

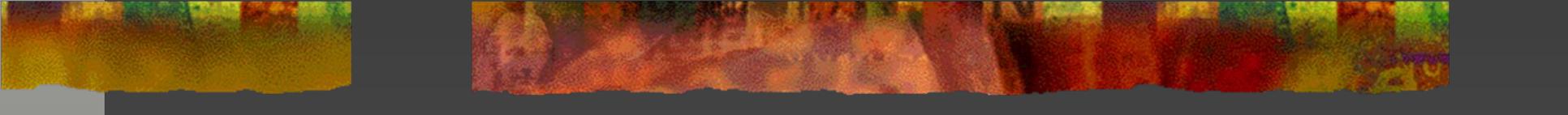


"REAL INDIANS"

LITTLE STEPS

TOWARDS SOCIAL CHANGE

BY: NATALIE LUCAS



"REAL INDIANS"

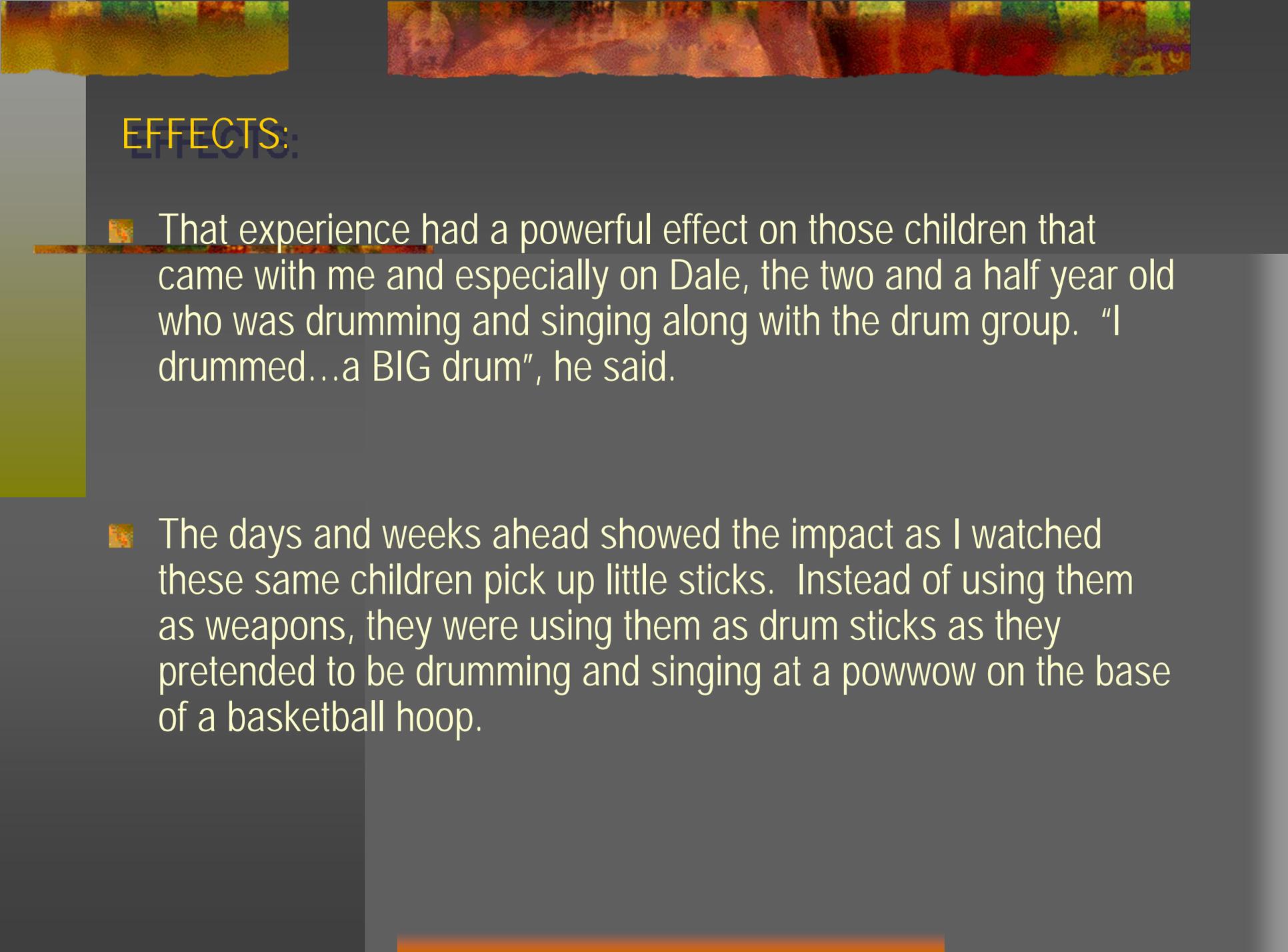
SETTING THE SCENE:

