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2022

PHOENIX: An Indigenous Learner

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Recommended Citation

Hill, G. PHOENIX: An Indigenous Learner. Reframing mental health in schools: Using case stories to promote global dialogue, edited by Keith, Erin, & Maich, Kimberly, 2022, p. 67-78.

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Case Study #8 – PHOENIX: An Indigenous Learner

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Location of Author

Aaniin, Waase-Gaaboo Ndizhnikaaz, Anishnaabe Endaw, Obadjiwaan miinwaa Bawating Ndoonjibaa. Cambridge Endayaan. Hello, my spirit name is Waase-Gaaboo, and the name that I have been called for my whole life is Gus Hill. I am of Ojibwe, British and French ancestry, I grew up in Batchawana Bay, and Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. My ancestors come from the North Shore of Lake Huron and the Eastern Shore of Lake Superior, in Ontario. I live with my family in Cambridge, Ontario. It is important for me to introduce myself in this way because it honours and respects my ancestors.

Introduction/Background

I use the term Indigenous throughout this chapter to denote First Nations, Metis, and Inuit/Innu people who are the original inhabitants of North America. In the context of this chapter, this is an exclusive designation, and is not to be confused with Globally Indigenous people. I employ a Critical Indigenous lens in my analysis.

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight an Indigenous experience in the school system in Canada in case study format, to provide some reflections on the experience, and to make some recommendations as to how to mitigate the experience. This will be accomplished by providing some background/history related to the education system and Indigenous learners, a case study of PHOENIX, and asking some critical questions related to PHOENIX'S experience. The questions on offer within this chapter are for you to use as prompts for your self-reflection. I hope you will use them wisely, not on others, but on your inward journey of self-exploration.

BEGINNING QUESTIONS:

What does it mean to be an Indigenous learner in school these days?

What does racism look like?

What does racism feel like?

What does colonialism feel like?

What does violence feel like?

What does safety feel like?

What do young Indigenous people have to put up with in order to attend school?

There are policies that have shaped the education of Indigenous children. The first is the Royal Proclamation of 1763, the next is the Gradual Civilization Act of 1857, then the Constitution Act of 1867, specifically section 91(24), the next is the Constitution Act of 1982, specifically section 35(1). As a result of federal responsibility outlined in The Indian Act of 1876, Residential schools became popular as a mechanism of assimilation because they severed the relationship between child (future) and community (ancestral history). The debate of whether Indigenous people were humans or animals raged for decades amongst white people. While the constitution act states clearly that Indigenous people are, indeed, human, society still treats us much the way the early settlers did; like animals, and with disregard and brutality. Indigenous people are still living with the narrative of “being conquered” and it is difficult to exist in the context of always being inferior. The pervasive attitude extends well beyond racism and microaggressions. Those are gentle words to describe the experiences of Indigenous people in Canada. Case in point, from personal experience of the author: how is it that a white professor can say to an Indigenous professor “you were only hired because you are Aboriginal” and get away with it? Where does that entitlement come from? It is the colonialism that whites embody and perpetuate each day that keeps Indigenous people “in their place.”

To play this out just a little bit more, I want to draw a hypothetical scenario. If an Indigenous person makes a claim to a piece of land and states clearly, and explicitly, that this is my land, the police will intervene and that person is imprisoned, or shot dead in the case of Dudley George. Should I choose to walk into your house, displace you, and claim the property as my own, I will be imprisoned and you will be gently and compassionately returned to your home by authorities, all the while acknowledged in the media as a victim of violence. You will likely receive some commendation from your local mayor and some go-fund-me campaign will be created on your behalf. The argument here is that there are laws in place to protect people and to punish those who break those laws. By contrast, whites came to Turtle Island and enacted the very process noted above. The local laws were ignored, the men slaughtered, the women raped and claimed as property, and the children enslaved. Whole nations of people were intentionally murdered in a process of erasure. The first scenario is hypothetical; the second is historical fact. The white narrative is one of conquest, of victory, of seizure, of heroes defeating villains, of saints taming savages, and of historical timelines that start immediately after the great victory. Indigenous people live with the reality of what occurred before the white timeline began.

The intergenerational trauma and inherited grief and loss that each Indigenous child lives with is real. It is real because Indigenous people, as a whole, live in relative poverty, in poor conditions, in a racist society full of racist people who, after extracting and exploiting the Indigenous cultures of what is valued by whites, would rather they disappear from sight and from history.

