

Diverse Voices Inquiry: Exploring First Nations and Métis Poetry and Plays

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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Poetry and plays have long sat on the literary sideline in many language arts programs. Why is this so? Have past experiences, or perhaps lack of experiences, negatively shaped our perceptions, level of comfort and engagement with these powerful forms of literature? Take for example my own school experiences with poetry: a sporadic, limited and unfortunately, rather dull collection of memories. In fact, had it not been for Mr. Zultok fluttering about the classroom calling out “Lenore! Lenore!” into the hallway as he brought to life Poe’s *The Raven* before a roomful of stunned tenth graders, I cannot say that I would recall a single poetic experience from my school days (Thank you, Mr. Zultok!). Yet this largely underutilized and oftentimes underappreciated form of literature is among the most influential forms of literary expression available to readers and writers. Furthermore, when accompanied by strategic teaching and thoughtfully selected resources, poetry and plays can be made accessible, meaningful and engaging for our students, too.

This article facilitates inquiry into the following outcome from Saskatchewan’s renewed grade eight English Language Arts Curriculum (CR8.6):

Read and demonstrate comprehension and interpretation of grade-appropriate texts including traditional and contemporary prose fiction, poetry, and plays from First Nations, Métis, and other cultures to evaluate the purpose, message, point of view, craft, values, and biases, stereotypes, or prejudices. (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 39)

Although this outcome is specific for grade eight, similar outcomes exist at other grade levels making this inquiry unit quite easily adaptable to other levels.

THE INQUIRY

Framing outcomes using big ideas, essential questions and performance assessments facilitates the inquiry process, deepens student understanding, and increases student engagement. Although big ideas, questions and performances of understanding may vary, an inquiry might examine the following:

Big ideas: i.e., What should our students leave with once all the words and facts have faded?

- All people have opinions, biases and prejudices.
- Literature represents diverse voices, opinions, biases and perspectives; some of which we will share, others which we will oppose.
- Critical readers must be skilled in identifying underlying messages, biases and prejudices.
- All people have a powerful voice, expressed through a variety of forms.

Essential questions:

- What are some ways in which people express their views, perspectives and opinions?
- What reading strategies must critical readers utilize to reveal authors' perspectives, biases, prejudices and purpose? Why is it important for readers to identify authors' views, perspectives, biases and purpose?
- Why do many authors choose to express their views through poetry, plays and prose? Are poetry, plays and prose effective ways to share a message with others? What other ways might people share their views?
- Is it acceptable to have biases, values, prejudices and opinions? What are some of your personal biases and prejudices? What are some ways in which you (the student) elect to share these views?
- Why do people choose to publicly express their views, opinions and prejudices?

Learning objectives

Student learning will need to target skills in identifying author's purpose, message, point of view, and craft, as stated in the outcome. Consequently, instruction will need to center on those strategies good readers employ to identify, interpret or evaluate literature for biases, stereotypes, or prejudices, which can be difficult concepts for students to grasp. Depending on students' prior knowledge, additional instruction about prejudice, biases and stereotypes may

also be required. Finally, this outcome calls on students' questioning skills, so providing opportunities for students to further questioning strategies is essential.

As poetry and drama are often less familiar to students, students will need to understand the varying structures of these genres in order to better understand author's craft. Exposure to a wide variety of poetry and plays throughout the year will help students to better understand these genres.

Instructional strategies

Identifying author's message and point of view is a valuable skill that fosters critical thinking. One strategy to consider is "Important to Whom?" which comes from *Strategies that Work* by Harvey and Goudvis (2007, p. 167). In this simple strategy, students first underline what they believe is important to remember, and then return to the text to underline what they believe the author would want the reader to learn and remember.

Poetry offers students a wealth of opportunities to hone inference skills (stated in the outcome as "interpretation"). To further students' skill in interpretation, Harvey and Goudvis (2007) recommend a lesson entitled, "Questioning that leads to inferential thinking" (p. 119). Using a guided discussion format, the teacher first models questions that stem from his or her doubts and questions about the poem. Following the teacher's model, students share their own questions, returning to the questions after the entire poem has been 'questioned' to propose interpretations that might "unlock the poem's meaning" (p. 119).