- Born a Doukhobor in the Kootenays, I felt the stings of colonialism and whether directed at my culture or another, whether young or old, we all can challenge the misconceptions. I share my latest journey.
- A number of years ago, a little boy came to preschool and proudly stated that Indians were dead. I wanted to know how he had come to this conclusion so I asked him why he thought that. He told me that he has never seen any here. He also said that there were no teepees anywhere here. "Indians live in teepees and there are no teepees, there are no Indians, they are all dead."
- The Slocan Valley is the traditional territory of the Sinixt peoples, a people that is said to be extinct. Could this have been something he overheard? Indigenous peoples that called this area their home "preferred to stay hidden to avoid possible persecution" as my friend told me of her husband and his mother. This could have a bearing as to why "Indians" are not seen. I could not let this boy's statement, "Indians are dead" pass, I wanted to help this boy see things differently and construct new knowledge. So I invited an indigenous man to our school to share some drumming and his story. The children told their parents, "it was great!" That little boy ran to his mom and excitedly related his experiences of that day. "We drummed a song to the bear and Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star and Indians live in houses and wear clothes just like us". That day I knew I had to do something on an ongoing basis before the children's assumptions and judgements increased.

When Castlegar was celebrating National Aboriginal Day, I took a small group of children from Valhalla Children's Center in Slocan with me. I often say "Big things can happen with little steps" and it certainly did that day. The youngest boy, when he heard the drumming, walked straight towards the drum group and stated very calmly that it was his turn now.

Well, by the end of the song, they said that he was even singing along with them!





EFFECTS:

- That experience had a powerful effect on those children that came with me and especially on Dale, the two and a half year old who was drumming and singing along with the drum group. "I drummed...a BIG drum", he said.
- The days and weeks ahead showed the impact as I watched these same children pick up little sticks. Instead of using them as weapons, they were using them as drum sticks as they pretended to be drumming and singing at a powwow on the base of a basketball hoop.

In May of 2007, I had the opportunity to invite the young drum group from Creston to do a drumming session with the preschool children. They agreed to come. Every preschool child had a chance to drum.

After the visit, the preschool children spoke about how their hands hurt from drumming, how hard they had to drum on the drum, and how fun it was. When they saw the pictures I took, they talked about each other and the drumming, never once mentioning "Indians".

The children of the drum group were just that: children of a drum group and "those kids sure know how to drum!"

Dale said, "You know what, Natalie, I don't want to be Spiderman anymore. I want to be a drummer when I grow up".

"I believe you will." I answered.



- At this point I also believed that their association with the indigenous drum group was a very powerful factor towards preventing or changing stereotypical thoughts and words.



- Right after that visit in May of 2007, we acquired a large drum from the school next door. We saved it from the spider's lair (storage closet). I was told Aboriginal protocol dictates that a drum needs to be used or it loses its voice and the children of Valhalla were given the task of "honouring the drum".

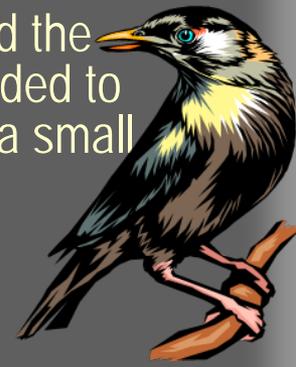
THE DRUMMING BEGINS:

- From that time to the present, Dale stopped coming to daycare and other children began coming.
- The children drummed often...trying to drum "in one voice". Some children really enjoyed drumming, Jesse, the youngest of our group, had a good grasp of the drum beat and liked to lead. I was fascinated by his innate sense of rhythm. With his own beat, we actually had moments where we sounded like the drums at powwow. I could see that this was possibly what the indigenous elders saw in the very young and in their wisdom supported their participation at a really young age. The children all took turns being the lead and they focused hard on keeping in time with the lead drummer. Sometimes we even sounded together. Cass always covered her ears.



