

Activity #5

Shannen's Dream

Inequalities in education

What the TRC says about reconciliation

It requires that the paternalistic and racist foundations of the residential school system be rejected as the basis for an ongoing relationship. Reconciliation requires that a new vision, based on a commitment to mutual respect, be developed. It also requires an understanding that the most harmful impacts of residential schools have been the loss of pride and self-respect of Aboriginal people, and the lack of respect that non-Aboriginal people have been raised to have for their Aboriginal neighbours. Reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem; it is a Canadian one.

Inviting an Indigenous speaker

The best way to learn about Indigenous people is from an Indigenous Elder. Contact a [Friendship Centre](#). For protocols for inviting Elders, see page 6 in the Introduction to this resource.

Who are Indigenous people?

The Indigenous (or Aboriginal) people in Canada are First Nations, Inuit and Métis. See page 4 in the introduction for definitions.

Communicating with Parents

These activities and the conversations may affect children (and adults) differently. Read the section about communicating with parents in the Introduction on page 6. Each activity includes a sample letter for parents and includes suggestions for what you may say to parents about the activities. Adapt them to suit your group's needs.

Self-Care for Leaders

The facts about colonization, residential schools and other discriminatory practices in Canada can be difficult for people of any age to learn. To help yourself and others, read "Pastoral Care" on page 5 in the Introduction to Reconciliation Activities.

Objectives

This activity includes storytelling and a craft response. The children will

1. Hear the true story of an Indigenous student, Shannen Koostachin, and her dream.
2. Learn about the unequal quality of schools for Indigenous children on reserves compared to other schools in Canada.
3. Be encouraged to share Shannen's story with others.

Overview for Leaders

Schools on reserves, particularly in remote regions of Canada, are underfunded. While we think of education as provincially funded, it is the Government of Canada that is responsible for the education of Indigenous young people living in reserve communities.

The Parliamentary Budget Officer has reported that Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada's funding mechanisms:

- ◆ do not adequately take into account circumstances that drive up the cost of running band-operated schools (i.e. size of school and geographic location);
- ◆ put remote northern regions at significant disadvantage.

(From *Federal Spending on Primary and Secondary Education on First Nations Reserves*, 6 December 2016 http://www.pbo-dpb.gc.ca/en/blog/news/First_Nations_Education)

Many First Nations schools receive only two-thirds of the funding per student that provincial and territorial schools receive and they do not receive funding for libraries, computers, languages or extracurricular activities. Less funding also means that many Indigenous children are exposed to hazardous conditions including mold contamination, high carbon dioxide levels, rodent infestations, sewage, and inadequate or lack of heating. (<https://fncaringsociety.com/shannens-dream>)

The story of Shannen Koostachin has been shared across Canada and many people, particularly students, who have been advocating for change. The suggested responses in this activity were influenced by the campaigns of the First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada. For ideas, go to these websites:

<https://www.facebook.com/CaringSociety/videos/1018073454958808/>

<https://fncaringsociety.com/have-heart-day-gallery-and-resources>

<https://fncaringsociety.com/our-dreams-matter-too>

Preparation

Choose one leader to be the storyteller and provide the script so that he or she can read it a few times in advance, becoming familiar with the story and how to tell it to engage young people. It includes instructions in italics for the storyteller.

You will need:

For the storytelling

- ◆ A bag with a child's winter toque, scarf, pair of gloves, pair of snow boots and, in the very bottom, a pair (or picture) of moccasins.

Teaching tip:

A storyteller knows the main points of the story but may change the exact words and phrasing as he or she looks up at the children while speaking. The storyteller may also engage in conversations, questions and answers with the children during the telling of the story.

- ◆ A map of Ontario on which Attawapiskat and Ottawa are clearly indicated e.g. with stars, arrows, or a circle around their names. Optional: You may wish to show the children a map of where they live.
- ◆ A photo of school children in Attawapiskat. <https://tinyurl.com/y9hdeqd3>

For the response

- ◆ Choose a craft: set out writing and drawing supplies like different types of paper for letter writing, drawing, making signs or banners; large envelopes; a variety of craft supplies like coloured pencils and markers, pastels, scissors, glue, fabric pieces, feathers, buttons, ribbons, pipe cleaners. Optional: Digital camera or video recorder(s).

