



## **Learning to Infuse Indigenous Content in Physical Education: A Story of Growth towards Reconciliation**

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## Abstract

This paper documents our initial response to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* as White settler-Canadian pre-service students and educators learning about appropriately integrating Indigenous content for all students in physical education. Through storytelling we describe our in-class and post-course experiences evaluating physical education resources that infuse Indigenous content. Course documents, meeting artefacts, and reflections were thematically analyzed and reflect our concerns regarding independent planning, time and research involved, and feelings of lacking relevant knowledge; and our questions about addressing stereotypes with students, and balancing complexity with classroom constraints. We navigated these dilemmas by engaging with critical multiculturalism. Attending more closely to our experience of learning to plan for cultural infusion allowed us to shift from a liberal to critical multicultural lens that benefited our growth towards facilitating reconciliatory education. We suggest emphasis on the *process* and *experience* of learning to plan for cultural infusion to allow for critical growth.

**Keywords:** critical multiculturalism; physical education; story; Indigenous education; cultural infusion.

## Résumé

Ce texte documente notre première réponse à la *Commission Vérité et Réconciliation du Canada* en tant qu'enseignant en formation et éducateurs membres du groupe de colonisateurs blancs; nous y décrivons notre apprentissage de l'intégration de contenu autochtone pour tous les élèves en éducation physique. Nous présentons des récits de cette intégration de contenu autochtone sous forme de ressources dans nos expériences en classe et dans des évaluations à la fin du cours. Des documents utilisés durant le cours, des artefacts de rencontres et des réflexions ont été analysés sous forme de thèmes et reflètent des préoccupations touchant la planification indépendante, le temps et la recherche et les sentiments d'un manque de connaissances pertinentes. Nous partageons nos questions sur les façons de prendre en considération les stéréotypes des étudiants et l'équilibre à établir entre la complexité et les contraintes de la classe. Nous naviguons à travers ces dilemmes à la lumière du multiculturalisme critique. Cette attention portée à notre apprentissage à planifier l'insertion de contenu culturel nous a permis de passer d'une perspective multiculturelle libérale à une perspective critique et a facilité notre développement de la compétence à mettre en place une éducation de réconciliation. Nous suggérons de mettre l'emphasis sur le *processus* et *l'expérience* d'apprentissage à planifier pour insérer un contenu culturel pour permettre un développement du jugement critique.

**Mots clés:** multiculturalisme critique; éducation physique; récits; éducation autochtone; apport culturel

## Prologue

In 2008, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was formally established to document, share stories, and highlight the ongoing impact of the Indian Residential School system that existed in Canada for over 150 years. The Indian Residential School system was a government-sponsored and, up until 1969, church-run regime, in which Indigenous<sup>1</sup> children were separated from their families and forced into residential schools. These schools were created for the purposes of weakening Indigenous children's familial and cultural ties and indoctrinating them into Euro-Christian Canadian society, amounting to an act of "cultural genocide" (TRC, 2015a, p. 3). The TRC's final report, released in 2015, incorporates 94 Calls to Action that cross the educational, health, legal, sport, and child welfare sectors – among others – to reveal the far-reaching impacts of the Indian Residential School system. The report specifies "Governments, churches, educational institutions, and Canadians from all walks of life are responsible for taking action on reconciliation in concrete ways, working collaboratively with Aboriginal peoples" (TRC, 2015c, p. 238). Reconciliation is described by the TRC as "about coming to terms with events of the past in a manner that overcomes conflict and establishes a respectful and healthy relationship among people going forward" (TRC, 2015c, p. 6).

The role of the K-12 and post-secondary education systems for reconciliation is highlighted throughout the TRC's volumes, with a prominent example in Volume 6 that asserts "reconciliation requires sustained public education and dialogue, including youth engagement, about the history and legacy of residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal rights, as well as the historical and contemporary contributions of Aboriginal peoples to Canadian society" (TRC, 2015b, p. 16). Unfortunately, however, the TRC (2015b) also reports that post-secondary institutions have played an "inadequate role" (p. 15) in training school teachers to fulfill their responsibilities to integrate such Indigenous content and reconciliatory education into their practice. We, as a group of White settler-Canadian<sup>2</sup> educators trained and teaching in the Canadian province of Ontario, either as instructors of physical education teacher education (PETE) courses or Indigenous education courses in post-graduate Bachelor of Education programs, or as pre-service teachers of physical education (PE) at the intermediate/senior level, were distressed to read this. Our distress had many layers, including the confirmation of our previously ignored fears that, in reality, our instruction and/or education was falling short of its role in reconciliation, despite our hopes and expectations to the contrary. While we were conscious that guilt and shame are common reactions to this new unsettling learning (Ahmed, 2005), we recognized that these emotions can be paralyzing and unproductive. As Regan (2010) points out, we must move beyond these feelings towards action as our moral and ethical responsibility. Thus, we set out to learn more about how we could improve our instructional practice, specifically our capacity to appropriately integrate Indigenous content for all students in

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term 'Indigenous' in this paper to refer broadly to all the original peoples of Canada. Note that the term 'Aboriginal' also appears in the paper. This is the legal term which identifies First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples in the *Constitution Act*, 1982. We use the term Aboriginal, rather than Indigenous, when we are referring to particular documents that use this term. Apart from those instances, we use the term Indigenous consistently throughout the paper as it is the more contemporary and increasingly used term in Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Settler-Canadians include any peoples whose ancestors are not Indigenous to the land that is now Canada. This includes new migrants and peoples whose families have been in North America for generations.

our PE classes. This paper outlines the story of our experience engaging in this learning process and particularly our shift from a liberal multicultural perspective to more critical one.