An excellent instructional strategy to further comprehension is the "think aloud" strategy. In the think aloud strategy, the teacher selects a passage and while reading aloud, models and explicitly shares their thinking with the students. This is especially suited to comprehension of main idea, evaluating, drawing conclusions (interpreting) and inferring. An excellent resource for explicit models of the think alouds for these strategies is *Explaining Reading* by Duffy (2003).

Possible assessments of understanding

Students should have many opportunities to think and act on this outcome in a variety of ways in order to build understanding. Some performance tasks that would provide opportunities might include:

- Draw comparisons between different passages by one author to describe the author’s craft.
- Compare and contrast author’s messages (similar opinions, opposing opinions etc.)
- Evaluate a poem or play’s effectiveness at either disguising, exposing or persuading others of underlying opinions or biases.
- Create a poem, play or prose fiction text that shares your opinion, biases or views about a topic that is important to you: consider topics that affect the classroom or school, community, or world.

SELECTING RESOURCES

As this outcome should be integrated throughout the year, select resources that connect to one, or more, of the recommended units for grade eight: Adventure and Adventurers; Timeless Narratives of the First Nations and Greek Peoples; Becoming Myself; An Eye on our Natural and Technological Environment; Burning Questions; and, Is it Fair?—In Search of Justice.

As these resources are often harder to access for teachers who are oftentimes more familiar with novels, but less familiar with poetry or plays, resources should aim to help both students and their teachers learn to love and appreciate poetry and plays, rather than leave with a bad impression. Consequently, resources should aim to spark conversation and curiosity in both adults and youth by connecting to topics that are meaningful and relevant.

The following selection of recommended resources center on the big ideas and essential questions of the inquiry, delving into meaningful topics that will appeal to students: personal identity, slavery, terrorism, and important world issues. For example, one resource is a written response to the events of September 11, 2001, from the point of view of a Middle Easterner. Another resource would certainly stir up curiosity as students read poems that pay tribute to

the bones of a 19th century slave, tapping into students' interests about fairness and rights, topics which from my experience capture student engagement. As well, one resource depicts First Nations traditional and modern stories in a graphic format, but also includes a prose version and interviews with Elders corresponding to the stories. This resource will especially appeal to visual learners. Finally, the language in the collection of plays was engaging to students and I felt this resource would especially appeal to students at this level.



SELECTED RESOURCES

Bouchard, D. (2010). *The secret of your name: proud to be Métis = Kiimooch ka shinikashooyen: aen kischitaymook aen li michif iwik*. Calgary, AB: Red Deer Press.

Bouchard’s poetic text, told in 27 four-line stanzas, recounts the author’s journey of self-discovery, ultimately leading to uncovering his lost Métis heritage. Told with a sense of regret, pride and hope, this resource is a moving portrayal of Bouchard’s Métis past and future. This resource is accompanied by beautiful illustrations by Metis artist, Dennis J. Weber, as well as music by master Métis fiddler, John Arcand, on its companion audio CD. This resource is highly recommended in reviews and will be an excellent addition to the Grade 8 unit of Becoming Myself.

Fleury, N., Pelletier, G., Pelletier, J., Welsh, J., Welsh, J., DePeel, J., and Saganance, C. (2008). *Stories of our people/Lii zistwayr di la naasyoon di Michif: A Métis graphic novel anthology*. Saskatoon, SK: Gabriel Dumont Institute.

This rich resource offers readers five traditional and modern folktales of the Metis culture, as well as a choice of reading format: illustrated, prose, or interviews with the storytellers. Its unique format creates a perfect blend of the oral storytelling traditional to the Metis culture and modern audiences by connecting to young adults in a popular format. Richly illustrated and interspersed with language from Cree, Michif and French, this resource belongs in every school library and perfectly suits the Grade 8 unit of “Timeless Narratives of the First Nations and Greek Peoples.” This anthology was reviewed and recommended by British Columbia teacher-librarians (see review at <http://books.bc.ca/resources/for-teachers-librarians/>). Available through the Gabriel Dumont Institute.

Nelson, M. (2004). *Fortune’s bones: The manumission requiem*. Asheville, NC: Front Street.