DRUMMING TO DANCING...

- Others preferred to listen and dance so I brought in a CD that we learned to "round dance" to. It was a hit with all of them, they enjoyed the round dance and Cass stopped covering her ears.
- As they got more and more comfortable with the steps, we began to vary the dance.
- I knew though that these little drumming sessions did not come close to what this powwow drum was made for. . I thought it would be helpful if the children could experience an environment of the powwow drums, the gathering of peoples of all ages and all backgrounds.
- I remembered an Abenaki story about a man who wanted to understand the ravens. He did so by spending time with the ravens as the children needed to spend time at a powwow. The closest powwow was in Creston, it was a small traditional powwow and the children's drum group came from there.





This last April, I began to ask questions of the children:

- "Do you know what a powwow is?"
- "What do you think you will see there?" The children said very little to my questions.
- I asked, "what if we all plan to go?"
- One of the children said that he would ask his mom if he could go.
- "Could my mom come with us?" asked another
- "Could we invite the moms and dads to come with us?" I asked all the children.
- Their answer was an excited "YEH"!!
- "What do you think about sleeping over?" I asked

They began to talk, all at once. Some said they had tents and some had trailers to sleep in. They all got very excited about the camping. I reminded them that we now need to talk to all the parents about our plan. As soon as the parents came to pick them up, they were bombarded with information and requests for going to Creston. And so the field trip planning began in earnest.

DISCUSSION: "REAL INDIANS"

Recently, the children were gathered for circle which is a time not only for singing, stories and games but is also a space where children can initiate and contribute to discussions. It was during this circle that Gnome unexpectedly began to speak about his idea of real Indians.



- Gnome: There is going to be real Indians at the pow-wow.
- Josh: Indians were with the Dinosaurs (here again there could be a reference to the "extinct" Sinixt of this area)
- Gnome: No, they are people.
- Josh: I don't know if we are going to the pow-wow.
- Gnome: It is a very long drive, very close to Calgary.
- Natalie: The pow-wow will be in Creston, which is on the way to Calgary.
- Lavender : Are we going to the pow-wow?
- Troy: Creston is a long way.
- Natalie: Some of us are going and we are going to camp there.
- Gnome: I am going to bring my tent. There is going to be real Indians on the grass beside the road
- Natalie: What do you think a real Indian is?
- Gnome: Indians are real and I think....
- Natalie: Are you still trying to figure out what real Indians are?
- Gnome: They look like brown men.
- Natalie. They could be, some are not though. Do I look like I am?
- The children smiled and said "No.Natalie":

DISCUSSION CONTINUES:

Natalie: They like to be called First Peoples because they were the first people living here. They can be called ~~First Peoples, First Nations, Aboriginal or Indigenous~~. In this part of the world, this continent, they lived here. When the people from the other side of the world came across the big ocean in boats, they found the First nations peoples here. Some have brown eyes, blue eyes...blond hair or flaming red hair... have pink skin like Gnome... freckles like Lavender.

Gnome: I watched "Spirit" but the Indians weren't real like the real ones at the pow-wow.

Troy: I won't be able to go.

Natalie: We can bring pictures to show those who cannot go.

Josh: I will talk to my Dad about the pow-wow and I might be able to come.





I pondered this conversation:

- Was Gnome trying to distinguish the difference between TV cartoons like in Spirit (a movie) and real people? ?
- How did he construct this information and where might some of the sources of information come from? Parents? His older brother?
- He really likes feathers, his mom told me that his whole family like to look for feathers wherever they are. Could he have been referring to the realness of feathers in comparison to pretend ones?
- I spoke to his mom and shared the documentation with her. She was very surprised at the words Gnome used. They don't use the word "Indian" at home and they don't distinguish "them" from "us". "We are all people." She said.