The theory of critical multiculturalism will be elaborated on later in the paper but, in brief, it can be understood as recognizing: (a) the significance of ethnicity and culture without essentializing them; (b) unequal power relations; (c) that culture must be understood as part of the discourse of power and inequality; and (d) the need for constant critical reflexivity of ethnic and cultural practices (May, 2009). In discussing critical multiculturalism, it is important to note that we understand culture to be the multi-layered and fluid customs, history, values, and languages held by a person or group of peoples that allow them to communicate, interpret and attach shared meaning to behaviours and events, and ultimately make up their heritage and contribute to their identity (Brizinski, 1989; May & Sleeter, 2010; Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, 2002). While there are alternative views to critical multiculturalism, such as an anti-oppressive framework, critical multiculturalism's focus on linking "culture to power, and multiculturalism to antiracism" (May, 2009, p. 45) is aligned with our particular interest in the reconciliatory potential of utilizing culturally appropriate resources that support learning about Indigenous peoples and to support learning among Indigenous students.

In order to share our experience most practically and meaningfully we have turned to the tool of stories. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) describe "humans a[s] storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (p. 1), and thus stories can be used to make meaning of the world (Davis, 2004). As "narrative is both phenomenon and method" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2), in this paper we share the memory of our experience, our story, by narrativizing it. Specifically, we share a two-part story of our experiences: (a) learning to plan for the infusion of Indigenous content into PE by evaluating existing resources through critical multicultural dialogue in a PETE course; as well as (b) in a post-course professional community. The nature of our method can be understood through Norrick's (2000) explanation that

the storytelling process acts as a catalyst to activate memory rather than simply extracting information from it and arranging it for inspection. Telling and retelling can deepen our understanding of a story, and put us back in touch with details and relationships presumed forgotten. (p. 7)

Our story can be understood as guided by the following research question: *What lessons can be learned from our experiences planning for the infusion of Indigenous content into PE by evaluating existing resources through critical multicultural dialogue?* In narrating our story, we "move[d] back and forward several times in...[the] document as various threads [were] narrated" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 7). It is important to read our story with the understanding of restorying in mind, that is, a story, like life, is continually unfolding: "We story earlier experiences as we reflect on later experiences, so the stories and their meaning shift and change over time" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 9).

We recognize that to share our story responsibly (i.e., with relational accountability) "the reader must be able to understand the [storytellers'] beliefs in order to see what the [storytellers] see" (Wilson, 2008, p. 7). Thus, here we reveal "our identity to others; who we are, where we come from, our experiences that have shaped those things, and our intentions for the work... 'location' in Indigenous research, as in life, is a critical starting point" (Sinclair, 2003, p. 122). While we have already briefly shared some of our positionality (and also continue to do so throughout the paper since in many ways this paper is about coming to understand our location), we offer an explicit account here as well. As mentioned, we are a group of White settler-

Canadian teachers and teacher educators. Our work together took place on the traditional territory of the Attawandaran, Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Leni-Lunaape peoples. In terms of the shaping of our experiences, here we acknowledge some of the unconscious and unearned privileges and power inherent in our White settler-Canadian identities that we recognize to be influential to our understanding of this work and our story (Halas, 2011). In particular, we are aware that our status as pre-service teachers and teacher educators of PE is due in part to the historical fact that our identities were affirmed each day through the content and conduct of our school and university PE experiences. We understand that we were often affirmed in ways that our Indigenous peers and colleagues' identities were not, and which has contributed to reproducing the predominately White PETE landscape that continues to exist in Canada (Douglas & Halas, 2011). We also recognize the inequitable reality that we have the choice of whether or not to take up this and other reconciliatory efforts. We acknowledge the irony that the power to conduct this work often rests in non-Indigenous hands. In terms of our intentions for this work, we aimed to learn more about how to be allies by ending our complicit perpetuation of the inequitable status quo of PE and PETE classrooms that are not infused with Indigenous perspectives.

Story, as a form of communication and meaning making, is central to Indigenous ways of knowing (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008) in which it is understood that stories are teaching tools that allow the listener to gain knowledge from his or her position to the story (Wilson, 2008). Thus, we share our story with the hope that it might be used as a teaching tool for other educators. What *we* have learned through the telling of this story is that attending more closely to our experience of learning to plan for cultural infusion through critical multiculturalism allowed us to shift from a more liberal to critical multicultural lens, which we feel benefited our growth towards facilitating reconciliatory education. We believe that teaching and learning about critical multiculturalism and cultural infusion must focus more heavily on the *process* and *experience* involved so as to allow for such critical growth in non-Indigenous educators.

### **Part One: Lessons Learned in and for the Classroom**

In the summer of 2015, Jenna Lorusso (Author 1), the instructor of an intermediate/senior PETE course, was re-evaluating her upcoming course syllabus in light of the recent release of the TRC's final report. This was, unfortunately, Jenna's first formal reading on the topic of Indigenous education. As a starting place, she turned to the Ontario Ministry of Education's *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (2007), which is the current document that frames the policy context for Indigenous education in the province she works. The vision statement of the framework outlines two aims, the first being that:

First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students in Ontario will have the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to successfully complete their elementary and secondary education in order to pursue postsecondary education or training and/or to enter the workforce. They will have the traditional and contemporary knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to be socially contributive, politically active, and economically prosperous citizens of the world. (p. 7)

The second aim is that "All students in Ontario will have knowledge and appreciation of contemporary and traditional First Nation, Métis, and Inuit traditions, cultures, and perspectives" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 7).

