

LT3 - Part II - Action for Social Justice: Truth and Reconciliation

Loralee Laycock

Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary

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Doctoral Candidate Lili Jardine

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Nine years ago, Strathmore High School's dance and drama teacher Deanne Bertsch created a performance with her dance class that would reflect the story of First Nations people in Canada and the history of their "cultural oppression" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 67). Deanne consulted with Eulalia Running Rabbit, a teacher of Blackfoot language and history at the high school, as well as with then Chief Vincent Yellow Old Woman from the Siksika Nation to create a presentation that follows the history of the fur trade, smallpox, colonization, residential schools, and alcoholism among First Nations people. The production, named "New Blood," involves both Indigenous and non-Indigenous high school students, incorporating live narration using the poem "Words to a Grandchild" by Chief Dan George (n.d.), a traditional First Nations singer/drummer, and live musicians performing songs from Peter Gabriel's album "New Blood" (2011). While the individual performers have changed over the years, the production itself continues to be presented many times each year within the province of Alberta, as well as across Canada. I attended this event on January 30, 2023 in Strathmore, along with 150 high school teachers from the Calgary Catholic School Division who were attending as part of their professional development day.

Since "New Blood" began, I have been interested in its origins and the powerful message being shared in my community by young people. As a future educator, I want to be able to share all parts of history in Canada with my students. I felt that by attending a presentation that allows young people to learn about their past while sharing the painful parts of their history in a meaningful way with others, I could learn more about this history as well as learn a new pedagogical approach for sharing knowledge with my students in the future. While "New Blood" is a story of the darkest parts of history for First Nations People in Canada, it is also a message of

hope. At the end of each performance, audience members are invited to stay and participate in a talk-back session, asking questions to the show's creators as well as the students involved.

Listening to these young performers share their experiences was incredibly impactful for me.

Indigenous students introduce themselves using their traditional Blackfoot language and share stories of their grandparents who are residential school survivors. Non-Indigenous students share how much they have been impacted by seeing the history of oppression for the First Nations People in a more personal way. Audience members ask thoughtful questions about impactful historical events they may not have accurately understood before, gaining insight from the answers from these talented young people. While the performance does address the devastating effects of oppression for First Nations People, the message is of truth and reconciliation in its purest form. The historical truths are painful and difficult to accept, but trying to reconcile these truths and move forward with a better understanding and a hope for the future is the goal.

To extend this presentation into our daily interactions with others, it is important for all people to examine how we view the separation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. As a non-Indigenous person myself, I need to understand more deeply the lasting impact that cultural oppression has had on First Nations communities in Canada and address my own identity in relationship to theirs. In their article "Exposing Privilege and Racism in the Great White North: Tackling Whiteness and Identity Issues in Canadian Education" (2010), Lund and Carr explain the importance of examining "the complex ways Whiteness works to oppress others...to challenge oppression through an analysis of racialized privileges" (p. 229). As part of our efforts to provide reconciliation to First Nations people in Canada, we first need to acknowledge, on a personal level, the vast difference between the experiences of those who are and are not Indigenous. Lund and Carr also pose the question: "If White people do not know that

they are White, then how can those who are in positions of power effectively understand and challenge their unearned privilege and racism?” (p. 230). Again, examining my own racial identity, along with the challenges that face those with a different race than my own, is a very effective way for me to extend the learnings from “New Blood” into my own life.

Another method of extending the learnings from this presentation into my own life is how important it is for us to accurately understand our history. I attended elementary school in the 1980’s when residential schools were still actively operational in Alberta. Until the newest revision to Alberta’s curriculum in 2022 which includes references to residential schools throughout the elementary social studies curriculum (Learn Alberta, 2022), as recently as 2021 the references to Alberta’s 25 residential schools, as well as the extremely damaging and lasting effects from these schools, were rarely taught (Canadian Race Relations Foundation, 2021). My lack of knowledge of my own province’s history with residential schools is my main motivation for learning as much as I can, sharing my knowledge with others when I can, and coming to terms with my role in raising awareness of the cultural oppression within the First Nations Community.

