Teacher

BC Teachers' Federation

Nov/Dec 2022

Joshua Berson Photography

BCTF

Kids Matter Teachers Care

IN THIS ISSUE
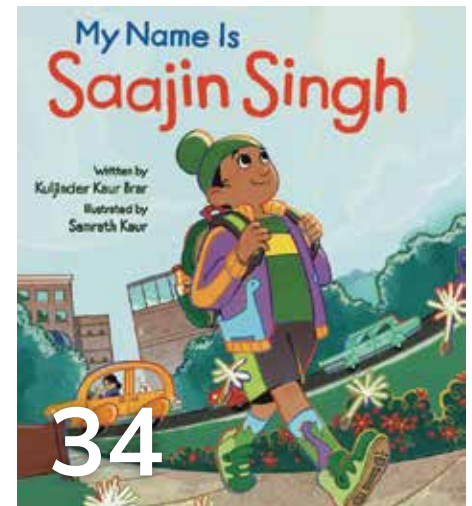
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Regular features

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THIS IS YOUR
MAGAZINE

Do you enjoy writing? Have a story to tell? Know of a project at your school or in your local you want to share with colleagues? Then consider writing for *Teacher*, the flagship publication of the BCTF! Submission guidelines are available at *bctf.ca.*

We also welcome letters to the editor. Send your letter to *teachermag@bctf.ca.*

Teacher reserves the right to edit or condense any contribution considered for publication. We are unable to publish all submissions we receive.

Deadlines

March issue	January 6, 2023
May/June issue	March 24, 2023

Tweets celebrating the election of Teri Westerby, the first out trans man to be elected to a school board in Canada. Congratulations Teri!

Reid Clark
@ReidClark06
...

Meet my friend Teri Westerby. The first openly trans man elected to a school board in Canada... in Chilliwack. Since 2017, we've all been on this unbelievable journey. It got better in 2018. And tonight, what a night. #bced

Teri Westerby (he/him)
@TeriWesterby33
...

Thank you to everyone for their warm messages and thank you to #Chilliwack for voting to move forward together!

Peggy J
@peggybe_oonujut
...

I love this for us

Change4Chilliwack @C4Chilliwack · Oct 16
WE DID IT CHILLIWACK!!!!!

CHILLIWACK MAKES HISTORY

1	*BONDAR, Carin	8,888
2	*REICHELT, Willow	8,287
3	*REID, Margaret	8,116
4	*SWANKEY, David	8,047
5	*WESTERBY, Teri	7,584
6	*MAAHS, Heather	7,075
7	*PROCEE, Richard	7,047

"I am so proud that Chilliwack chose love, chose progress and chose to elect me as their trustee"

Teri Westerby

BY ELECTING THE FIRST OPENLY TRANSGENDER MAN IN CANADA!

Reid Clark
@ReidClark06
...

"My friend's son, who's trans himself, burst into tears out of relief that his life's going to get better. That caused us all to cry because that's why we're doing this. I'm welling up just talking about it." A moment I'll never forget #bced

xtramagazine.com
In a historic first, an out trans man was just elected to a school board in Canad...
"I hear so loud and clear that people want to move forward," Teri Westerby tells Xtra following his historic victory

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Clint Johnston, BCTF President

Supporting inclusive classrooms

Last month, teachers across BC took to the polls to have their voices heard in municipal elections. School board trustees are important decision-makers in public education systems, and the democratic process is an opportunity to have our say in these decisions.

This municipal election was of particular significance because of the large number of regressive candidates advocating for policy changes that would cause harm to students, families, and staff from the LGBTQ2S+ community. In part because of the efforts and participation from BCTF members, many of these regressive candidates were unsuccessful in securing their seats on school boards.

As a proud Chilliwack teacher, I am thrilled to celebrate the election of Teri Westerby as a school board trustee. Teri is the first out trans man to be elected to a school board in Canada. Chilliwack teachers and community members who volunteered and voted showed us we can move toward inclusion and representation.

This milestone is significant, not only in Chilliwack, but across the whole province. Teachers work hard every day to make sure all students feel safe and welcome in their classrooms. Our students also deserve a school board that will stand up for safe and inclusive schools by supporting SOGI curriculum, resources, and progressive policies.

Thank you to each of you for your work in creating safe spaces for your students every day. Showing up to vote in municipal elections was a part of this work.

In solidarity,

Clint Johnston
BCTF President

MESSAGE DU PRÉSIDENT

Soutenir les classes inclusives

Le mois dernier, le corps enseignant de la Colombie-Britannique s'est rendu aux urnes pour faire entendre sa voix lors des élections municipales. Les commissaires scolaires sont d'importants responsables des systèmes d'éducation publique et le processus démocratique est l'occasion d'avoir notre mot à dire concernant leurs décisions.

Cette élection municipale a été particulièrement significative en raison du grand nombre de candidatures régressives prônant des changements de politique qui porteraient préjudice aux élèves, aux familles et au personnel issus de la communauté LGBTQ2S+. En partie grâce aux efforts et à la participation des membres de la FECB, bon nombre de ces candidatures régressives n'ont pas réussi à obtenir leur siège au sein des conseils scolaires.

En tant que fier enseignant de Chilliwack, je suis ravi de célébrer l'élection de Teri Westerby à titre de commissaire scolaire. Teri est le premier homme transgenre à être élu au sein d'un conseil scolaire au Canada. Le personnel enseignant et les membres de la communauté de Chilliwack qui se sont portés volontaires et ont voté nous ont démontré que nous pouvons progresser vers l'inclusion et la représentation.

Ce tournant est important, non seulement à Chilliwack, mais dans toute la province. Le personnel enseignant travaille fort chaque jour pour s'assurer que tous les élèves se sentent en sécurité et bienvenus dans leurs salles de classe. Nos élèves méritent également un conseil scolaire qui défendra des écoles sécuritaires et inclusives en appuyant le programme d'études, les ressources et les politiques progressistes de l'OSIG.

Merci pour votre travail dans la création d'espaces sécuritaires pour vos élèves au quotidien. Se présenter pour aller voter aux élections municipales constituait une partie de ce travail.

Solidairement,

Clint Johnston
Président de la FECB

Understanding how to support Indigenous languages in the classroom

By **Candace Kaleimamoowahinekapu Galla**, Kanaka Hawaiʻi, Ph.D., Associate Professor, UBC; and **Marny Point**, Musqueam, Ph.D. student, Adjunct Professor and Program Instructor, UBC, on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the hən̓q̓əmin̓əm̓ speaking xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) people

Indigenous language frameworks, policies, and initiatives

Within what is now known as Canada there have been a handful of recent policies, frameworks, and international initiatives in the last decade that demonstrate a movement toward support of Indigenous Peoples and their respective Indigenous languages. These include the following:

Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action

The TRC made several Calls to Action in 2015 regarding Indigenous languages to remedy the legacy and impact of residential schools on generations of Indigenous families, communities, and nations. This long history has been known and felt by survivors and intergenerational survivors, which has been validated by archived documentation, reports, testimony, and the countless, massive unmarked gravesites of missing children, yet this has only recently been acknowledged and recognized as the truth in this country.

UNESCO's International Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL) and International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL)

The IDIL, which commenced in 2022, was an outcome of the 2019 IYIL. It intends to raise awareness of Indigenous language vitalities, and to protect, promote, and strengthen Indigenous languages locally and globally. This international initiative recognizes and affirms that a sense of urgency is required to revitalize Indigenous languages and to build the capacity within Indigenous communities.

BC and Canada's legislation

In 2019, Bill C-91 (the *Indigenous Languages Act*) was passed in Canada stating that the "recognition and implementation of rights related to Indigenous languages are at the core of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and are fundamental to shaping the country." Later that same year, BC passed Bill 41, known as BC's *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* (DRIPA), which establishes the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) as its framework for reconciliation, as called upon by the TRC Calls to Action. In 2021, Bill C-15 (Canada's DRIPA) was passed into law in Canada. We can anticipate that there will be further changes to existing laws within BC and across Canada to align them with UNDRIP principles.

These policies, frameworks, and initiatives in BC, Canada, and beyond serve as foundational resources that support Indigenous language work and are a crucial reminder that Indigenous Peoples are still here—continuing to fight and advocate for their human rights, cultures, and languages in an unjust and colonial world. These policies indicate that Indigenous Peoples can hold responsible parties and stakeholders to account in an effort to restore and (re)normalize Indigenous languages to their rightful place in the local and global society, and across all domains of life alongside English and French.

Institutions and educational systems

Indigenous Peoples locally and globally are committed to reawakening, reclaiming, revitalizing, and renormalizing their respective Indigenous languages, despite the ongoing mistreatment and current lived realities. While schools were the very institutions and systems that intentionally stripped Indigenous children of their linguistic and cultural knowledge, these educational systems are the very places and spaces that are attempting to, or seeing the need to, teach students Indigenous languages. Though we can say that education has taken a leap forward to diversifying curriculum, there is considerable work to be done. It is important for us as educators to recognize that the foundation of schooling in Canada is still steeped in foreign ideologies that hold, carry, and privilege non-Indigenous perspectives.

While schools may have the resources and wherewithal to teach Indigenous languages, not all students may be receptive. To assume that all Indigenous Peoples should be grateful and eager to (re)learn and engage in (their) Indigenous languages is a blatant disregard to the injustices and trauma that continue to endure in and among communities. We must be aware and raise our consciousness individually and collectively, and not expect students (and families) to always respond positively, excitedly, and with gratitude to potential language learning and teaching that may occur in the classroom.

In addition, while it may appear that non-Indigenous students and peers may be "learning" and picking up the language at a faster pace, it is likely that they are not proficient in cultural understandings of knowing, being, and doing, which is often sustained through blood memory, lived experiences, and culturally grounded worldviews. For Indigenous students, there is undue baggage—burden, responsibility, and trauma—that has persisted, that may in fact hinder their learning. Healing is necessary for the health and well-being of the individual, family, community, and nation, and has no specific timeline. This restorative process to become whole again needs to take place and take root in the love and light that exists in and for Indigenous communities to thrive culturally and linguistically, so that they too may learn unencumbered.

Importance of language

Learning and/or teaching Indigenous languages is more than the grammar structure, sound systems, and literacies. It requires an embodied understanding that language is culture, and culture is language. Language is not just a linguistic code necessary for communication, but it is a critical and necessary part of our well-being—a social determinant of health.

Indigenous languages are a distinct and unique representation of ancestral funds of knowledge that cement us to past generations, bind us to the current generation, and link us to the seven generations ahead. Through our Indigenous languages we are transported through a portal that helps us to understand the origin of our people, genealogical connections, kinship ties to nature and the more-than-human, oral stories, protocols, and ways of knowing, being, doing, learning, and teaching.

Grounded in Indigenous epistemology, our languages are our identity and culture that helps to strengthen us—physically, spiritually, emotionally, and mentally—as individuals, as part of a family unit, community, nation, and global citizens of the world. Embedded in Indigenous languages are intergenerational teachings or the transmission of Indigenous knowledge that transpire through traditional and cultural practices. These connections through language tie us to specific lands, mountains, oceans, and rivers that remind us of who we are and who/what we are responsible for and accountable to.

Language as kin

It is very important to unlearn the performative practices that "check the box" and are self-serving—that do more harm than good. Learn, establish, and embody the practices of respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility,[1] relationality,[2] and resiliency[3] that will help in understanding your role as an ally in Indigenous language education, broadly defined.

As educators, we need to move beyond plans, visions, verbal statements, and taking the stance as a "perfect stranger"[4] to actualizing, carrying forward, and bringing to fruition relevant language learning opportunities for resilient students. We all have a role and responsibility to Indigenous language revitalization, reclamation, and education, but we need to learn first and foremost what our role is in regards to language learning, teaching, and sharing, especially when the language is not from a community that claims you. Establish genuine and meaningful relationships grounded in respect and reciprocity that allow your heart and mind to be transformed. These relational connections may lead to language sharing and a glimpse into knowledge systems, cultural practices, and an embodied understanding that can open up to decolonizing and Indigenizing possibilities for your praxis. Together we are bound by relational connections—seen and unseen. Language is our kin. •

nə́ c̓ aʔmat ct
We are all one—We are all together

1 V. J. Kirkness and R. Barnhardt, "First Nations and higher education: The Four Rs—respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility," *Journal of American Indian Education*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 1991, pp. 1–15.

