

RMYC
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Regional Multicultural Youth Council
Multicultural Association of Northwestern Ontario

AN INDEGENOUS CURRICULUM
The History & Knowledge of our Traditional Ways

2020 Summer Project Team:

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AN INDIGENOUS CURRICULUM

The History & Knowledge of Our Traditional Ways

Introductions:

Boozhoo, my name is Jacie Indian. This is my second summer job with the Regional Multicultural Youth Council (RMYC). I am from Treaty Three (3) Anishinabe of Wauzhushk Onigum located in the Kenora area, Ontario. I completed my Aboriginal Community Advocacy diploma at Confederation College last year and I am attending Lakehead University this year. I helped to put together this project to enhance Indigenous education in the school curriculum, promote our true history, celebrate our culture and counter the misinformation in Canadian society today, challenge stereotypes and eliminate racial prejudice and discrimination due to ignorance.

I was inspired to come up with this project after attending the *Coming Together To Talk With Youth* forum at Lakehead University on April 30, 2019. The event was attended by 250 students from Thunder Bay high schools. I was one of the youth organizers and facilitated one of the workshops. In spite of current efforts to improve the school curriculum and make more multicultural and inclusive, I was surprised at how ignorant many non-Indigenous students in my workshop were about Indigenous people. This motivated me to lead a team of six First Nations high school students and share ideas to enhance the education curriculum and make a difference.

Other Team Members:

My name is Jasper Beaver and I was born in 2004. I am from Summer Beaver First Nation. I heard about the RMYC from my mother and I am very interested to learn about my culture and educate others about Indigenous people and advocate for reconciliation.

My name is Ayvah Crowchild and I am from Tsuu T'ina Nation. It is located outside of Calgary, Alberta. I am volunteering with the RMYC and we are working on a project titled: The Indigenous Curriculum Project. I was born in 2007, and would like to learn about my culture in school. We chose this project to promote knowledge about Indigenous people.

My name is Destiny Linklater, I am from Couchiching First Nation. I'm working with the RMYC for the first time. I wanted to get involved with the RMYC because I want to help Thunder Bay to become a better city for everyone and to also gain new skills. I chose to work on this project to educate our peers about our Indigenous culture and teachings.

My name is Hannah Kakegamic and I am originally from Keewaywin First Nation. Keewaywin First Nation is located north of Red Lake. I am doing this project on Indigenous curriculum to share my ideas to improve our education. I was born in 2007 and I feel that more people should know about our culture and history.

My name is Tyrone Munroe and I was born in Sachigo Lake First Nation in 2002. This is my first year working with the RMYC. I initially joined as a volunteer to get involved in my community. Our summer project is about providing input to improve Indigenous curriculum so that more Canadians know the truth about the original inhabitants of this land.

My name is Drea Sinclair and I was born in 2002. I am from Kinonjeoshtegon First Nation in the Treaty #3 Territory. This is my first summer working with the RMYC. I decided to join this project team to educate myself and advocate on behalf of my peers how to improve the school curriculum so that it covers Indigenous topics and reflects Indigenous issues.

WHY THIS INDOGENOUS EDUCATION PROJECT?

This project originated from a discussion the Regional Multicultural Youth Council (RMYC) summer team had about making education more appealing to Indigenous students. There were 36 students hired to work on different projects, and we chose to work on education because there is still a very high dropout rate among Indigenous students, and incidents of racism and violence targeting Indigenous students in Thunder Bay were increasing. There was a need to make the curriculum more inclusive and appealing to all students.

While reviewing the highlights from the Coming Together to Talk with Youth forum report attended by 250 high school students, those who participated at the conference as facilitators or delegates all felt that more should be done to enhance the education curriculum and reduce the ignorance that perpetuates cultural stereotypes and racial prejudices faced by Indigenous people on their own traditional lands. The whole group acknowledged that the current content did not fully cover true Indigenous history. Non-Indigenous students said that they did not learn much in class to fully understand how the original 'Nishnawbe' inhabitants of 'Turtle Island' lived before contact, their culture, systems of government, the impacts of colonization, the treaties, residential school, the Indian Act, banning of traditional ceremonies, the reserve system and so forth.