Two things came to my mind when I was sharing the different ways Indigenous peoples are referred to.

- I wanted to take time and really help the children understand the meanings of each of the words.
 - I also wished I had some pictures of the indigenous children in our two centers as visuals for this discussion. But I knew I needed to hear more of the children's views at that moment.
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THE POWWOW:

with Tia, Gnome, Keiran, Cass, Sasha and Maye

We met outside the community center and I had a chance to talk to Tia's family. Her dad said she was very excited about coming. She wanted to dance. I reassured her that she would have many chances to dance. She pranced around on the grass.

She was very intent on watching the Grand Entry and patiently waited until everyone was sitting down again. Right away she asked when was she going to dance. I explained to her about the word "intertribal".

"Listen for the announcer to say that word" I told her.

She jumped up when she heard it and soon she was on the dance floor. She watched for a few minutes as the dancers danced passed her. Then with a quick jump she was hopping (looked like she had springs in her feet) all around the circle. The next intertribal, she began to notice the steps of the dancers and followed their lead.

Tia: " I was dancing around in a circle. He... ya... ya. He...ya...ya. Ya...ya."



Tia's little sister wanted to dance too so Tia, brought her down to the floor. After watching the dancers for a while they both joined the dancers. Her mom and dad were surprised at her strong intentions and her willingness to help her sister join in. I was impressed to see this shy little girl become so confident.





Tia is waiting for the next intertribal to go down and dance. Cass is NOT covering her ears!



When Gnome's brother, Kieran, voiced an interest to dance, she offered to take him down and show him how. Gnome followed.

"See, go like this, Gnome." Tia demonstrated the dance step. Tia demonstrated the dance step.



- Gnome is looking with great interest at each of the dancers as they dance by him. His attention is periodically interrupted by Tia's dance instructions. Sasha followed along behind, sometimes she got far behind but it was of no concern to her as her attention focused on the many colourful dancers.



- "Wow! I really like the way he is dressed!"
- **THEY DID IT!!** With watching and trying they now were dancing



■ "We are holding hands in a line".



■ "This is FUN!"

Gnome began to disrupt the threesome's dancing and his dad went down to dance with him. Tia and Kieran barely missed a step...they continued on their own for that dance and others that came later.





BACK AT THE CAMPGROUND:

- Tia, Sasha, Gnome, Keiran, Maye, and Cedar were dancing and singing around the campfire like they were at the powwow. Gnome's mom brought out some little djembe drums and asked them to move away from the fire pit for their dancing. They enthusiastically moved to the new circle space and continued their dancing, singing and drumming. The parents were all amazed at the impression this powwow had on their children. Gnome's mom was also amazed at how well Tia was able to drum the appropriate drum beat for them to dance to. The other children were very happy to follow Tia's directions and lead.
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DISCUSSION BACK AT DAYCARE:

- Tia: " I was dancing around in a circle, hi ya ya, hi ya ya. I liked it best"
- Gnome: "Powwows are for dancing and stomping".
- Natalie: What did you see there?"
- Gnome: "People, black and white skin on them." I liked the dancing the best...with my mom at home just like at powwow."
- Josh: "Did you see Indians?"
- Gnome: "no Indians, there's lots of people."
- Alex (did not go to the powwow): "Indians are people."
- Gnome: "no they're not."
- Quentin (he is in Kindergarten): "they are First Nations."
- Alex: "I know feathers. Girl ones have 2 feathers, boy ones have one feathers. Moms and dads have three. Indians are humans."
- Gnome: "They are not just humans, they are people."
- Alex: "Know why they are called Indians?" They have arrows and stuff... things. People call them Indians. They are actually kind of human."
- Gnome: "They have the same skin as us, some have black skin."
- Alex: "I met a dragon before...a snow dragon."
- Josh: "What about jingle dancers?"
- Tia and Gnome: "YEH!"
- Alex: "They have jingles in their dresses and have a feather fan."
- Cass: "I liked the music!"
- Alex: "of the jingles?"
- Cass: "the drums! They were loud (smiles). I liked when we got to stand up and me and Tia crawled under the people's seats."
- Natalie: "Did you eat there?" (Cass and her family stayed for the day, they did not camp)
- Cass: "We ate mashed potatoes and peas and bread and butter."