2 J. Carjuzza and J.K. Fenimore-Smith, "The give away spirit: Reaching a shared vision of ethical Indigenous research relationships," *Journal of Educational Controversy*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2010: *cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol5/iss2/4*

3 C.K. Galla, K. Kawaiʻaeʻa, and S.E. Nicholas, "Carrying the torch forward: Indigenous academics building capacity through an international collaborative model," *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2014, pp. 193-217.

4 S. Dion, "Disrupting molded images: identities, responsibilities and relationships—teachers and Indigenous subject material," *Teaching Education*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2007, pp. 329–342.

Infusing Indigenous content and perspectives into classrooms

By Su Chang, Indigenous student and community outreach teacher, traditional, ancestral, unceded, and shared lands of the Stó:lō people of Sq'éwlets, Leq'á:mel, Sema:th, Matheqwí, and Qwó:ltl'el First Nations

SOME TEACHERS face barriers when trying to infuse Indigenous perspectives and content into the classroom. If you have acknowledged the importance of doing this work, then you have already faced your first challenge! Some of the major barriers that many face are not knowing Indigenous-based languages and being unfamiliar with new vocabulary words introduced as a part of this content.

In anything new that we do in our classrooms, there is always a learning curve. Whether it is math, science, foods, or a PHE class, there are unfamiliar words and language that are new to you and your students. Language can be incredibly intimidating, as language does hold power in our society: the power to engage or the power to cause harm.

Sometimes educators are afraid of saying the wrong thing or upsetting people if they do not get things right the first time. We need to allow ourselves time to reflect and make changes. Our teaching practice does not have to be perfect the first time we try something new. It's important we create time and space to reflect on what worked and what didn't; this is a major part of teaching.

When infusing Indigenous knowledge and content into our classrooms, there are tons of resources available to help us. Students and Indigenous communities expect us to be open, try our best, and experience humility in our practice. Teachers are encouraged to be courageous with BC's new curriculum.

If you are worried about teaching a lesson that is new to you, there are some steps that you can take to feel more confident about what you are teaching:

- Start small: try something that is being practised by other teachers so you have a model to follow, e.g., Indigenous land acknowledgments.
- Research and learn about the ancestral land where you teach.
- Focus on not causing harm. One way to do this is by making sure you are not continuing with out-of-date narratives.
- Get in touch with someone from your Indigenous education department and ask them for support.
- Contact an Elder or Knowledge Keeper to see if you could share your ideas and get some pointers. You may also want to ask the Elder or Knowledge Keeper to come into your classroom to do an activity with your students.
- Watch videos of other teachers and how they infuse Indigenous content into their classes.
- Look for another teacher who is already doing this work and ask them to mentor you as you begin this journey in your classroom.
- Look for BCTF or Ministry of Education resources to support your work infusing Indigenous content into the classroom. TeachBC and the BCTF's Aboriginal Education webpage (both accessible on *bctf.ca*) have several resources that can support your work.
- Read an Indigenous-authored book to your students. This way, the language you use is not your own, but is shared with them through an Indigenous person's voice.
- Show an Indigenous-based movie or documentary to your students.
- Avoid language that "pan-Indigenizes" the information you are sharing with your students. For example, phrases like "all Indigenous Peoples" or "every nation" do not acknowledge the different perspectives, experiences, and diversities that exist between different nations.
- Share traditional art, stories, and text with your students and ask them what they think.

As a part of our commitment to reconciliation, it is important to take steps forward and begin the journey of introducing Indigenous perspectives into the classroom. It is every BC teacher's responsibility to commit to the work, and to align our classrooms with the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

We have a great opportunity now to participate in teacher inquiry and create board-approved Indigenous courses in the subjects that we love to teach. It's time to collaborate with local First Nations in BC and put into action our visions for the future. The new graduation requirements begin in September 2023, which allow us to offer students many ways to participate in learning Indigenous perspectives and content. You are empowered and supported to engage in Indigenous vocabulary and language, and to feel competent with infusing it into everything you do in your classroom. •

Catch your language

By Regie Marie Plana-Alcuaz, (she/they), teacher and Committee for Action on Social Justice—Status of Women Action Group member, Surrey

INGRAINED
1. (of a habit, belief, or attitude) firmly fixed or established; difficult to change.
2. (of dirt or a stain) deeply embedded and thus difficult to remove.

"You guys," "Oh boy," "Man!"

Terms like these are so ingrained in our everyday language that we don't even pause to reflect on how much of our language centres and privileges men. There are many people that don't consider these terms to be offensive because they're used so frequently; I have often heard male-dominant language used in spaces including union workshops, classrooms, and staffrooms. But these terms are not gender-inclusive at all.

Male-dominant language reinforces a system in which men hold greater value over all other genders. Terms such as mankind, freshman, policeman, chairman are still very much the default in daily speech. Sherryl Kleinman's thought-provoking essay "Why Sexist Language Matters" notes that it is a "symbolic annihilation" to subsume women under male-based terms, which makes it infinitely easier to render this group invisible and therefore do with them whatever the dominant group wants.[1] It may not be identified as an act of violence, but it is an erasure that, along with other patriarchal norms, makes it easier to dehumanize women.

Take a moment to reflect on how often you may have used these words unthinkingly. As educators, it's important we consider the implications of the language we use in the classroom and the norms we choose to perpetuate.

We've come to understand that gender is a spectrum, not a binary. When we think about the variety of genders that have become more visible these days, we realize just how many people are being excluded by using male-dominant language. More effort should be made to communicate in ways that are gender-inclusive. There are many gender-neutral terms to address a group: folks, you all, people, team, friends, scholars, buds, epic humans—take your pick. Personally, I like theydies and gentlethems, because it's punny. Whatever your preference, it's a step toward gender equity that you can take right now, while modeling gender-inclusive practices for your students.

The use of inclusive language extends beyond verbal language. In my school, the first time the nameplate for my classroom door came in, the title was "Ms." because apparently, whoever took the order from our secretary might have assumed that "Mx." was a typo. Thankfully, this was corrected after a couple of weeks. I identify as a non-binary woman. Although my gender expression is non-binary, I identify more, am coded, and socialized as a woman,

and experience all the issues associated with that. The use of Mx., in my opinion, challenges people to take stock of their own beliefs, and allows for dialogue to challenge current norms.

Whenever you can, please gently assist your colleagues in being aware of gender-inclusive language. Persist without being unpleasant. The appropriate time, place, and opportunity to make corrections should be considered. People are typically more sensitive and less amenable to being corrected in public, for example. If time allows, an explanation can be helpful, otherwise a follow-up might be possible, depending on the situation. Relationships matter a lot in this work.

In essence, the effort to try to be more inclusive in your language may take some time, but is totally worth it. It takes a while for people to break habits so it's important to be forgiving. I experience the occasional slip myself, but mistakes should not discourage us from making an effort. By attempting to widen our perspective, we become more accepting of possibilities. Moreover, it is rewarding when we deepen relationships with family and friends who see our efforts to understand them as individuals! ●

1 Sherryl Klienman, "Why Sexist Language Matters," *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Summer 2002: *5y1.org/download/997c4ff4d5b1dc117e9bd2b9a4470152.pdf*

Closing the socially distanced gap for "COVID cohort" children

By Lora Baker (she/her), speech language pathologist, Powell River

FOR MOST of you reading this, memories of sending your kids to Kindergarten, or maybe even pieces of your own Kindergarten experience, linger with mixed emotions. Perhaps something between excitement, nerves, and wonder? September 2021 was an exciting time for our family. Our oldest child was heading to Kindergarten; her first grade-school experience. Even with the burgeoning excitement and anticipation, I couldn't help notice that we, along with other families of "COVID cohort" students, were experiencing things a little differently this year.

Fast forward through a summer of outdoor, distanced playdates to September, when masks were not mandatory for K–3 students, but they were for school staff and for students Grade 4 and up. Most of the students, including my daughter, wore masks daily. The fall went fairly smoothly, with the kids and parents in the honeymoon phase of their school careers. I saw my five-year-old loving school and loving the time she got to spend with peers, thanks to the efforts of her teacher who did an incredible job creating opportunities for learning and connection.

Right around Christmas I started to wonder, worry, and ask questions. I noticed my daughter asking about things her peers were saying and describing minor, but concerning, social conflicts. As I talked to other parents and educators, I recognized familiar patterns in their Kindergarten experiences. Many "COVID kids" didn't know how to ask a group of students to join their game; they struggled to join their peers in play. They didn't know how to voice feelings of frustration, sadness, or even glee. Social problem-solving was a challenge. Even making requests from teachers, adults, or other students was hard.

My worry and questions were getting louder and more emphatic: did my daughter and her COVID cohort peers have delayed social language skills? I started to wonder if my daughter and her classmates were in fact suffering from the effects of COVID on social interaction and social development? This isn't a far stretch, considering this cohort of kids didn't see a stranger's mouth or smile for two years.

Let me be clear: I am not starting a mask debate. I believe in wearing masks to prevent and slow the spread of the COVID virus; masks save lives. My goal here is to increase awareness and start the discussion about how we can mitigate and compensate for the negative impacts on children's communication skills.

As speech language pathologists (SLPs), we often talk about an individual's communication toolbox. Most, but not all, of us have verbal speech in addition to non-verbal communication tools like gestures, facial expressions, written language, and body language.

Mask-wearing and covered faces are just a drop in the bucket of the impending tsunami of effects COVID will have on the social skills and language skills of COVID cohort children. A huge concern is the limited amount of time these children spent around their peers or unfamiliar adults, people other than immediate family, while practising social distancing for two years. Many of these children had limited extra-curricular activities, limited playdates or time with peers, and even missed out on gatherings with friends and extended family.

As a former teacher and current SLP, I have spent a lot of time in classrooms and have been working with preschool and elementary students for years. Preschool years are the primary years for speech and language development and these children have clearly missed some important opportunities.

I know in our house, spending time isolated with our family with no playgrounds and no extra-curriculars lead to increased screen time. For most of the pandemic the only accent my kids heard was Peppa Pig's high-pitched English banter. The number and diversity of linguistic models they had would be devastatingly smaller when compared to kids who were preschool age before COVID.

Furthermore, spending time mostly at home with our own family unit means parents don't get to see their child

"Many 'COVID kids' didn't know how to ask a group of students to join their game; they struggled to join their peers in play. They didn't know how to voice feelings of frustration, sadness, or even glee."

interacting or playing with peers. This affects friendships and has also led to many parents missing red flags in their children's development when looking at age-appropriate norms. Parents who have had limited social contact may not realize their child is not saying as many words as other kids the same age. It is not surprising that many SLPs and counsellors have noticed a significant increase in the number of referrals in the last couple of years for Kindergarten students.

Recently, in a meeting with SLPs from across the country, we discussed this very topic. Researchers, experts, clinicians, and parents share my concern; so much so that there is talk of adjusting the guidelines and milestones for early childhood speech and language development.

Conversations with friends and colleagues is part of what inspired my reflection and ultimately writing this article. Leanne Gahan, a long-time Kindergarten and Grade 1 teacher, echoes many of my observations and notes, "Social communication was already a big focus in Kindergarten and Grade 1, but the amount and frequency of social situations most children have experienced has decreased, depending on the home situation during the pandemic, leading to students needing more practise and experiences to learn these skills."

I am not writing this to add to the long list of concerns and fears parents and educators have about COVID. I'm simply looking to start the conversation and hopefully increase awareness that these cohorts of children may need a little extra support, instruction, guidance—and a little bit of extra patience—as they journey through school and life.

We can help to close the language gap with some simple strategies. Conversation with kids is the best tool to improve language skills. Set time aside daily to talk to kids with no distractions and take turns asking and answering questions. During conversations ask open-ended questions instead of yes/no questions, and be sure to model good listening with non-verbal signals like nodding and smiling. Discuss scenarios in your life and theirs when connecting with someone else was challenging. Talk about the solutions you figured out for social conflicts.

