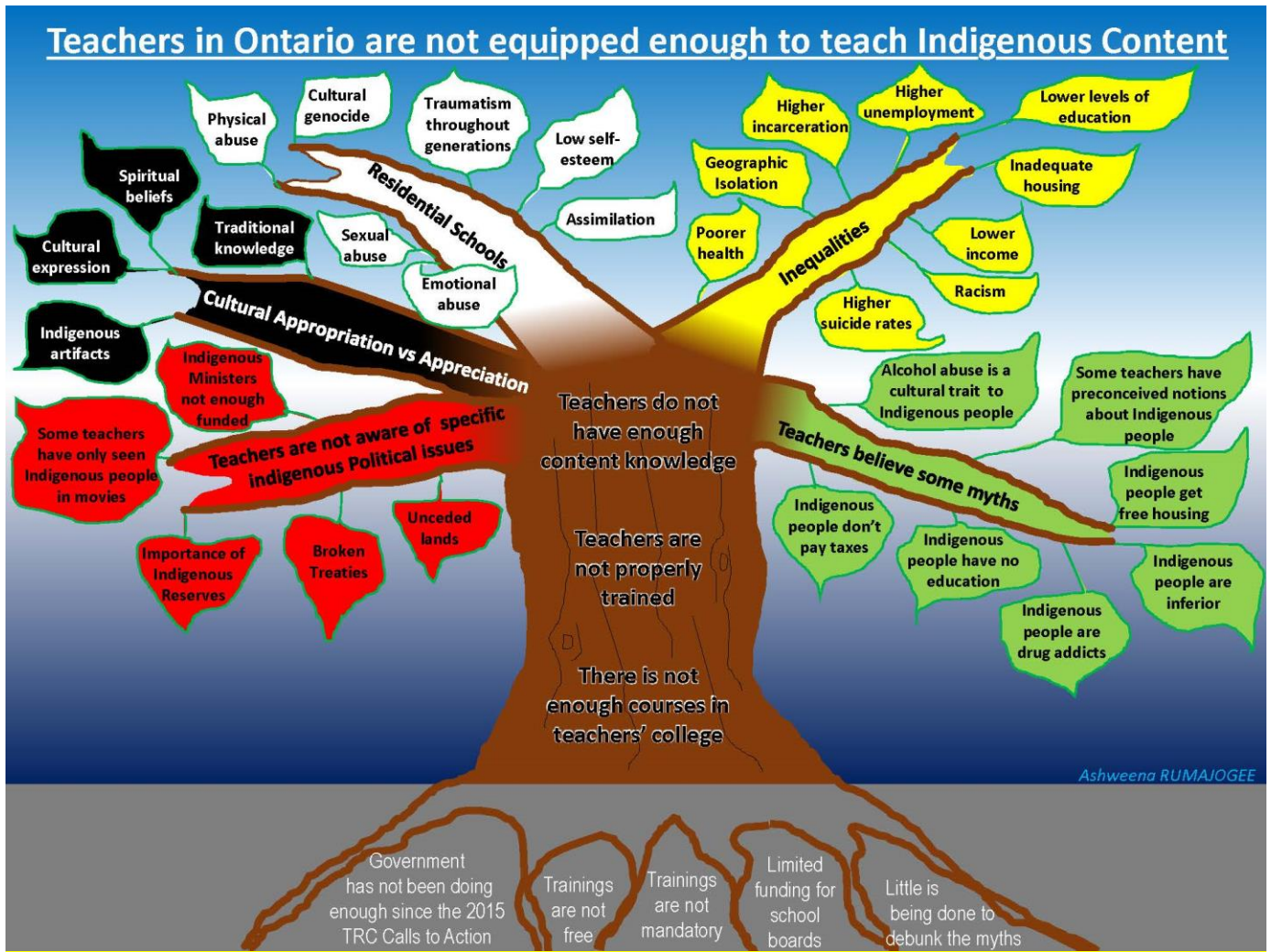


The Problem Tree



Question from the tree:

To support reconciliation, shouldn't teachers in Ontario be better equipped to teach Indigenous content?

I have been taught a lot about addressing diversity and inclusion in the classroom and catering to every child's needs and learning style. Respect for differences is a fundamental component in education.

I then discovered the subtleness of teaching about Indigenous culture. Much more than just knowledge, it also requires an understanding of these subtleties, which, often, go beyond our usual level of comprehension. Thus, inadequately trained teachers are likely to do a poor job.

Teachers should be better trained to deliver proper, accurate and respectful Indigenous teaching or, at least, be steered towards finding the relevant resource(s) and/or person(s) to help.