Nelson wrote this collection of poems to celebrate the life of Fortune, an African American slave who died in 1798 and whose bones, rendered by his owner, Dr. Porter, were later donated to a local museum and the source of community research. The poems offer a powerful lesson in humanity as they “recount this tale of execrable ownership with a simple yet profound dignity, simple enough for a twelve-year-old reader and deep enough to sound the fathoms that are America’s racial history” (2005, Horn Book). This resource would be an excellent companion to the Grade 8 unit of Is it Fair?—In Search of Justice.

Nye, N. S. (2002). *19 varieties of gazelle: Poems of the Middle East*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

This collection of poems by Naomi Shihab Nye was written in response to the events of September 11, 2001. In her effort to speak out against the horrific crimes committed by people of the Middle East, while equally speaking on behalf of innocent Middle Easterners who had not committed any crimes, Nye turned to her poetry to represent who her people really are. This resource would be an excellent companion to the Grade 8 unit of Is it Fair?—In Search of Justice.

Surface, M.H. (2007). *More short scenes and monologues for middle school students: Inspired by literature, social studies and real life*. Hanover, NH: Smith and Kraus.

This collection of plays written especially for middle school students, make this resource accessible and engaging to its intended audience. With a range of topics from immigration to global warming, this collection could tie into any of the Grade 8 units. This resource is “a most highly recommended title” in the WilsonWeb database (<http://www.hwilson.com/>) and according to Fleming (2008) “stands out for its distinct voices, multicultural characters, and engaging scenes” (“Nonfiction” section) which are perfectly suited to the needs of this curriculum outcome.

RECOMMENDED SELECTION TOOLS

Saskatoon Public Library (n.d.). *Cultures from other lands: Teen fiction*. Saskatoon, SK: Young Adult Services.

The staff of the Saskatoon Public Library has published a variety of resource lists for children, teens and adults. Among recent additions are two lists of multicultural literature. One booklet, *Cultures from other lands*, was especially valuable for this assignment. This 12 page booklet includes over 100 resource recommendations for teens (previewed, annotated and recommended by the Young Adult librarians) including novels, nonfiction and video resources. A similar resource for younger children has also been compiled by Children's Library staff. These resource booklets, and resources, are available in print at any Saskatoon Public Library.

H.W. Wilson Company (2011). *WilsonWeb*. Retrieved from <http://www.hwwilson.com/>

The ability to select the Middle Years/Junior High database makes this database especially valuable for selecting resources for Grade 8, which can be a difficult level. This is also a great selection tool that brings together information about awards, reviews and recommendations. The search function is easy to navigate and titles can be sorted using your preference of date, starred reviews or relevancy.

Manitoba Library Association (2011). *CM Magazine: Canadian review of materials*. <http://www.umanitoba.ca/outreach/cm/index.html>

This review magazine's emphasized Canadian content focus makes it an excellent tool for First Nations and Métis resources which are often not reviewed in larger, American journals. Reviews are clear and concise and generally provide "recommended," "highly recommended," or "not recommended" ratings. This online magazine is published weekly and available free of charge.

Goldman Group (2007). *MultiCultural review: Dedicated to a better understanding of ethnic, racial and religious diversity*. <http://www.mcreview.com/index.html>

This review journal, dedicated to diversity, is published four times annually. Available through ProQuest educational journals or by subscription, the professional contributors to its reviews are honest and clear about the resources reviewed. False information, misconceptions or inappropriate portrayal of cultural groups are clearly identified in the reviews. As a result, recommendations made by the contributors are valuable to librarians and classroom teachers alike.

Association of Book Publishers of British Columbia (2011). *Resources for teacher-librarians*. Retrieved from <http://books.bc.ca/resources/for-teachers-librarians/>

The Association of Book Publishers of British Columbia (ABPBC) publishes two resource catalogues, BC Books for BC Schools and Canadian Aboriginal Books for Schools. Reviewed and annotated by teacher-librarians, the Canadian Aboriginal Books for Schools catalogue is an especially valuable resource for adding First Nations, Métis and Inuit content to your school collection. The catalogue includes a variety of elementary, cross-grade and secondary resources from notable publishers of First Nations, Inuit and Métis resources. With increasing curricular alignment across the provinces, many of the curricular recommendations align with Saskatchewan curriculum as well.

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