Acknowledging Traditional Territory

Find out whose traditional territory you are on. See page 8 for resources on how to do this. Say:

We gather today and stand on the traditional territory of *[name the Indigenous people who lived here before you]*. We understand

- ◆ that this land was very important for Indigenous people who lived on it before us;
- ◆ that this land is still important for Indigenous people today;
- ◆ and that Indigenous ways of living with each other, and their ways of relating to the Creator, have always been connected to this land and its creatures.

Shannen’s dream – Hearing a true story

The storyteller invites the children to sit down and get comfortable to hear a story that begins with a girl about their age. As you speak names that may be new or hard to pronounce for them, repeat them and ask them to try saying them. Have the bag with supplies nearby. If it includes a pair of moccasins, pull them out the first time you say the phrase “Just keep walking in your moccasins” and holding them up every time you say the phrase (in boldface). Perhaps it could become like a refrain that the children join in on.

Today, I want to tell you a true story of an Indigenous girl named Shannen Koostachin (Koo – stash – in). Shannen lived in the Attawapiskat (Atta – wa – pe – skat) First Nation community in northern Ontario. The story starts when Shannen was six years old, in grade one. It’s about Shannen and her school. There are some sad parts to this story, but the ending tells us about people who are happy and full of hope. Now tell me something about your school or your classrooms.

Teaching tip:

Listen to the children’s responses and be ready for unexpected answers. For example, if a child says that their own school is cold and has a leaky roof, a good response might be:

“I’m sorry to hear that! It must make it pretty hard to learn when you are cold. Shannen had a similar problem at her school. Her school wasn’t nice at all.”

(Encourage them to talk about the physical characteristics: What's their classroom like? Is it warm or cold inside on a winter's day. What other rooms are there in the school e.g., a gym, or library?)

Your schools sound pretty nice! Shannen's school wasn't nice at all. The nice school building was closed down when a fuel pipe burst. After that all classes were moved into portables. Look at what Shannen needed to wear in class on a winter's day... *(One by one, pull winter clothes out of the bag and name the items)*. Imagine needing to wear these things in class. Shannen had to because the portable doors didn't shut properly! The winter winds blew in through cracks in the walls. Students' fingers got so cold and stiff they could hardly write! And the portables were small and crowded. The school made Shannen feel ashamed and sad.

But away from school, Shannen felt happy and proud of her family and community. For example, she loved the annual spring camp when they all spent two weeks in the bush. She learned where to find berries, how to recognize animal tracks, how to make a fire, and how to imitate the call of geese! And after dark, sitting in a circle around the campfire, Shannen and her brothers and sisters and cousins loved to listen to the Elders telling stories about long ago.

One night, snuggled up to her father, Shannen exclaimed, "It feels so good to be here. But I never feel like this at school. School makes me feel like we don't matter. Why can't we have a real school, like other kids do?"

Shannen's father said, "You feel like you are part of this place; together we keep the circle strong. But never give up when you face difficulties. **Never give up. Just keep walking in your moccasins.**" *(Hold up the moccasins or the picture and place them beside you.)*


School day after school day, school year after school year, Shannen kept hoping. Finally, when she was in grade eight and about to graduate, the government said there would be a new school – a real school! Shannen was so excited! But just as suddenly the news changed. The government said, "No! There's no money."

Shannen exclaimed, "How can they say no?" Her friends said, "Oh, government leaders don't care. They live far away. They don't see our problems." Shannen thought of her father's words and said to her friends, "**We can't give up. Just keep walking in our moccasins.** We must help them see."

So one winter day Shannen and all the other students stood outside their portables in the icy wind holding signs, saying things like "We've never seen a real school. And if the government has its way, we never will." Photos of them appeared in newspapers around the country. *(Pass around the photo of students in Attawapiksat for the children to look at.)* Shannen and her friends also wrote to the government asking for help. But nothing happened.

Shannen kept thinking, "**We can't give up. Just keep walking in our moccasins.**" She knew they needed a bigger, stronger circle. So Shannen and her friends made videos of themselves and they posted the videos on YouTube. In the videos they asked other students to write letters to the government, to spread the word. And little by little, word did spread. Shannen was invited to speak at other schools. She even travelled to Ottawa to speak to government people. *(Hold up the map of Ontario and show the distance between Attawapiksat and Ottawa.)*

Some days Shannen got tired; she was discouraged when she saw how beautiful other buildings were. But her father still urged her, "**Don't give up. Just keep**



walking in your moccasins.” So she kept going. Even though she was now in high school in New Liskeard, Ontario, she kept making speeches, writing letters, telling the story in different places. The more Shannen spoke, the more people listened. The more they listened, the more they cared. Students, teachers and churches all around Canada and around the world joined the circle and brought strength to the voices of Shannen and the students at her school. It seemed like nothing could stop Shannen.