The answer to “why didn’t I learn this in school?” is one of erasure. The Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy (1969 White Paper) still has teeth, and society plays out its intentions; erase treaties, the Indian Act, and the legal and moral responsibilities as guests on Turtle Island.

In contrast to these policies, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP) report from 1996 outlines in remarkable depth all the ailments colonization has created for Indigenous people and the myriad ways to address the effects. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) from 2007 outlines for white people exactly how you should behave, but no one is forced to read it. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Report from 2015 offers explicit actions that are not being internalized by whites. These documents represent the best of what we have to offer, and yet they are treated as “other” by white people. It is a privilege to not have to read them. It is this privilege that perpetuates colonialism in society. It is this privilege that plays out every day against Indigenous learners in K-12 educational settings. Non-Indigenous teachers never have to consider the needs of Indigenous learners, never have to accommodate their learning styles, never have to transform themselves into the teacher that the Indigenous learner deserves. Indigenous learners are not equity seeking; they are equity deserving. All of this educating occurs on Indigenous learners’ land, after all. The salaries and benefits enjoyed by non-Indigenous teachers are paid while Indigenous people starve, live in boil-water advisory conditions, die from exposure in the same communities where the non-Indigenous teachers participate in the white economy by shopping for trivial items, eat in restaurants, and enjoy leisure activities, and exercise the privilege of turning a blind eye.

We are all treaty people. What does this statement mean? It means that anyone who lives in Canada is bound by the treaties that were signed as peace agreements; also called contracts. These contracts set out rights, considerations, conditions, and payments to be made to Indigenous people, in perpetuity, in exchange for the land and its resources. Education is one of those rights. The residential school policy was one way the government fulfilled its obligation to educate Indigenous

people. In the aftermath of residential schools, and the damage they created, reservation schools were created, and have been a problem since their inception.

Questions:

What are the relevant Acts or policies that impact Indigenous learners?

What is a treaty?

What are the lasting effects of residential schools?

What is the RCAP Report of 1996?

What is the UNDRIP of 2007?

What is the TRC Report of 2015?

What are your responsibilities and obligations related to these reports?

One of the gross assumptions has always been that children on reservations achieve at lower levels when compared to their urban counterparts. I have never been witness to any sort of deconstruction of this statement. It is simply accepted as fact. So, I have been reflecting on this situation in light of this case study, and I have come to some preliminary deductions. These deductions do not rely on statistics that paint an inarticulate picture; rather, a lived experience of reservation schools and an untold truth about them. These statements cannot be captured by any research methodology because they contain a truth that people deny, for fear of judgement.

Some reservation schools are carryover institutions of residential schools. Indigenous children achieve to the level of expectations. Only the most desperate of young, untrained, beginning

educators accept postings at reservation schools. Many of those young teachers have some type of saviour complex. The societal convention is to expect less from Indigenous learners because they are “simple, less-than, incapable, Savages, living in difficult conditions, etc.” Reservation schools are underfunded, under-resourced, neglected, condemnable facilities. There are normally one or two teachers for multiple grades; often one teacher for all grades JK-8. Reservations are perceived as black holes; no one knows what goes on there, and no one cares. Funding for any activity on reservations, including education, is perceived by the public as a budgetary liability, and these perceptions exist on a continuum from favourable to damnable - those with saviour complexes, with their good intentions, still regard these children as a “worthy cause.” Society does not regard the education of Indigenous children as an inherent right; however, in a double-standard-sort-of-way these same people rally against urban teachers when their own children are not taught curriculum right up to the last minute of the school year. The disparity between reservation schools and urban schools continues to grow due to malignant neglect, complacency, racism, marginalization, exclusion, and ongoing colonialism. Indigenous children are blamed for the results of all this, and society never takes the blame or responsibility. Children are the product of environment, intentions, investment, inputs, resources, ideologies, influences, subtle messages, and role modelling. The phrase “they just need to pull themselves up by the bootstraps” assumes many things, such as: there is sufficient funding for boots, those boots have straps, the wearer of said boots has eaten a sufficiently nutritious and substantial meal to fuel the energy to do said pulling-up, said child has been taught the mechanics of the said action of pulling-up, said instructor role-models the wearing of boots and not high-heeled shoes, and the analogy goes on-and-on. Standards are lower on reservation schools, but those standards are set by the provincial governments, and Band Chief-and-Council governments, like any other