Another friend and colleague, Elaine Maxwell, an elementary school counsellor, reminded me, "We are relational beings, and this is not irreversible.

We can connect again and teach connection."

Despite sharing concerning observations, these two, and all my colleagues, share my predominately positive and hopeful outlook for the future of these students. As therapists and educators, we do what we do because we believe in the principles of neuroplasticity and the resilience of children. I trust the brilliant minds, insightful programs, and supportive communities to rally behind these children and provide exceptional, focused, and direct instruction around social communication, interaction, and language skills. I've watched how our school teams have modified, adapted, and adjusted to restrictions, constant changes, and the unique needs of students during the pandemic. I have complete faith.

I bet the COVID cohort of children will be one of the most resilient generations we've seen. When you've waited with your parents for two hours to get into Costco, only to find there are no samples, or discover your Kindergarten teacher has a nose piercing that was hidden under their mask for months, your skin must thicken! If nothing else, we will have a generation of the best hand-washers the world has ever seen! •

Promoting language comprehension in the early years

By Jen Kelly, Ph.D., teacher consultant, Provincial Outreach Program for the Early Years (POPEY)

WHY IS TALK so important? First and foremost, it provides educators a window into who students are and what they think. Talking not only promotes relationships and community-building within a classroom, but also provides significant academic payoffs in learning. Talking supports robust learning by boosting memory and providing richer connections to concepts through vocabulary development. Conversations allow students to have a voice and encourage students to reason with evidence. In addition, intentional talk can enrich the development of critical social skills in and out of the classroom. Below are three strategies to support intentional talk in the early years classroom.

Conversation station

Setting up conversation stations is a way to bring in purposeful dialogue daily in Kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms. During the interactions at the station educators and students actively listen to each other, engage in meaningful dialogue driven by students, and have the opportunity for educators to develop and expand students' language.

Setting up a conversation station is quite simple, but it may take some time for students to get used to the format. The significance of the interaction is rooted in the concept that the students drive the conversation; however, most students will need to have dialogue scaffolded until they are comfortable. Educators can accomplish this by having some theme-related vocabulary picture cards that can spark opinions or thoughts. Recently read picture books can also provide prompts for conversation starters. Establishing rules about talking and listening can be discussed with the whole class and practised with students one-on-one. As students start to show competence and confidence in conversations, additional students may be invited to join the conversation.

There are many benefits to using conversation stations in early years classrooms. A significant advantage is that educators can expand upon the language students choose to use from their background knowledge. For example, an educator may say, "You mentioned that your puppy was running into the water; was it a lake or a river? Can you tell me how your puppy looked when he was in the water?" In addition, if a student wants to tell the class about their new puppy during a whole class discussion and there is no time to dive into the topic, the educator can suggest that they continue the discussion during the conversation station. The student feels respected and heard by the class, and can be invited to be the first person at the station that day.

Guiding intentional talk between students

The opportunity for educators to step back and observe students' language and thinking can provide a lot of information about students. During a recent forest walk, I had the chance to follow a conversation among three students working together to build a snake habitat.

Student A: And this is a snake nest, and this is a little snake bed.
Educator: Why did you choose to put a rock here?
Student A: It's the thing for the babies to go under.
Educator: How did you design your snake home?
Student A: By looking at others and thinking about what snakes need.
And this is chew stuff for the babies.
Student B: And that's the dinner table.
Student A: And this is the baby room, and this is the Daddy room.
Student C: And where's the Mommy room?
Student B: It's the same spot.
Student C: Just like my Dad's and Mom's room, but they don't share it anymore.

In the script, there is meaningful learning to note. The educator asked intentional questions to get the three students to describe and explain; however, it is evident that the students are leading the conversation. The students are working collaboratively and building on each other's ideas. The students were not only thinking about their ideas and building on their background knowledge of snakes, but also connecting to their own lives to make sense of the world around them.

Hands-down conversations

An essential skill for young children to learn and practise is having an authentic conversation based on listening to others, adding opinions, and justifying reasons. A hands-down conversation is an opportunity for students to experience how people converse in the real world where the format of "question, response, evaluation (right or wrong)" is inappropriate. In *Hands Down, Speak Up,* by Kassia Omohundro Wedekind and Christy Hermann Thompson, the authors describe the process of listening and talking through hands-down conversations.

The format of hands-down conversations involves no hand-raising; instead, students are taught how to listen for a place to slide their voice into the conversation. There is only one voice speaking at a time, and students are expected to listen closely to the person speaking. Educators take the position to the side of the students or as part of the circle to guide the conversation at times, but not lead it. The educator may prompt students by mentioning, "Sadie is trying to get her voice in. Someone can invite her in by asking her what she thinks."

A beneficial way to scaffold how to share ideas and opinions in hands-down conversations is to have a detailed lesson on how to talk about reasoning or telling why you are going to say something. An educator may begin by saying, "We are going to tell our ideas to our friends and then tell them why we think that, because that will help us understand each other's thinking. We can start our sentences like, 'I think..., Because..., I noticed..., So I'm thinking....'"

An interesting way to monitor the hands-down conversation is conversation mapping. An educator may draw a quick sketch of the circle, naming where students are sitting, and then draw arrows to indicate where the conversation is going and who is taking part. The authors suggest sharing the map with students afterward and discussing what they notice about it. After discussing who was often speaking and who was not, students become aware of the conversation directions in the following weeks and become more diligent about having an "even" conversation where everyone is involved.

Each of these instructional practices exposes students to new ideas, new language structures, and new vocabulary through intentional and authentic engagement in conversation. The benefits are significant and far-reaching in real-life situations. One huge benefit that needs to be mentioned is the fact that all these language development opportunities set up students for enhanced reading comprehension. Reading comprehension starts long before students learn to decode, and instead begins as students learn to understand and use spoken language. The best investment in future reading comprehension is to focus on language comprehension in the early years. ●

Literacy blitz: A school-wide collaboration to support student literacy

By Jason Lui (he/his), teacher, Langley

Some hard truths

IN SEPTEMBER 2021, between 45–80% of students at Nicomekl Elementary School (it varies among grade groupings) were not reading proficiently at grade level. At that time, 80% of our Grade 2 students were not reading at grade level. This is understandable given that these students had missed so much in-person school time because of the global pandemic. Coupled with the challenges and trauma some students consistently encounter (e.g., low income, language barriers, abuse, mental illness, etc.), reading was not a priority.

As a school staff, we set a goal to improve literacy among all grades throughout the school year. Our school administrators, English language learning (ELL) team, learning support team, and reading recovery teacher came together to brainstorm ideas on how to do this. The idea we settled on was a school-wide literacy blitz.

What is a literacy blitz?

First and foremost, we wanted to work alongside classroom teachers to effectively serve vulnerable learners. The intent was to work with small groups for eight-week cycles, Monday to Thursday, for approximately 30 minutes each session. As our school principal shared, it was an "all-hands-on-deck approach," where non-enrolling staff and enrolling staff worked together to ensure all emergent readers were supported. This literacy blitz was in addition to the literacy lessons that were already happening in the classroom.

Like many other public schools, we use Fountas and Pinnell kits to gather data on each student's reading level. We aim to collect this data by the end of each term and use it to better inform our teaching and move forward in assisting students who are not yet reading at grade level.

Using this specific student data, our principal, reading recovery teacher, learning support team, and the ELL teachers sat down together and split all the emergent readers into groups of one to three students, making sure we minimize distractions and at the same time maximize our time with the students. Each student group consisted of the same reading level within the same grade. When we met with these smaller groups, we conducted additional assessments to further investigate any lagging skills (e.g., phonological awareness).

We carved out a 30-minute time slot, four days each week, for guided reading. During this time, all small reading groups worked on guided reading with an assigned educator. Our multipurpose and ELL rooms, along with any vacant school spaces, were filled with multiple tables, all working on intentional reading support. Meanwhile, proficient readers stayed in their classrooms and enjoyed independent reading time.

The second part of the plan was finding more people to help out: we needed additional educators to ensure we could limit the small groups to a maximum of three students, so we are very grateful for our inaugural partnership with the School of Education from Trinity Western University (TWU). Thirty TWU pre-service teachers volunteered their time every day to assist with the literacy blitz. To be clear, these pre-service teachers took on more of a tutoring role than an intervention role, as they were not certified teachers yet. Most often, they would review a literacy lesson from class or sit with students and read grade-leveled books. This partnership between TWU and Nicomekl Elementary School was an important part of the success we experienced.

The pre-service teachers also volunteered in our after-school literacy program. I have had the wonderful opportunity to co-lead this after-school program for ELL students every Wednesday, along with two settlement workers in schools and two TWU pre-service teachers. We support students with reading and writing skills through word games, reading, and writing activities. We also implement some of the strategies from the literacy blitz in the after-school program.

The beauty of coming together to drive change

Our reading recovery teacher took the lead in creating specific reading interventions, lesson plans, and resources for each teacher involved in the literacy blitz. Two significant resources we used were: Tara West's decodable books and the Reading Simplified's Switch It program. We also created a daily schedule where students would re-read familiar books for fluency, review and practise writing skills, and play sight word games.

Each teacher involved in the literacy blitz adapted or modified the structure of the session to fit their skill set and to tailor it to the students' needs. For example, through my own ELL lens, I know that speaking and listening skills are significant building blocks to language acquisition; therefore, I may introduce extra oral activities in addition to decoding skills and phonological awareness. Our reading recovery teacher has a strong understanding of balanced literacy, as well as specific training on phonemic awareness and the science of reading that she was able to incorporate into her group work. I also implemented my additional training in using six teaching strategies from the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol. I have found these six strategies to be very useful in working with both ELL students and emerging readers to support literacy development. The six strategies are as follows:

- preparation (e.g., adaptation of content, links to background knowledge)
- scaffolding (e.g., modelling, guided practice)
- group options (e.g., whole class, small groups, partners, independent)
- integration of processes (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, listening)
- application (e.g., hands-on, meaningful, linked to objectives, promotes engagement)
- assessment (e.g., formative, summative, written, oral).

The results

From October to November, 2021, (term one), a group of three Grade 2 students I worked with jumped three reading levels. Similarly, in term two (January–February, 2022), I witnessed the three Grade 1 students jump at least two reading levels. During the final term (April–May, 2022), I worked with a few Grade 5 students, and they improved between two to six reading levels. And all of this improvement occurred despite inconsistent student attendance because of the ongoing pandemic and Omicron variant.

At the end of the school year, our data showed that 40% of our Grade 2 students were reading at grade level compared to 20% at the start of September. I'm glad to have seen an increase in literacy levels among all the classes, but the Grade 2 students' improvement was the largest. Overall, our literacy blitz plan worked!

Looking forward

We have continued our literacy blitz this year with a few improvements. New TWU pre-service teachers have returned to assist once again. Instead of eight-week cycles, we decided to try a six-week program this year. Another change is that this year's program also serves developing readers, instead of just emergent readers; in other words, those students who are close to being proficient.

Overall, the school-wide collaboration has had a tremendous impact on student literacy at Nicomekl Elementary. I am thankful to be working with such a talented teaching staff and appreciate the collaboration between us. This teamwork not only helped our students, it made me a better educator. Our literacy blitz will continue to evolve as we try to make this support the best possible for our school. I feel this specific support can be replicated, and I would not be surprised if there are similar practices already happening at other public schools. Let's continue to work together to help our students be proficient and confident with their literacy skills. ●

Supporting the development of verbal and non-verbal communication

By **Jennifer Chobotiuk** (she/her), **Andrea Hoeving,** and **Danielle Neer** (she/her),
Learning Assistance Teachers' Association (LATA) Executive Committee members

Throughout this article, we intentionally use identity-first language to acknowledge that autism is a neurological difference that is an integral part of a person's identity.[1]

COMMUNICATION is a social act: we speak with others to share our needs, wants, and thoughts; or we listen to others so that we can better understand their needs, wants, and thoughts. The former is referred to as expressive language, while the latter is referred to as receptive language. This means that speaking and listening (i.e., verbal communication) are social skills.

