achieve our goals alone. We need non-Aboriginal people to understand our shared histories, our perspectives, our visions, and our goals, and to participate in achieving them together. This means we need non-Aboriginal teachers respecting and using Indigenous perspectives in our classrooms (para, 9).

While the curriculum framework in Newfoundland & Labrador requires students to learn about the history of Canada's residential schools, other topics, such as the historical and contemporary contributions of Indigenous peoples to Canada are largely absent (Kairos, 2015). Furthermore, an investigation completed by Godlewska et al. (2017), on the social studies textbooks in NL for ages five to fourteen, found that some of the content regarding Indigenous peoples was problematic, with incorrect terminology and erroneous historical information.

Due to the lack of background knowledge and the limitations of the resources, educators must seek further information through media and technology-based information to supplement the curriculum. In this case study, Lisa utilized the prescribed curriculum resources for Religion and Social Studies in order to introduce students to the concepts of Indigenous beliefs, colonization, culture, and human rights issues. While the religion textbook provides a cultural representation of NL, the text offers only a limited viewpoint based on the positive aspects of colonization on culture and Indigenous belief systems. Because of this, expecting students to understand the lasting atrocities of Indigenous colonization could pose a challenge for teachers. By encouraging discussions about Indigenous communities in Newfoundland and Labrador, students were able to recognize various seemingly positive aspects that colonization had promoted to the well-being of the Indigenous community, such as trading, might also have had negative outcomes. Students then were engaged in an open dialogue, loosely guided by a series of critical prompts and posed questions. For example, students were asked to consider if Indigenous communities already had their own spirituality and belief system prior to being colonized by the British in NL, and after confederation with Canada in 1949. This question prompted students to reconsider if the sharing and promoting of Canadian values had, in reality, had a positive impact on Indigenous communities.

Texts written for children can deal with complex issues such as trauma and loss (Elshaikh, 2016). Resources in the form of children's literature, illustrations, and first-hand accounts can and should be introduced into the classroom environment to enhance an open dialogue with the students, and our study explored how children's literature which offered new and different perspectives on the Indigenous experience in Canada could introduce these issues within classrooms. Two picture books were utilized as supplementary texts to promote critical thinking surrounding the concept of colonization and cultural identity in this study. These picture books, written by Indigenous authors Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton, and illustrated by Gabrielle Grimard, are titled *When I Was Eight* (2013) and *Not my Girl* (2014). The books are based on Margaret Pokiak-Fenton's experiences' as an Indigenous residential school girl. Born in the North West Territories in 1936 to Inuvialuit parents, Margaret's experiences' in the books are powerful and compelling and easily grasped by young students.

The first book, *When I Was Eight* (2013), tells the story of an 8-year-old Inuit girl, Olemaun, who wants to attend the "outsider" school so that she can learn to read. When she goes to the residential school, they cut her hair, make her wear a uniform, and give her a new English name; Margaret. They also

forbid her from speaking her native language. During her stay, she is emotionally abused by the nuns at the school. In the second book, Olemaun (Margaret) now ten, returns to her home community after being in a residential school for two years. She struggles to remember her language and other traditional ways of life; because of this, she has trouble fitting in with her family and community.

The illustrations in both of these books convey emotion to the reader, which, in turn, allows the reader to see and empathize with the damage inflicted by residential schools to the cultural identity of Indigenous persons. At the beginning of *When I Was Eight* (2013), the visuals illustrate Olemaun smiling and enjoying being a member in the community; however, after she goes to the residential school, the visual medium in the book provides a stark contrast to the earlier joyfulness. Olemaun is illustrated with scared and sad facial expressions, all the girls now look the same, and the book demonstrates that they have been stripped of their distinctiveness and individuality. Similarly, the visuals in *Not my Girl* (2014), particularly the facial expressions of the characters, convey the sadness and harm that was created by the loss of Indigenous cultural identity in residential schools.