municipal governments, have no jurisdiction over these standards; yet, they are blamed for not prioritizing the funding or enforcing policies of the school. Chiefs and their Councils are the equivalent to Mayors and their Councils. Do white mayors of white cities get blamed directly for what goes on in schools? The answer is no. Parents of children on reservations are blamed for not doing their part at home; yet, they are also the product of the reservation school system, colonialism, societal racism, erasure, dishonoured treaties, and displacement from the land. These parents are struggling to boil sufficient water to wash and feed their families because too many Indigenous communities are on boil-water advisories. There is an assumption that there are hidden resources, whether capitalistic or innate, that magically appear. Everyone “passes the buck” and expects the next person in the line of responsibility to attend to the neglect - the best examples of which are grammar, literacy, numeracy, finances, ethics, morality, relational accountability, critical analysis, curiosity and investigation, the subtle art of deduction, etc. You cannot teach what you do not know. Inexperienced educators burn out. What does a burned out person have to offer? A burned out teacher is exactly like a burned out lightbulb - they no longer shine, they offer no light to illuminate the darkness of the unknown, they still draw power from the grid (salary and benefits), and they are dangerous to the touch. Indigenous students in reservation schools normally have several teachers each year - there is no consistency, or stability for these children. Ceremonies and cultural activities, such as the well-known “Goose Days” in the far-north of Ontario, are not folded into the learning, the curriculum, nor are they celebrated by society. I have heard stories from many teachers who had their “horrible” experiences up in the far north of Ontario and they all talk negatively about any activity that “interfered” with their curriculum. Teachers extract resources (\$\$\$) from the community without ever becoming part of the community. I have heard Indigenous community members say that

teachers should be mandated to participate in the community - actively engage with ceremonies, cultural activities, sit with Elders, pull nets on the lake, hunt, gather medicines, participate in the preparation of community feasts. Teachers always leave for greener (urban) pastures, selfishly, leaving behind broken-hearted children who then have to grieve that loss.

Case Study

I am writing a narrative about PHOENIX, a gender non-specific Indigenous person experiencing headaches at school, and night terrors at home. I will write this narrative from the perspective of a third person observer. I am writing this case study in three parts. Drawing on your experiences, please work through the questions at the end of each part before you proceed to next.

PART ONE:

PHOENIX is a beautiful, dark-skinned, dark-haired, visibly Indigenous learner, in grade 5, who has been labelled as difficult, lazy, unfortunate, and distracting by some, while also being labelled as unique, creative, expressive, interesting, enthusiastic, and sensitive by others.

PHOENIX has two loving, hard-working parents who are vocal about racism in the school, and who challenge the teachers and administration to engage Indigenous Learners more intentionally and respectfully. PHOENIX's father is particularly vocal about the treaty rights of PHOENIX.

PHOENIX has undiagnosed Specific Learning Difficulties with dyslexia and dysgraphia. The parents "are doing the best they can with what they have." PHOENIX is engaged with their culture, is well-read, well-travelled, and has a beautiful long braid of dark hair. PHOENIX is also larger than their peers by a considerable margin.

For a brief period of approximately three weeks PHOENIX was acting out in class, claiming to have a headache every time math class started, disrupting peers, asking off-topic questions,

requesting to go to the bathroom frequently, and generally presenting distracted behaviour. This behaviour was communicated home to PHOENIX's parents who said they would talk with PHOENIX. When asked what is going on, and what is causing your headaches and distraction at school, PHOENIX shared that math gives them a headache. A discourse about how the world is unsafe started to permeate dinner conversation. Furthermore, the discourse included questions and bold statements about "mean people" and "evil people," and about vengeance. Lastly, as a talented visual artist, PHOENIX's sketches started to take on darker themes of violence, death, blood, and fire. The themes of conversation, and drawing, were well out of character for PHOENIX. This concerned the parents, especially given PHOENIX's gender identity. PHOENIX's parents began to wonder if PHOENIX had entered a "dark period" or if it was hormonal, or if there was an external cause to the change of nature and demeanour.

Drawing on your experiences and training, please answer the following questions:

- What are your assumptions and biases about PHOENIX?
- What are your assumptions and biases about the parents?
- What are your instincts and intuition telling you about this situation?
- What is your formulation of a solution at this point in the case study?

PART TWO:

Soon thereafter, PHOENIX entered the schoolyard with their father before school, and was excited to play with friends from their class. The school bell rang and PHOENIX lined up to enter school. PHOENIX's father departed. The school day progressed without incident until after the first break. PHOENIX's father was called to the school to pick up PHOENIX because they hit, and injured, another child in the school yard during break. Upon arrival, PHOENIX's father asked them what happened, but PHOENIX refused to answer. The father asked the Principal and

Vice-Principal what happened. The father was told that PHOENIX grabbed another child and punched them. The father asked if PHOENIX was provoked and was told that they were not. This occurred on four separate occasions over the course of two weeks. The father became angry and aggressive with the teachers and administration at the school, threatening to take legal action for their neglectful treatment of PHOENIX. The parents used words such as racism, sexism, and called for an inquiry.

