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**Current Events Journal #2**

The article *First Nation Students Deserve a Safe Place to Learn* addresses the importance of incorporating aboriginal content in the classroom. I chose this article because of its relevance to the prescribed learning objectives for this particular course. Specifically, the purpose of IED 373 is to help future educators develop an awareness and appreciation for the dynamics of aboriginal languages, knowledge, traditional pedagogy and origins of traditional values and worldview as pertaining to aboriginal people in Canada, examine ways in which members of different cultures can bridge cultural differences with respect to an aboriginal educational context and create a classroom atmosphere where aboriginal perspectives are honored and respected, which is exactly what this article is expressing need for. Specifically, the report suggests that one of the key elements contributing to low graduation rates in Aboriginal students is the lack of connection to culture in the classroom. As it currently stands schools are solely presenting students with general First Nation history and leaving it at that. As a result, based on the 2006 Canadian Census, 40% of aboriginals age 20-24 do not have a high school diploma and 61% of first nations on reserves have not finished high school. Therefore, as the article outlines, it is crucial for teachers to introduce aboriginal content in the classroom in order to increase Aboriginal graduation rates and success in the future.

Prior to taking IED 373 I would not have thought to introduce aboriginal content into a lecture. I believe this is due to the fact that I was completely oblivious to the treatment of aboriginal people in Canada from the 19th century to now. However, due to IED 373, my understanding and appreciation for aboriginal people in Canada has entirely changed, and I now see how important it is to make that connection to aboriginal history, culture and tradition in the classroom.

I do agree with what is being said in the article. Because of residential schools a huge chunk of aboriginal culture and tradition has been silenced resulting in aboriginal students being reluctant to share their background. For this reason, aboriginal students have struggled finding themselves within their own culture especially since they are living in a European dominated culture. Moreover, this is even more difficult when all of the information they are learning in schools does not include or apply to them. Therefore, like the article suggests, if schools were to incorporate aboriginal content into the curriculum then aboriginal students would feel more accepted, respected and proud of their culture.

One thing that I was unsure about in this article was their request for Aboriginal teachers. I understand that information coming from people with aboriginal backgrounds will connect with the students better than if it were delivered from non-aboriginal people. However, as a future educator, this makes me feel as though I am not adequate when it comes to discussing aboriginal content in the classroom. Regardless of how I could or could not take this what I believe is important is that there is a connection that needs to be made between aboriginal content and the current curriculum regardless of who is teaching it. It is also important that the teacher is introducing information that reflects the local area to ensure that the information is relevant to the students. Furthermore, it is not required for a teacher to assign an entire lecture to aboriginal content. What is important is that the teacher incorporate aboriginal teaching and learning styles, and or assignments that allows students to approach them in whatever way makes most sense to them thereby giving the students more freedom and choice in their learning.

The Aboriginal people’s voice is most strongly presented in this article. One section that really hit home for me was, “school is a difficult time for any young person. Imagine on top of that sitting in a classroom hearing your cultural identity dismissed as a figment of the past, or simply ignored completely.” I could not even imagine what that would be like for someone, which is why it is so important that teachers and the community are aware of this and do something about it. Positives steps that have been taken include: for aboriginal students on the island, there has been a third signing of the 5 year Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement for the Nanaimo-Ladysmith school district, in British Columbia and Ontario there are promising starts on education programs such as high school First Nations Studies and aboriginal-centered English courses and there is movement towards aboriginal run schools. Moreover, Ontario is developing a grades 9-12 native studies course and a grade 1-8 native languages program. With all of this progress there is hope that soon there will be greater incorporation of aboriginal culture in the curriculum resulting in greater success for aboriginal students.

**Article:** First Nations students deserve a safe place to learn

**BY MARC AND CRAIG KIELBURGER, TIMES COLONIST** FEBRUARY 19, 2012

 Robert Genaille was not a big fan of teachers.