As Jenna sought to learn more about how to achieve the first aim within the context of PE (i.e., how to support Indigenous students to be successful in their education) she turned to the literature and was able to find helpful, practical Canadian works to inform her. This literature included, for example, the work of Halas, McRae, and Petherick (2012), who present advice from Indigenous students to PE teachers regarding how to be a culturally relevant teacher, or ally. In brief, the Indigenous students recommended that PE teachers can support their learning by being: a friend, inclusive, encouraging, aware of the individual students who need support, aware of groups and how they form, involved, and funny. Similarly, Torrance and Seehagen (2012) present what Kanai First Nations students desire for a healthier school PE environment. The students expressed a desire for learning experiences that connect “youth with nature, the land, and traditional sites... include teachings from tribe Elders,” and “incorporate traditional language” (p. 29). As a final example, the work of Robinson, Barrett, and Robinson (2016) takes a broader view and relays what Mi’kmaw Elders and community leaders consider to be culturally relevant PE pedagogy for Mi’kmaw children and youth. They advise:

A physical education teacher as ally needs to exhibit caring (but with clear boundaries). Demonstrating cultural competence requires physical education teachers to use knowledge about the local culture to make purposeful connections with the students and the community. Physical education teachers need to use curriculum to connect traditional cultural activities with contemporary practices. Finally, physical education teachers must be mindful to engage with their students, their families, and communities in ways that celebrate their cultural identities and their community-based knowledge. (p. 16)

However, as Jenna sought to learn more about how to achieve the second aim within the context of PE (i.e., how to ensure all students learn and appreciate historical and contemporary Indigenous traditions, cultures, and perspectives), she felt less successful in her search for helpful, practical Canadian literature. While she was able to find various resources that described either Indigenous physical activities or physical activities that integrated Indigenous content, she felt unprepared to discern which resources were appropriate, followed protocol, and maintained cultural integrity (Alberta Education, 2005). She had never had any training in her teacher education program or through in-service professional development about how to evaluate the appropriateness of Indigenous resources as she had for other types of PE resources and content. She now realized that up until that point she had incorporated other cultures’ physical activities and content into her PE classes in a rather uncritical way. That is, she had evaluated the quality of cultural physical activities based on the, in this case, inadequate criteria of quality PE principles (e.g., does the activity allow for maximal participation, i.e., no elimination, little wait times, etc.), rather than culturally-relevant criteria (i.e., does the activity allow all students to experience academic success, as well as to develop and/or maintain cultural competence and a critical consciousness to challenge the status quo? Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Jenna recognized that she needed guidance on this. She reached out to a colleague in her Faculty, Kaitlyn Watson (Author 2), an instructor of the Indigenous education\_ course in the Bachelor of Education program, who had made Indigenous education the focus of her scholarship. Jenna admitted her emerging realizations about her lack of knowledge, and asked Kaitlyn if she’d be willing to help her figure out where to begin. Kaitlyn happily provided Jenna with some readings and initial guidance. Jenna later returned to Kaitlyn with more questions, and ultimately wondered if Kaitlyn would be interested in collaborating on a lesson for her PETE course. At this point the two engaged in an important discussion about expectations. For example, Kaitlyn wanted to be clear that her involvement would mean there was an expectation

that the lesson would be part of a sustained focus in the course and would be sufficiently critical, rather than simply a ‘one-off,’ ‘how-to’ workshop. Following this negotiation, Kaitlyn agreed to collaborate and together the two developed a lesson that focused on helping teacher candidates assess the appropriateness of resources outlining Indigenous physical activities or physical activities that integrate Indigenous content using an evaluation tool employed alongside a critical multicultural dialogue. The content of the lesson was largely framed by the questions Jenna had come to Kaitlyn with (i.e., how to evaluate the appropriateness of existing Indigenous teaching resources), the assumption being that it was likely that Jenna’s students would have the same inquiries. However, Kaitlyn also supplemented the lesson with important considerations that Jenna had not yet known enough to inquire about in the first place (e.g., land acknowledgements, terminology, sharing circles). During this co-planning process a number of important exchanges took place, particularly regarding complexity. For example, when Jenna expressed her desire to have her students participate in an Indigenous physical activity during the lesson, Kaitlyn advised her that it was important to ensure the activity was not a sacred one, for instance.

As a result of this planning process, the lesson ultimately went as follows. Class began with an acknowledgement of the traditional Indigenous territory upon which the university is located, and a discussion of why such an acknowledgement is important. Jenna and Kaitlyn then shared the importance of Indigenous education for all students and discussed the systemic barriers that have prevented Indigenous content from being included in education generally (and if included, appropriately so), and in PE more specifically. A discussion of terminology that is out-dated, offensive, and stereotypical, as well as language that is appropriate and accurate, followed. The lesson then moved to the evaluation of resources by employing a framework widely used in teacher education programs, that is, Alberta Education’s (2005) *Our Words, Our Ways: Teaching First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Learners* document (*Our Words, Our Ways*). This framework is not culturally specific to any particular group of Indigenous peoples and is intended to support Indigenous education broadly. *Our Words, Our Ways* recognizes that the “infusion of Aboriginal content encourages all students to become more aware of their own perspectives on particular topics or concepts, and to increase their knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal perspectives” (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 53). In particular, the lesson utilized the framework’s section on “Cultural Infusion and the Non-Aboriginal Teacher” (p. 54), its guide to “Selecting Aboriginal Content” (p. 54), and its checklist for “Evaluating Resources About Aboriginal Peoples” (p. 164).

The students were tasked with evaluating two existing PE resources together using the framework. The results of their evaluation identified one of the resources, a website offering a lesson plan of the Dene game Pole Push, as an appropriate one. The class then moved outdoors to participate in a modified version of the game (see Figure 1). To close the lesson, a sharing circle was held to reflect on the experience, as well as a discussion of the importance of sharing circles among Indigenous peoples and key guidelines for doing so responsibly.





