

WOVEN WORDS

for INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

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EDITED BY
Rebecca Priegert Coulter and
Ahnungoonhs/Brent Debassige



Painting on picnic table by M.Ed Leadership in Aboriginal Education class, summer 2011.
Table presented to Hillside School, Kettle and Stony Point First Nation, by Western's Faculty
of Education in appreciation of program partnership. Photo by Neil Cornelius.

WOVEN WORDS *for* **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

**Edited by Rebecca Priegert Coulter
and Ahnungoonhs/Brent Debassige**

The sixth in the
Our Schools/Our Selves book series
2013





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ISBN 978-1-77125-070-2

Production

Typesetting and design: Nancy Reid (nrgrafix.com)

Cover photograph: Summer Bressette

Cover design: Nancy Reid

Printed in Canada by RR Donnelley,

1500 Saint-Patrick, Montréal QC, H3K 0A3

Publications Mail Registration No. 8010

The opinions expressed in *Our Schools/Our Selves* are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CCPA.

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Photo of a kettle stone by Summer Bressette

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Photo of shoreline, Kettle Point, by Summer Bressette

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INTRODUCTION

Collected Perspectives on/for Indigenous Education

REBECCA PRIEGERT COULTER

Decolonizing education is difficult work. Anti-oppressive teaching is a complex, contextually situated endeavour. And in locations where the hard labour is undertaken, educators and students face many challenges. Nowhere is this more evident than in settings where very conscious and explicit efforts by states and churches to eradicate Indigenous identities, knowledge and languages have left a painful legacy. But re-visioning and re-learning are possible and the powerful forces of recognition, resistance and resurgence are discernible among educators taking on many tasks that support the goals of revitalizing languages, reclaiming Indigenous knowledge systems, and rebuilding communities where wellness and wholeness prevail, individually and collectively.

The book before you is written by educators working in the field of Indigenous education. The educators, as students, are just completing a Master's of Education program focussed on leadership in Aboriginal education offered through the Faculty of Education at The University of Western Ontario. They have spent two years reading, writing and thinking about their histories, their practices, and the young (and not so young) people with whom they work. While the educator-students (and their instructors) were socially

produced by colonial knowledge systems and the hegemonic practices of dominant educational institutions, and thus acquired Western sets of understandings about the purposes of education, curriculum, teaching, student success, and academic achievement, the chapters included here reveal the authors' efforts to re-consider and re-work dominant discourses of practice and develop new, more culturally relevant and effective approaches. Apparent are the educator-students' changing understandings of educational purpose, their growing thoughtfulness about pedagogical and leadership practices, and their on-going struggles to decolonize self in order to strengthen and enhance the learning of others.

Governed by legislation, regulations and policies, controlled by a narrow ideology of professionalism, and subjected to surveillance through testing programs, performance reviews and the like, educators find themselves practising in a world that too often demands conformity and rejects critical teaching that would lead to social and political awareness and action. Educators working in Indigenous contexts confront additional challenges. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) observes,

Indigenous communities continue to view education in its Western, modern sense as being critical to development and self-determination. While criticizing indigenous people who have been educated at universities, on one hand, many indigenous communities will struggle and save to send their children to university on the other. There is a very real ambivalence in indigenous communities towards the role of Western education.... (p. 75)

Cajete (2012) clearly identifies the source of that ambivalence by noting that "the emphasis on only modern educational methods and Western-oriented curricula, by their nature, will erode an Indigenous way of life." He goes on to add "that when people embrace modern education they are conditioned away from their cultural roots, not toward them" (p. 146). As they engage with the complicated and difficult work of decolonizing education inside a range of institutions from early childhood centres to post-secondary colleges, the contributors to this book tread cautiously and carefully, sometimes acknowledging the harmful "conditioning" they have experienced,

sometimes revealing their own ambivalences about Western education, always demonstrating they intend to make their teaching journey in a mindful way.

