

CCR #2: Understanding Our History is Integral to Culturally Responsive Teaching

Lately, the importance of knowing and understanding the history of education in Canada has been highlighted throughout our course content in Block 1. Another theme has been culturally responsive teaching. The importance of connecting these two themes and reflecting on how they inform one another has been on my mind over the last few weeks. The quote from Martin Luther King Jr. that was presented in our October 2 lecture in EDUC 393 got me thinking. It may seem like a small thing but being reminded that, “We are not makers of history. We are made by history,” prompted me to reflect on how much our personal and collective history informs our present and our perspectives (Personal communication, M. Baerg, Oct. 2, 2023). In my previous training in anthropology and history, there was a considerable focus on reflecting on how the past influences the present. It is important I take the time to learn the history of the Canadian education system. Understanding the roots of our education system and how we have arrived at our current system is, in my view, integral to successful culturally responsive teaching.

Exploring the history of the Canadian education system and confronting the classism and racism within the system’s roots is necessary for gaining a sense of the whole picture of Canadian education. Exploring that history is also vital for understanding the diversity of experiences that have resulted from the system. Educators especially need to consider history from multiple perspectives so we can present accurate information to our students and present a diversity of experiences. In EDUC 346, we have been discussing the importance of becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable and being willing to face the truth about Canada’s residential school system and its legacies in all its ugliness. Jo Chrona (2022) writes about the importance of bringing your heart into your learning concerning Indigenous education to gain a deeper understanding. She rightly argues that there is a difference between knowing and

understanding (Chrona, 2022). Developing that understanding is something I have been personally working toward. For one of our projects in EDUC 346, we were asked to select and attend a cultural event in the local community. I chose to attend an interactive Blanket Exercise where the history of the relationships between settlers and Indigenous communities in Canada was narrated from an Indigenous perspective. The narrative began before Contact and continued into the present day. I went into the exercise with an open heart, ready to lean into the emotion of the story being shared with me. I never want to become desensitized to the pain that exists because of colonialism and the residential school system. Sitting face to face with the Indigenous woman who co-hosted the event as she shared stories about how her family has been impacted by the racist policies of the Indian Act and the residential school system was powerful and deeply moving. Knowing our history allows us to appreciate the present in context and be more successful in culturally responsive teaching.

Another aspect of understanding our history and connecting it with culturally responsive teaching is recognizing we now aim to teach from the perspective that every child is capable of growth, but that has not always been the case. Residential schools were established to “civilize” Indigenous children and assimilate them into Western society (Robson, 2019). It is painfully apparent that this school system did not value multiple cultural perspectives or view Indigenous children as capable within the context of their own culture. Additionally, until 1850 when the second Common School Act was passed, many children were prevented from receiving an education simply because their families could not afford to pay tuition to send them to school (Robson, 2019). Now, we hear messages from people like Zaretta Hammond (2017), Dr. Martin Brokenleg (2015), and Rita Pierson (2013) that proclaim all children are capable and should be taught to believe that they are capable, important, worthwhile individuals. A beautiful message

offered by Dr. Martin Brokenleg (2015) is that if we focus on connectedness we will learn that every human being has the desire to succeed.

Another piece of culturally responsive teaching is building equity in the classroom. Zaretta Hammond (2017) states that equity is about reducing the predictability of who fails and who succeeds in school. I am grateful to have seen an example of building equity in action during one of my practicum days at Suwilaawks Community School. The students were preparing for a school-wide write. I have done school-wide writes as a student and observed how school-wide writes are administered now at a local independent school. What I have noted from those previous experiences is that the topics are often related to activities outside of school or draw considerably on the student's home life – which can be a sensitive area for some students if their home life is turbulent or they are more private about the details of their life outside of school. At Suwilaawks, the principal makes it a point to put on a school-wide event prior to the school-wide write so that the students all have a common experience to write about. In this case, each classroom was given clues to follow to find a big stash of Lego. They were then given time to play and create with the Lego. The students were then asked to describe the experience of finding the Lego and what they created during their play-time during the school-wide write. I was impressed with this approach to the school-wide write because I imagine that having a common experience helps the students feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts. As a student, overly personal writing prompts always made me feel a bit uncomfortable, especially if I did not fully trust my teacher. That discomfort sometimes prevented me from showcasing the full extent of my writing abilities simply because I did not care to share about my personal life and I am sure other students have had similar experiences. Choosing a writing topic that is relatively neutral and relatable to all the students likely also helps them to feel capable.

Moving forward, I am going to strive to learn more about the history of the Canadian education system and listen to a diversity of experiences to gain as holistic an understanding as possible.

References

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