Seven students decided to focus on education, and we chose the title: *An Indigenous Curriculum – The History & Knowledge of our Traditional Ways* as our project. We discussed our own personal experiences with mainstream education and also talked with our parents, siblings and relatives to hear their own stories about what was taught in class and the impact this had on them. From this research, we felt that Indigenous history should be featured front and centre and not taught as an elective, separate from the standard history class. It should be part of the mandatory classes. We feel that Indigenous students deserve to see themselves reflected in the school curriculum, not be a side project. Furthermore, to enhance reconciliation, non-Indigenous students must learn Indigenous history, gain knowledge of traditional Indigenous ways in order to develop a sense of respect for their peers, prevent stereotypes, bullying, racism, and disrespect. Indigenous students impacted by residential schools must also learn their cultural history to build self esteem and self confidence in order to keep them interested and engaged in school.

Residential Schools:

In Canada, Indian Residential Schools were boarding schools for Indigenous peoples. The First one (Mohawk institute) opened in 1832, the last one closed in 1997 (Cowesses/Marieval). The purpose of these schools was to assimilate Indigenous peoples and erase their culture so that they conform to the colonizer's way of life. An estimated 150,000 Indigenous children some as young as four years old were taken from their parents and communities and forced to attend these schools where they were not allowed to speak their language . According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, it is estimated that anywhere from 3,200 to 6,000 children died at these schools.

While the need to educate Indigenous was necessary to prepare them for the changing future, the way the residential schools were run harmed Indigenous children, depriving them of their culture, language and traditional up-bringing surrounded by family. Many were exposed to physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and the disconnection from their culture and community isolated them. Children that survived experienced intergenerational trauma, and the pain led them to alcoholism, substance abuse, and suicidal tendencies.

On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper offered an apology on behalf of the Government of Canada. Soon after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established to uncover the truth about what really happened in these residential schools. They gathered around 7,000 testimonies the survivors and most of the stories were heart-wrenching. In 2015, the TRC published a multi-volume report detailing the survivors' stories. They concluded that the school system amounted to cultural genocide.

Orange-Shirt Day on September 30 is a national day of remembrance for the victims of the Canadian Indian Residential school system. This event was established in 2013, designed to educate people and promote awareness in Canada about the Indian residential school system and the impact it has had on Indigenous communities for over a century.

Orange Shirt Day aims to bring communities together in a spirit of reconciliation and hope because every child matters. Schools should play a key role to promote and host events that educate students about the legacy of residential schools. This will help everyone to understand the inter-generational impacts and on-going trauma affecting many Indigenous people today, and rally everyone to play a role to intervene and break/stop the cycle.

60s Scoop:

From the late 1950's to the mid 1980's, an estimated 20,000 Indigenous children were taken by the government from their homes and communities and moved elsewhere. This is what is referred to as the 60's scoop. The children that were taken were put into mainly white foster homes. It was a culture shock to many who had to abruptly adjust to living in a new social environment without any regard to the detachment this caused .

The children removed from their cultural surroundings were separated from their parents and extended families, lost their traditions, teachings, and language and were exposed to a totally different way of life. Even though they developed a settlement bond, and new families they were placed in accepted them, many experienced loss and detachment due to how the process was done without consultation and dialogue.

The forced integration left a lot to be desired, and there were not enough culturally appropriate supports provided. The \$20,000.00 compensation cannot bring back the time they lost with their loved ones. The breaking of family and community bonds should be highlighted in schools to generate empathy for struggling Indigenous people who are over-represented at the bottom of the social and economic ladders due to discriminatory policies and systemic racism.

The Oka Crisis:

The Oka crisis began in 1990, resulting in a 78-day standoff. It involved the Mohawk Nation of Kanesatake, Quebec police, the RCMP, and the Canadian military. The town Oka proposed an expansion to their 9-hole to an 18-hole golf course to be built on the sacred burial grounds of the Mohawks. The dispute revived the history of stolen land. The stand-off that included military action led to violence that resulted in the death of a Quebec police officer. The federal government bought the land and it was not returned to the Mohawk nation. This is one important and impactful example of a broken treaty.

We believe that the Oka crisis should be taught in the context of land rights and the long delays to honour and resolve treaty rights. We are all treaty people and we signed them in good faith. This will help to enlighten the general public about the legitimate grievances Indigenous people have on broken promises which should be viewed as such, and not see protestors as agitators, violent and trouble makers disrupting progress. This breeds tension and resentment which divides people, while knowledge and can change perception and enhance understanding which will help to facilitate reconciliation.

The Medicine Wheel:

A Medicine wheel is a foundation of teaching and learning that shows how different parts of life are connected and balanced. The symbol of four colours in a represents the interconnectivity of all aspects of a person's relationship with themselves, others and the natural and spiritual worlds. The Anishinaabe, or Ojibway people, have a teaching that the medicine wheel is the circle of life. From generation to generation, the medicine wheel gives us a place in the universe and clarifies our relationship with Mother Earth.