Teaching about Indigenous Culture and History

The findings of a 2009 study conducted by the Environics Institute found that 46% of non-Indigenous students were unaware of the history of residential schools, and 89% of urban Indigenous students reported learning little to nothing about Indigenous culture and history. Furthermore, 63% of non-Indigenous students thought schools were only doing a fair to poor job on teaching about Indigenous peoples (Environics Institute, 2010). Importantly, Justice Murray Sinclair, a commissioner of the TRC, declared:

Education is what got us into this mess—in terms of residential schools—but education is the key to reconciliation because we need to look at the way we are educating children...the way we have educated Aboriginal peoples in residential schools to believe that they are heathens and savages and pagans and inferior, it is the same message we are giving in the public schools. Additionally, we need to change that message in the public schools, and in the Aboriginal schools as well, to ensure all students being educated in our school system in Canada are educated to understand the full and proper history of each and every Indigenous group...so that they will grow up learning how to speak to and about each other in a more respectful way.” (2015, 9:34-10:21).

Discussions like these suggest that there are several considerations educators should make when teaching about Indigenous people. First, educators should begin with teaching how the Indigenous people of our country are resilient, and that they still exist today despite the long history of colonial subjugation. It is important that educators do not begin by teaching about cultural genocide and residential schools, because it portrays Indigenous people as victims (Freeman et al., 2018). Additionally, students need to understand their own culture and history first so that they can more deeply

understand what the Indigenous lost through assimilation. Third, educators should endeavour to build strong relationships between schools and the local Indigenous communities and, when possible, educators should bring Indigenous people into the classroom to speak about their insights, as a way to personalize Indigenous experience (Freeman et al., 2018). Fourth, it is important to recognize that “truth comes before the reconciliation;” therefore, educators play a very important role in providing their students with the essential and relevant information (p. 12). Finally, when looking for Indigenous resources, educators should check to ensure that the resources accurately depict Indigenous and are appropriate for the particular students that will be using them. Resources should also deal with diverse subject matter from many different areas of the curriculum.

The curriculum framework utilized within NL in English Language Arts, Social Studies, and Religion does provide opportunities for students to utilize critical thinking skills and engage with social justice issues. All Canadian provinces are required to teach about Indigenous issues and culture, and education ministries must provide educators with resources. However, while the NL curriculum does require that students learn about residential schools in grades seven and nine, there is a lack of implementation (Kairos, 2015). This may be because oftentimes the curriculum framework does not provide educators with the background knowledge or detailed resources that they require to effectively engage students in the process of developing a broader understanding of Indigenous culture. According to Freeman et al., (2018), a great number of teachers do not have a background in cultural sharing or “first-hand experience with Indigenous people” (p.10). This contributes to their discomfort when talking about Indigenous issues in the classroom. Consequently, educators often do not engage in this critical analysis with students as they feel uncomfortable discussing the topics and worry that they will not be able to effectively engage students in critical thinking processes. Despite their discomfort, it is important for educators to work on reconciliation in their own classrooms. Additionally, Freeman et al., (2018) recognize that “doing nothing adds to the problem” (10). In other words, when teachers completely avoid talking about Indigenous people in their classroom, they are alienating their Indigenous students, while their non-Indigenous students remain uninformed about the First Peoples of Canada. Because of this, they may infer that Indigenous culture, people, and perspectives are not important. However, as Restoule (2011) explains, “I’ve often encountered two types of benign resistance from those who would otherwise be strong allies: the fear of appropriation and a lack of confidence. Approaching indigenous inclusion through the fostering of relationships can address both of these issues” (para. 9). In the next section, we discuss one teacher’s classroom critical dialogues around reconciliation with her year 6 class.

Conversations in the Classroom

The use of children’s literature and open discourse in the classroom, both key aspects of this study’s methodology, lead to many intriguing conversations among students and teachers concerning colonization and cultural identity. Students struggled with understanding how these atrocities continue to impact Indigenous people today despite the abolition of residential schooling in the late 1990’s in Canada. Students also questioned how particular subject textbooks in their present curriculum viewed

the cultural impact on the Indigenous people as positive. In earlier textbooks, the national narrative around colonialization in Canada has been presented as a positive experience for indigenous peoples. Shrubbs (2014) recognizes that, "Canadian history is steeped with idealistic, imperialist discourses organized around keywords such as peacekeeping and multiculturalism, as well as progress, development, identity, and nation-building" (iii). Classroom discussion around such topics can offer students an arena to deconstruct viewpoints that are prevalent in Canada's history.