In the book “Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education” by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017), the authors explore the concept of understanding our history to help raise awareness for the racial inequalities in society. As explained in their book, residential schools were part of the “Gradual Civilization Act of 1857” (p. 123), with the goal of civilizing Indigenous children. Understanding that the enrollment in residential schools was not isolated to just the time the students were attending the school, that children across Canada were affected for generations as a result of these schools, and that they continue to create a feeling of dissonance between cultures, is the first step towards

reconciliation. Additionally, Sensoy and DiAngelo explain that this process of understanding is *only* the first step; that we must be able to “engage with peoples of Color about [racism] in an open and thoughtful way” (p. 149). To discuss the lasting impact with those who have been affected is another way I feel I can best move forward and help to contribute to any sort of reconciliation. Furthermore, Sensoy and DiAngelo debunk the myth that “racism is a thing of the past...I wasn’t around when Indians were put in residential schools” (p. 151). This assumption only contributes to the feeling of individualism in our society, instead of creating the need for our culture to recognize the need for informed change. I hope that by better understanding my history, engaging with Indigenous people to better understand their history, and recognizing the importance of change for society, I can extend what I have learned as a result of attending “New Blood” and use these important principles for my own students, as well as in my own life.

The question I asked during the talk-back session was how involvement in the production had impacted the students, as well as the community. The answer was that when “New Blood” was first created nine years ago, most of the non-Indigenous students were not convinced that residential schools were a reality. They were willing to participate, but in the context of a more fictional event. The Indigenous students knew of the impact of residential schools but were afraid that none of their friends and family would want to attend as it may be painful to see their experiences recreated. However, after the very first performance, the Indigenous community embraced and began to support the telling of the story, as it was a chance for their experiences to be shared. Additionally, the non-Indigenous community began to take notice of the healing power of this presentation, offering support to their own children, as well as those from the Indigenous community. Because “New Blood” has created an opportunity to create and share experiences that were not previously understood, I would argue that while Sensoy and DiAngelo

state that “schools function in actual practice to produce racial inequality” (p. 152), the dance and drama departments at Strathmore High School are an exception to this statement. The cohesion and healing I witnessed as a result of this performance were profound and deserve to be acknowledged.

On a personal note, my 16-year-old son is one of the performers. Until he was involved, he had knowledge of the oppression of First Nations people from his school curriculum as well as what we had discussed with him at home, but he had no personal connection to the lasting impact these traumatic events had. Now that he has become friends with several students whose grandparents are residential school survivors, he is starting to understand the importance of sharing the message of cultural oppression through “New Blood.” Recently, the entire production travelled to Winnipeg, Manitoba to perform at the National Human Rights Museum. His experience performing “New Blood” in a venue that is focused on the importance of equality for all, while also stressing that we are nowhere close to being equal, was life-changing for him. Learning more about the history and culture of people who are his friends has made this personal for him. Seeing the change in him is inspiring to me, as it gives me hope that our future leaders and lawmakers will see the importance of creating a space for all to be heard, seen and recognized. My hope is that by creating exposure to presentations such as “New Blood,” as well as sharing truthful knowledge with young people that I will someday teach, I can create my own role in reconciliation, moving forward with a hope for something better in all our futures.

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Appendix A – Event Outline (LT3 Part A)

