

# THE ETHICAL GROUND OF PEDAGOGY

Following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 2015 *Calls to Action*, the First Nations Education Steering Committee's Indian Residential Schools and Reconciliation Teacher Resource Guide (Grade 5) encourages educators to account for the ways in which "curriculum and pedagogy will support positive change in relationship to Indigenous histories and cultures of redress."<sup>1</sup> Recommended are "picture books" to be juxtaposed with primary source documents to teach "the painful history of residential schooling in Canada."<sup>2</sup> The final lesson poses the question: "What will reconciliation look like when it is achieved?"<sup>3</sup>

Lisa Farley and Tasha Henry teach stories as "portals to memory that reconnect teachers to the obligation to learn as the ethical ground of pedagogy," learning that requires "becoming participants of history that charge us to work against colonial legacies continuing to define learning as something to measure in the student."<sup>4</sup> They "reframe teaching as an act of learning from what is difficult to face about our implication in the colonial history of the profession," teaching as "one response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's *Calls to Action*."<sup>5</sup> Farley and Henry hear "the call to develop and implement 'curriculum and learning resources'—from Kindergarten to teacher education classrooms—that address (quoting the *Calls to Action*) "Aboriginal peoples in Canadian history, and the history and legacy of the residential schools."<sup>6</sup>

To illustrate such "storied pedagogical action," Farley and Hendry provide "an account of our learning from Nicola Campbell and Kim LaFave's 2005 picture book *Sbi-sbi-etko* and its 2008 companion, *Shinchi's Canoe*, books that enable Farley and Henry to suggest "the ways that text and image open spaces of resignification, impacting our own unfolding stories as teachers of history and social studies."<sup>7</sup> They believe that "it is exactly what cannot and should not yield to the desire to find absolution where teachers may enact the ethical injunction of the stories we use to teach."<sup>8</sup> They hope to "highlight the power of stories to reconnect us to the work of learning as central to the pedagogical imperative to act."<sup>9</sup>

Farley and Henry appreciate that "teaching stories of residential schooling to children that include stories of violence against children may seem risky, but denying or stamping out these stories by not risking the telling is unfathomable."<sup>10</sup> They feel sure that such stories "can be reparative when they invite us to confront what is difficult to know about the world and, in turn, ask us to wonder about the future."<sup>11</sup> Farley and Henry encourage teachers "to actively work against fears that can accompany reading Indigenous stories testifying to trauma," as (quoting Susan D. Dion) "we cannot use our fears of saying the wrong thing as a defense against doing the work."<sup>12</sup>

Fears, Farley and Henry explain, "reconnect the teacher to the vulnerability of learning as the work of pedagogy and not its opposite."<sup>13</sup> They remind that students

can “read stories critically for how they have been used in the service of racism, social hatred, and genocide by over-determining which lives matter and which lives do not.”<sup>14</sup> Such a curriculum “continually calls us into account,” requiring one to give “an account of oneself as affected by the very knowledge one encounters in the effort to affect others.”<sup>15</sup> Citing Mishra Tarc, they suggest that curriculum becomes “reparative when it activates a level of engagement that (quoting Tarc) “moves the ego” in ways that “summon us to make meaning from senselessly shattered sociality and relations,” the “inner work of responding to events ... beyond what can be anticipated in learning outcomes.”<sup>16</sup> This requires “a willingness to reside in what must remain difficult and tender work.”<sup>17</sup>

Farley and Henry “frame reconciliation as a reparative action that is without the certainty of knowing when it will end,” encouraging their fellow educators to ask: “What can it mean, pedagogically, to be called to act, without repeating the pervasive colonial tropes that conflate teaching with the aim to manage and measure the learning of others?”<sup>18</sup> They answer: “From this perspective, the work of teaching means shaping curriculum to support transformation—in the self and others—without also overdetermining the meaning of what is to be learned,” a “paradox, we suggest, [that] challenges teachers to dwell with the unexpected qualities of being called to action, which call us outside of what we already claim to know.”<sup>19</sup> Such “surprising openness—and openness to surprise— [i]s central to the pedagogical action of reconciliation, where action is a matter of ‘giving an account of oneself’ as implicated in the social context in which each of us lives, learns, and teaches.”<sup>20</sup> Citing Judith Butler, Farley and Henry assert that “there is no teacher who can stand apart from the violent history of the residential school and no teacher who is not implicated in the set of conditioning norms that continue to permit the glaring stagnation of white settler colonialism.”<sup>21</sup> What is “difficult knowledge is that settler teachers are active participants in their entrenched, and inherited colonial history by virtue of their position in the profession.”<sup>22</sup>