It is important to note that, "Cultural identity is constructed and maintained through the process of sharing collective knowledge such as traditions, heritage, language, aesthetics, norms, and customs" (Hsueh-Hua Chen 2014). It is this sharing between members that strengthens group bonds and heightens a sense of cultural uniqueness. It is important for educators to demonstrate to their students that when these bonds are disrupted, broken, or presented as being deviant from the prevailing culture, the breakdown of individual concepts of self in connection to the wider dominant society is disrupted or shattered. Governmental policies which forced re-education, removal, and compulsory assimilation created conflict and confusion around what it is to be Indigenous in Canada. The swiftest path to deconstruct this colonial paradigm is through early education and inter-cultural dialogue.

One primary key to the shaping of cultural identity is language, "...because identity is itself at the very heart of what language is about, how it operates, why and how it came into existence and evolved" (Joseph 2004, p.224). World views are articulated through language by expressing group narratives concerning place, time, and ultimate meaning. Degradation of native languages strips individuals of their external communications and internal thought processes. Language is generational, containing thousands of years of cultural expression and world view. Lisa felt simply allowing children to read the book and study the illustrations was futile if she was to move the dialogue into a more critical points of connection. Here we see the struggling conversations between students in trying to reconcile their westernized perspectives of education with what the main character experienced. Below is an open dialogue recorded, and observed between the teacher Lisa, and her student (all names pseudonyms) concerning the importance of language exchange and communication amongst indigenous and "white" cultures:

Jack: "My partner and I are having trouble with this question." Lisa: "What in particular about the question are you having trouble with?"

Jack: "We know that a person's language is an important part of their culture, but we also think that it was important for people in the Indigenous community to be able to communicate with the white people or outsiders."

Ms. Lisa: "I think that is a very interesting idea that you and Terri are discussing. Communicating with other people is always very important when we are living in the same community. Do you think that the Indigenous people should have learned to speak English or that the outsiders should have learned to speak the Indigenous Language?"

Terri: *"I think that they both should have learned each other's language; that way, it would be fair".*

Ms. Lisa: *"What do you mean by fair?"*

Terri: *"Neither one of them would lose their own language if they learned to speak each other's; plus, they would both learn something new, which is good."*

The student Terri's comments share her determination to offer atonement for the loss of language that many indigenous people have experienced as a result of residential schooling. Another conversation saw a student draw comparisons between both of the biographical genre forms of children's literature studied in the classroom during the year such as *Malala: My story for standing up for girls rights* (2018) written by Malala Yousafzai, and the experiences of the main character Margaret in the book *When I was eight* (2013). The illustrations in the books also prompted the students to engage in various discussions surrounding the importance of education, identity, and culture. In trying to reconcile what it means to be marginalized and female, students draw from their knowledge of the life of Malala in current Pakistan. One of the conversations that arose during classroom group work was around gender and the importance of girls being able to receive an education:

Jason: *"I think that it was a good idea that they were provided with a chance to get an education. Not everyone gets that kind of chance, like think of what we talked about in Social Studies in some countries girls aren't allowed to get an education. So that's a good thing that they got to go to school."*

Sarah: *"That is true, but there were a lot of problems with the school. Like, they didn't learn anything in their own language. I know we learn French, but English is our first language, so that's not so bad. They didn't get to speak their own language at all."*

A further conversation showed how the children drew on prior knowledge from an earlier discussion observed by the researcher on the provision of private education for girls where public education is still available but limited in marginalized and third world countries. This acute dialogue shows a growing critical awareness of the underpinnings of critical literacy as the students dig deeper into understandings around race, gender and equity when talking about the Indigenous character Margaret from the picture book *When I was Eight*.

Molly: *"At least the education they got was free. Not everyone in the world gets that kind of opportunity."*

Drew: *"But was it really free?"*

Ms. Lisa: *"Can you explain what you mean, Drew?"*

Drew: *"Well it wasn't free because of all the rules they had, like not speaking their own language, or being allowed to be themselves. They ended up losing their identity so they could learn what other people thought was important."*

