

# Teachers as learners

BY MARTHA MOON

I AM writing this column from the perspective of a white teacher in an ongoing learning process of how to better honour Aboriginal students and their families. Thank you to all who have helped me along the way, and my apologies for anything I say here that shows how much I still don't know! I will focus on 'recognizing,' 'rethinking,' and 'relating' as three big parts of my learning.

## Recognizing

Although I knew a bit about residential schools going into my teaching career, there was something I didn't quite understand: the effects of residential schools live on in Canada.

A cultural instructor I worked with who was also a friend and mentor, explained that walking into the school building gave her a terrible gut feeling in connection to the agonizing memories and stories of family members who survived residential school. This is recent history in Canada.

Although I may never understand



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that gut feeling because my family's story of school is quite different, it is my responsibility as a teacher to recognize what happened.

## Rethinking

A big step for me has been realizing that what I consider "normal" about school is just one way to think about education. For example, linear thinking is normal to me but an interconnected, circular, holistic way is normal to the Aboriginal teachers I've talked to.

I'm accustomed to grade levels, a standardized curriculum and written tests, but these are ideas that came across the ocean with my ancestors.

In Aboriginal communities, a

child's interests and strengths and the pace of their own development was what drove education. Self-contained schools are normal to me but community-integrated learning was normal here until quite recently. In rethinking education, I come to question how schools are run right now — and what education could be!

## Relating

I have a lot to learn about Canada's history with Aboriginal people in education and what that means for each student I meet. Learning to be a respectful teacher in the eyes and minds of the Aboriginal students I meet is very important to me.

Much of my learning in this area has come through friendships, conversations, and the example of Aboriginal teachers, cultural staff, education assistants, and specialists. Their patience and non-judgment, balanced with their willingness to share honestly with me about how to proceed respectfully is a gift.

Students, their families, and community members are also my teachers. Valuing students and their stories is a great way for both of us to

learn. Building relationships with families and welcoming their help is huge. It can be tough because my perspectives can be so one-sided (and I might not even know it!) and because school represents such trauma due to residential school history. Still, learning through relationships gives me hope for growth.

In Thunder Bay we are positioned in an amazing way, as our schools are a microcosm of the wonderful diversity in our city. This leaves us with the opportunity to consider new perspectives and to break old norms that don't work. As a white teacher, I challenge myself and my colleagues to recognize the strength Aboriginal students, their families, and members of the community bring to schools. Learning from one another could lead to a kind of education that is engaging, relevant and community building. Let's take that opportunity.

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