REFLECTIONS:



- Again I felt I should spend some time with the children to help them learn what specific words meant (humans, First Nations, etc)
- I wondered about Alex's comments, as he did not go to the powwow. How did he construct this information about First Nations people? He has a grandma who lives in Atlin (a predominantly Aboriginal community), but he usually only sees her once a year.

AFTER OUR DISCUSSION...FREE PLAY:



- Troy, Jonah, and Simon played the drums, rattles, and danced.
- Quentin played with the playdough. He made a medicine wheel. It was an uncanny moment. He has been away a number of days lately, he did not go to the powwow and I know I did not talk to them about medicine wheels...still need to explore this at another time.
- Alex, Simon, Gnome, and Tia painted, explored colours and white "snow" on them.



DURING FREE PLAY...



Cass's painting of a powwow drum. "This is a cover over the drum so the rain doesn't get on the drum."

REFLECTION:

At the powwow, I explained to them about the "drum keepers" and their jobs were to stay with the drum and protect it. I see that to Cass, being safe was very important. Now I see that she is comfortable with the loudness of the drumming. Could it be that the drum itself is more "real", like a person? More vulnerable, like she feels sometimes? In Cass' painting she made a cover for the drum, could that be a gesture of caring and protecting the drum?



Alex: "This is my dad drumming on a drum."



Josh: "I am making a jingle dancer, he is a boy. These are his feathers, here is the head."

REFLECTION:

I see Josh, in his quiet way, really wanting to experience a powwow. When I showed them the pictures, the bells on the ankles caught his attention. His perception of a jingle dancer is anyone who wears bells (he calls them jingles).

PARENTS' REFLECTIONS:

■ Gnome's and Kieran's mom was so happy to have been a part of this experience. She noticed Tia's strong leadership skills during the day of the powwow. She spoke of the connection her children made with Tia and her sister. She also spoke of Gnome's enthusiasm about his new friendship with Tia. They love being together. Keiran's focus on dancing at the powwow and his comfort level was shared. All in all her whole family learned a lot and they were glad to be a part of it.

■ Cass' mom said "it was a wonderful experience" for all of them.

■ Tia's dad sent me an email:

"hi Natalie, we had such a fun time at the pow wow we would like to do it again. i spent a few hours trying to figure out my camera and computer, i managed to make a cd with 10 very short videos on it, which didnt play very well on my computer hopefully the reason for that is that my computer sucks,

Tia mentioned that her favorite dancers were the men in pink and purple, she will remember it for life though i am sure, there is a video of her hopping across the whole gym in the opposite direction of the dancers, i will remember that for life. I really enjoy seeing native culture and traditions passed on and kept alive because i feel like we are deprived of culture in general. i have only just started to learn about the history of what really happened to the natives in this country, and it saddens me deeply. The only part i dislike about the pow wow is that i am only an observer, yet i know i have the same desire to be connected with nature this is only human. These natives have survived, and are together creating power and beauty, this must be protected cherished and respected.
yours truly jon.





MY PERSONAL REFLECTIONS:

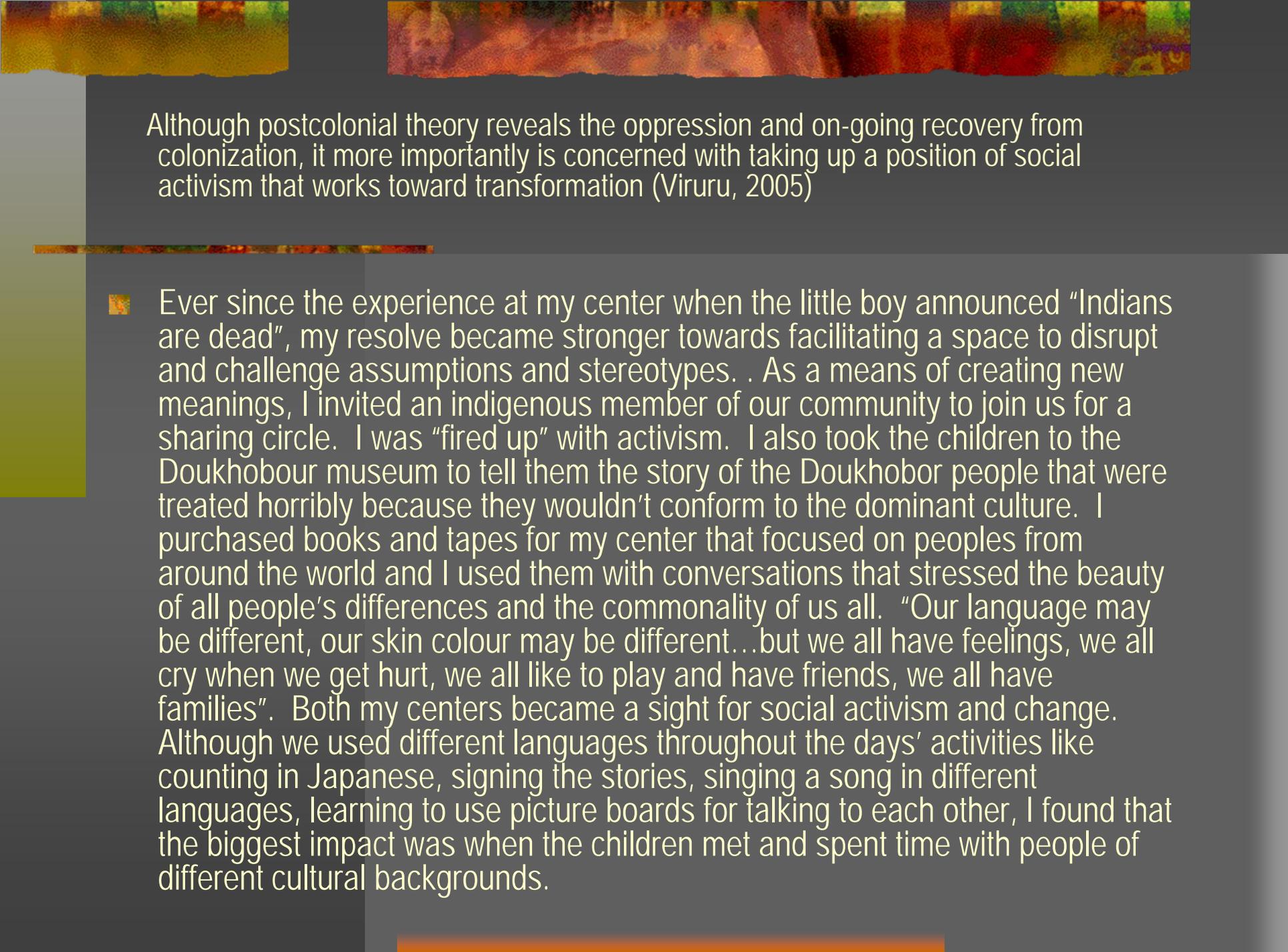
- Looking back at the learning moments of this past year, I feel elated to be a participant in it. I asked myself "Why"? I often say 'big things happen with little steps' and we all together took many little steps that carry a hope or promise of moving toward social change.
 - Being one who comes from a Doukhor community that experienced colonization and assimilation, I felt the hatred for my race but didn't understand it. When I had to give up my own name for a colonized name, I felt my self-esteem begin to crumble. When I was strapped for speaking the only language I knew, I became fearful. But I also found my determination grow. I would do something about this view of supremacy over other people and constructing an attitude of us and them. I was not sure how I was going to go about it until I opened my own childcare center. I knew I had an opportunity not to teach children what to think but offer them a space that encourages thinking and learning, to help them feel safe to reflect, to dialogue and to challenge meanings, perceptions and attitudes towards peoples perceived to be inferior or exotic or those that they know little about.
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....AND MORE REFLECTIONS:

Gnome appeared to now have a broader perception of First Nations and less of the stereotypical "Indian" that he spoke about before attending the pow wow. He noticed "people". Some of these "people" had a skin colour very much the same as his and others had very dark skin. He experienced companionship and closeness with a group of peoples that he could not see in a distant way as Indians anymore and Alex' comments did not ring true to him anymore. The words human, First Nations, Aboriginal and even Indian seemed to confuse him. I know I would like to help him and the other children be able to sort out all these different words and their meanings and hopefully give them peace of mind to move on with their learning.