Communication also may involve facial expressions, hand ges-tures, body posturing, symbols, written language, sign language, Braille, and other multisensory strategies. This is often referred to as non-verbal communication. While many of us think of communication as oral language, you can see that it is only a small component overall. Neurotypical people often rely heavily on oral language, while neurodivergent individuals may find oral language challenging. Non-verbal communication plays to the strengths of a visual processor, because it relies on visual stimulus.

Autistic learners often have difficulties with auditory processing, but have great strength in visual processing. Functional Magnetic Resonance Images have supported this idea by showing that autistic people use their visual cortex rather than their prefrontal cortex for a variety of tasks.[2] For example, Temple Grandin explained that she did not understand the words "over" and "under" until she saw pictures to go with them.[3] Autistic learners

may need extra time to create a picture in their minds or to see visual representation to go along with an idea. They also may be Gestalt language processors, which means that they learn language in whole parts or chunks.[4] This can be seen in students with echolalia, who repeat words or phrases. They may be communicating or processing large, complex ideas with a single word or phrase.

Non-verbal communication includes gestures (e.g., thumbs up, nods), facial expressions (e.g., smile, frown), and body language (e.g., leaning in, crossed arms). The ability to communicate with others using non-verbal signals is developed by many infants before they learn to speak through their interactions with adult caregivers in their lives. Neurodivergent children take in excess stimulation and information from their environment, which leads to becoming overwhelmed by the volume of information to process. These extraneous sensory experiences are typically filtered out in a neurotypical brain. This difference makes it more difficult for neurodivergent people to pick up on the nuances of non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal cues are continually sent and received in complex social situations in classrooms and schools. These cues are used to understand the various interactions and to figure out how to best respond. Having an interest and ability to read others' non-verbal messages can be a challenge for both neurotypical and neurodivergent students. Children often require explicit instruction in order to read (receptive) and to share (expressive) needs and wants with others in verbal and non-verbal ways.

1 Lydia Brown, "The Significance of Semantics: Person-First Language: Why It Matters," Autistic Choya, August 2011*: www.autistichoya.com/2011/08/significance-of-semantics-person-first.html;* Emily Ladau, "Why Person-First Language Doesn't Always Put the Person First," Think Inclusive, July 2021: *www.thinkinclusive.us/amp/why-person-first-language-doesnt-always-put-the-person-first*

2 American Museum of Natural History. (2012, June 7). Science Bulletins: Autistic Brains Show Visual Dominance.

3 Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, 2006, "Autism and Visual Thought": *www.grandin.com/inc/visual.thinking.html*

4 Amy Yacoub, "Is Your Child a Gestalt Language Processor?" TherapyWorks, August 2022: *therapyworks.com/blog/child-development/gestalt-language-processor;* "Echolalia and Its Role in Gestalt Language Acquisition," American Speech-Language-Hearing Association: *www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/autism/echolalia-and-its-role-in-gestalt-language-acquisition*

5 Rachel Zamzow, "Double empathy, explained," *Spectrum*, July 22, 2021:

www.spectrumnews.org/news/double-empathy-explained

6 Damian E.M. Milton, "The double empathy problem," presented at Neurodiversity: A Paradigm Shift in Higher Education and Employment conference, Dublin, Ireland, October 2020: *kar.kent.ac.uk/84693*; and "On the Ontological Status of Autism: The 'double empathy' problem," *Disability & Society*, Vol. 27, No. 6, 2012, pp. 883–887: *www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09687599.2012.710008*

7 Adrienne Gear, *Reading Power: Teaching Students to Think While They Read,* Pembroke Publishers, 2015.

8 Jennifer Katz, *Teaching to Diversity: The Three-Block Model of Universal Design for Learning,* Portage & Main Press, Vancouver, 2012, "Creating a Community—Block One: Social and Emotional Learning," pp. 27–58.

9 Julie Carter, "It's Time to Revise the Traditional 'Whole Body Listening' Model," Julie Carter Law LLC, November 3, 2021: *juliecarterlaw.com/whole-body-listening;* "Meet Bumper: A Whole Body Learner," Autism Level UP!: *autismlevelup.com/meet-bumper-a-whole-body-learner*

Studies have shown that neurodivergent people do not seem to have difficulty communicating with each other.[5]

Problems arise when neurodivergent individuals are trying to communicate with neurotypical people. This is known as the double-empathy problem.[6] The reverse is also true. Historically, we've been trying to teach autistic students to communicate in a neurotypical way. However, all students will benefit if we teach multiple ways of communicating.

Strategies to support the development of verbal and non-verbal communication for all learners:
- Allow additional processing time; it may be longer than you think. If you re-ask the question, you are restarting the processing time.
- Reduce teacher talk: keep instructions short, simple, and explicit.
- Make sure you actually want what you are asking for. For example, if you say, "Put that over there" or "Stop that," consider where is "there" and what is "that" in these statements.
- Don't make something seem like a choice if it isn't, e.g., "Do you want to work on these math questions?"
- Use and explicitly teach gestures as a means of communicating when appropriate, e.g., point to where to hang a coat instead of saying, "Put your coat in the cubby."
- Remove pressure to use oral language by providing students with ways to respond non-verbally. For example, when anxious, overwhelmed, or in cases of selective mutism, a student can give a thumbs up/down, nod their head, draw a picture, or use facial expressions to communicate their response.
- Enhance students' understanding of others' thinking by talking about what a character in a book might think or feel about a situation based on the non-verbal clues provided. For example, the text says, "She crossed her arms." What does that mean?
- Model effective communication, both verbally and non-verbally, by using adult narration to show thinking, actions, and purpose. For example, "I am going to sit at my desk for a moment so I can think of a way to respond that helps us to learn from this situation."
- Use visuals, such as:
  - picture cues
  - photographs, e.g., how my desk looks when it's clean

- speaking voice and thinking voice [7]
  - checklists
  - gestures and signals, e.g., sign language, stop sign
  - cards or signs for occasional use, e.g., break, help, washroom.
- Explicitly teach social skills, such as active listening, turn taking, etc.
- Use role-play to record and to revise expressive non-verbal communication to enhance meaning.
- Play turn-taking games.
- Work with small groups of at least three students to allow for listening time as well as contributing time.[8]
- Connect with school support teachers about a dedicated quiet space for students to go to if communication breakdowns happen.
- Look deeper: listen to repeated phrases to determine when they are used. Find out from those closest to the child what may be meant by this behaviour.
- Work with your augmentative and alternative communication speech language pathologist (AAC-SLP) to support non-speaking students in the use of communication tools (e.g., TouchChat, core communication boards, switches, eye gaze, spelling boards).
  - Ensure the student *always* has access to their communication tool. Limiting access is similar to taping over someone's mouth.
  - Work with AAC-SLP to implement class-wide access, such as a poster of a core board for the teacher to use, or core boards at desk groupings.
  - Add age-appropriate language to their core words so they can "talk" like their peers.
  - Allow AAC user to decide when they no longer need a support.
- Encourage and support active listening (see Julie Carter's Revised Whole Body Listening and Autism Level UP's Bumper: A Whole Body Learner).[9]

In conclusion, a busy classroom presents many opportunities for adults and children to learn communication skills and strategies as a community. Like every other area of learning, there are many different ways to observe and to respond to the signals. When the adults in a room remain open to seeing that behaviour is communication, then they can together face the challenge in determining what the behaviour means. •

For links to resources and references mentioned in this article, check out the digital version at *bctf.ca*. Also see *latabc.com* for more resources.

Celebrating visual languages: BC School for the Deaf

By **Isaac Flink** (he/his), **Tommy Huang** (he/his), **Mike Kellett** (he/his), **Jonathan MacDonald** (he/his), **Kelly Sizto** (she/her), **Jo Smith** (she/her), **Christina Wilson** (she/her), **Madison Yaworski** (she/her), teachers, British Columbia School for the Deaf (BCSD)

BEFORE WILLIAM STOKOE (a hearing person) defined the linguistics of American Sign Language (ASL) in 1965, even culturally deaf* people had been taught to believe it was not a legitimate language. He identified the syntax and morphology that make it a true language, rather than a system of gestures. While many people have heard of ASL, there is a widespread misconception that it is a universal signed language. Just as there is no universal spoken language, there are over 300 signed languages worldwide, and there are at least 5 in Canada alone: ASL, Langue des Signes du Quebec (LSQ), Maritime Sign Language (used in Atlantic Canada), Oneida Sign Language, Inuit Sign Language, Plains Sign Language, and many other Indigenous sign languages. ASL is used across Anglophone North America and has roots in several sources: Indigenous sign languages, French Sign Language (through Laurent Clerc, also known as the apostle of the Deaf in America), and Martha's Vineyard Sign Language (a dialect local to a small island in Massachusetts).

Signed languages were used extensively until a conference in Milan, Italy in 1880. At this meeting of (mostly hearing) educators, there was a bias toward oral education and the use of speech, and it was voted that signed languages were banned in educational settings. Unfortunately, this disconnect between natural language and education continued well into the 20th century, even after Stokoe's publications. In the absence of formal signed languages, other manual forms of communication were developed, including Signed Exact English I and II and Cued Speech. These systems of communication are used to manually represent English and are not distinct languages.

After 130 years, the 1880 Milan vote was overturned in 2010 at the 21st International Congress on the Education of the Deaf held in Vancouver, BC. But the damage had been done: Deaf people were deprived from their true language for the comfort of the rest of society for more than a century.

Support for ASL is coming back slowly: instead of creating a unifying mode of communication, we are now celebrating different languages and modes. Sign language is popping up everywhere on social media and in pop culture, with people teaching it on Instagram, Deaf themes and actors featured in movies and TV, and an interpreter presence in news reports.

Our ableist world often encourages culturally deaf people to become "more hearing" rather than celebrating their abilities as they are. Some are framed from birth with the lens of "failing" a test, and throughout life are expected to learn lipreading and spend hours training in speech skills to fit in with the norm of spoken language. Each person who chooses to use assistive hearing technology will access sound differently, not to mention the complexities of processing sound as language. There is so much variance in deafness that visual language is the only mode of communication that is reliable enough to use with everyone, including people who are Deaf-Blind (BCSD has a program for that, too!).

Because signed languages originate in specific geographic locations, they encompass the soul of the peoples who craft

The use of visual language is an important part of ensuring all students have equitable access to education and equitable opportunity in all spaces.

and use them. They are filled with culture, history, experience, story, and are a means of building identity and connection. Using ASL allows culturally deaf people to confidently express themselves, improving equity for deaf people to be seen and heard without limitations.

BCSD is a school designed around visual language and the culture surrounding its use. It is built on a philosophy of celebrating the use of visual language and the true self-expression that comes with it. Focusing on visual language allows communication of feelings, desires, dislikes, and abstract thought. When the language of instruction is ASL, students can receive information effortlessly. This contrasts "listening fatigue," which is the exhaustion associated with attending to an interpreter or trying to process bits and pieces of conversation. Additionally, some students arrive at BCSD exhibiting behaviour disorders. Teachers note that when communication breakdowns are reduced, the student's frustration and problem behaviour often subsides accordingly.

Our school has two campuses: one at South Slope Elementary and one at Burnaby South Secondary. It also has a community commons called the Deaf Pod, which is a flexible, open space for students to gather socially during breaks or for productive group learning during class. The focus on visual language creates a tight-knit community of language users, building a strong support network and creating pride among individuals.

Most teachers and educational assistants (many of whom are Deaf and Hard of Hearing) use fluent ASL in real-time teaching communication. Our team also has several passionate hearing teachers who are eagerly learning ASL! Hearing staff are welcomed into the BCSD community and are quickly immersed in deaf space and culture. Hearing teachers become aware of their "hearing privilege," a term that refers to the multitude of advantages hearing people enjoy in a world that assumes and rewards people for their hearing status.

Classrooms at BCSD are set up to optimize visual learning. For example, many classrooms are set up in a horse-shoe design because it provides the best sight lines for class discussions. For Deaf-Blind students, the school focuses on routine and space. Deaf-Blind students need consistency to predict their next steps. Hallways are kept as clear as possible and classrooms need to be free of clutter so they can find what they need independently. Once in a while, we rearrange classroom spaces to encourage problem-solving and relearning.