*Figure 1.* Members of our class participating in a modified version of the Pole Push.

To conclude the first part of our story, we feel it is important to share how Jenna's thinking about culturally relevant PE began to shift under Kaitlyn's guidance from a liberal multicultural perspective towards a critical multicultural perspective. To explain, liberal multiculturalism aims to address "the problem' of ethnic and cultural diversity" (May & Sleeter, 2010, p. 4) through efforts of social cohesion and the simple recognition of ethnic, cultural, and/or linguistic differences. For example, this approach might be taken up in PE by simply engaging students in the Finger Pull game of the Dene peoples, without giving any attention to the historical or cultural significance of the game. In this way, teachers can "check the box" for including Indigenous content without giving critical attention to the context of the practice, or the inequitable power relations and structural racism surrounding Indigenous-settler relations. Following her experience with Kaitlyn, Jenna realized this is essentially the way in which she had previously incorporated culture into her PE classes. In stark contrast, critical multiculturalism consists of "understanding, engaging, and transforming the diverse histories, cultural narratives, representations, and institutions that produce racism and other forms of discrimination" (Giroux, 1997, p. 237). Such an approach does not examine culture as an "artifact of the past" (May & Sleeter, 2010, p. 10), but instead gives attention to the ways that culture and identity are "multilayered, fluid, complex, and encompassing multiple social categories" (p. 10). Incorporating the Finger Pull game of the Dene peoples from a critical multicultural perspective might include a discussion with students about why they may be less familiar with Indigenous physical activities as compared to Eurocentric physical activities, so as to highlight the ways in which Canadian society is dominated by Eurocentric discourse. Further,

a critical multicultural approach might involve sharing a story about the meaning, creation, or significance of the Finger Pull game from the Dene perspective. Finally, such an approach would seek to highlight the relevance of the Finger Pull game to contemporary life so as to demonstrate that Indigenous cultures are not ahistorical or trapped in the past.

With Kaitlyn's guidance, Jenna and Kaitlyn's lesson about integrating Indigenous content into PE could be considered aligned with a critical multicultural approach. For instance, Jenna and Kaitlyn explicitly shared with the teacher candidates the TRC's statement that Faculties of Education have been inadequately preparing teachers for the work involved in cultural infusion, with the intention that the students would understand this as a structural problem instead of one of disinterest among individual instructors. As a further example, the guiding framework, *Our Words, Our Ways*, helped Jenna and Kaitlyn to meet the critical goal of challenging dominant discourses by providing the class with specific prompts that give attention to the ways in which teaching resources can perpetuate racist stereotypes about Indigenous peoples, their cultures, traditions, and beliefs. For instance, a teaching resource that does not present important context about the particular Indigenous physical activity, such as the Finger Pull, could be misconstrued as violent and perpetuate common stereotypes, such as savagery, that have inappropriately been associated with Indigenous peoples.

After the lesson concluded, there was some informal conversation amongst Jenna, Kaitlyn, and some of the students in the class regarding interest in further learning about the infusion of Indigenous content into PE. There was discussion that additional reflection on and sharing of the experience would be of value not only on an individual level, but also perhaps for other teachers and teacher educators. In part two of our story we share the ways in which we, as a community of learners, came to better understand the complexities of integrating Indigenous content into PE by focusing on our experience engaging in the planning process.

### **Part Two: Lessons Learned Beyond the Classroom**

Part Two of our story begins a few weeks after the lesson described in part one. Jenna and Kaitlyn reached out to Jenna's now former students via email to follow up on their informally expressed interests in continuing their learning about integrating Indigenous content into PE and asked if they would like to more formally commit to such work. Encouragingly, half of the class (i.e., four students out of a class of eight) responded affirmatively.

In our first meeting as a group we debated the form our work should take so that it would be most meaningful to ourselves and others. Upon reflection we felt that the following options were not adequate for various reasons: (a) simply creating or sharing resources that described appropriate Indigenous physical activities or physical activities that integrated Indigenous content; or (b) sharing frameworks, such as the *Our Words, Our Ways* guide and checklist, to help frame teachers' assessment of these resources. One important reason was that, based on our shared lesson experience using the framework to evaluate existing resources, we knew that there were many challenging emotions associated with this work that were unexpected to us, and thus might also be to others.

We felt it would be most meaningful for ourselves and others to make obvious our, perhaps otherwise hidden, lived experience of learning to evaluate resources for cultural infusion. We have done this so that others may know what they might expect when doing this work and not become paralyzed by shame or other challenging emotions and ultimately disengage. As a result, we decided to once again evaluate the Pole Push resource as a group

using the *Our Words, Our Ways* checklist and guide, but this time to document our experience doing so (i.e., our questions, concerns, emotions, etc.). Over a nearly eight-month period we evaluated the Pole Push resource through a series of virtual and in-person meetings that involved some independent, paired, and whole group efforts. During this time, we gathered the following data: artefacts of our independent and group work evaluating the Pole Push, notes from our meetings (minutes were taken by Jenna), and written reflections of our individual experience throughout the process.