Many things in the natural world are represented in four ways, such as the Directions -- north, south, east west; the Elements – earth, water, air, fire; the seasons --summer, autumn, winter, spring, times of the day – morning, afternoon, evening, night; human race pigmentation -- black, red, yellow, white and so forth. Some Indigenous cultures have sacred knowledge about plants and animals that fly, swim, live on land and under the ground. A person is often represented in four ways –baby, juvenile, adult and senior/elder. Among the Ojibway people, many cultural practices regard the number four as a sacred symbol which includes the number of rounds of drumming, rounds of singing, times to be in a sweat lodge and so forth.

The Four Sacred Planets:

The sacred planets teach us about our culture, health and spirituality.

* Tobacco -- the East, it was a natural plant, with no ingredients such as nicotine or tar to make it dangerous or addictive. It's meant to be used for offering or giving thanks for the day's work, food, or guidance. It is burned in ceremonies as a prayer to the creator.

- * Cedar -- the South. The Cedar tree is a healing plant. It is used to make shelter, transportation, and medicine for many Indigenous people. We use this plant to make sacred teas.
- * Sage -- the West. It is considered a cleansing plant. It is often used in smudging, which means it is burned to invite positive energy, so we can see, hear, and think clearly in a good manner.
- * Sweet Grass -- the North. It represents the hair of Mother Earth. It is braided to remind us that as people we are strong when mind, body and spirit are bound together as one in a balanced way. Just like a strong Nation if we stand together as one, it is hard to break us up individually and separate us.

The Seven Grandfather Teachings:

According to an oral traditional story, the Seven Teachings were given to the Anishnaabe early in First Nations history. When the Seven Grandfathers sent their Messenger to learn about the current state of the Anishnabee people, they were told that the people were not living in harmony with each other nor with the rest of creation. In a vision quest, the Messenger found a child worthy of the teachings, and the Grandfathers shared with the child the "good way of life". Each Grandfather instructed the child with one teaching, which collectively became known as the Seven Teachings.

These teachings were gifted to help the people live a good and happy life, respect the Creator, Mother Earth and each other. By caring for Mother Earth, we learn to apply these gifts, values and qualities to our families, communities, ourselves, and to all living things.

The seven grandfather teachings are:

1. **Courage** - Let nothing stand in the way of doing the right thing.
2. **Honestly** - Better to fail.. with honestly than succeed by fraud.
3. **Humility** - To be humble about your accomplishment is to be strong.
4. **Love** - It is important to care for one another.
5. **Respect** - Give it, Earn it, receive it.
6. **Truth** - It is always easiest to speak the truth.
7. **Wisdom** - With hard work and dedication will come knowledge.

These teachings reveal to non-Indigenous people that Indigenous people have their own beliefs and practices, strong culture and values that sustained them. This counters negative perceptions that Indigenous people as savages and their cultures primitive worth outlawing and banning. These actions devastated once proud Indigenous people and the intergenerational impacts continue to ravage individuals, families and communities.

Pow Wows:

In Native American culture, powwows are a social gathering where people sing, dance, meet, socialize and honor culture and teachings. The word pow-wow means "Spiritual leader". There are many different types of dances and regalias (regalias are what we dance in). For men, there is fancy dance, men's traditional, grass dance and straight dance. For the women there is fancy shawl, jingle dress and traditional. There are traditional pow-wows where you dance and listen to the music just for enjoyment. There are also competitive pow-wows where dancers compete to win prizes.

The reason Anishinaabe-Kwe dance is to heal, honour and celebrate our ancestors. There is pow-wow etiquette to follow. You cannot touch a drum group's drum without permission, or touch someone in their regalia without their permission. No photographs or videos are taken during grand-entry but offering tobacco to drum groups is appreciated. Traditional knowledge of the pow-wow takes many teachings and generally involves many people sharing tasks, taking responsibilities and roles such as making offerings and giveaways.

Many Canadians are aware of pow-wows today as communal cultural events. They are well featured during National Indigenous People's Day ceremonies on June 21. Teaching about pow-wows will help non-Indigenous people to appreciate the significance of such gatherings, and question why governments of the day banned such happy occasions and sacred ceremonies that played a key role in healing and unifying communities.