QUESTIONS:

- What are your assumptions and biases about PHOENIX?
- What are your assumptions and biases about the parents?
- What are your instincts and intuition telling you about this situation?
- What is your formulation of a solution at this point in the case study?

PART THREE:

PHOENIX's father informed the Principal of the school that he would be attending school for the day to observe PHOENIX throughout the day. After a period of argument over disrupting the flow of the school day, making children feel uncomfortable, and concerns over what other parents might say, the Principal relented/consented. The father observed that the game of choice amongst the children on each break was 'tag'. Inevitably, PHOENIX wound up being "it" during the game, and remained "it" for extended periods of time. This would frustrate PHOENIX and they would ask the other children to change games, repeatedly. The other children would eventually allow PHOENIX to tag out, but within two tags amongst a group of 12 children PHOENIX would end up being "it" again; a respite of approximately 1 minute. The game turned ugly as each of the other kids would run circles around PHOENIX, while keeping just out of reach, and pull hard on their braid of hair while making "INDIAN" noises while patting their

mouths with their hands. This made PHOENIX visibly angry until PHOENIX was lying on the ground holding their head from a headache, caused by all the hair pulling, and crying. The father intervened before PHOENIX could retaliate again and withdrew PHOENIX from school until such a time that the Principal met with the parents of the other children. The father declared that there were acts of bullying and racism occurring in the schoolyard right in front of teachers on duty, all under the leadership of the school administrators. The father asked PHOENIX why they bother playing with those children at all, and the answer was that they liked the other children, and indeed one of the children was their best friend. The father insisted that the situation be dealt with immediately, and in comprehensive fashion.

QUESTIONS:

- How accurate were your assumptions and biases about PHOENIX?
- How accurate were your assumptions and biases about the parents?
- Did your instincts and intuition about the situation impair your ability to attend to PHOENIX?
- Was your formulation of a solution helpful?
- Why was PHOENIX experiencing headaches?
- Why was PHOENIX protecting the “best friend”?
- What is the correct course of action in this situation?
- What is your role in supporting PHOENIX in this situation?
- What is your role in addressing the bullying?
- What are some of the signs of racism, sexism, ableism, and bullying that you should be looking for, all the time?
- What can you do to be more situationally aware as an educator?

TAKEAWAYS:

The risk here is to focus on the labels of dyslexia and dysgraphia, the difficult parents, the disruptive behaviour of the student, and the innocent play of the classmates. This would be a

mistake. The lens to use here is one of systemic racism, heteronormativity, ableism, sexism; and moreover, colonialism.

How does the section on reservation schools relate to PHOENIX? This Indigenous student is the product of generations of Indigenous people who have gone through reservation schooling, residential schooling, and who have experienced all of what was stated in the above paragraph. It is the context in which PHOENIX has been raised, and the worldview that permeates this young person's life. Simply put, it is an intergenerational truth of First Nations, rural, and urban Indigenous people who have survived the white school system. There is trauma attached to education for Indigenous people, regardless of what they might say to your face.

Recommendations

1. Read the RCAP report from 1996;
2. Read the TRC report from 2015;
3. Read the UNDRIP from 2007;
4. Read the Constitution Act sections 91(24) and 35(1);
5. Read the White Paper from 1969;
6. Read about Indigenous wholism (see Hill, 2021);
7. Engage relational accountability in teaching.

Conclusion/Critical Questioning

While you may never “know” what it is like to be an Indigenous learner, like PHOENIX, you can engage in critical self-reflection to further your capacity for ethical relational engagement. You need to develop greater awareness of contextual factors that may not be readily apparent. Each child is an ecosystem, and each of those ecosystems interact with one another. You are also an ecosystem, and this requires careful consideration as you engage Indigenous children because the inherent biases, assumptions, values, beliefs, and worldviews of different

ecosystems can cause trespasses, transgressions, wounding, and violations. What does it mean to be white? This is not just about deconstructing white privilege, or how you benefit from ongoing colonialism, or a class analysis, but also about what values, beliefs, biases, assumptions, and reflexes you embody. Good educators examine their own worldviews, and work to mitigate the potential negative impacts of their worldviews on children that have been raised in different worldviews. This is a lesson in diversity.

