

Culturally Safe Classrooms for Inuit Students & Multiage Pedagogy:
A Personal Reflection

EDUC 5843: Instructional Design - Multiage Pedagogy
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It is 2016, the Report from Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been published. The Canadian government has been found guilty of systemic racism when it comes to the welfare of Indigenous children, and Indigenous communities all over the country are demanding that school boards address the academic and achievement gaps between their children and non-Indigenous children. Indigenous children are some of the most marginalized children in the education system, forced to conform within policies and politics, an academic “box”, which was never designed for them. Canada’s education system is a Eurocentric one, based in 19th century judeo-christian colonial morals and values, where students are placed on a scale of measurement that neither they, nor their teachers or parents, can or want to begin to understand. At the same time the relic that is our education system continues to reign, neoliberal buzzwords are thrown about in order to create the illusion of education in 2016 as one that accommodates and celebrates the diversity of our school communities.

Definitions like “differentiated instruction”, “holistic education”, “inclusive education”, and others have been created as a part of the neoliberal “educational reform” when standardized tests show the alleged proof that students are not learning as they should be and not succeeding as the system wants them to succeed. Provinces’ ministries of education are extremely skilled in creating bandaid solutions that seem like permanent cures, unfortunately it is the next generation of leaders, parents, politicians, and artists who suffers. What Canada needs is for its provincial and territorial education systems to focus on the creation of culturally safe schools, as well as considering the benefits of multiage pedagogy and how it compliments cultural safety within education.

My graduate research focuses on culturally safe classrooms for Inuit students. This year I have made it a personal and professional goal to create a real solution to the problems many of my students in the north face. This solution will be created with my students and their community, instead of simply for them. I only offer the knowledge I have, and like a puzzle, we will each bring pieces together to create one whole vision. My research intends to address the academic and achievement gaps by questioning the validity of the present day schooling and classroom management systems, consulting with the community as to how they view success and what dreams and inspirations they have for their children, and creating a workshop to deliver to educators that will encourage culturally safe teaching practices and classroom management techniques that will hopefully address teacher retention issues, high school dropout rates, and gaps in learning achievement. Certain aspects of multiage pedagogy would seem to complement aspects of cultural safety that are integral to my research, and to the success of the project.

The future of education is bleak if permanent solutions are not offered and implemented. Multiage pedagogy is quite possibly one of these permanent solutions that can impact the success of all children, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, English language learner or first language learner, disabled, etc. Multiage pedagogy is based in the philosophy that children and youth should have a certain amount of power and freedom when it comes to their learning. Teachers are facilitators of learning and knowledge, not authoritarian figures that dictate what to learn and how to do it. The responsibility of their success is determined by the student, and not solely dependent on teacher, school, assessment, or grade. I believe that the multiage classroom can set the stage for cultural

safety for our Indigenous students. In my own case, I will focus on how it can help northern and Inuit run school boards begin to address the academic and achievement gaps our students presently face within the schooling system.

Cultural safety originated out of New Zealand nursing education programs. As the country of New Zealand began to recognize and honour their Treaty of Waitanga, a treaty signed between the Maori people and the non-Natives who intended to colonize the island, guaranteed that New Zealand would be a bicultural society, and Maori would have equitable representation within government (MacFarlane, *Culturally Safe Schools*, p. 67). This treaty had not been honoured until more recently, when health care practitioners and educators recognized an equity gap between treatment of non-Indigenous New Zealanders and the Maori people. Together, Maori and non-Maori researchers defined, created, and facilitated nurses, teachers, and other health care and education personnel to become creators of culturally safe hospitals, clinics, and schools. The post-secondary level of education also recognizes the importance of cultural safety within its walls, and researchers in New Zealand continue to contribute to the subject of cultural safety and equity for Indigenous New Zealanders.

According to the authors of the article *Creating Culturally Safe Schools for Maori Students*, Dr. Angus MacFarlane, Dr. Tom Cavanagh, Dr. Ted Glynn, and Dr. Sonia Bateman state that cultural safety begins with teachers and students establishing reciprocal relationships based in caring and respect (MacFarlane, 71). These relationships are, "...place based, constructivist, personalized, and encourage role models and mentorship...[relationships based classrooms] empowers students to participate in

creating a learning environment based on reciprocal relationships between the teacher and students and students with students”(p. 71). What better way to establish these kind of productive, empowering relationships than to work within a multiage classroom, where the teacher and students work together for more than ten months. Trust is a key factor in the success of the Inuit children I work with, it is a key factor in the success of all children within the school system. Multiage classrooms create a foundation of learning based in trust and caring because not only do teachers empower students through the inquiry based curriculum, teachers are a part of their student’s lives for a longer period of time. Like parents, teachers must act *in loco parentis*, and I believe this becomes more than simply words within policy when teachers work with the same children for multiple years.