His mother would talk about the scars the Kamloops Indian Residential School had left on his grandfather, how he refused to teach her his native language because his own experiences made him fear it would get her hurt.

Living on his mother's Sto: lo Nation reserve, Genaille was bussed to a public high school in nearby Hope. It was not a happy time. The school was not a welcoming place for aboriginal students and their culture. Teachers did nothing to break down the barriers between aboriginal and nonaboriginal students.

The courses were devoid of aboriginal culture. History classes touched briefly on Canada's First Nations, but only in broad generalities.

"It planted aboriginals firmly in the past, and then went right back to talking about explorers like Champlain. The people who had supposedly 'shaped the country'," remembers Genaille.

School is a difficult time for any young person.

Imagine on top of that sitting in a classroom hearing your cultural identity dismissed as a figment of the past, or simply ignored completely.

"I didn't feel well treated in high school. It wasn't a safe environment to learn."

Genaille persevered. He finished high school, earned a Bachelor of Arts degree and was considering becoming an actor. That's when the chief of his band pulled him aside and gently suggested he consider a different career - as a teacher.

The chief was concerned about the failure and dropout rates among local First Nations youth. He wanted someone in the school who understood the challenges the kids faced.

So it was that Genaille found himself in Hope, facing an English class full of aboriginal youth caught in a school system that did not reflect their culture or experiences, much like he once had been.

Into his class came 16-year-old Mary (not her real name). Genaille had been warned about her. Mary had a reputation with the principal and other teachers for being confrontational. She was apathetic. Given an essay assignment, she would hand in a page with one line written on it, if she handed anything in at all.

Genaille was pretty sure Mary was "on her way out" - close to dropping out of school.

How could he engage her and get her interested in learning?

Instead of introducing his students to the usual suspects of English literature, Genaille produced a selection of short stories by aboriginal authors like Sherman Alexie and Eden Robinson.

"[Mary] came alive," remembers Genaille.

Asked to write a short paragraph describing how the stories reflected their own life experiences, Mary did not hand in one line, or even one paragraph. She wrote a whole page.

By giving his students the opportunity to connect with their culture in the classroom, Genaille had made a breakthrough. When last he heard, Mary had completed high school and enrolled in college.

"First Nations students really seem to step up when they see themselves reflected in what they're learning."

The 2006 Canadian Census found that 40 per cent of aboriginals between 20 and 24 did not have a highschool diploma. For First Nations on reserves, 61 per cent hadn't finished high school. The rate among nonaboriginals was 13 per cent.

Part of the solution is funding. According to a study from the Caledon Institute of Social Policy, reserve schools receive on average $2,000 less in annual funding per student than provincial schools. On Feb. 8, the National Panel on First Nation Elementary and Secondary Education released a report calling for an immediate funding increase for First Nations education.

The other half of the solution has to happen in the classroom, making curriculum more relevant and recruiting aboriginal teachers. "If we don't do something at the classroom level, we're wasting our time," says Genaille.

British Columbia and Ontario have both made promising starts on education programs that integrate aboriginal culture and history. B.C. has created high school First Nations Studies and aboriginal-centred English courses, and is experimenting with aboriginal-run schools. Ontario is developing native studies courses for grades 9-12 and a native languages program that extends from grades one through eight.

Beyond the curriculum, our European-styled education system has to recognize that aboriginal cultures often have a very different style.

"The whole 30 kids in rows facing the teacher thing, it's not the most ideal way to do it. It doesn't feel natural, for First Nations students or teachers," says Genaille.

Aboriginal cultures place much more emphasis on learning by experience. You aren't given the answers by a lecturer, you find them yourself. If you fail, it's not an ending, it's part of the learning process.

Aboriginal classrooms incorporate practices like circles and storytelling. Schools should be flexible by giving students time off to attend ceremonies and engage in traditional activities like family hunting trips .

When the classroom reflects aboriginal culture and experiences, says Genaille, it creates a safe space for aboriginal youth.

"When kids feel safe, they can learn."

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