Some students at BCSD take mainstreamed classes with interpreters. The school features a dormitory where students are supported in extra-curricular activities and studies by staff who are familiar with ASL or are native ASL users, have meals and social time together, and are provided access to even more community resources.

Outside of these signing spaces, many students struggle to be understood and to feel connected to people around them—even at home. Coming to BCSD provides an opportunity to connect with those with similar experiences, meet role models, and flourish.

There are many students across the province who use visual language but are not able to attend BCSD and are instead enrolled in mainstreamed programs. It is still important to support visual language use to help these students connect and flourish. Even if you are not proficient in ASL, all you need is patience and a willingness to navigate visual space.

Culturally deaf people are often the ones to reach further over the gap. We encourage hearing people who are afraid of making mistakes to just go for it—gesturing, miming, and facial expressions are things that cross language barriers and are much more efficient (and entertaining!) than trying to force one sense to do the job of another. All of us have busy lives, and learning a new language is an intimidating goal. Instead, we suggest you start small: begin by using gestures and drawing pictures to initiate conversations with deaf students. Later, take time to learn a few basic signs. "Hello," "Thank you," and "How are you?" go a long way to helping deaf students feel seen and welcome in hearing spaces.

The use of visual language is an important part of ensuring all students have equitable access to education and equitable opportunity in all spaces. We encourage all teachers to take a moment to reflect on your classroom space and teaching practice. Language barriers exist for students both hearing and deaf. The interpreter is not there for the Deaf person. The interpreter is there because there are people who know ASL and there are people who don't know ASL in the same room. By opening our minds to various modes of communication and visual language we can create opportunities that match individual learning needs. ●

*The Provincial Outreach Program for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing is an excellent resource that teachers can use to find ways to support their signing students: **www.popdhh.ca**. To learn more about the need for language development in young people, check out **@language1st** on Instagram.*

*AUTHORS' NOTE

It is common in culturally deaf conversation to refer to someone who can hear as "a hearing person." Previously, the capitalized term "Deaf" meant culturally deaf (as opposed to a person who is deaf and does not participate in the culture). There is discourse surrounding replacing the terms "Deaf" and "deaf" with "culturally deaf" and "not culturally deaf," respectively; we have used a combination of these terms in this article.
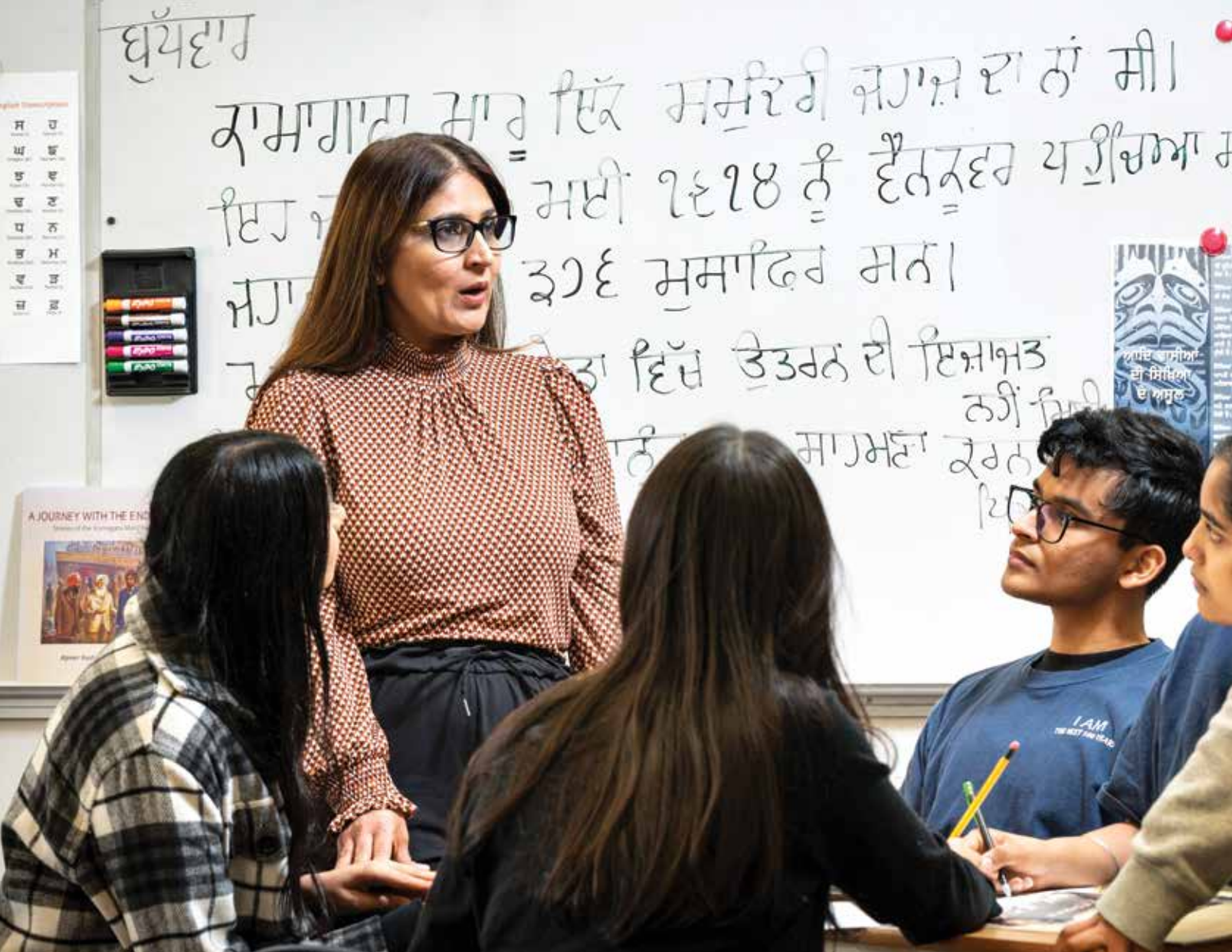
MENTORSHIP THROUGH IDENTITY

WHEN YOU SIT IN on one of Gurpreet Kaur Bains's Punjabi classes at LA Matheson Secondary School (LAM), it's easy to see students' knowledge of spoken and written Punjabi. What's less visible, but perhaps more important, is the way this Punjabi program fosters students' connection to Punjabi culture and promotes strong cultural identity.

Gurpreet's career in education started out as a science and learning support teacher. When the opportunity to teach Punjabi language at her current school came up, she was eager to take on the new role to expand the program beyond literacy and language and include learning that emphasizes identity and culture. Gurpreet believes in empowering students, engaging community, and thinking critically about culture, all through Punjabi language instruction. "Identity and culture are integral parts of teaching language. Culturally relevant instruction can result in a more in-depth discovery of language, but infusion of culture must go beyond just dine, dance, and dress," said Gurpreet.

Gurpreet has worked with several community organizations to weave together language and culture in her Punjabi classes, including the Next Hundred Years Mentorship Program, Kaur Collective, Vancouver International South Asian Film Festival, Shakti Society, Dhahan Youth Prize, Surrey School District Film and Speech Festival, Punjabi Language Education Association, Mustang Justice, and Indus Media Foundation. All of these fall under the umbrella of Punjabi Mustang, a program dedicated to taking ownership of language and connecting to one's roots.

As the program grew, Safe Schools, a leader in prevention and intervention programs for youth, approached Gurpreet and presented an opportunity to create a mentorship program focused on identity. LAM students in Punjabi 11 and 12 were chosen as the first mentors in the program, called Next 100 Years Mentorship Program. The name comes from the publication titled *The 100 Year Journey* by Rana Vig and Rupa Vig.

Gurpreet Kaur Bains with Punjabi 11 and 12 students. All photos by Joshua Berson Photography.

RESOURCES FOR BRINGING SOUTH ASIAN CULTURE AND HISTORY TO YOUR CLASSROOM

Untold Stories: The South Asian Pioneer Experience by Karen Dosanjh
This book documents the stories of the first wave of South Asians who immigrated from Punjab to BC in the early 1900s.

The 100 Year Journey by Rana Vig and Rupa Vig
This book is a collection of personal stories and photos of Punjabi settlers in BC. The collection highlights resiliency and the lasting legacy of Punjabi settlers in BC.

South Asian Canadian Legacy Project available at *openschool.bc.ca/saffronthreads*
This collaborative project that was co-written by a group of South Asian educators, BCTF members, and University of Fraser Valley staff includes K–12 learning resources for educators to explore South Asian Canadian culture, history, and heritage in BC.

South Asian Canadian Digital Archive available at *sacda.ca*
This digital archive includes photos and exhibits that highlight South Asian Canadian history and contributions, and features one exhibit specifically on labour history.

Duty, Honour & Izzat: From Golden Fields to Crimson— Punjab's Brothers in Arms in Flanders by Steven Purewal
This book highlights the role of Punjabi Canadian soldiers in WWI in France and Belgium.

> *If students do not see themselves in the curriculum … engagement and sense of belonging is diminished.*
>
> – Gurpreet Kaur Bains

This book highlights migration stories of settler Punjabi pioneers in BC and their struggles and resilience as they made a home for themselves in Canada. It also centres their contributions and legacy. Through peer mentorship, students explore subjects such as inclusion, racism, identity, resilience, belonging, and prejudice. These themes are taught in the Punjabi language classroom using stories, classroom discussions, guest speakers, and activities such as interviewing grandparents, parents, and community members. Students also complete various film projects to build and share their learning. All of these activities give students an opportunity to learn more about their families' stories and experiences of migration, and dig deeper into what it means to be a settler.

Many participants, like Manreet Sandhu, a 2022 LAM grad and winner of the Cmolik Foundation Scholarship, express their feelings after participating in the program as "incredibly rewarding, insightful, and helpful in building connections to make better communities." She commented that mentorship is "a two-way street where you get as much as you put in."

Riya Samra, a Grade 11 student at LAM, said, "Learning Punjabi language gave me the skills and connection to my identity, which helped me discover the person I want to be." Mentorship also taught her "patience, flexibility, and not to judge anyone based on the way they look."

Students in the program have taken on a leadership role in the school and brought attention to areas within the curriculum and other school activities that lack representation. For example, in the past when students learned about Remembrance Day, there was no mention of the 1.1 million Indian soldiers who served in World War One (WWI) under the British Empire. Students pointed out that despite the large South Asian population at the school, there was not a single turbaned soldier in any textbook lessons about WWI, nor the slideshow that used to be part of the school's Remembrance Day commemoration. Indus Media Foundation displays

and artifacts in the hallways have brought these hidden stories to light.

"If students do not see themselves in the curriculum, their engagement and sense of belonging is diminished," said Gurpreet.

Through conversations in the Punjabi classroom, students shared their rich family histories and stories of great-grandparents who served in various wars. Gurpreet's maternal grandfather also served in WWII and was a prisoner of war. The Punjabi program at LAM created an opportunity to bring these stories of identity and history to the entire school population. Together, students and teachers worked to re-create a more inclusive, less Eurocentric, commemoration of Remembrance Day that reflected students' and staff's personal stories and histories.

To create more opportunities for students to learn from role models who share their cultural identity, the mentorship and Punjabi language program brings in several guest speakers every year. Settler pioneer families are invited to share their stories with the class, as well as prominent members of the community, such as Baltej Singh Dhillon, the first turbaned Sikh RCMP officer, and the Dosanjh family, whose ancestor came to Canada in the early 1900s.

After a successful pilot project at two elementary schools, the mentorship program has now expanded into four elementary schools in Surrey. Each year, several mentors in Grades 10–12 are selected to receive additional training before they get to know their elementary school mentees. The training is supported by the Surrey School District, Surrey RCMP, and Equitas, a human rights education organization. The training helps students gain an understanding of how to support their mentees and covers topics including youth rights, the difference between rights and privileges, and how to create safe and inclusive communities. These mentors apply their training and use their own knowledge and connection to Punjabi language and culture to deliver workshops and help plan and co-ordinate celebrations such

as Vaisakhi at their designated elementary school.