Picture 1: Education is key!

This is the picture of Cindy Blackstock, a member of the Gitksan First Nation and Doctor of Social Work. She has championed the rights of Indigenous kids for decades and, has recently, reminded us of something, regrettably, more accurate than ever: *"If we can raise a generation of non-Indigenous kids who don't normalize discrimination, and have the tools to peacefully and respectfully advocate for the end of this kind of apartheid system, then we'll be in a position where First Nations children never have to recover from their childhoods again"* ¹.

This can only happen through education!

Debunking the myths through education is crucial for the next generations of kids (Indigenous or not) to help their mindset develop and grow further towards tolerance, empathy, and humanity. Therefore, **breaking the myths is very much in the hands of teachers**, who are the key players in education: they need to be well informed in terms of Indigenous historical, social, economic, and political issues.

To the quote above Cindy Blackstock also added: *"and non-Indigenous children never have to say they're sorry"* ². This is a key statement towards Reconciliation. While everything should be done to mitigate the damage, the settlers made years ago (that is still reflecting in today's society); unfortunately, colonization cannot be undone! Hence, as part of Reconciliation, it would be unfair that the non-Indigenous Canadians are held responsible for what their ancestors perpetrated in the past.

Consequently, the key to **Reconciliation** is **education**, and it encompasses both kids and their teachers!



¹ Marie-Danielle Smith: "Cindy Blackstock: A relentless champion for Indigenous children's rights", <https://www.macleans.ca/society/cindy-blackstock-a-relentless-champion-for-indigenous-childrens-rights/>

² Marie-Danielle Smith, *op. cit.*

Picture 2: Teachers need to be better equipped...

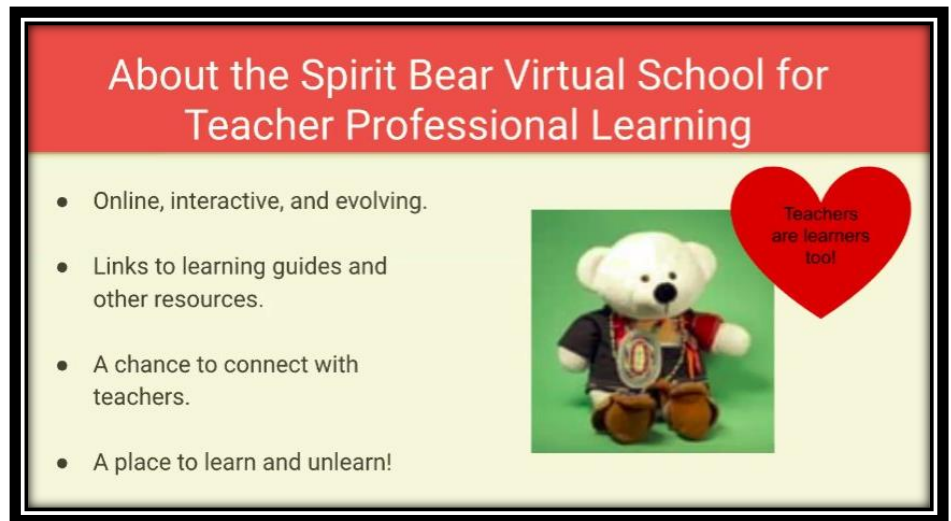
This picture is about the launch of “*Spirit Bear’s Virtual School for Teachers*”³ by the Caring Society⁴, aiming to provide educators with **a place to connect, learn and... unlearn!** This is imperative as many teachers are not adequately trained to deal with Indigenous issues.

My knowledge about the Indigenous population in Canadian society was limited when I first arrived in Canada. I learned a lot in the field while

working in independent schools, and I had some training through the B.Ed. Program.

I was astonished that many people, including some of my fellow student teachers who were brought up in Canada, know so little about Indigenous issues (*e.g.* having never heard of Residential Schools) or cultural appropriation. I recently read about a teacher who tried to teach about ‘Medicine Bags.’ Due to her lack of knowledge about these sacred artifacts, she acted disrespectfully (*e.g.* asking students to decorate the bags with random animals or using LCBO paper bags...)⁵. Although somehow limited, teachers currently have a few tools at their disposal (*e.g.* invite Indigenous people or an Indigenous specialist working for the school board to share their knowledge). So, existing or future teachers will need more training and resources to develop and/or compensate for knowledge gaps to deliver proper, accurate and respectful Indigenous teaching.