As the conversation above demonstrates, students have the ability to critically reflect on what they initially believed to be a beneficial experience when drawing conclusions from a Euro-centric viewpoint. By presenting students with the opportunity to read, discuss and visually connect through the illustrations and narratives in picture books addressing Indigenous issues, students draw from a set of multimodal tools to challenge dominant ethnocentric ideas concerning identity, race, as well as, the acquiring of knowledge (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015). For many non-indigenous students, the foundation of education is premised on white European educational standards, however, this is not always the case, and it should be recognized by both educators and students alike, that learning in and of itself is a cultural system that helps form identity. McCue (2018) rightly notes that, "The introduction of European classroom-style education as part of a larger goal of assimilation disrupted traditional methods and resulted in cultural trauma and dislocation" (Education of Indigenous Peoples in Canada section, para.1). In our study, we found that the students were able to link Indigenous children's literature to previously learned ideas from other courses, as well as their own personal experiences with the dominant education system. They were then able to engage a critical lens to understand how the government enforced education of Indigenous people had a negative effect, stripping individuals of their own culture and language, as well as marginalizing their traditional ways of life.

The students further advanced their understandings of what cultural identity means through their observations of how the picture book illustrations showed the characters dress evolving when they entered the schools, with the characters' traditional clothing disappearing shortly after they arrived. Many of the students were initially surprised that all the girls illustrated in *When I Was Eight* had the same haircuts and were forced to wear the same uniforms:

Sarah: *"They took away their individuality; I would never want to wear a uniform at school."*

Lori: *"I think it's worse than that; they cut off her hair. She even talked in the book about how her mother used to braid her hair a certain way"*

Ms. Lisa: *"Why do you think that was important? That they cut the girls hair and made them dress alike."*

During the teacher inquiry groups, much discussion revolved around the complexities in the theme of identity pictured in the illustrations of nuns cutting off the girls' hair. The teachers, who were mothers themselves, were strongly affected by the scene, and spoke about the importance of the bonds created by mothers and daughters around hair styling. These feelings were also shared by the female students during subsequent classroom discussions.

Lori: *"Well, they didn't get to wear their traditional clothes, which is another part of their culture. Plus, the hair thing was like a personal thing that Margaret had with her mom."*

Sarah: *“Yeah, when they cut her hair, it was like they were taking her mom away from her.”*

Ms. Lisa: *“Well, her mom wasn’t at the school, so she was away from her mom. Can you explain more about what you mean that they were taking her mom away from her?”*

Lori: *“They were taking away the memory of her mom, or an activity that her mom did with her, which I think is important to her.”*

Hair remains particularly important to Indigenous peoples; a sign of health and strength, and cultural identity. By cutting it in residential schools, the authorities’ reasoned that it would sever ties to the children’s traditions and culture; thus, making it easier for them to assimilate into mainstream Canadian society (Florence 2016, p.54). Hair and dress are considered an individual’s choice in our modern western society. It is not surprising then, that students who have grown up with a post-modern concept of individuality are able to locate the inequity of such conformity to rigid and unfamiliar standards enforced by government schools and would be sensitive to such punitive methods. Through identifying with the narrative back story of indigenous children as shown in the illustrations of the picture books, students were able to empathize and place themselves into the shoes of others and feel what was traumatic and unfair. Educators, through literature, can unlock this natural empathy through deep learning and interactive discussions that bring out the natural abilities of the student to connect and cognitively identify with the sympathetic experiences and personalities in these books. It is important not to underestimate the ability of children to connect with others emotionally through diverse educational mediums.

Empathetic and critical thinking concerning the treatment of Indigenous children who attended these schools was further developed during discussions of the second picture book selection, *Not My Girl* (2014). The discussion surrounding the concept of cultural identity began with the introduction of the title of the book and the illustration on the cover:

Ms. Lisa: *“What do you think that this next book is about?”*

Dylan: *“I think it is about Margaret coming home and being rejected by a family member.”*

Ms. Lisa: *“That is a very interesting prediction. Do you think that you can explain to the class how you came up with this idea?”*

One of the goals of the project was to help students think more critically and deeply about this subject, how illustrations can play a part in this process. In this exchange the students demonstrated how they were beginning to read beyond the surface narrative of the illustrations, and to critically focus into the deeper cultural content (Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2015).