"Cultural holiday traditions and celebrations are important in building strong bonds between family and community. They give us a sense of belonging and a way to express what is important to us. They connect us to our history, roots, and ancestors," said Gurpreet.

This year, two students from the mentorship program, along with their teacher Gurpreet, will be featured in an upcoming documentary titled *Hidden Histories: Settler Pioneer Sikhs in Canada.* The documentary will highlight the ways in which the mentorship program supports positive cultural identity development through language, mentorship, and cultural connections across the curriculum. You can watch the documentary soon on PBS or at the Sikh Art and Film Festival.

Programs like Next 100 Years Mentorship stress the need for building connections and community to help ease the transition from elementary school to high school, and create a positive and supportive school culture. In the seven years the program has been running, the school has seen a marked improvement in school culture, sense of belonging, engagement, diverse representation, peer connections, communication with students and families, and student anxiety.

"The program has benefited both elementary and secondary school students. Kids need to see themselves in their curriculum to build a strong sense of self and belonging. This program aims to do just that, and we've seen long-term benefits for both mentors and mentees," said Gurpreet. •

What is the biggest challenge French teachers face?

Quel est le plus grand défi auquel le personnel enseignant en français est confronté?

By Elizabeth Rush (she/they, elle/iel), SEPF teacher, gender-fluid settler on traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the Lekwungen speaking people, also known as the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations, colonially known as Victoria

... approaches to the language that make audible and visible the gender identities of non-binary, gender-fluid, trans, and gender-creative people ...

FROM MY PERSPECTIVE, the key challenge stems from an incredibly exciting arena of innovation within French teaching in BC. I'm talking about approaches to the language that make audible and visible the gender identities of non-binary, gender-fluid, trans, and gender-creative people, and tackle equitable representation of all individuals in French. This is as much about modelling inclusive French as it is about locating, developing, and revisiting resources from the standpoint of gender equity. Our federal and provincial human rights frameworks offer this extraordinary generative potential in that they enable us to creatively resist the cis-sexism that is evident in the way specific social institutions (such as the Académie française) police grammar to exclude non-binary identities. Teachers seeking French resources that discuss and model inclusive grammar can scan the QR code (left) or visit *https://qrco.de/bdRNUe*. Together, we can teach a form of French that respects human rights and gives fair representation to all students.

... d'approches qui rendent audibles et visibles les identités de genre des personnes non binaires, fluides, trans et créatives sur le plan du genre ...

DE MON POINT DE VUE, le principal défi découle d'un champ d'innovation passionnant au sein de l'enseignement du français en Colombie-Britannique. Je parle d'approches qui rendent audibles et visibles les identités de genre des personnes non binaires, fluides, trans et créatives sur le plan du genre, et qui se penchent sur la représentation équitable de tous les individus en français. Il s'agit autant de modéliser un français inclusif que de localiser, développer et reconsidérer les ressources dans une perspective d'équité de genre. Nos cadres fédéraux et provinciaux des droits de la personne offrent cet extraordinaire potentiel génératif en nous permettant de résister de façon créative au cissexisme apparent dans la façon dont des institutions sociales spécifiques (comme l'Académie française) gèrent la grammaire pour exclure les identités non binaires. Le lien suivant (*https://qrco.de/bdRNUe*) s'adresse au personnel enseignant qui cherche des ressources en français abordant et modelant la grammaire inclusive. Ensemble, nous pouvons enseigner un français qui respecte les droits de la personne et qui offre une représentation équitable à l'ensemble de nos élèves.

By Sonja Gowda, French immersion teacher, Dawson Creek

... a sense of isolation. Limited professional development opportunities in French mean that immersion teachers cannot collaborate readily with colleagues ...

FRENCH IMMERSION teachers face numerous challenges; one of the greatest obstacles is a sense of isolation. Limited professional development opportunities in French mean that immersion teachers cannot collaborate readily with colleagues, nor easily access the latest educational resources. Available resources must be translated into French or adapted to fit the language level of the students, while at the same time remaining relevant to the region. Teachers must therefore invent authentic language learning experiences for their students with limited resources, and without the linguistic and cultural reinforcement from the community. The school is often the *only* place in the community where students get to experience French culture and use French language. This challenge was highlighted when schools shifted to distance learning. Teachers were left to invent creative solutions to help their students continue their French language education, while parents struggled to find alternate French resources to support their children.

... principalement le sentiment d'isolement. La collaboration professionnelle nourrit et encourage la créativité chez l'enseignant.e.

LES ENSEIGNANT.E.S EN IMMERSION FRANÇAISE font face à plusieurs défis, principalement le sentiment d'isolement. La collaboration professionnelle nourrit et encourage la créativité chez l'enseignant.e. Malheureusement, l'accès limité au développement professionnel, ainsi que la collaboration entre collègues en immersion sont restreints en régions éloignées. Les ressources disponibles doivent être traduites en français ou adaptées pour correspondre au niveau langagier des élèves et les caractéristiques uniques de notre milieu. Le personnel enseignant doit donc créer des expériences d'apprentissage linguistique authentiques pour ses élèves avec des ressources limitées et sans le renforcement linguistique et culturel de la communauté. L'école est souvent le SEUL endroit où les élèves peuvent s'engager avec la langue et la culture française. Ce défi a été mis en évidence lorsque les écoles sont passées à l'apprentissage à distance. Les enseignant.e.s ont dû inventer des solutions créatives pour aider les/ces élèves à poursuivre leur éducation en français, tandis que les parents se sont efforcés de trouver différentes ressources en français pour soutenir leurs enfants.

By Meaghan Bowes and Kindra Harte, core French teachers, Victoria

Teaching French at the core level often comes with a sense of impostor syndrome, and teachers feel inadequately prepared when compared to their immersion and Francophone counterparts.

ONE OF THE ISSUES currently facing core French teachers in BC is that of linguistic insecurity. Teaching French at the core level often comes with a sense of impostor syndrome, and teachers feel inadequately prepared when compared to their immersion and Francophone counterparts. The requirements to teach core French can differ at each level. For this reason, teachers may have a different level of fluency and lack the confidence to engage in conversations or professional development sessions conducted in French. As a result, many teachers are left feeling insecure and miss out on opportunities to become part of a rich and well-supported community. Hopefully, as we pivot back to in-person events, there will be opportunities for language teachers at all levels to connect, seek mentorship, and increase their own proficiency.

L'enseignement du français de base s'accompagne souvent d'un sentiment du syndrome de l'imposteur, et les enseignant.e.s se sentent mal préparé.e.s par rapport à ses homologues des programmes d'immersion et des programmes francophones.

L'UN DES PROBLÈMES AUXQUELS est confronté le personnel enseignant du français de base en Colombie-Britannique est l'insécurité linguistique. L'enseignement du français de base s'accompagne souvent d'un sentiment du syndrome de l'imposteur, et les enseignant.e.s se sentent mal préparé.e.s comparativement à ses homologues des programmes d'immersion et des programmes francophones. Les exigences et les qualifications pour enseigner le français peuvent différer à chaque niveau. Par conséquent, le personnel enseignant au programme de français de base possède souvent un niveau de maîtrise différent et manque parfois de confiance pour participer à des conversations ou à des sessions de perfectionnement professionnel en français. Ainsi, beaucoup de personnes qui enseignent se sentent peu en confiance et ratent des occasions de faire partie d'une communauté riche et bien soutenue. Espérons qu'avec la réouverture des événements en présentiel, le personnel enseignant de langues à tous les niveaux aura l'occasion de se rencontrer, de chercher du mentorat et d'améliorer ses propres compétences.

Decolonizing learning spaces: Possibility and process

By Alanna Skene (she/her), teacher-librarian and inquiry project co-ordinator, Cowichan Valley

DECOLONIZATION: is it possible in a colonial education system? What does it mean? How can we progress in education through the truth and reconciliation process that honours Indigenous Peoples and cultures? How can we shift focus from "learning about" to "learning with"? These are all questions teachers in Cowichan Valley asked last year as part of their teacher inquiry project. These are all challenging and complicated questions that are vital to address if we are to ensure that the educational system in our district moves toward understanding the truth about Canada's history and then participates in honest and authentic reconciliation.

Teachers in this project came from many different backgrounds to participate in this inquiry. Many were teacher-librarians, in both the elementary and secondary levels, some were classroom teachers and others were teachers in Indigenous education departments. All these teachers had questions about how to ensure that their learning spaces honoured Indigenous Peoples, students, staff, communities, Indigenous ways of knowing, and Indigenous knowledge, while also ensuring that they were not tokenizing or "othering." These questions lead every teacher to reflect upon past practices and personal growth. This journey was one of personal evolution, self-improvement, relearning, clear intentions, and so much more.

In this first year of our inquiry, we worked with the BCTF facilitators to develop individual questions around "decolonizing learning spaces." These questions varied considerably, evolved throughout the process, and allowed us to focus on our own schools, students, and communities to determine how we could improve the learning spaces for all. This inquiry project, for many of us, was a starting place. It allowed for space, conversation, and time to see what we needed to do to re-evaluate and adjust our pedagogical practice to better serve the needs of our students and to help others in their understanding of the truth and reconciliation process.

Experiential and place-based learning with Indigenous community members

Some of the classroom teachers within this group looked at ways to increase authentic content and experiences by involving local Indigenous community members and Elders to foster respect for the diverse cultures present within the school's community. Sometimes they invited guest speakers to talk to students about first-hand experiences related to content they were discussing in class. Other times, students travelled to and learned about places through the oral histories of community Elders. This place-based and experiential learning was rooted in Indigenous knowledge and allowed teachers to deliver curriculum in a manner that helped to dismantle the colonial lens of the social studies content. This learning also allowed students and staff to build respectful and long-lasting relationships with local Indigenous community members. This practice will continue and become stronger in the years to come, and will allow all students to see and experience the place they live in, while deeply understanding and connecting to the history of the local peoples. It also allowed Indigenous students to feel celebrated and honoured within their school community. Students are curious and pivotal in the healing of Canada's past, and their learning is vital to reverse the inequity and racism left in Canada by colonialism.

Practising Indigenous ways of knowing

Other classroom teachers looked at avenues to improve instruction by incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing into their practice. These teachers began by centring their practice around the whole child, while endeavouring to decentre their own whiteness to allow students to understand that they are all honoured and have gifts to share. By teaching content in a manner that allowed students to understand the impact of colonialism, they created an environment for young students to question past colonial practices and find ways to become better citizens and show respect, collaboration, and kindness to all people within their community.

Celebrating community diversity and Indigenous culture with welcoming spaces

A theme that wove throughout every project in this inquiry process was how to create learning spaces that welcomed and celebrated the diversity of the school's students and community. As the project progressed, these teachers began to dive deeper into how they could create learning environments that honoured their students' diversity and Indigenous cultures. To create these welcoming spaces, many teachers began to seriously look at their classrooms and libraries and make changes so children felt invited into the space, able to find safe places to self-regulate, and cared for and respected. Here are some ways that teachers improved learning spaces:

- Ensuring signage was in both English and Hul'q'umi'num', as language revitalization is imperative to undoing settler-colonial alienation.
- Authentically acknowledging the land that we all work and live on.
- Ensuring all resources are authentic and showcase diverse and Indigenous voices, perspectives, and experiences.
- Showcasing/displaying resources (books) and artwork that celebrate Indigenous and local culture, as students must see themselves and their culture reflected in the school in order to feel that they belong.
- Having conversations with Indigenous students about what makes a learning space welcoming and inviting, and what teachers can do in their own classrooms.
- Engaging in continued professional and personal learning to better understand the impact of colonization, racism, and oppression and how to combat these in the classroom and library learning commons within our schools.
- For libraries specifically:
  - Weeding culturally inaccurate resources that perpetuate negative and harmful stereotypes and are told from a white-settler lens.
  - Acquiring resources that celebrate and honour Indigenous knowledge, contributions, and worldviews, that are "own voices," authentic, and represent the community of the school.
  - Looking at how to organize Indigenous knowledge that uses relationship to categorize, rather than a hierarchy of knowledge (Brian Deer Classification instead of Dewey Decimal Classification).

What is teacher inquiry?