But one day something did stop her. Shannen was in a car accident and she died. However, when her family and friends gathered in a healing circle to share their sadness, they knew what they needed to do. Shannen had shared her dream of a new school. So her friends said, **“We can’t give up. Just keep walking in our moccasins.”**

Four years later in 2014, a new elementary school opened in Attawapiskat. It has long hallways, big warm classrooms, a library, a music room, bathrooms and a gym. One of the first big events in the gym was a play put on by the students. The play retold stories celebrating people who lived there since long ago, people who spoke up for the community, people who dreamed of a better world, people who had made a difference. It celebrated people like Shannen.

This is the end of our story, Shannen’s Dream. But it’s not the end of the story about improving schools for Indigenous children. As more and more school students learn about the unfair school situation in Canada for Indigenous students, they want to bring about changes. They are speaking out and taking action, following Shannen’s example. And we can join in.

Response

Invite children to gather around the writing and craft supplies that have been set out. Encourage everyone to think about Shannen’s story and talk about how they feel about it. Speaking from her heart, Shannen told others about the inadequate, unsafe schools in Attawapiskat and other remote Indigenous communities. She inspired them to speak out. What do the children want to say about Shannen’s dream? Ask them to use words and pictures to describe what they are feeling. Ask the children who they want to share Shannen’s story with. Consider helping them send pictures and letters to family members or politicians to share Shannen’s story.

Closing

You will need: A Bible and the Book of Praise.

Read from the Bible

Remind the children that Bible stories often include children in important roles. Read 1 Timothy 4:12: *“Don’t let anyone think less of you because you are young. Be an example to all believers in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity.”* Ask everyone to repeat the phrase a few times, getting louder and louder each time.

Sing to the tune of hymn #328

It's the Creator's world
O happy day to see
the rocks and trees, the skies and seas
God loves us, you and me!

Pray

Thank you God, for creating
each one of us,
and for making us stronger
when we work together.
Help us learn from Shannen:
to believe in our dreams,
to never give up, to keep walking
in our moccasins,
to make a better world. Amen.



Handout for Home: Shannen's Dream

Dear parent or guardian,

Today we heard an interactive, true story about an Indigenous student, Shannen Koostachin, from Attawapiskat, a remote First Nations community in Northern Ontario.

Shannen attended a primary school in an uninsulated portable. It was an unsafe environment for learning. Shannen began asking "Why?" and speaking out. She had a dream of a new school for her community and good quality education for all Indigenous children in Canada. She kept drawing people's attention to this unfair situation. Her fellow students helped her and they began to get media attention that led to her going to Ottawa where she spoke from her heart to people in the government – because the Government of Canada is responsible for the education of Indigenous children. A new school was finally built in Attawapiskat in 2014. Sadly, Shannen died in a car accident before the new school was built.

From this story the children learned that young people can make a difference, that change can happen and that there is hope for better schooling for Indigenous children in Canada. But they also know that many Indigenous children are still learning in schools that are in very poor condition.

The children continued to talk about the changes needed as they responded creatively to the story. With images and words they expressed their messages of hope for change so that all children in Canada are treated fairly and given access to a good education.

To help your child

- ◆ Ask about the story of "Shannen's Dream" and what your child liked and didn't like about it. Wonder together about what your family could do to support Shannen's dream for quality education for all Indigenous children in Canada (e.g. learn more, tell others).
- ◆ Learn more by reading about Shannen's story at:

Shannen Koostachin, Indigenous education advocate, named one of 150 greatest Canadians
<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sudbury/shannon-dream-legacy-150-canada-1.3981858>

Shannen's Dream for Safe and Comfy Schools
<https://fncaringsociety.com/shannens-dream>

<https://www.facebook.com/CaringSociety/videos/1018073454958808/>

If you have any questions about this activity, contact

Name: _____ Organization: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

We believe that reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada requires us to learn and to take action. Through this activity we are trying to encourage this process. For information about reconciliation in Canada, see www.trc.ca.