Language:

In 2011, there were over 60 Aboriginal languages reported in Canada. They included Cree, Ojibway, Inuktitut, Dene, Oji-cree, Lakota, Dakota, Machif and Odaawaa and so forth. Within these languages, there are also different dialects dependent on location. Each language has its own spelling, pronunciations and syllabics. Language facilitates communication, expression and identity, and is a very important part of Indigenous culture.

The prohibition of Indigenous children to speak their language in residential schools created barriers of communication with parents, siblings, extended family, and other community members. This disrupted parenting and the sharing of knowledge and skills.

Teaching Indigenous languages will boost the self-confidence of Indigenous students and make non-Indigenous students appreciate why it is important to reverse the decisions done by banning native tongues and preventing their use in residential schools. This contributed to making some Indigenous languages becoming extinct. Once the languages are lost here on Turtle Island, they cannot be found anywhere else in the world.

Colonization -- The Indian Act.:

The Indian Act was enacted by the European colonizers of Canada in 1876 and has since been amended to allow the government to control different aspects of Aboriginal life. For over a century, the Indian Act has been used to oppress Indigenous peoples and they are the only distinct groups in Canada controlled by such an Act of Parliament.

This should be taught to educate Canadians on how once sovereign and self governing nations became subjugated under colonial laws. The Indian Act enabled the Canadian government to create reserves as homelands for Indigenous groups making it easy to expropriate lands for the exploitation of natural resources without due compensation. The Indian Act defined who is 'Indian', who qualified for Indian status, disenfranchised Indigenous people from voting, and determined 'Treaty payments'. In fact the traditional autonomy of Indigenous groups was lost and we became wardens of the crown.

This needs to be taught in schools for Canadians to understand the special laws specifically designed to control Indigenous peoples and treat them as second class citizens on their ancestral lands.

Smallpox:

Smallpox is a deadly contagious disease that killed over 300 million Native Americans. Brought to this continent by European explorers, it had devastating consequences on Indigenous groups who had no immunity to the disease. What is shocking is that once the colonizers realized the potent nature of the disease, they intentionally spread it among Native Americans with infected blankets. This was intended to wipe out Indigenous peoples and destroy entire communities. This was genocide and created the mistrust Indigenous groups have that the colonizers were really interested in their wellbeing.

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (and Girls):

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) is considered an epidemic because this involved high numbers of Indigenous women and girls whose deaths and disappearances have not been satisfactorily investigated and resolved. Police services do not treat Indigenous females with the same respects as all other women because stereotypes and prejudices prevail and they are not prepared to put in the time and resources required to properly deal with the cases.

Teaching about MMIW will increase awareness of systemic discrimination, biases, racist attitudes, the violence and mistreatment directed at and experienced by Indigenous women and girls. The recent national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls revealed that the actions of Canadian institutions, policies and practices on this matter amounted to genocide. As young 'Indigenous-Kwe', we need to speak out for justice for females as life givers so that Canadians know and help to stop the cycle.

Stereotypes:

There are many stereotypes about Indigenous people perpetuated by ignorance and misinformation. Many originate from colonial attitudes taught in schools and seen in early films and theatre as entertainment. Walt Disney films such as the Pocahontas and Peter Pan, and some cartoons mock native people. The education system can teach the facts and enlighten the nation about facts and myths to counter colonial folklore and ignorant perspectives that have created negative jokes and stereotypes about Indigenous people.

Portraying Native Americans as savages, uncultured, aggressive, our skin coloured "red", and we could not speak coherent English has been etched in mainstream culture. Other stereotypes such as "leeching" off the government after the treaty agreements, being alcoholics and dependency on drugs. This is what gets prominence when people do not know much about our actual culture, traditions and struggle for identity when controlled by the Indian Act under the direction of a powerful mainstream government without our input and representation to offer a second opinion and counter the stereotypes and prejudice.

After suffering from years of abuse and suppression, we feel the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada offers an opportunity to re-examine our relationship and the damage done by government policies and practices through the years we have been judged on. Teaching our true history will reveal that we are strong people traumatized by colonization, residential schools, the 60's Scoop and broken treaties. We believe that incorporating this knowledge into the school curriculum will open a new chapter by teaching our true history to wipe out ignorance, shake off negative labels, and reconcile.

Anti-Indigenous Racism:

We believe that most of the racism targeting Indigenous people stems from ignorance. The resentment shown by many Canadians who stereotype, resent and hate Indigenous people can be attributed to what they see on the streets and the funds spent on special services, programs and supports as agreed to in treaties. Claims that Indigenous people exploit the system are rampant, and when they are getting something which others are not, implies that they are taking advantage of the tax payers.