In order to share in this story the details of our experience during this process, our meeting artefacts and notes were analyzed in an independent and collaborative process of coding, thematizing, and refining (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings of our analysis are described in the following sections, while our reflections are synthesized and shared in the epilogue. The analysis process began by compiling our meeting artefacts and notes into a single document (organized by whether they pertained to the checklist or guide). Each group member then independently familiarized themselves with the data through reading and re-reading the data and then generated initial codes and searched for overarching themes. By coding we mean that we assigned labels to the most basic units of meaning in the data, such as ‘trepidation’ and ‘time,’ for example, and by thematizing we mean that we grouped our codes into categories that had a shared meaning and reflected a broader understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), such as ‘trepidation about planning independently’ or ‘feeling overwhelmed by the time and research involved in planning.’ The group then came together in a series of meetings to share the results of their independent coding and thematizing and to discuss and negotiate the review of the themes, that is to determine “whether the themes work in relation to the coded extracts...and the entire data set, generating a ‘thematic map’” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). In these meetings the group also worked on defining and naming the themes in efforts to capture their essence (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Ultimately, we came up with two themes each with subthemes. The first theme pertained to our experience engaging with the checklist, entitled “planning concerns,” with subthemes being “trepidation about planning independently,” “feeling overwhelmed by the time and research involved,” and “feelings uncomfortable about lacking the knowledge required to plan.” The second theme pertained to our experience engaging with the guide, entitled “pedagogical questions,” with subthemes being “classroom management concerns about addressing stereotypes,” and “balancing complexity for cultural integrity with realities of one’s classroom.” At this point in the analysis process we considered the themes of our experience in relation to the theory of critical multiculturalism, and more specifically to an application of the theory in PE by Fitzpatrick (2010). To deepen our understanding and refine our articulation of our themes, we connected each theme to the key practices Fitzpatrick identifies, including: building the environment, deconstructing power, playfulness, studying critical topics, and embodied criticality. We felt that each of the key themes spoke to one of our planning concerns or pedagogical questions in a way that helped us to navigate through them. Finally, Jenna and Kaitlyn took the lead in writing up our thematic realizations, and the other group members then reviewed and further refined.

Before we share the themes of our experience, we briefly describe the Pole Push resource and the *Our Words, Our Ways* checklist and guide to provide necessary context. However, it is important to note that while the resource and framework were the vehicles used in our learning process, their details are not the key to our story. Rather it is our experience of critical multicultural engagement with these documents that is at the heart of our story.

### **The Pole Push**

The Pole Push resource we reviewed is from a website<sup>3</sup> entitled “Dene Games” by Daren Wicks, a PE teacher in the Northwest Territories. The description of the Pole Push activity begins with a story of the game’s origins. In brief, Dene peoples would travel hundreds of miles by paddling and portaging their birch bark canoes to hunt and visit family. In order to establish and maintain strength and endurance for these trips, some Dene would practice the Pole Push, which is similar to tug-of-war but participants hold a pole and try to push each other out of a circle. Following this story Mr. Wicks describes how to participate in the Pole Push. He provides detailed instructions and photographs of how to prepare the pole to be used in the game from a spruce or pine tree (i.e., removing the bark, planing the wood smooth, and marking the center of the pole), and how to prepare the playing area (i.e., marking the boundaries and center of an approximately 30-foot circle on a flat snow surface). The game is played with four players per side, and is won by winning the best two out of three matches, for which there is no time limit. Mr. Wick has players engage in “rock, paper, scissors” and the winning team selects the end of the pole they would prefer, while the other team selects the side of the circle they would prefer, with the teams switching ends and sides after each match. The game begins after a “3-2-1-Push!” lead-in, and the basic rules include that the pole cannot be above the shoulder or below the waist, and that players cannot move laterally.

### **“Evaluating Resources About Aboriginal Peoples” Checklist**

The checklist asks seven questions of a resource that includes Indigenous content in order to evaluate its appropriateness: (a) whether it’s been validated by Indigenous groups, Elders, authors, or scholars, and if it has been approved for use in other settings; (b) its authenticity, that is the accurate portrayal or interpretation of Indigenous worldviews, values and beliefs, traditions and customs, cultural and societal roles, and ways of life in the past and present; (c) its historical accuracy, requiring consideration of events, processes, Indigenous contributions, contact with other cultures, connections to life today, and dates and times; (d) its balance and objectivity, with questions about stereotypes, biases, and inclusion of multiple points of view; (e) the accuracy and respectful use of language and terminology; (f) the accuracy and respectful inclusion of graphics; and (g) its source, which concerns the qualifications of the author(s) or contributor(s). Any “no” responses require the resource to be further considered, in which case dialogue with a colleague or member of the relevant Indigenous community might be necessary to decide if the resource may be used.

### **“Selecting Aboriginal Content” Guide**

The *Our Words, Our Ways* resource details guiding principles for a more holistic evaluation of resources incorporating Indigenous content. The principle of *voice* asks whether the resource uses a respectful tone, includes truthful information, respects the diversity of Indigenous peoples and their histories, and is free of racist or insulting language. *Source* relates to the authorship of resources and seeks to discover if materials originate from, or have been validated by, reputable Indigenous sources. *Intent* refers to the portrayal of balanced, factual information based on deep knowledge of the realities of contemporary and traditional ways of life. Lastly, *complexity* acknowledges that social, spiritual, and cultural contexts contribute to the significance of a resource or activity and raises questions about the engagement of an activity outside of its intended use so as to preserve significance and cultural integrity.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.denegames.ca/dene-games/pole-push.html>

## **Our Experience: Navigating Planning Concerns and Pedagogical Questions through Critical Multiculturalism**

**Trepidation about planning independently.** The benefits of working through the checklist collaboratively rather than independently was frequently mentioned by the group, as well as was simply obvious in the results of our work and in our body language during meetings. For example, because we had each completed the checklist independently and then come together in our meeting to compare results, we were struck by the number of instances in which we had each left question marks instead of circling a response, as well as how disparately we had answered in some cases. As we worked through the checklist together question by question to resolve these differences, we often remarked how beneficial it was for us to be pooling our resources, citing that as individuals we each only felt confident about a few particular areas of the checklist, but together felt much more secure. As Jocelyn Brewer (Author 3) explained in her reflection, she found working on the checklist alone to be “very uncomfortable, as I found myself critically judging myself about my uncertainty in some areas of the checklist.” However, she describes that when we worked as a team to review the checklist “it allowed me to see we were all having similar struggles. This alleviated some of my hesitation and self-judgement and allowed me to further immerse myself in the checklist.”

