

Lesson: Learning through Poetry

By Canada's History

Summary:

This activity guides students through a reading of and reflection on the poem "For My Nieces" by Makayla Webkamigad on page 6 of *Truth Before Reconciliation: Listening to Survivors*.

Background:

Before beginning this activity, teachers should assess the students' knowledge of Residential Schools. Teachers of young learners may introduce the topic using one of the age-appropriate books noted on pages 18 and 19 of the publication. Teachers may also consult the following resources as part of their preparation and as an introductory lesson:

- Video: [Teaching on the Frontlines of Reconciliation](#), presentation by David A. Robertson at the Canada's History Forum (2023).
- Lesson Plan: [Preparing for Difficult Conversations](#), by Jacqueline Cleave (2022).
- Webinar: [A Conversation about Truth and Reconciliation in the Classroom](#), with Gavin Bergeron, Sylvia Smith, Maxine Hildebrandt and Natacha Sirois (2021).

Lesson:

To begin, read the poem "For My Nieces," by Makayla Webkamigad aloud to your students. Then, return to the beginning and read through the poem in small sections, pausing as follows to allow for explanation and conversation:

Read stanzas 1-4 as a class (the teacher may lead the reading, or may divide students into small groups). Pause after the fourth stanza and ask some of the following questions:

- What is happening in this section of the poem? Students may recognize that an Auntie is telling her niece about stories her Grandma told her in the past. Ask students what types of things the Grandma spoke about (childhood memories, language, teaching, and prayers).
- Ask students to recall a time a family member or loved one told them a story that was not from a written book. What sorts of things did they share?
- Ask students how this section makes them feel. What words are used to describe the Grandma and her stories?

Continue with reading stanzas 5-8. Pause to encourage conversation by asking some of the following questions:

- What is happening in this section of the poem? Where was the Grandma taken? How did she feel at the school? How did she feel when she was able to return home? Explain to students that Residential Schools were created to separate Indigenous children from their culture and family as a way to assimilate them into the dominant Euro-Canadian culture.
- Ask students how this section makes them feel. What words does the poet use to describe the Grandma's experience?

Read the final six stanzas together. Ask the following questions:

- What is the Auntie saying in this final section? What does she mean when she says "it's time to heal?"
- Explain that Residential Schools were just one aspect of **colonization** – the process of asserting control over a group of people through policies of assimilation. In Canada, the *Indian Act of 1876* and its subsequent amendments banned, "any Indian festival, dance or other ceremony," which included potlatches, powwows and Sun Dances, and sacred dance forms, such as hoop dancing and jingle dress dancing. There were also many traditional practices and knowledges that were lost as a result of families being separated through such systems and policies as the Residential School System and the Sixties Scoop. These traditions include language, song and music, art forms, land-based skills and more. Some specific examples include throat-singing, building canoes, kajaks or umiaks, kakiniit (traditional Inuit tattoos), or hide tanning.
- Explain the concept of **revitalization** – that many Indigenous people and organizations in Canada are relearning and sharing traditional languages, cultural practices and teachings that were disrupted and lost because of colonization.
- Ask students to describe how this section makes them feel.

Final Reflection:

As a class, brainstorm some of the main themes (ideas) that were included in the poem. Students may note themes such as family, language, stories, loss, or love.

In small groups, have students select a theme and find a phrase in the poem that best represents that theme. Create a poster that includes their selected phrase and images or colours that represent how the theme makes them feel. Have students share their posters with each other or display them in the school.

Extension:

Have students read the article, "Small Pebbles," by Lisa Jane Smith on page 24 of *Truth Before Reconciliation: Listening to Survivors*. Have students take turns recounting one of the stories of revitalization that they have read. As a class, explore the websites, social media feeds or videos made by the individuals profiled on pages 27 and 28:

- Michelle Chubb: [Jingle Dress straight dance](#)
- Mikey Harris (Ivan Flett Memorial Dancers): [Métis jigging](#)
- Isabelle Chapadeau: [Inuit art and jewelry](#)
- James Jones (Notorious Cree): [Hoop dancing](#)
- Shina Novalinga: [Inuit throat singing](#)