Generally, teachers must ensure they create an inclusive environment in their classroom, which respects diversity. However, to achieve this, they must themselves be fully aware of this diversity.



About the Spirit Bear Virtual School for Teacher Professional Learning

- Online, interactive, and evolving.
- Links to learning guides and other resources.
- A chance to connect with teachers.
- A place to learn and unlearn!

Teachers are learners tool

³ On Twitter: [@spiritbear](#)

⁴ First Nations Child & Family on Twitter [@CaringSociety](#)

⁵ CBC News (Feb 21, 2021)

Picture 3: ...so that kids are better taught!



I wonder how many teachers know about “**Have a heart day**”?

This is “an annual child and youth-led reconciliation event to help make sure First Nations children have a fair chance to grow up safely with their families, get a good education, be healthy, and feel proud of who they are”⁶.

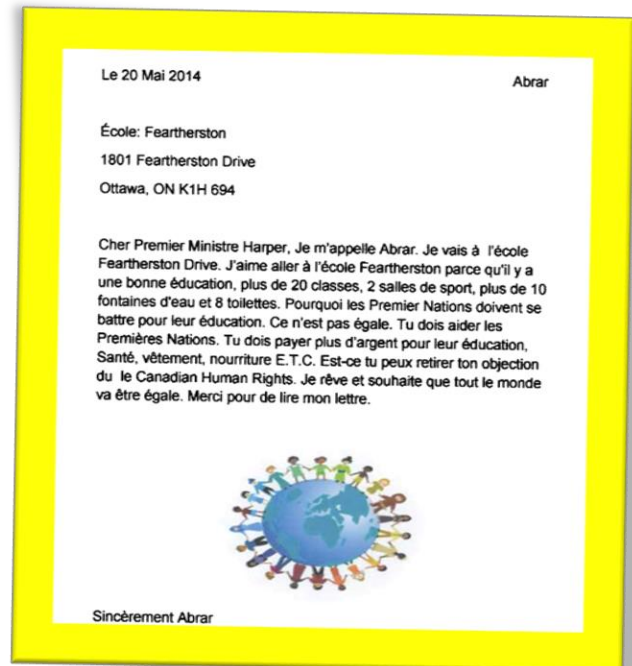
I also wonder how many kids, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, know about this annual event?

It looks to me that **everyone should know about this event!** Even Amnesty International is joining in the effort on February 14th ⁷.

‘Have a Heart Day’ is a perfect example of an activity that **raises awareness** about Indigenous people’s conditions in Canada. Being aware is, to me, a mandatory step towards **reconciliation**.

During that event, cards/letters are sent to elected officials to talk about current issues faced by the Indigenous population. Gatherings are also organised on Parliament Hill and other public spaces. Such actions raise consciousness not only for politicians and students but also for parents as well as teachers about **inequalities** and the fact that First-Nation children deserve to grow up safely with their families, get a good education, be healthy, and feel proud of who they are. Interestingly, through the students’ research and creative activities, teachers may also learn a lot about Indigenous issues.

Instead of perpetuating mistakes due to **cultural ‘appropriation’** and ignorance, let’s make it right by promoting **cultural ‘appreciation’!** While upgrading their grasp of Indigenous History and culture, teachers should also develop Indigenous knowledge in their classroom (*e.g.* movies, stories, blanket exercise), using all appropriate resources available.



⁶ First Nations Child & Family website: <https://fncaringsociety.com/have-a-heart>

⁷ Amnesty International website: <https://www.amnesty.ca/blog/have-heart-day-2021>

Final thoughts

I am relatively new to Canada and even newer to Ottawa. I was born and brought up in Mauritius, lived a good part of my life in Europe, and before coming to Canada, I had only heard about or seen Indigenous Peoples in movies. But the more I read or hear, the more I find it hard to believe all the atrocities they have endured. Among the various carnages that they went through, I discovered Residential Schools⁸. It is said that the goal of these schools was to "*kill the Indian in the child*," as Indigenous kids were removed from their families and "re-educated" to assimilate them into the dominant 'white' culture. These schools were created in the 1880s. The last one closed only in 1996! I was appalled to discover such a dark side in Canada's History, one of the most welcoming countries in the world! The worst part is that I have realized in the last six years that I have spent in Canada that many Canadians are either not aware of what residential schools represented or were not cognizant of their existence. This shocking lack of awareness is representative of the enormous task in front of us. Considering Canada's history, much more should be done to mend Indigenous people's situation.

