Evaluating Indigenous education resources for classroom use

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WITH THE INCLUSION of Indigenous content and perspectives in the revised curriculum in BC, educators are scrambling to find suitable resources to use in their classrooms. Because this formal shift is relatively new, many educators have expressed that they feel ill-equipped to evaluate Indigenous resources and are seeking guidance to determine what resources to bring into their classrooms. In the past, the emphasis has been placed upon including Indigenous content (information about Indigenous Peoples) without necessarily considering who created the materials, thus the inclusion of Indigenous content was prioritized over the representation of Indigenous perspectives.

As a teacher-educator with experience teaching courses in Indigenous education, I am regularly asked to recommend Indigenous resources, advise educators on the “best” resources, or to provide feedback on resources that have already been selected for classroom use. Though I am glad these questions are being asked, they can put me in an uncomfortable position of gatekeeping what gets brought into other educators’ classrooms. Therefore, in the interest of supporting educators to develop their own professional judgment in this area, I have decided to share the questions I consider when I am reviewing Indigenous education resources.

Who developed the resource?
When we are intending to bring authentic Indigenous perspectives into our classrooms, the resources we select should be developed by Indigenous Peoples or in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples. If possible, we should also consider whether the Indigenous representation in the resource aligns with the ancestry of those who have developed it. For example, as a Haida person, it would not be appropriate for me to lead the development of a Stó:lo resource. Instead, I should be deferring to Stó:lo peoples to be involved. For those of you seeking to learn more, the website www.StrongNations.com provides information about author and illustrator ancestry. However, it should be noted that this is only a place to start with resource evaluation.

How are Indigenous Peoples represented in the resource?
To determine representation, you may begin with questions such as, does the resource have stereotypes? Has respectful language been used? Does the resource recognize the strength of Indigenous Peoples? This last question is worth considering, as many times Indigenous Peoples are represented as victims and their resiliency is not recognized. To learn more about respectful representation of Indigenous Peoples in children’s literature, visit Dr. Debbie Reese’s blog: www.AmericanIndiansInChildrensLiterature.blogspot.com.
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Does the resource contain traditional Indigenous stories?
There are usually protocols associated with the use of traditional Indigenous stories in classrooms, so it is particularly important to carefully review these resources. Here are two questions to consider: does the resource indicate that permission has been given to use the story in a public context and/or for educational purposes? And, does the resource indicate what protocols and/or guidelines (if any) should be followed when using this story for educational purposes? A place to start is the online resource www.IndigenousStorybooks.ca, which includes a list of vetted stories for classroom use in the “Resources” section.

Does the resource contain Indigenous art?
It is common to include Indigenous art in Indigenous resources; but, we need to consider how the art is being credited and used. To determine this look for information about the artist to be included in the resource. Uncredited art may have been used without permission or it may not have been created by an Indigenous artist. Look to see whether information about the artist’s nation(s) has been included. Some resource creators include art that appears Indigenous for aesthetic reasons; however, it may be generic or from a nation that has not been represented in the resource. This minimizes the diversity between nations, thus reinforcing a singular (and inaccurate) Indigenous identity.

Lastly, it is worth considering whether the artist has been compensated for the inclusion of their art in the resource. This may not be immediately obvious, but if the art appears to have been copied from another source, compensation is unlikely.

Does the resource contain references to or depictions of ceremonial information?
This question is particularly significant if it appears that the resource creator is not Indigenous or does not belong to the nation represented in the resource. Some examples include traditional songs and spiritual or ceremonial practices. If this content has been included in the resource, look for evidence that permission has been given to share this information. Keep in mind that if the resource has been developed by or in collaboration with someone from the same nation as the resource, they are likely familiar with the protocols associated with sharing the knowledge.

Does the resource honour the diversity of Indigenous Peoples?
There is tremendous diversity between Indigenous Peoples, and this diversity must be recognized in the resources we use in classrooms. Indigenous Peoples should not be blended together to form one singular people. One way to check this is to look for references to specific nations. An exception is when the resource is referencing experiences that may be common to Indigenous Peoples, such as residential schools or colonialism.

Does the resource portray Indigenous Peoples authentically and accurately?
To determine this, you must consider the references that are being used and/or the people who have been involved in creating the resource as well as the resource itself. Do the resource creators belong to a reputable organization? Does the resource contain factual and researched information? Has the historical information been accurately portrayed? Remember that Indigenous Peoples should be presented as enduring, as opposed to vanishing, and history should not be distorted to justify European conquests.

I have shared these questions in the hopes that they will help educators to feel more confident about the Indigenous education resources they bring into their classrooms. However, I must emphasize that we will still make mistakes. As educators, we must remain informed and continue to review the resources that we bring into our classrooms.

We also need to be open to changing our minds when we have learned more or when additional information about a resource or author surfaces. When questions emerge, remember that you can ask for help from colleagues or the school district. It is our responsibility to educate ourselves and to learn from the people who are most affected by our mistakes so we can continue to move forward.


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