Dylan: *"Well, the title of the book is "Not My Girl," and the illustration shows a woman turning away from a little girl. I think that the little girl is Margaret and that the woman turning away is her mom or sister.*

Ms. Lisa: *"Why do you think the other character is turning away from Margaret?"*

Jessica: *"It might be because they don't like the fact that she went to the school."*

Dylan: *"Yeah, she might not fit in with the other people in her community who didn't go to school."*

As the story reading unfolds, the students encounter how Margaret no longer fits in with her family or community and feels as if she is now a "stranger". Indigenous children who were subjected to government schools were devastated on several fronts, not the least being removed from everything they knew, and forced to integrate into a foreign and many times a punishing educational system. This was compounded by the inability to connect to their previous life when they returned home as pointedly demonstrated in *Not My Girl* (2014). The young child Margaret (Olemaun, her ancestral name) said in the book, "My first few weeks at home were difficult. I could not eat the food my mother prepared. I relied on my father to translate almost everything. And, I had lost the skills I needed to be useful" (14). Countless students were in school ten months or more a year, away from their families. Many stayed all year round at residential schools. What written communication there was sent from the children to their families was in English— which many parents couldn't read. *Not My Girl* brings home to the students the power of losing a sense of cultural identity and rejection of all that was familiar, especially as a child:

Dylan: *"I was surprised by how much she lost at the school."*

Ms. Lisa: *"What kind of things did she lose?"*

Dylan: *"Well, she couldn't speak her own language, or eat the food her parents prepared, and couldn't help with the chores. It's like she forgot everything."*

Jessica: *"It really shows how out of place she was not able to fit in with her own family. Plus, it shows how important family is in making us who we are."*

Dylan: *"It's true who we are, is a part of how we are raised."*

Ms. Lisa: *"You're right; how we are raised has a big impact on our values, beliefs, and our cultural identity."*

Jessica: *"What I like is how she re-learned everything and became a part of her family again; she got her identity back."*

Dylan: *"Yeah, it took time, but she learned her language and how to be a part of her family again."*

Ms. Lisa: *"She was able to regain her cultural identity that she lost while she was at the school."*

From these discussions, it became apparent that students were able to readily acknowledge the issues that First Nations people have faced through the loss of their culture through forced residential

schooling. By learning to analyse and challenge continuing misinformation associated with Indigenous beliefs and culture, students can become culturally responsive citizens beginning these conversations with an informed critical understanding of what has become known as a historically dark chapter in Canada's history. The deployment of children's literature for critical analysis within the classroom was an essential part of developing the student's knowledge, and critical thinking skills to understand the plight of Indigenous peoples in a present multicultural Canada.

Conclusion

While introducing the impact and loss of Indigenous identity to students is an important learning experience around Canada's nation building history, however it is also essential that the students consider what we, as non-Indigenous people, should do to support Indigenous communities. Many teachers may not feel comfortable implementing lessons that address dark periods of history, concerning colonialism, residential schools, and inequitable and racist government policies (Kello, 2016; Zembylas, 2015). Our intention in this article was to show how teachers can inform students of these challenging historical moments through a critical classroom pedagogical approach using children's literature as a resource. Again, as Restoule (2011) maintains, "...the fear of presenting material in an area where one is not the expert should not be a barrier." Multimodal mediums such as those in picture books and critical dialogue opens up avenues for students to learn about our shared multicultural history of Canada and allows for students to feel that they can engage freely in open dialogue, even when what they have known is only the partial truth.

Teachers are at the forefront of these efforts to establish a fair and equitable society for all, through offering knowledge and tools for social change to our youngest citizens. This study demonstrates that children's literature can be effectively utilized to present sensitive cultural topics and can be used to guide students in open dialogue about national and global issues.

Overall, students in this study, were profoundly affected by the way in which the indigenous characters in the picture books were treated, and how they were encouraged to change their culture, language, and spiritual belief practices to sustain the hegemonic views of the modern Canadian society. Our ultimate goal was for students to reach a critical understanding of how, as Canadians, we can ensure that the cultural identity of others is understood and approached with respect. In our research, we were able to demonstrate that the students gained an understanding through the literature, and their discussions of what it meant to lose identity, both as an individual and as a collective group.

By gaining a greater understanding of First Nations cultural identity, the students were provided with the opportunity to build on their knowledge, both as Canadians and global citizens, regarding the rights of others within society. Our study recognizes that through visual learning, multimodal educational methods and the development of critical thinking skills in the classroom, students can be engaged in reflective learning surrounding topics such as the loss of cultural identity and the need for national

compassion and integrity towards marginalized groups. Further, they gained a shared understanding of what it is to be an Indigenous Canadian in an age of multiculturalism.

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