Indigenous Peoples suffer from inequalities at various levels of our society. As a teacher, I probably do not have the legitimacy to comment on all issues but, while we cannot do much about many of these discriminations, I think that there are a few things within our reach. Acknowledging diversity and being inclusive is of paramount importance in the classroom. Most of the time, it is about respecting students' skin colour, origin, and cultural background. All of these become even more important given that Indigenous culture has been denigrated and denied for years. Their culture and beliefs often go beyond our comprehension with, for example, the way they address the relationship between humans and nature, which holds values and symbols that may not seem 'rational' to us. Yet, we need to show respect to Indigenous culture and to any culture for that matter.

Besides ignorance, there is also misconception! Recently I have had the opportunity to read Chelsea Vowels' book, *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit issues in Canada*. After reading the whole myth-busting section of Vowel's book, I realized that when it comes to Canada and representations of the Indigenous Peoples here, several myths exist. Debunking those myths and identifying that they are false and biased is imperative. Non-Indigenous people in Canada should engage in sincere and respectful conversations with Indigenous Peoples and become better educated about Indigenous issues. I admit that the subject matter is complicated and can make many people uncomfortable, but it is of the utmost importance to do so.

I feel that educators or aspiring educators who were born and bred in Canada do not seem to know a lot about indigenous beliefs, practices, and education. Using terms like Indian and Aboriginal is not appropriate anymore. To me, calling Indigenous Peoples, 'Indian,' never made any sense. If settlers were ignorant, do we have to follow suit by continuing to use those terms?

Courses about Indigenous culture need to be made compulsory from elementary to postsecondary because there are too many laypeople about Indigenous history. Many of them have stereotypical prejudices against the Indigenous population. Since I have the intention to teach in Ottawa, the Indigenous Walk through Ottawa, which was a fantastic experience for me, would be a distinctive way for students to see the city for a start. Students must know this city in a different light and learn about its history. They need to understand why it is essential to acknowledge that we are on unceded Anishinaabe territory and know more about the oppression and cultural genocide the Indigenous Peoples of Canada endured. They also need to be aware of how greed by settlers lead to the Indigenous loss of land, life, and culture.

⁸ The Residential School system: https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_residential_school_system/

In line with this, I have appreciated all the efforts made in this B.Ed. Program to educate us about Indigenous culture. I have learned a lot from the module "FNMI Education: Historical experiences and contemporary perspectives" (PED 3138) and some topics discussed in "Schooling and Society" (PED3102). I have also tried to educate myself about Indigenous culture humbly. I have read a few books in French (e.g. "*Les bas du pensionnat*⁹", "*Quand j'avais huit ans*¹⁰", "*Je ne suis pas un numéro*¹¹") and in English (e.g. "*Little Voice*¹²"). I read them with my daughter (10), and her feedback highlighted how unfair the situation of Indigenous people was. I have also learned about "Beading" and "Smudge Ceremony" from the Indigenous Beading Group in Orleans¹³. With guidance, I later used beading as an activity during my practicum at St Michael's school (Ottawa). In 2019 at St Clements School (Toronto), I had the opportunity to teach "*The 7 Grandfather Teachings*", an essential part of the Indigenous culture. Beforehand, I sought help from knowledgeable persons to prepare my teaching in French.

As part of my willingness to continuously develop my skills, I want to advance my knowledge of Indigenous culture. I plan to include more meaningful activities, such as the "Blanket" activity, in my teaching. Aiming to make a difference at my level will be my way to contribute to the significant effort towards acknowledgement and respect of Indigenous culture. We need to educate the new generation about this part of history and help them eliminate the biases they have that may have been transmitted by their parents/grandparents. Having empathy is part of being a decent human being. And when we teach kids about history, no matter how hard it is for them to understand and accept, we are enabling them to have compassion, hence making the world a better place!

By Ashweena RUMAJOGEE

⁹ *Les bas du pensionnat* (by Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton)

- http://www.scholastic.ca/editions/communiqués/pdfs/2011/Bas_du_Pensionnat.pdf

¹⁰ *Quand j'avais huit ans* (by Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton) - <https://www.communication-jeunesse.qc.ca/livres/quand-javais-huit-ans/>

¹¹ *Je ne suis pas un numéro* (by Kathy Kacer and Jenny Kay Dupuis) - <http://www.scholastic.ca/editions/livres/view/je-ne-suis-pas-un-numro>

¹² *Little Voice* (by Ruby Slipperjack) - <https://www.writerstrust.com/authors/ruby-slipperjack/>

¹³ Indigenous Beading Group - <https://www.facebook.com/events/orl%C3%A9ans-cumberland-crc/weekly-indigenous-beading-group-orleans/615852382153736/>