Overview of the book

In Section One: The Past in the Present, four different takes on the importance of remembering are offered. Summer Bressette's tribute to her grandmother, Bonnie Bressette, is full of lessons about the importance of treaty rights, the significance of inter-generational connections for learning, and the ways in which Western education combined with Indigenous knowledge can be used to resist colonial domination and offer new opportunities for students and communities. Drawing on her grandmother's lifelong commitment to improving conditions locally for members of the Kettle and Stony Point First Nation, Summer Bressette argues that the resurgence illustrated by the Idle No More movement is part of a much longer history of every day resurgence and resistance. Similarly, the chapter by Neil Wayne Cornelius is ultimately a hopeful history of language regained and the leadership that has been exercised to achieve that goal. Drawing on his own family history, Cornelius sets out the history of the Oneida Nation of the Thames, explores the process of language loss, and tells the story of the concerted and on-going effort to revitalize the language today. Both chapters are a reminder of the very rich history of Indigenous leadership in education that can be found rooted in the local communities, leadership that has contributed to the development of First Nations positions on education over many decades and has organized opposition on the ground as needed.

Starr McGahey-Albert takes a different approach to history, re-visiting an encounter she had with a teacher while she was in high school and imagining how it might have unfolded differently. She goes on to argue for an end to racial profiling in education and accentuates the need for teachers to help build leadership capacities in their Indigenous students. From the perspective of an elementary school teacher in a First Nation school, Angela McLean discusses how and why she addressed the difficult history of land loss and reserves, residential schooling, and the Sixties Scoop with her students,

teaching them important aspects of their history while observing the demands of the provincial curriculum that teachers in First Nations schools must use.

Section Two offers four chapters that expand on the theme of working in and with Western institutions. Penny Smith shares her experience building an Indigenous early childhood education program, Jarvis Nahdee explains his work as a language teacher in the First Nations School of Toronto, Jessica Hill discusses her efforts to enrich Native Studies courses in high school, and Jake Taylor looks at the challenges and responsibilities of recruiting Aboriginal students for post-secondary education institutions. Taken together, the chapters raise questions about the dilemmas of working and making change inside Western educational institutions but also emphasize the importance of drawing on local resources and working with local Indigenous communities, and especially with Elders, where ever possible.

The third and final section of the book features the work of four teachers and has a primary focus on teaching and learning in First Nation schools. The chapters also demonstrate how autobiography matters when it comes to making pedagogical decisions and these teachers bravely discuss how their own backgrounds have influenced their work. Patricia Day emphasises learning the language and culture through a range of activities and sets out specific instructions for making corn husk dolls. In so doing, she reminds us of the importance of engaging children's creativity and imagination. Michelle Brown openly discusses her efforts to help her students understand their experiences of racism while also exploring her own relationship with her identity. The book concludes with two different approaches to environmental education. Toni Nahdee explores her motivation for emphasizing environmental consciousness and shares two strategies she has used with her grade seven students. Kathleen Padfield, a primary school teacher, offers a photo essay that documents the development of her environmental programming through gardening, programming that grew to involve the whole school and promotes community cohesion in many positive ways.

Acknowledgements

The chapters offered here are the culminating projects of the twelve students who completed their University of Western Ontario Master's of Education program, Leadership in Aboriginal Education, in April 2013. This program was community-based and offered in partnership with the Kettle and Stony Point First Nation. Western's Faculty of Education is grateful for this partnership and is particularly thankful for the enthusiastic support of the principal of Hillside School, Cathy Hampshire, herself a graduate of an earlier offering of this program at Walpole Island. Gratitude is also offered to all who shared their photographs. Thank you to Bonnie Bressette and the family of Neil Cornelius for the historical photographs in chapters 1 and 2, to the Indigenous Education Coalition for the photographs of Nmaachina in chapter 7, and to Summer Bressette for the cover photograph and foreword where she explains the importance of the basket. Finally, I thank my colleague and friend, Dr. Donna Kotsopoulos, for suggesting "Woven Words" as the book title.

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