As we got deeper into the checklist we began to notice that each time a particularly challenging item arose many of the heads in the room snapped over to look at Kaitlyn for guidance. For example, in addressing section six’s questions about accurate and respectful graphics, there was a fair deal of discussion about many members’ uncertainty towards knowing what is “traditional.” Fortunately, Kaitlyn was able to explain that the author had reflected tradition in a contemporary way and did not misuse cultural items. Following this there was lengthy conversation that many in the group felt we were relying heavily on Kaitlyn to guide us through components of the checklist. Some of us echoed the concern Megan Pickett (Author 6) expressed during a meeting, that she “wouldn’t have been able to complete the checklist without the guidance from Kaitlyn,” and if we had, we wondered whether the results would have been considerably different (i.e., less accurate).

Our concern about working independently exemplifies the importance of Fitzpatrick’s (2010) key practice of building the environment in a critical multicultural approach to PE. Fitzpatrick describes that a strong network of relationships between individuals must be established in the learning environment as a platform upon which deep cultural infusion can then occur. In our view, we were able to reach deeper levels of learning in our later extracurricular attempt at cultural infusion because we had made the effort to intentionally create a safe space in which it was explicit that we could trust and learn from one another as equals with a shared goal of improving our infusion of Indigenous culture into PE. Upon reflection it is clear to us that it would be advantageous for educators to find a community to work with when evaluating resources for cultural infusion and to make a purposeful investment in building relationships within that community as an important first priority. For example, this might take the form of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) at one’s school or university that meets regularly and supports each other’s efforts towards cultural infusion.

**Feeling overwhelmed by the time and research involved in planning.** Throughout our experience using the checklist to evaluate the Pole Push resource, the group voiced concern about the time and research required to adequately address the checklist items. For example,

addressing section one's questions of validation was not possible by reviewing the Pole Push resource itself. Instead, we needed to go beyond the Pole Push webpages to other portions of Mr. Wick's Dene Games website where we eventually found an acknowledgement that the work was informed by Elders on one webpage, and on another webpage an invitation from the author to participate in the Dene Games activities and share experiences with him electronically. In other cases, the time and research commitment were more considerable and required us to go beyond the resource itself to external sources. For instance, to gather the information needed to answer section three's questions of historical accuracy we had to search various webpages and books (e.g., when exactly was the Pole Push a part of Dene lifestyle rather than simply part of the Dene games? Was it 300 years ago? 50 years ago? Is it still so?). Maddison Hubley's (Author 4) reflection captured her evolution of feelings with regards to the time and research involved. She described,

At first glance the checklist seemed streamlined and helpful... However, I quickly felt overwhelmed by the significant amount of time it took to deconstruct each item... [Yet] at the end of working through the checklist I was glad we used it because, even though I still felt overwhelmed, it helped me to feel more assured the resource we were evaluating was appropriate. I realized the importance of this process but also the time, research, and confusion involved.

Kaitlyn's involvement in this whole process reaffirmed her previous experience that "too few teachers consider the additional layer of effort (i.e., time and research) it takes to do this type of work in ways that respect Indigenous peoples' ways of knowing."

Our concern about the time and research involved in adequately planning for cultural infusion highlights the reality of Fitzpatrick's (2010) key practice of deconstructing power in a critical multicultural approach to PE. Fitzpatrick explains that unpacking issues of power can be "messy and, at times, disrupt normative notions" (p. 182) of teaching and learning. Because the questions asked in the checklist are intended to deconstruct power and racial inequities embedded in educational documents, answering them may require a disruption in an educator's typical practice. In our case this was exemplified by the extra time and research involved, which could be considered "messy" in comparison to the time and research it takes to plan for other PE content.

As we reflect on this realization of our experience, we wish to ensure that other educators are prepared for the time and research evaluating these resources will take, and to embrace the importance of this investment. We believe it is unlikely that one can complete the checklist adequately in a single sitting, as they will likely have to gather information from various sources to do so and may need to reach out to an Indigenous person or community. We concluded that, moving forward, we should allocate nearly double the amount of time normally budgeted for the evaluation of other non-cultural PE resources. We also concluded that we need to spend time building strong authentic relationships with Indigenous peoples. Building relationships is particularly important to deconstructing power as it may lead to opportunities where Indigenous peoples could share their insights with our classes (and be compensated appropriately with an honoraria), shifting the power of teaching about Indigenous content back into the hands of Indigenous peoples, when they so choose. Ultimately, these actions are critical, albeit time-intensive, to ensure we fulfill the important responsibility of deconstructing power in educational resources as part of our action towards reconciliation.

**Feeling uncomfortable about lacking the knowledge required to plan.** There were some moments of our experience using the checklist in which we were confronted with the fact

that we lacked the relevant knowledge needed to complete the checklist accurately and, as a result of this, felt uncomfortable in various ways. For example, addressing questions of cultural authenticity from Section Two was challenging as it caused us to deeply recognize our status as cultural outsiders who lack the relevant knowledge to make a distinction regarding authenticity. It also made us recognize that this ‘outsiderness’ is something that Indigenous students may feel regularly, or even constantly, in PE.