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- I didn't consider myself a social activist, I just knew something inside me cringed at words like "Indian" or when a segregation was voiced by using "us" and "them", very much like what was happening in the children's conversations about "Indians." I found myself wishing I could say something to stop those words but I also knew that here was an opportunity for the children to reason on all these words and meanings. Knowledge and experience are powerful interventions that can be used toward transformation of thoughts and actions to make new meanings. I felt the adrenalin of being able to assist in making a difference, to disrupt colonial meanings and attitudes and find new meanings and creative possibilities and transformation.
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Although postcolonial theory reveals the oppression and on-going recovery from colonization, it more importantly is concerned with taking up a position of social activism that works toward transformation (Viruru, 2005)

- Ever since the experience at my center when the little boy announced “Indians are dead”, my resolve became stronger towards facilitating a space to disrupt and challenge assumptions and stereotypes. . As a means of creating new meanings, I invited an indigenous member of our community to join us for a sharing circle. I was “fired up” with activism. I also took the children to the Doukhobour museum to tell them the story of the Doukhobor people that were treated horribly because they wouldn’t conform to the dominant culture. I purchased books and tapes for my center that focused on peoples from around the world and I used them with conversations that stressed the beauty of all people’s differences and the commonality of us all. “Our language may be different, our skin colour may be different...but we all have feelings, we all cry when we get hurt, we all like to play and have friends, we all have families”. Both my centers became a sight for social activism and change. Although we used different languages throughout the days’ activities like counting in Japanese, signing the stories, singing a song in different languages, learning to use picture boards for talking to each other, I found that the biggest impact was when the children met and spent time with people of different cultural backgrounds.

Open discussions were and still are so valuable for disrupting the children's assumed perceptions:

- I allow the children to share their thoughts, whatever they may be.
- Instead of stepping in and correcting them, I try to bring out other examples for them to ponder. For example, when Gnome shared that Indians are "brown men", I eased into telling him that First Nations are not only brown but have a variety of skin colours, presenting examples of his Aboriginal friends who are light skinned. We have four children from Indigenous families that attend the other childcare program I work at

These four children do not look like the stereotypical "Indian" child





IN CONCLUSION:

- I position myself as a social activist and consider my centers as sites of social activism. As a site of social activism, I include families and offer them a space for dialogue and critical self-reflection. I hope that together, we can challenge and disrupt meanings, preconceptions and attitudes constructed through colonialism toward First Nations and any other peoples as the opportunity arises. I hope to continue to encourage and provide opportunities to develop new meanings as is evident in the email from Tia's father. I told him we can do great things together.
- As the children are becoming exposed to more information and experiences about the First Nation peoples, I realize that their understanding can only be partial. How can I help to broaden their understanding step by step without reinforcing stereotypes and the us and them dichotomy?
- This is a work in process without definitive answers or truth, it is about the unknown laden with questions of where to take this next.

WHAT IS THE NEXT STEP?

This work is difficult and complex, there are many unknowns. I did not know what the result would be after each step of introducing new meanings, information and experiences of First Nations to the children and, I continue to have many questions.

- By disrupting old meanings have new meanings been constructed that could continue to carry the legacy of colonialism that responds to First Nations as the exotic other or as inferior?
- By exposing the children to the powwow were stereotypes challenged or reinforced?
- Are the children's understanding of First Nations limited to what they experienced and observed at the powwow, eg. The drumming, dancing and Regalia?
- Has the attitude of 'us' and 'them' been reinforced?
- Would seeing the children from the drum group in both settings (at the daycare and at the powwow) help my daycare kids challenge the stereotypes?
- How have the children constructing new ways of perceiving First Nations? (eg. Gnome says they are people)
- What other steps can be taken toward change through social action?