



Editorials, Op-eds & Letters to the Editor
in Support of
Education for Reconciliation



Opinion

Debunking the myth that Canadian schools teach enough about indigenous people



Whenever there is talk about the need for systemic changes to ensure Canadians learn about Indigenous peoples, a veritable tsunami of anecdotes pour in. To hear some tell it, Canadians are already experts on indigenous cultures, history and contemporary realities.

I majored in secondary social studies during my Bachelor of Education, and I remember listening to some of my fellow teachers-in-training complain about the "pointless Aboriginal content" in a mandatory Canadian history course. "I made a dream catcher in grade six," one said. Another one had "done that smudge thing that smells like weed" in her school.

During law school, a peer let me know she was very knowledgeable about my people (I'm not sure she realized I'm Métis) because in her school, they'd grown the Three Sisters (beans, corns and squash, it's sort of a Haudenosaunee thing).

On my twitter feed, another person claims that she didn't learn European history in high school because "indigenous studies [were] mandatory and WW2 was not".

That this is provably untrue doesn't really matter if the purpose of such claims are merely to bolster a rhetorical point: forcing people to learn more than they already apparently know about Indigenous peoples is akin to "brainwashing", "fascism" and any number of other less repeatable terms.

There is a lot to unpack here, but I wanted to focus specifically on what Canadians are actually learning about indigenous peoples. Is it enough? Are the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's educational calls to action unnecessary?

The TRC's Call to Action 62.1 exhorts governments in Canada "in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal peoples, and educators, to make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students."

No mandatory courses K-12

Since the current debate centres around mandatory courses at the post-secondary level such as those recently announced at the University of Winnipeg I thought it made sense to look at what Canadians are learning before they get to that point.

Educational curricula are a provincial concern, so what is taught in Canada varies greatly. To know what elementary and secondary level students in any given province or territory are learning about Indigenous peoples, you need to access Ministry of Education sites and look through the curriculum. When it comes to elective courses, you also have to look at each school board to see which schools actually offer those courses.

In Canada there are no mandatory indigenous studies courses, meaning one can graduate from high school without ever having to take such a class. Only five provinces even offer elective indigenous studies courses, and there is no guarantee these elective courses will be available in any given school.

Interested students in Manitoba, Quebec, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island cannot even choose to take an indigenous studies course.

Seven provinces have developed a curriculum to teach an indigenous language but these courses tend to be even less available due to lack of qualified language teachers.

Empty promises

Surely there are no mandatory indigenous studies courses because these topics are already a "primary focus of social science and history classes from kindergarten" on, right?

In October, 2015, KAIROS (Canadian churches working together for justice and peace) took a look at how much Canadian students are actually learning about indigenous peoples in elementary and secondary school.

They issued a report card on provincial and territorial curriculum using the TRC's Call to Action 62.1. They examined whether or not curricula include the four elements identified: residential school legacy, treaties, historical contributions and contemporary contributions.

KAIROS also looked at whether these elements are mandatory, and at what grade levels they are offered. Further, public commitment by provinces and territories was measured against actual implementation.

Turns out no provinces or territories received top marks for their public commitment to Call to Action 62.1. Only the prairie provinces received a passing grade; all other jurisdictions have so far failed to make significant public commitment to integrating these topics into the general learning outcomes. That means, most places in Canada aren't even issuing empty promises to follow the TRC's recommendation.

In terms of actual implementation, seven of the provinces and territories have one of the four elements included in their learning outcomes and only Saskatchewan can boast teaching more than one of the four elements (though not all). In our most populous provinces, Ontario and Quebec, none of the four elements are adequately covered in the curriculum.

In seven of the eight provinces that cover at least one of the recommended topics, this learning is mandatory in only one grade. Saskatchewan out performs all other provinces and territories in Canada and still does not even come close to K-12 integration of mandatory coverage of the four elements recommended by the TRC.

It seems that anecdotes do not translate into actual Canada-wide learning outcomes.

Huh, maybe those mandatory indigenous studies courses at the post-secondary level are necessary after all, at least until the K-12 curriculum is revamped.



Dark truths must be told

Dark truths test us all, Editorial Dec. 16

In high school, one of the soccer teams I played against was from a former residential school. I had no clue of its history. I was never taught that these schools separated indigenous children from their families and cultures, often abusing them. What little I learned about indigenous peoples and their cultures was through a very stereotypical filter.

The release of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is an important moment in Canada's history. It has the potential to set us on a path toward right relations between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. Its calls to action must not be ignored.

My young boys, in grade two and kindergarten, must not grow up ignorant of the history of indigenous peoples in Canada, and their extraordinary contributions.

I urge Ontario and other provinces to implement the TRC's Call to Action #62 – to include this history in public school curriculums — as soon as possible.

Shannon Neufeldt, KAIROS Canada



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Right relations

Growing up in the 1990s and early 2000s, I didn't learn about residential schools until Grade 12.

In primary school, we got a rudimentary overview of the history of different indigenous groups before settlers arrived. It's as if their history after that was being wiped away.

I am grateful that indigenous peoples have refused to let that happen. With the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report, we can no longer ignore the truth.

I see its call to action recommendation on education (No. 62) as a priority. All children and youth must learn about the history and contributions of indigenous peoples. This will be a huge help in the movement toward "right relations."

Sheryl Johnson, Toronto



Canada, U.S. on different trajectories

Published on Mon Dec 14 2015

Re: Indigenous women's inquiry begins, Dec. 9

I applaud the federal government's decision to collaborate with indigenous peoples, including the victims' families, on an inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women and girls in Canada. As the Star writes: "Painful soul-searching lies ahead."

So much of the violence and inequity experienced by indigenous peoples in Canada is due to deeply ingrained racism and sexism, the legacy of an educational system that taught generations of Canadians to see First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples, especially women, as inferior. It's also the result of political policies designed to strip indigenous peoples of their lands, rights and identity, particularly the 130-year system of residential schools.

My hope is that as Canada launches into its inquiry, all Canadians step up efforts to ensure that the Truth and Reconciliation's 94 Calls to Action are implemented. A good start is Call to Action 62, which will see provincial governments mandate that the history of indigenous peoples in Canada, and their invaluable contemporary contributions, are taught in all public schools.

Jennifer Henry, executive director, KAIROS



Published Wednesday, Nov. 04, 2015 6:00AM EST

Sorrow, support

Re Residential-School Documents Go Online (Nov. 3): If we are to express genuine support for residential school survivors and true sorrow for their suffering, it is essential that provincial governments act on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's call to require that this part of Canadian history be taught in all public and secondary schools, with, wherever possible, participation from First Nations persons.

Mervyn Russell, Oakville, Ont.