“The pedagogical action of giving an account of the self,” Farley and Henry continue, “is a story of relationships that position each one of us unevenly, sometimes defensively and sometimes openly, with others in the world.”<sup>23</sup> They theorize the process of “giving an account of oneself in relation to two stories of residential school,” stories told in “picture books,” recalling “orality, which is how Indigenous storytelling is predominantly understood.”<sup>24</sup> They consider the “divides” between “oral cultures” from those working with “written texts ... as yet another binary that stories oblige us to rethink.”<sup>25</sup>

The curriculum Henry develops and teaches for grades 5–8 in Victoria, British Columbia is grounded in “fictional picture books,” and these, Farley adds, “support primary source documents and critical historical texts in the education of beginning teachers in the Faculty of Education at York University.”<sup>26</sup> For both the British Columbia elementary school teacher and the Ontario university professor, “residential

school testimony and literature are paramount to our work.”<sup>27</sup> They seem certain that “picture books representing residential school narratives” can “disrupt worn-out stories and activate complex responses that contribute to teachings for both children and adult readers.”<sup>28</sup>

Farley and Henry remind that “picture books” themselves – their publication and circulation – reside within colonial histories, but that fact (as well as the distinction between written and oral texts) does “not change their function”: “Written stories, like oral stories, lead to transformation and themselves transform what and how we know.”<sup>29</sup> “While books are mediated through colonizing histories,” Farley and Henry allow, “the stories inscribed onto their pages can also unsettle these legacies, as the “written does not replace the oral,” it instead “opens a dialogue.”<sup>30</sup>

That dialogue can be stifled by presumptions of the child reader’s innocence. When it is the teacher who so presumes, she or he can be understood to be projecting “the teacher’s unacknowledged desire to preserve the fantasied innocence of their own childhood and reconstruct it through the act of teaching.”<sup>31</sup> They note: “In response to the call to take action in a way that holds space for silenced histories, teachers may be obstructed by a perceived threat that certain content is too treacherous to enter.”<sup>32</sup> The “presumption of innocence is a privileged notion of childhood,” a “privilege” that is “racialized,” one denied to those “children dragged off to residential schools” their “innocence was intentionally taken.”<sup>33</sup> “If Indigenous children were never granted the privileged label of innocence,” Farley and Henry continue, “it is also the case that Indigenous adults, including Elders, were relegated to the other side of this fantasy, as if trapped in a perpetual state of deficiency.”<sup>34</sup>

“At stake in our reading” of picture books, Farley and Henry summarize, “is a construction of teaching that is itself never innocent and rather implicated in the ongoing colonization of history by virtue of the stories we choose to (not) tell and *how* we tell them.”<sup>35</sup> They suggest that “children’s picture books may be read as opening a literary ‘contact zone’ in which to represent the ways in which dominant and Indigenous cultures meet and clash on unequal terrains of power,” a “literary contact zone” wherein “important knowledge about the tensions that emerge in the teacher’s effort to tell and retell stories of colonial violence.”<sup>36</sup>

The book *Shi-shi-etko* depicts “life before residential schools,” a “pre-colonial narrative of a culture intact—a childhood flourishing in its own right.”<sup>37</sup> The sequel, *Shin-chi’s Canoe*, “documents the insidious effects of colonization as it is passed on between *Shi-shi-etko* and her younger brother, who must now also attend.”<sup>38</sup> These stories “invite readers into a world of contrast, or splitting, that tears curriculum from the communities it is supposed to serve, families from children, and children from the land.”<sup>39</sup>

“If children’s literature, as both genre and institution, has sought to preserve and profit from narratives that protect a white settler notion of childhood,” Farley and Henry continue, “then both *Shi-shi-etko* and *Shin-chi’s Canoe* testify to a different

possibility,” one without “promise of a moral ending through enlightenment,” only “confrontation with the most unsettling of pasts: the eradication of a child’s right to childhood and the ensuing question, what must be done now?”<sup>40</sup> Read “in juxtaposition,” these stories “oppose the anaphora of multicultural children’s literature,” as these stories “unsettle, and they incite the teacher to teach against those traditions”<sup>41</sup> in which childhood itself has been immersed.