The BCTF Teacher Inquiry Program provides professional development opportunities for groups of teachers to collaborate on an inquiry topic they develop that relates to the BCTF Leadership Priorities. For more information visit **bctf.ca**.

Overall, teachers in this project found that they each could do more to make all students feel welcome and invited into their learning environments. These teachers are now doing what they can to create learning spaces within their schools that are more welcoming, and they are more willing to be catalysts for further positive change within their school environments.

Personal and professional growth and understanding

Every teacher on this journey shared that their own personal and professional growth were the most important aspects of this inquiry project. These teachers also stated that this learning was only the beginning of their journey with reconciliation. Continued intentional effort and practice allowed us to push through aspects that were challenging and often overwhelming. Dismantling our own biased views of the world and education was at times a struggle and still is part of all our own learning. Continuing in this important professional development will ensure that more students feel included and will therefore engage with learning in our schools. We have all learned deeply about ourselves as individuals and educators, and will continue to unapologetically work to promote the process of "challenging and dismantling settler colonialism" within our own practices.[1] We will also persevere in promoting and seeking out resources and pedagogical practices that honour, value, and uplift the children we teach, to celebrate the experiences of all. Moving forward, I know that the educators who participated in this project will all find ways to create learning environments that provide space for all children to feel valued and celebrated. •

Acknowledgment

1 Aubrey Jean Hanson, "Teaching Indigenous Literatures for Decolonization: Challenging Learning, Learning to Challenge," *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 66, No. 2, June 2020, pp. 207–222: *doi.org/10.11575/ajer.v66i2.68509*

Irene Kelleher Totí:ltawtxw:
New school honours first Indigenous teacher in BC

By Nancy Knickerbocker, BCTF staff

IF IRENE KELLEHER could walk through the tall glass doors of the new school that bears her name, into the light-flooded foyer, past the library full of Indigenous children's literature, seat herself on one of the circular couches upholstered in the colours of the medicine wheel, and gaze up at the waves of blonde wood and roof beams designed to echo the ribs of an upturned canoe—well, you can easily imagine that her eyes would be brimming with tears of joy and her heart swelling with quiet pride.

Totí:ltawtxw, the Halq'eméylem word meaning "house of learning," is part of the school's name too.[1] During the naming consultation period last spring, the Abbotsford School District received almost 800 submissions, including from many former students.

"As we aim for reconciliation and healing from the atrocities wrought upon the Indigenous people of this country, to name the school in her honour as an SD 34 teacher would be both healing and an acknowledgment of her tireless work to help her people," one person wrote.

"As a teacher Miss Kelleher practised kindness, respect of all students, a pride in her culture and heritage, and a love of nature and the environment," another local resident wrote. "She modelled perseverance as she followed her dream to become a teacher despite the racial barriers she faced at the time."

The first Indigenous person certified to teach in British Columbia, Irene did indeed face many personal and professional obstacles because of racism and the stigma of being a so-called "half-breed," a derogatory term that she disliked but

1 Totí:ltawtxw, the Halq'eméylem word meaning "house of learning," is pronounced *tuh-teelt-OUT.* Scan the QR code to hear audio from a native speaker.

2 All royalties from Dr. Jean Barman's book *Invisible Generations* will go to the two scholarship funds at the University of the Fraser Valley generously endowed by Irene—further evidence of her enduring commitment to Indigenous students.

emphatically used to describe how the dominant settler society perceived her and her family.

Irene's family story is told in detail by the eminent BC historian Jean Barman in *Invisible Generations: Living Between Indigenous and White in the Fraser Valley.*[2] Irene's grandfathers came to BC from Ireland and the United States during the gold rush and both married Indigenous women who bore numerous children.

Irene's father, Cornelius Kelleher, and her mother, Julia Mathilda Wells, both attended the St. Mary's Mission run by Oblate priests and Sisters of Saint Ann. Neither received much of an education, but she learned sewing and "fancy work," becoming an accomplished seamstress. Cornie and Mattie, as they were known, settled in Matsqui and had two children: Albert and Irene.

Although her brother quit school before graduating, Irene continued her education thanks to the encouragement of a favourite teacher at Matsqui High. She trained at the Provincial Normal School in Vancouver, graduating with a second-class teaching certificate.

Devoted as she was to her parents, Irene's fondest wish was to teach in her home community but, as she told Barman, "I could not teach in the district. The secretary was an Englishman, he didn't want a half-breed teaching his children."

For decades, Irene was forced to go to places "on the margins," where communities were grateful for any qualified teacher, regardless of her racial heritage. In 1921, she began her teaching career in a one-room schoolhouse in the remote mining community of Usk on the Skeena River, more than 1,200 kilometres from home. Her annual salary was $1,020.

In the fall of 1925, Irene enrolled in the University of BC to get her first-class teaching certificate. As the only "half-breed" student there, she felt isolated yet persevered. Irene worked hard at her professional development. Every summer from 1924 to 1958, she took courses at the Victoria or Vancouver normal schools to improve her teaching practice.

Above: LSS and ELL teacher Amanda Coluccio, Indigenous success teacher Charlotte Tommy, and Indigenous support worker Thea Zosiak. **Opposite top left:** Irene Kelleher, courtesy of The Reach, P111696. **Opposite top right and below left:** Irene Kelleher Totí:ltawtxw, courtesy of Abbotsford School District.

She took courses on teaching English to new Canadians, which proved useful over the next decade when she taught Russian-speaking Doukhobor children in the Kootenays. It was a difficult and sometimes dangerous role. Fearing they would be assimilated into the secular society, the Doukhobors used arson to resist regulations requiring their children to attend public school. Despite the difficulties, Irene continued teaching Doukhobor students until 1939, when her school in Ootischenia was bombed.

Finally, Irene landed a job back home at North Poplar School in Abbotsford. She was paid $1,050—only $30 more than her starting salary almost 20 years earlier! She was later promoted to school principal, and for the next 25 years was a respected education leader in her community. In 1964, Irene retired after 44 years in public education. She died on March 16, 2004, at the age of 102.

Now Irene's rich legacy lives on in the beautiful school on top of Eagle Mountain. Her story inspires both staff and students, says Indigenous support worker Thea Zosiak. "She never gave up on her dream. This is the same attitude I have," Thea said. "I'm so grateful to be working here with this team of teachers. We're all women who are continuing that journey like Irene."

As the school's teacher for Indigenous success, Charlotte Tommy appreciates the thoughtful way that Indigenous

story and natural elements have been built into the school. "It's a design marvel," she said, pointing out how the curved bookshelves and hallways, the soft blues and greens of the walls and flooring evoke water and waves. All the furnishings and carpets feature Indigenous art and design, and all signs throughout the school are in English, Halq'eméylem, and Braille.

Charlotte has noticed that since her students from Sumas First Nation moved to the new school, attendance is much improved. "That just speaks for itself," she said, adding that "their comfort level here is fabulous."

Each classroom on the ground floor has floor-to-ceiling windows that can be opened wide to create outdoor learning spaces. A school garden area is fenced off from deer and ready for planting. The glass dividers between classrooms are rarely closed, allowing teachers to collaborate easily. The school also houses the Eagle's Nest Early Learning Centre and both before- and after-school care programs.

Learning support services and English language learner teacher Amanda Coluccio is extremely happy to be part of the first staff team. "We really get to build something together," she said. "We're all bringing our different experiences to create an amazing space to learn, work, and play." •

Creating queer community: Virtual affinity spaces

I moved to a small, remote community with a population of less than 150 people at the north end of Vancouver Island in 2018. Honestly, living here as a gay Black man has been very challenging. There is no queer community and no activities within the community to cultivate a culture of awareness and acceptance. I have felt isolated for many reasons. Events like the virtual queer teacher meet-ups have helped me feel less alone. I have realized that I can't be a resource if I don't have access to resources, and I can't be a support if I don't have supports.

– Christopher Rolle, teacher in Zeballos

By Heather Kelley (she/her), BCTF staff

THERE ARE MOMENTS when you know you are about to be a part of something special. I had one of those feelings last fall when I was looking at the volume of registration for the BCTF's LGBTQ2S+ teacher meet-up. We had hundreds of people sign up and register. By all accounts it was one of the most successful virtual event sign-ups the BCTF has ever had. I was elated and, to be honest, also overwhelmed.

A few weeks before, I was feeling a bit silly standing in the media room at the BCTF waiting to record a video asking other queer* teachers to join me for a virtual meet-up to build community and connection. I have since been told my awkwardness in that clip comes off as mostly charming and, to be honest, that is all I could hope for! At that moment I thought having 10 teachers connect would feel like a win, but I was uncertain if we would even get that. I was experiencing Zoom fatigue and could understand a lack of interest in yet another hour of screen time. I had no idea the chord we were about to strike with queer teachers from across the province.

The monthly queer teacher meet-ups from October to June were deeply meaningful. The growing connection and community building was beautiful to witness. Friendships grew, older teachers mentored new teachers, colleagues shared advice and support, and despite it being on Zoom, during one of the most challenging teaching years, there was such joy and laughter. We had hundreds of queer educators joining us from across the province, many of whom continued to come back every month.

We started out in one large group for folks to connect, but soon realized that, because queer identity isn't a monolith, we needed to create more specific break-out rooms for folks to connect with people who shared specific aspects of their identity and lived experience. This included dedicated spaces for QTBIPOC educators; trans, non-binary, gender-fluid, and gender non-conforming educators; pansexual and bisexual educators; lesbians; gay men; queer parents; queer elementary teachers; queer secondary teachers; new teachers; and a space to discuss resources and policy. The appetite for connection and space to talk to other queer teachers was palpable.

There are many reasons that queer teachers need and want community. First, schools reproduce, teach, assume, reinforce, celebrate, and desexualize heterosexuality. Historically, anything that is not neatly categorized as heterosexual or cisgender has been marked as problematic, deviant, and/or inappropriate. Unfortunately, this historical context often permeates school cultures even today. This places queer teachers in a space that is often complicated to navigate, with most of us having no road map to follow. Many queer educators expressed feelings of isolation and a lack of support. For some, queerness still seems like a professional liability. We had especially high participation from teachers in more rural parts of the province, who felt they couldn't come out as queer in their job and others who didn't have any access to queer community within a hundred-mile radius.

As someone who grew up in a tiny village in the North, I can certainly relate to the challenges of being the only queer person, that I was aware of, in a small town and feeling very divorced from any connection to queer community or acceptance. I would have greatly benefited from having access to one queer educator during my education program or my early years of teaching. Younger me would not have thought it possible to have more than a hundred queer educators together talking about being queer teachers and all the joys and challenges that come with that. Even now, for me as a gay teacher who has intentionally created queer-teacher community for myself, these events were and will continue to be something special. •

We look forward to connecting again with queer teachers on the first Thursday of every month, from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. Visit **opportunities.bctf.ca/monthlymeetups** *for more information.*

* AUTHOR'S NOTE

I use the word queer to include any and all folks who don't identify as straight or cisgender. For me, queer is a term that is inclusive of gay, lesbian, bi, pan, ace, and all trans, non-binary, gender non-conforming, and gender-fluid folks.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS ARE SAYING

Being a queer, trans educator can be very isolating, even in a large urban district, in 2022. In many communities and locals, there are no LGBTQ2IA+ supports; sometimes just talking about yourself and being who you are can be a challenge. Sometimes it doesn't even feel safe. This is why the provincial meet-up is so important. **– Lee Locker, teacher in Victoria**

I attended a few of the LGBTQ+ meet-ups, and wished I could have attended more. Last year was my first year teaching and my first year being openly non-binary. Attending the meet-ups allowed me to connect with other queer and non-binary teachers, something that was really valuable to me, as I know of only two queer teachers in my own district. I did not grow up with any LGBTQ+ representation in my own schooling, and so the meet-ups became an opportunity for me to share experiences, seek advice, and just make nice connections with teachers across the province. **– Nat Baillaut, teacher in Saanich**

The queer teacher meet-ups have been a much-needed mode of connection this past year. They have become something I look forward to, not only to give and receive support, but also to build friendships and cultivate community in and around my district and even across the province.