We believe that teaching our true history from a non-European perspective will provide the information Canadians can use as reference when dealing with Indigenous people. This is the best way to combat racism that stems from ignorance and misinformation.

Land Acknowledgements and Indigenous Contributions to Canada:

Mentioning the traditional inhabitants of the lands we are on at the beginning of school lets students know about the Indigenous groups that occupy the area. This is necessary for more people to be aware of the treaties we signed to share the land and natural resources and coexist. Acknowledging the status of Indigenous peoples and teaching about how they lived, thrived and their contributions to the development of Canada will let everyone know who was here first and the inherent rights should be honoured and respected.

Knowing that treaties are binding agreements puts into context Indigenous protests about land rights and unfulfilled promises. We should move beyond land acknowledgements and use the knowledge to understand, change attitudes and enhance reconciliation.

Land and Nature-based Learning:

Land and nature-based learning appeals to Indigenous students who have grown up on the land, developed relationships with their environment, survived on trap-lines, and created a bond with nature. Growing interest on conservation and saving the planet, applying outdoor education on the land will show how Indigenous people lived in harmony with Mother Earth and maintained an ecological balance -- unlike the greed of mainstream corporations that exploit and pollute the land, and plunder natural resources for profit.

Incorporating land and nature-based learning in the curriculum will make education more appealing to Indigenous and rural students. This will generate greater interest in schooling, boost attendance and participation which will improve student retention and graduation.

Governance, Social Organization and Traditional Lifestyles:

Indigenous people belonged to tribes and governed themselves before contact and we had our own forms of 'democracy'. We had hereditary chiefs and some tribes and clans were chosen at gatherings to rule the people. They had the authority to maintain order, resolve disputes and to over-see the welfare of their people. Different Indigenous groups had their own social structures and practices unique to their traditions to suit their needs.

Many tribes had Elders to share wisdom and Medicine men and women to heal the sick and maintain wellness. We had our own medicines from plants and there were special foods to cure diseases and give good health. This knowledge was shared through the generations, and passed on to those who had the gifts to be healers.

We worshipped the creator, had rituals and spiritual ceremonies. Sharing circles provided community members with a voice to express their opinions and channels to address grievances. There were no police to arrest people and communities used restorative practices and healing circles to deal with crime and social disorders. Those committing serious offences could be banished, and when major disagreements occurred, to diffuse tension some people often moved away and created their own community.

We lived off the land, hunting, fishing and gathering plants and fruit. Where weather permitted, some Indigenous groups grew crops, and in this area many tribes harvested wild-rice. We worked hard to survive and men, women, children had roles to support their families. We were not savages and lazy welfare bums as stereotypes portray us to be.

Reconciliation:

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action provide a way to move forward and reconcile. With all levels of governments in Canada agreeing to act on the 94 recommendations, the Calls to Action should be incorporated into our education curriculum. Learning about the TRC provides a solid foundation to build a more just and harmonious future based on the facts gathered from and Indigenous perspective.

The RTC recommendations aim to close the gaps that have resulted in situations that are central to the plight of Indigenous people. Addressing these issues will reduce the cultural stereotypes, prejudice and racial discrimination that feed divisions and tensions prevalent in Canadian society today. Education will facilitate healing and make a difference.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

According to the teachings of the Medicine Wheel, we are all part of the human race in a circle of life. We should be united, learn to co-exist and live in harmony in the world we all share. Ignorance breeds fear of the unknown and makes it easy and convenient to use cultural stereotypes, racial prejudice to judge others and discriminate against them. Being taught our true history will provide proper knowledge to enable citizens to come up with informed decisions and gain wisdom to make wise choices.

Schools play an important role to educate all citizens and adopting an inclusive curriculum that encompasses and accommodates everyone will change the once dominant Eurocentric superiority complex and biases that promote white privilege and have marginalized everyone else. Education can level the playing field by opening the mind of every student and supporting them to realize their true potential to learn so that they can participate equally in all aspects of Canadian society.

Many Indigenous people excluded from the mainstream have been damaged, and are carrying loads of inter-generational trauma that is affecting every aspect of their lives. Including their stories in the education curriculum will open the minds of all Canadians. Hence our recommendation to teach the true history of Indigenous people in classrooms. However positive results will be accomplished if there are culturally competent educators and dedicated teachers committed to reconciliation. Good teachers make a difference and recruiting many who reflect the community to connect well with the diversity in the classroom will produce a more enlightened generation of citizens.