Even after taking considerable time to seek out additional sources beyond the resource to educate ourselves about the aspects of cultural authenticity relevant in this case, many of us still felt uncomfortable and as though we did not have the “right” to make this interpretation, to use Megan’s words. In other cases, the experience was more dramatic. For example, addressing section five’s questions about respectful and accurate use of language and terminology caused us to actively call up the stereotypes we were aware of. In doing this, some of us ended up correcting others in the group about terms they had thought were accurate but in fact were inaccurate and disrespectful. Not only was it difficult and uncomfortable to call up these negative terms and stereotypes, but some of us had rather startling realizations about what we thought we knew. In Jenna’s reflection she pointed out that the importance of these realizations did not make them any less “awkward.” She reflected on the “challenge of comforting those who felt badly about misspeaking without seemingly legitimating their error. However, it was good practice for how to handle this in the classroom in the future.” This step seemed to change the tone of the rest of the evaluation in an important way, as we became warier and more critical of our assumptions moving forward. Jocelyn explained in her reflection that it was at this point in the process she “noticed that [she] began taking the time to check her biases and assumptions.” In this way the checklist seemed to function as a guard against any unconscious tendencies for cultural appropriation.

The feelings of discomfort we experienced as we recognized that we lacked the relevant knowledge for cultural infusion underscores the necessity of Fitzpatrick’s (2010) key practice of playfulness in a critical multicultural approach to PE. Lugones (1994) defines playfulness as “an openness to being a fool...not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight” (p. 636). Fitzpatrick suggests “the foundation of relationships creates greater potential for playfulness...people exhibit playfulness when they are fully part of the society and community” (p. 182). In our view, the fact that we were able to create a space where we felt safe to point out one another’s faulty assumptions and to ask questions about the terms and stereotypes we were unsure of, exemplifies a level of playfulness that allowed us to be more fully engaged in the process of cultural infusion while maintaining respect for the process and each other. As we reflect on this part of our experience, we suggest that this willingness to step out of one’s comfort zone is a necessity to carrying out cultural infusion adequately and that educators are best prepared to do this work when they enter with the mindset of being comfortable with the uncomfortable. This sentiment is highlighted in Reid Lenders’s (Author 5) reflection that

as educators, especially newly trained teachers entering full-time roles, we often feel like we are required to have all the answers...but going through this process made me realize that being unsure of oneself while planning for culturally relevant pedagogy is part of learning...and we shouldn’t shy away from these feelings and try to ‘save face.’

**Classroom management concerns about addressing stereotypes.** During our holistic evaluation of the Pole Push using the guide, the group raised concerns about the ways in which students might react to the inclusion of Indigenous activities in the classroom. We noted that,

depending on the age or maturity level of students, some could act cruelly and/or repeat stereotypes. In our case, we worried that some students might suggest the use of poles as being “primitive” and wondered how we might handle that as teachers. In Kaitlyn’s reflection she shared that as a student, classroom teacher, and teacher educator, she had witnessed such stereotyping and also described an added layer of her “concern about what affect the voicing of such stereotypes could be for Indigenous students who hear them.”

Our concern about the potentially inappropriate reactions students may have to this material reinforces the value of Fitzpatrick’s (2010) key practice of using critical inquiry to study culture through a critical multicultural approach to PE. Wright (2004) explains the need to not simply engage students in “critical thinking” (p. 7) about culture, which can be understood as simply “logical reasoning” (p. 7), but rather to engage them in “critical inquiry...[by] assisting students to examine and challenge the status quo, the dominant constructions of reality, and the power relations that produce inequality” (p. 7). Understanding the key difference between these two critical approaches helped us to manage our concerns as we could now picture what such an approach might look like. For example, we envision that a critical inquiry approach to the Pole Push might involve the instructor engaging students in a discussion about how stereotypes of “primitiveness” came to be associated with Indigenous peoples, the inaccuracy of this stereotype, and the ways in which this stereotype, and others like them, continue to harm Indigenous peoples following a legacy of marginalization and the devaluing of their cultures and beliefs. Reid reflected that through this process he came to realize that when educators avoid the depth of a critical inquiry approach we “rob students of the opportunity to engage in discussions that might help them to better appreciate their particular positionality and also to identify their learned biases.”

#### **Balancing complexity for cultural integrity with the realities of one’s classroom.**

During our evaluation of the complexity of the Pole Push resource, questions were raised regarding the liberty we can take as non-Indigenous educators attempting to integrate Indigenous content. During one meeting Megan wondered aloud, “At what point in my modification do I strip away the relevance of the content and instead start to perpetuate the stereotypes I was trying to avoid?” In the case of the Pole Push, we felt as though the resource itself achieves complexity (e.g., it details cutting down and planing a tree that will become the pole used in the lesson), but recognized that some of these complex details are not realistic for teachers in all settings. When Jenna and Kaitlyn had the pre-service teachers participate in the Pole Push in class, they briefly referenced the complexity of the task by noting that in other settings students cut down and prepare tree poles but that we did not have the time, resources, or permission to do so, and not much further detail on this complexity was provided. In our later extracurricular group evaluation of the resource, we wondered if the infusion of culture could have been deeper if Jenna and Kaitlyn had included the preparation of the pole into the lesson in some way, even if they could not actually carry out the complex nature of this step as originally intended.

Our concern about balancing complexity with the reality of our learning environment becomes more manageable when considered alongside Fitzpatrick’s (2010) key practice of embodied criticality. Fitzpatrick describes embodied criticality as going beyond simply engaging students in the critical inquiry of culture. She suggests that an embodied approach to critical multiculturalism in PE requires the educator to disrupt dominant norms by literally exemplifying a different kind of physical educator through their body (e.g., through dress, disposition, language, movement, etc.). We suggest that in the case of the Pole Push, a physical educator may disrupt the dominant norm of ignoring or simplifying Indigenous content by highlighting the



complexity in an alternative way. For example, perhaps an educator could embody criticality through movement by engaging themselves and their students in a movement tableau of the pole preparation process that includes a recognition of the tension between Canadian laws that regulate the removal of trees and Indigenous traditions of living off the land. As we worked together to create an alternative, critically embodied instructional approach to achieving the complexity of the Pole Push, Jenna noted “coming up with such solutions is challenging and can require creativity, and therefore may look far different to how many physical educators embody their practice. Ultimately, embodying criticality can take some confidence to pull off.” Yet, as Kaitlyn described, this hard work “is at the heart of a critical multicultural approach.”