– Christina Billingham, teacher in Chilliwack

Queer community within teaching is fundamental to well-being for queer teachers. The opportunity to feel safe in discussing the unique experience of being a queer teacher is invaluable, especially for folks who may still be closeted or live in a rural community where they don't have access to other queer teachers for connection. Systemic bias continues to exist for queer folks who endure public attacks for simply being queer. The opportunity to discuss these issues in a safe space on an ongoing basis is key to thriving as an educator. It only takes one "I totally understand" from a colleague to change your trajectory as an educator. Queer connection spaces within the teaching community also offer the opportunity to say, "And what else?" Participants don't need to retraumatize each other by asking for the whole story again; however, they can dive deeper as a supportive community and move forward by asking important questions like, "What was the real challenge for you in that situation?" This kind of community creates a foundational support system for queer teachers to thrive.

– Lori Jones, teacher in Nelson

How UNESCO can strengthen classroom practices

By **Nichelle Penney** (she/her), social studies teacher, Kamloops; and **Susan Hall** (she/her), arts educator, Vancouver

TWO STUDENTS stand in front of a tree and speak passionately as if delivering an oratory. Their topic: what makes this neighbourhood tree a good "story tree"? Some of the audience, a Grade 4 class, nod approvingly, while others lean back with arms crossed in a stance indicating they are less convinced. A lively debate ensues as the circle of dialogue grows. The protocol of listening to understand and asking questions for the purpose of adding clarity helps this democratic practice come to life. It is uncertain how the difference of opinion will be resolved until each of the nominated trees has been visited and a vote has taken place.

Guiding the search for a story tree was a short list of criteria established during an aesthetic inquiry questioning if old-growth trees need our protection. An aesthetic inquiry challenges students to engage in deep observation and share new discoveries, primarily through an arts-focused process. Included on the list of criteria for a story tree are two critical points:

1. Evidence that the tree is old and has witnessed a lot of life.
2. The tree possesses some "magical qualities" that will draw people in, to look more carefully creating a sense of wonder and awe.

The students point out the tree's towering height, large girth, deep lines, and rough texture, as evidence of a long life. The second point is less easily explained. Art composition terms aid in helping the viewers shift between the realism that comes with being a witness and elements of composition commonly used by illustrators in the realm of storytelling. The group rushes toward the next tree

nominated and another pair take the lead, describing how something as ordinary as a tree, something we walk past every day, holds the potential to draw people in, to induce wonder, and lead us to feel a deeper connection. "I'd like you to notice the cool shape of the leaves, and if you look up, the way the light comes through at the top is magical," begins the speaker.

The tree selected will be decorated with a string of painted leaves and thoughtful messages creating awareness in the community of the important role trees play in a sustainable future. If people passing by linger long enough to consider this tree as a vital part of the ecosystem, the action taken by students will have made an impact.

~

An UNESCO schools framework ... means using school-wide themes to prompt inquiry, exploration, and dialogue encouraging learners to reimagine the world through a lens of empathy.

This lesson is one of many that has recently occurred in a classroom that is part of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Schools Network. When I first transferred to a UNESCO school, I had no idea what the title entailed, so I had some learning to do at a quick pace. I started with the history of the UNESCO Schools Network.

The organization began in 1953 when a small collection of schools across 15 countries signed a commitment to create a learning culture focused on a global educational foundation. Canada joined the program in 2002, encompassing a vision of welcoming new member schools in all provinces. With 117 schools across Canada (5 of those in BC), it has been a great opportunity to exchange ideas, work with themes across grade levels, and connect my students with others across the country.

As an active union member, and a passionate social justice advocate, I constantly find rewarding challenges and new discoveries in teaching social justice and genocide studies. Now, in the volunteer role I share with Susan Hall as provincial co-ordinator of BC UNESCO schools, I have a strengthened commitment to engaging in social justice topics in all of my classes and have encountered new opportunities to challenge myself and my students through our learning.

So, what does it mean to be a part of the UNESCO Schools Network?

An UNESCO schools framework supports an individual's journey toward becoming a good global citizen. Practically speaking, in classrooms, this means using school-wide themes to prompt inquiry, exploration, and dialogue encouraging learners to reimagine the world through a lens of empathy. Students are encouraged to take on small action projects to create awareness at the community level.

As a social studies teacher in this network, I am constantly editing my lessons to ensure that relevant current issues are included and supported. Connecting the past, present, and future helps students locate themselves in the ongoing dialogue.

One of my Grade 9 students, after exploring the ongoing impact of treaties and colonization, reflected in their final report, "We obviously do not pay enough respect to Indigenous people, and we need to do better." The use of the present tense in a reflective writing entry highlights the kind of shift that happens when participants link historical actions to the work ahead.

Discussion about difficult topics such as poverty, discrimination, and oppression are interwoven into many of the lessons. These discussions can be challenging for many students. It takes time to build the kind of trust that is necessary to share personal thoughts and ideas. One strategy I have used to build that trust is to become vulnerable; I put out aspects of my history that connect to the lesson, such as my experience with intergenerational trauma.

This vulnerability has made it easier for students to find their voice and share with a small group before bravely speaking to the class. Furthermore, individual or group projects are a time to do a deep dive into a topic that matters most to each learner. The wide range of topics and method of delivery models the kind of self-directed learning that offers a thoughtful reflection about being a change-maker.

One of the strengths of the UNESCO Schools Network is the open collection of resources related to a wide range of social justice topics to support this learning in classrooms. Experts in fields such as reconciliation, anti-racism education, environmentalism, peace, inclusion, and sustainability, just to name a few, offer materials relevant to K–12 classrooms.

Equally important to teachers in the UNESCO network is the opportunity to participate in an exchange of ideas with other educators. In BC, meetings take place each fall, winter, and spring based on the availability of teachers. Similar to the BCTF zone meetings, they are meant to engage and connect schools to build a lasting relationship that will bring teachers and students together to work toward a more equitable and just society. Pairings with UNESCO schools in other provinces and internationally may also be possible.

My journey learning about and joining the UNESCO network has informed and guided my practices in ways that bring students into the curriculum in a meaningful manner. Students interact with the material, connect with the concepts, and immerse themselves in a first-person learning environment. They not only see why change is important, but how they can be part of that change. ●

*The UNESCO network is constantly growing and connecting with other schools. Please contact Nichelle Penney or Susan Hall at **bc.unesco.network@gmail.com** if you are interested in opportunities with the BC UNESCO Schools Network.*

Opposite left: A student photographer during a forest walk to capture texture, shape, colour, and light. **Opposite right:** Student art imagining networks of communication. Susan Hall photos.

Q&A with author and Surrey teacher, Kuljinder Kaur Brar

Tell us about the book *My Name is Saajin Singh* and why you decided to write it.

My Name is Saajin Singh is a picture book about a young boy who takes pride in his name. Things begin to shift after his first day of school when his teacher mispronounces his name as Say-jin as opposed to Sah-jin. He tries to live with that version of his name, but it just does not feel right. After some interactions with friends and a meaningful conversation with his parents, Saajin begins to realize the importance of correcting others when they mispronounce his name.

I decided to write this book for many reasons. The biggest inspiration was my son, Saajin. Before he was born, I was on the hunt for picture books with Sikh protagonists. I wanted to create a library of books for him. Unfortunately, there weren't that many books on the market with Sikh protagonists. This bothered me, but at that time it didn't cross my mind to do anything about it.

How did you come up with the idea? What aspects of your own life helped inspire the book?

After Saajin was born, we spent a month carefully selecting and spelling his name. Unfortunately, during his medical check-ups, many people mispronounced Saajin's name. When people were mispronouncing Saajin's name, it reminded me of my personal experiences. As a child and even as an adult, people constantly mispronounce my name.

Growing up, I never really had the courage to correct others. In high school, I always feared attendance because I knew the teacher would say my name wrong and my peers would laugh and poke fun. Even as an adult, I don't always correct people when they mispronounce my name because I try to avoid the awkward conversation. Or I pronounce my own name in an anglicized way when introducing myself. This is something I'm still working on today and am getting better at.

As a teacher, I have witnessed many children, especially BIPOC children, not correct their teacher when their name is mispronounced. That version of their name then follows them throughout their educational experience. I'm hoping to change that through this book.

I hope children will take pride in their name and learn that they can correct adults/peers when they mispronounce their name. Or even go a step further and share how to properly pronounce their name in their mother tongue.
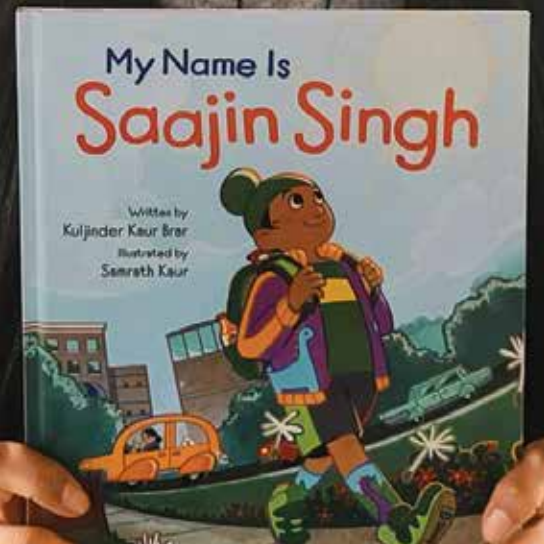
To learn more about my story and my writing, visit www.kuljinderwrites.com. I am currently working on professional development workshops for teachers on cultural identity, as well as additional writing projects.

As a teacher, I have witnessed many children, especially BIPOC children, not correct their teacher when their name is mispronounced. That version of their name then follows them throughout their educational experience.

How will you use this book in your classroom?

I have created a lesson plan and cross-curricular unit activities for this book. The resources and worksheets are available for free download on the Annick Press website. I have tried to incorporate my range of teaching experiences from elementary classroom teacher to learning support teacher to English language learner teacher, and I hope other teachers will find them helpful. The resources include before/while/after reading questions and activities, vocabulary word cards, story sequencing, and extension activities in language arts, social studies, math, art, and social emotional learning. I'm so grateful to the illustrator, Samrath Kaur, and the Annick Press graphics team for bringing my worksheet sketches to life.

What response have you received from teachers, students, readers, etc.?

Right when the book came out, there was an overwhelmingly positive response. Parents, young adults, and teachers reached out, sharing their personal stories and connections.

I enjoyed hearing from teachers who shared the experiences of their students who also tried to live with a different version of their name. Some teachers even shared how they didn't realize the magnitude of impact a mispronounced name could have on their students.

The response from the press was also a surprise. I never imagined being asked to interview on television (CBC, CTV, City News, OMNI) and radio stations (Red FM, Sher-E-Punjab, CBC, CKNW, Spice Radio) to talk about the book. So that was a very neat experience.

My favourite response is from children, especially BIPOC children. When I see their reactions and connections to this book, it truly melts my heart. It's especially huge for South Asian children to see representation in the book. They are thrilled to see a boy wearing a patka and kara who eats roti and daal. They are able to see themselves and their families in this book, which is so important to help ignite the love of books and reading in children. I grew up reading books with mostly animals and characters that didn't look like me or my family, making it harder for me to be interested in reading. I can see the excitement in their eyes when they see representation in the book, and that means a lot to me. •

Free resources are available at *AnnickPress.com,* **as well as links to retailers for** *My Name Is Saajin Singh.*

Kuljinder Kaur Brar photos

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Centre Paris, privately owned, 1 bedroom, everything included, $1,875/week: *irene.roland@gmail.com*

Sasquatch Mountain Airbnb. Ski-in, ski-out condo: *www.hemlockhaven.ca*

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- "Factor 90" if you are between ages 61 and 65
- age 65.

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You often never know the impact you have made, but occasionally a former student will contact you to share the impact you've had on their lives.

- Kyle H, Secondary Teacher

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IRENE KELLEHER TOTÍ:LTAWTXW, the new school in Abbotsford named in honour of the first Indigenous public school teacher in BC. Totí:ltawtxw, the Halq'eméylem word meaning "house of learning," is pronounced *tuh-teelt-OUT*. See pages 28–29 to read more about the school and its namesake, Irene Kelleher.