While “these stories expose the implication of education in the state-sanctioned attempt to extinguish Indigenous and First Peoples,” Farley and Henry note, they also – here they invoke the “metaphor of Shi-shi-etko’s braid” to “charge teachers to work against the stereotype of Indigenous Peoples as vanished, by representing the failure of colonialism’s violent project, evidenced in existing and emerging communities of survival.”<sup>42</sup>

*Shi-shi-etko* and *Shin-chi* challenge the “innocence” so often associated (they suggest) with “both history and childhood,” laying “bare the harmful legacy of education.”<sup>43</sup> “Just as colonial myths of hard work, fairness, and innocence reproduce a worn-out story of education,” Farley and Henry continue, “so too can the notion of inclusion, unless teachers can continue to contemplate its meaning and implications through critical and careful thought.”<sup>44</sup> They explain:

[T]he teacher’s positioning cannot be one of expertise that appropriates the telling of another’s story with the view to fill a gap in knowledge, whether her students’ or her own. Thinking with the image of paddling the canoe, pedagogical action is more about reaching in deep to churn up disavowed knowledge inside the self and *pulling back* the defences that guard against dilemmas, uncertainty, and the unexpected: all dynamics that un-do the teacher’s position of mastery.<sup>45</sup>

It would seem that the teacher’s positioning – if not “mastery” certainly “vigilance” – is prerequisite to undertaking the delicate inner work Farley and Henry describe.

“Amidst ongoing legacies of colonialism,” the two educators continue, “pedagogical action is dependent on the teacher’s ongoing vigilance to probe points of ignorance to learn from experiences that elude education’s firm grasp.”<sup>46</sup> Instead of acknowledging the “expertise” this knowledge and discernment demand, Farley and Henry instead define (anti-colonial) “pedagogical action” as “refer[ring] to a quality of mind that overturns the smooth surface of the teacher’s fantasy of self-mastery and instructional aptitude.”<sup>47</sup> They conclude: “If teaching is to decolonize its own trappings and become more than another old song of domination over knowledge, then teachers will need to let go of their own fantasied expertise as a necessary quality of learning and reparation.”<sup>48</sup>

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## COMMENTARY

Farley and Henry characterize children’s literature as a means of pedagogical action. They address the presumption that children’s literature should protect the “innocence” of children, noting that “innocence” is a privileged state, one denied Indigenous children at residential schools. Despite the risk (inevitability) of discomfort, there is, the two educators argue, a responsibility for children to understand such histories for the purposes of disrupting colonial violence. Farley and Henry give two examples of children’s literature to illustrate their point.

## REFERENCE

Farley, Lisa and Henry, Tasha. 2020. The Teacher’s Call to Act Beyond Childhood Innocence: Picturing Reparation in *Shi-shi-etsko* and *Shin-chi’s Canoe*. In *Oral History, Education and Justice: Possibilities and Limitations for Redress and Reconciliation*, edited by Kristina R. Llewellyn and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, (151-167). New York: Routledge.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 151.
  - <sup>2</sup> Farley and Henry, 2020, 151.
  - <sup>3</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 151.
  - <sup>4</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 151.
  - <sup>5</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 151.
  - <sup>6</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 151-152.
  - <sup>7</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 152.
  - <sup>8</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 152.
  - <sup>9</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 152.
  - <sup>10</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 152.
  - <sup>11</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 152.
  - <sup>12</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 153.
  - <sup>13</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 153.
  - <sup>14</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 153.
  - <sup>15</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 153.
  - <sup>16</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 153-154.
  - <sup>17</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 154.
  - <sup>18</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 154.

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- <sup>19</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 154.
- <sup>20</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 154.
- <sup>21</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 154.
- <sup>22</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 154.
- <sup>23</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 155.
- <sup>24</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 155.
- <sup>25</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 155.
- <sup>26</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 155.
- <sup>27</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 155.
- <sup>28</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 155.
- <sup>29</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 156. Not necessarily, one is obligated to remind.
- <sup>30</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 156.
- <sup>31</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 157.
- <sup>32</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 157.
- <sup>33</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 157.
- <sup>34</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 157.
- <sup>35</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 158.
- <sup>36</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 158.
- <sup>37</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 161. Precolonial childhood was hardly idyllic, as the pre-contact period was marred by intra-Indigenous warfare: <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/military-history/history-heritage/popular-books/aboriginal-people-canadian-military/warfare-pre-columbian-north-america.html> Accessed 2020-07-26.
- <sup>38</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 161.
- <sup>39</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 161.
- <sup>40</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 162-163.
- <sup>41</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 162-163.
- <sup>42</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 162-163.
- <sup>43</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 163.
- <sup>44</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 163.
- <sup>45</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 164.
- <sup>46</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 164-165.
- <sup>47</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 164-165.
- <sup>48</sup> Farley and Henry 2020, 164-165. “Self-mastery” implies a certain smugness we cannot assume all, even most, teachers exhibit, and – again – “probing ignorance” as Farley and Henry assert (almost as central to decolonization), cannot occur without a certain expertise and, yes, self-mastery, especially for those of us of European descent who have likely internalized anti-Indigenous attitudes.