## Epilogue

In the closing of our story we share a synthesis of our individual written reflections regarding our beliefs, experiences, and feelings before, during, and after our class and post-course learning together.

### **Before our Work Together**

From our experience teaching and learning in K-12 and postsecondary PE, we’ve perceived a “noticeable lack of Indigenous content being infused into classrooms,” to use Jocelyn’s words. Upon reflection, we now recognize and admit that many of us shied away from infusing Indigenous content into our classrooms because we were afraid of making mistakes. For instance, Madison shared feeling “scared as a new teacher” by the “horror stories” told in her teacher education courses and professional development experiences “about teachers who had attempted to use Indigenous content but it didn’t go smoothly and faced repercussions.” Similarly, Jenna shared that she now realized that she had previously kept all her attempts at cultural infusion at a very surface, or liberal multicultural, level because she had been “scared” to do so incorrectly. She explains, “I think subconsciously I knew there was something not right about this, but I either didn’t want to, or didn’t know how to, find out exactly how/why it was not right.”

Upon reflection we also recognize our considerable lack of knowledge, comfort, and confidence going into this experience. For instance, Megan described her “very limited education on Indigenous cultures, practices, and knowledge,” and that the little information she did have up until this point had been “gathered from cartoon TV shows and novels.” This left her feeling “overwhelmed” and “completely lost” at how to approach cultural infusion. Similarly, for Madison, approaching cultural infusion in PE felt “daunting” and she was “nervous” to do so. Jocelyn, on the other hand, felt she had some knowledge of Indigenous cultures and recognized the “importance” of infusing this into PE for all students, but felt “extremely unprepared” as to how to actually do so, particularly about “where to begin.”

### **During our Work Together**

It is our reflection that our work together resulted in truly “unforeseen possibilities for learning,” as Kaitlyn put it, particularly in the form of “unlearning,” as Jenna described. For example, Reid reflected that he “could have never anticipated...the extent to which this process would reveal the depth of our own misunderstandings.” In particular, he reflected on the part of the original lesson in which we analyzed another existing resource by a reputable PE organization he’d trusted for so many resources before. He realized that although “on the surface it appeared to be an appropriate resource” it was in fact not; thus, he had to unlearn his assumption that he could trust any Indigenous education resource, even if it was from a popular

PE source. Jenna reflected on the process of unlearning that occurred in her shift from a liberal to critical multicultural lens as

analogous to the shift I went through as a secondary to undergraduate PE student. This is when I realized that PE is so much more than simply participating in sports - it is about education, about the whole person, about all the movement domains, about living skills, and much more. In the same way that my undergraduate PE program allowed me to unlearn all of the things that I'd previously experienced in PE, this experience facilitated a similar unlearning of a nearly equal magnitude. That is, I had to unlearn my previous view that cultural infusion is just about inserting cultural content and that in fact it is much more.

### **After our Work Together**

In contrast to the lack of knowledge, experience, and comfort the majority of us felt entering the process, and the challenging unlearning that occurred by shifting towards a critical multicultural lens, our reflections on our feelings after our work together reveal improved understanding, preparedness, and confidence. For instance, Megan shared she felt “more confident in looking for cultural texts to incorporate into the classroom and ensuring that they are both relevant and preserve the integrity of Indigenous cultures.” She now found cultural infusion to be “more manageable.” Similarly, Jocelyn has found herself “becoming more comfortable integrating Indigenous content” into her classroom, and more “prepared” to align her work with the TRC’s Calls to Action. Reid felt the process has helped him to “ask more critical questions when utilizing content outside of [his] own culture,” while Madison now felt more “reassured that the content [she] integrates into [her] classroom is authentic.” It is this important shift from cultural infusion feeling daunting for educators, to it feeling achievable, that we feel is key to this work actually being taken up in a significant way. It is our view that if educators do not feel it is achievable some will continue to ignore the TRC’s Calls to Action for learning and teaching about Indigenous peoples’ histories and perspectives.

In closing, we hope that we have avoided portraying our story as a “Hollywood plot...where everything works out well in the end” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10). While we have grown from the experiences described in this story and have certainly improved our capacity to infuse Indigenous content and reconciliatory education into our instructional practice, it is just that, improvement. We wish to emphasize that this is not ‘the end’ of our necessary development in this regard, nor does such an end exist. Despite the fact that written documents appear to “stand still, the narrative appears finished... we are, as researchers and teachers, still telling in our practices our ongoing life stories as they are lived, told, relived, and retold” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 9). Furthermore, we also warn against the “illusion of causality... in which a sequence of events looked at backward has the appearance of causal necessity and, looked at forward, has the sense of a teleological, intentional pull of the future” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 7). Rather, we suggest it is important to understand our story “by a sense of the whole...[not] according to a model of cause and effect but according to...change from ‘beginning’ to ‘end’” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 7). That is, we are not suggesting causal links between the adoption of a critical multicultural approach, a focus on the process of preparing for cultural infusion, and the outcome of reconciliatory education. Rather, we suggest that these were key to *our* growth at this point in our reconciliatory efforts and may be important to emphasize in teaching and learning about cultural infusion to allow for others’ critical growth.

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