Cultural safety is not defined by those who provide the service, but by those receiving the service. Whether it is health care or education, Inuit people will decide whether or not the services provided for them are culturally safe. This is where in an educational context, multiage pedagogy can create that dialogue to determine how culturally safe students are within their classrooms. Multiage pedagogy encourages a teacher’s understanding of their student and families in a much more holistic way than the traditional “separation of parent and school” educational model. If schools wish to take on the multiage philosophy, they must communicate effectively and openly with families, and teachers must continue this dialogue throughout the student’s time with them.

Multiage pedagogy emphasizes the importance of working in partnership equally with students and their families. The videos found previously throughout this course on Williston Central School demonstrate how parents and teachers work together with their

children (students) to organize, plan, assess, and evaluate their individual learning. With this style of partnership, students have support throughout their educational growth inside as well as outside the classroom. For Indigenous students like the children I work with, the community plays a central role in their success as students, and as a teacher I want to work with my student's community. I recognize that I am an outsider and I represent the colonial society that is responsible for the oppression and racism that my students and their community has faced for generations. In order to be an effective educator, I need to be open and willing to give the power back to my students and their families in regards to their education and learning. I then take on the role as guide and facilitator rather than absolute authority, as that is a teaching style which is not only culturally unsafe, and counteractive to compassion, but it is out of date with the values of a modern Inuit society.

Schools can be culturally safe when communities are partners in the development of the education of their children. Elders, parents, community leaders, and school officials must work together in order to understand how success and learning is viewed amongst Indigenous communities. Indigenous knowledge must be viewed as separate, but equal to Eurocentric knowledge, and be equally represented within the schooling system. Canada is a country with a diverse and resilient Indigenous population. First Nations, Inuit, and Metis worldview and knowledge must not only be taught and celebrated within schools with Indigenous students, like the school board where I teach, but must be celebrated and respected in all school systems across the country. New Zealand is a great example of the possibilities of reconciliation, and we now have an opportunity along with many solutions

(94 different calls to action according to Canada's TRC), culturally safe schools are just one of the possible solutions that can aide in the reconciliation process.

I enrolled for this course because as a teacher and graduate student, I am trying to contribute something real and helpful to my student's education. I have been working and living in the village of Kuujjuaraapik, Nunavik as a special education teacher. In 2012, I was given the opportunity to create a program based on already established Nurture Groups in the U.K. and "classe Kangarou" in Quebec. These nurture groups work with children who are having a difficult time transitioning into the regular classroom. This difficulty can stem from different reasons, past trauma, disabilities, etc. Many of my students are in foster care and have experienced past trauma which keeps them emotionally in survivor mode throughout the day. They are waiting for the other shoe to drop, so to speak, and so I took it upon myself with the permission of my principal to design a program and classroom space that would help children feel safe, successful, and supported. I work closely with classroom teachers in order to ensure that when students have completed the nurture group program successfully, they can transition easily into the regular classroom.

Inuit children are faced with many educational inequities, and due to social issues which stem from historical trauma (residential schools, for example), systemic racism within our policies and government, and lack of holistic services for northern communities, many of my students and their families are suffering greatly. I feel like the least I can do as one of their teachers is try to make their experience at school a positive one. Education has not been a place of compassion and learning for Indigenous people historically, and there is a great mistrust between my profession and the community where I work, but by learning

about education, particularly different pedagogies, I am trying to offer a solution to the problem with education in the north. The deficit discourses that surround Indigenous children within the education system needs to stop, and I believe that understanding the multiage approach to education (along with social models of disability, Indigenous knowledge and worldview, and holistic and alternative approaches to education) can help teachers up north be the best facilitators of learning to their students, as well as the best support systems they can be on a personal level.

This year of study has helped me develop as an educator, encouraged me to develop a growth mindset when it comes to my profession and also my person. It has given me permission to embrace my inner social warrior and proudly call myself a social justice teacher and an ally to my students. I've realized after taking this course that education, no matter what pedagogy you practice, has to be about so much more than the curriculum, the standards, and the strategies. Education at its core has to be about one human being wanting to help another human being develop and grow as a member of this beautiful planet we call home. Multiage pedagogy has confirmed my beliefs in child-first education and understanding learning as a process not a list of standardizations. My only hope is that I will continue my role as a learner even when I am teaching my students again in Kuujjuaraapik.

References:

1. MacFarlane, Angus, Tom Cavanagh, et al. *Creating Culturally Safe Schools for Maori Students*, Australian Journal of Indigenous Education Vol. 36, 2007 (p. 67-76)