While it is absolutely critical to engage a learning journey about the cultures of the Indigenous children in your care, it is nearly equally important to not put those children on the spot with a “trivia Q&A” to demonstrate just how much you think you know. While well-intentioned and relational, the Q&A sessions create great discomfort for Indigenous **learners**. What can you do? You can learn, and then integrate the “knowledge” into your way of seeing, being, knowing, and doing. This type of cultural learning is for you to develop an awareness, but not an expertise; it is about self-reflection on your own epistemology, rather than external expression of perceived understanding or knowing. It is critical to understand that just because you read something, hear something, or watch something, does not mean you ‘know’ about something. Indigenous cultures represent what I call embodied knowledge, and the embodiment is not a passing fancy; it is a way of seeing, being, knowing, and doing. What does this look like in practice? A teacher who is truly engaged with Indigenous students might ask the question “Have you ever heard of X-cultural-piece-of-knowledge?” If the student says yes, it could be a sharing opportunity, and possibly a relationship building moment. If the student says no, it could be an opportunity to ask if they would like to learn about it together. Much information about Indigenous cultures is written, and much is on display with some regularity throughout the year.

What is the experience of Indigenous learners in grade school? Indigenous people have always been outsiders in the education system, coming from different worldviews, and have been treated in forcefully assimilative ways. The education system does not recognize or celebrate difference and is constructed to reinforce colonial rule of this land. Indigenous students are evaluated against criteria that are foreign, are forced to sit all day in rows, to raise their hands in a competitive way to be heard or are called on out-of-the-blue to answer questions. One simple strategy is to construct a classroom as a circle, and to use a talking stick so that every student understands that it is their turn to answer a question when the talking stick comes to them, and that they are not to speak when they are not holding the talking stick. This is a more inclusive, and equitable facilitation process.

What are the needed resources to help Indigenous students succeed? One way to support Indigenous students is to start with safety. It is not safe to ask an Indigenous student to raise their hand and compete with others to be heard. It is, likewise, not safe to call on them randomly. Using circle process is simple and effective for all learners. It inherently quashes competition. It creates predictable engagement. Some very obvious strategies are to use inclusive resources such as audio, video, and textual materials that represent the diversity of cultures within the learning group. Additionally, guests from cultural groups who can speak to experiences of culture can be very impactful. As an Indigenous learner, I recall very few exceptionally great days in K-12 school; however, the most memorable day was when one of my Elders from my community was invited to spend the day at my school. As soon as we saw each other we hugged, and he spoke to me in our language. He made some jokes and I was laughing, and he asked if I could be his helper for the day. He was a family friend, and one of my ceremonial Elders, and his presence at my school for that one day buoyed my spirit for weeks to come. I was more focused and

productive because I was supported, and I felt that the school was a safe place where Elders occasionally visited.

What can you do in your everyday life to transform yourself into a relational being? What can you do to go out of your way to make PHOENIX's life at school safe? What is your role, and in what ways are you complicit, in the racism, discrimination, and bullying experienced by PHOENIX? You are a treaty person. You benefit directly from the treaties signed by your ancestors. In what ways are you, personally, going to honour the treaties from which you benefit on a daily basis? It is your responsibility to be a good relation to Indigenous people. As an educator you are an instrument of the treaties that promise education to Indigenous people.

It is a well-known fact that curriculum does not reflect the knowledge systems of Indigenous people. It is a well-known fact that the popular pedagogy used in the current grade school curriculum does not capture the majority of learning styles. It is a well-known fact that there are greater numbers of students with specific learning difficulties (SpLD) than meet the eye.

These are structural deficits in the k-12 education system that negatively impact the majority of learners. The marginalization this creates for Indigenous learners is compounded exponentially.

I propose educating from the margins. I propose a pedagogy of universal design that attends to every learner's wholistic development. I compel teachers to engage in wholistic assessment of learners. I promote "seeing" and "knowing" your students. Treat them like family and community. Build a trusting, mutual relationship, and then take intentional steps to not betray that trust. The relationship is the vehicle in which intention travels toward action. The intention is student success. The action is doing what it takes to ensure the successful outcome for each student. I do not approve of activities such as assessment for the purpose of punitive action.

What does punitive action look like? Referrals to child protection, reports to police, reports to welfare workers, and so on. I encourage teachers to untrain themselves in ways that are judgmental, biased towards a single way of teaching and learning, toxically white, and singular.

Miigwetch, All My Relations.

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