Proposed Plan	
1. Activity	New Blood – The Story of Residential Schools in Alberta
2. Date(s)	January 30, 2023
3. Time	10:00 am
4. Duration (hr)	1 hr 30 mins
5. Location	Strathmore, Alberta
6. Facilitator(s) of this event	Strathmore High School, Deanne Bertsch
7. Why have you chosen this specific event?	I live in Strathmore, which is just 30 minutes West of the Siksika Nation, and many people who reside on the nation are involved in this production. Members of the Siksika Nation come to Strathmore to attend school and I hope gain a better understanding of what happened to their families as a result of their experiences in residential schools. I hope this knowledge will help me be a more empathic and understanding teacher of members from Siksika Nation who I hope to someday teach.
8. What are your assumptions and understandings going into the event about the group/community?	This production is created with movement, and very little talking, but I hope to learn more about the history of what happened to the people of the nation and understand better why some people struggle so greatly.
9. What are some questions that you would like to have answered about this group or community?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has this production helped increase awareness of the impact of residential schools on the survivors? • What ways can the community/educators better support students who come from Siksika nation?
10. Which readings will you draw upon to support your reflexive essay?	“Is Everyone Really Equal” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) “Exposing Privilege and Racism in the Great White North” (Lund & Carr, 2010)
11. What stage are you at in terms of organizing your activity and participation?	I have spoken with the high school and have been given permission to attend the performance, even though it is being held for teachers in the Catholic school division.
12. What supports do you think you might need to be successful in this activity?	Conversation with show’s creator, as well as Eulalia Running Rabbit who narrates the show, and is the person who inspired the creation of the performance.
13. What do you already know about the setting and proper protocols for your participation?	It is held in the Strathmore High School theater, and I need to arrive in advance but wait to be seated until all of the teachers who are attending have taken their seats.
14. How will you plan to show your appreciation for attending this event or activity?	Thank you card to the cast and production team, personal thank you to show’s creator and narrator.

Appendix B - Artifact

The following poem is recited at the beginning of each "New Blood" performance by the show's main character.

The Indian in the Child

by Sandra Sutter, Jim Peace • June-July 2014

6 years old on his first day of school, and emotions are running high

Mom and dad are left home alone, as he bids his parents goodbye

The shiny white building in a far away place holds promise and a yet unknown fear

The footsteps this young boy will take on his own, should have been taken with family near

The weather here is changing, and dark clouds are closing in

The boy can't withstand them for long, they remind him his skin is sin

They are sinister like the weather and like a storm that brews within

They wash away childlike innocence trying to kill the Indian in him

They tried to kill the Indian, kill the Indian in the child

They thought he was a savage, untameable and wild

They could not see the Creator's plan for him was the same for you and me

We are meant to walk together, on the good red road of (in) beauty

Kill the Indian in the child they said and to be sure those teachers tried

No language, no family, no culture, every night he cried

A forced haircut and a cruel bath, bleaching brown skin into white

Though they tried to kill the Indian, the Indian survived

Their methods were born of ignorance, along the way the road got twisted

The boy could not do a single thing right, no matter how hard he listened

The lessons that he learned were not about writing, literature or math

What will it take before graduation for him to discover a welcoming path

They tried to kill the Indian, kill the Indian in the child

They thought he was a savage, untameable and wild

They could not see the Creator's plan for him was the same for you and me

We are meant to walk together, on the good red road of (in) beauty

Oh Canada you failed your People, where did you go wrong?

Underneath that National Anthem, You were not true, free or strong

You built a railroad to unite this nation and sent your beautiful children to jail

They were beaten, starved and tortured, and their future was derailed

You get 9 years for rape and drug deals, 9 years for a major crime

Or 9 years in residential school to kill the Indian in the child

Generations have been affected and had to remember how to pray

To rediscover a sacred culture and find forgiveness along the way

For years he spent nights searching for a love (grace) he couldn't find

In the walls within his prison, (and in eyes) in the eyes that had gone blind

As he found the path to forgiveness, he could leave the pain behind

The grace he knew would save him was in his heart and not his mind

Once punished for sins like laughing, jailed in chicken coops by powers that were

We are walking again on the good red road, and creating a new future

We thank the Creator for giving us life and reminding us every day

That the enemy who destroyed us once is now the friend with whom we pray

The Indian in that child is the Chief of his People today

He is leading his community, showing them grace along the way

They walk towards a new future, In this country we all share

So that his 6 year old grandchild, will have no reason to be scared

They tried to kill the Indian, kill the Indian in the child

They thought he was a savage, untameable and wild

They could not see the Creator's plan for him was the same for you and me

We are meant to walk together, on the good red road of (in) beauty

Last time

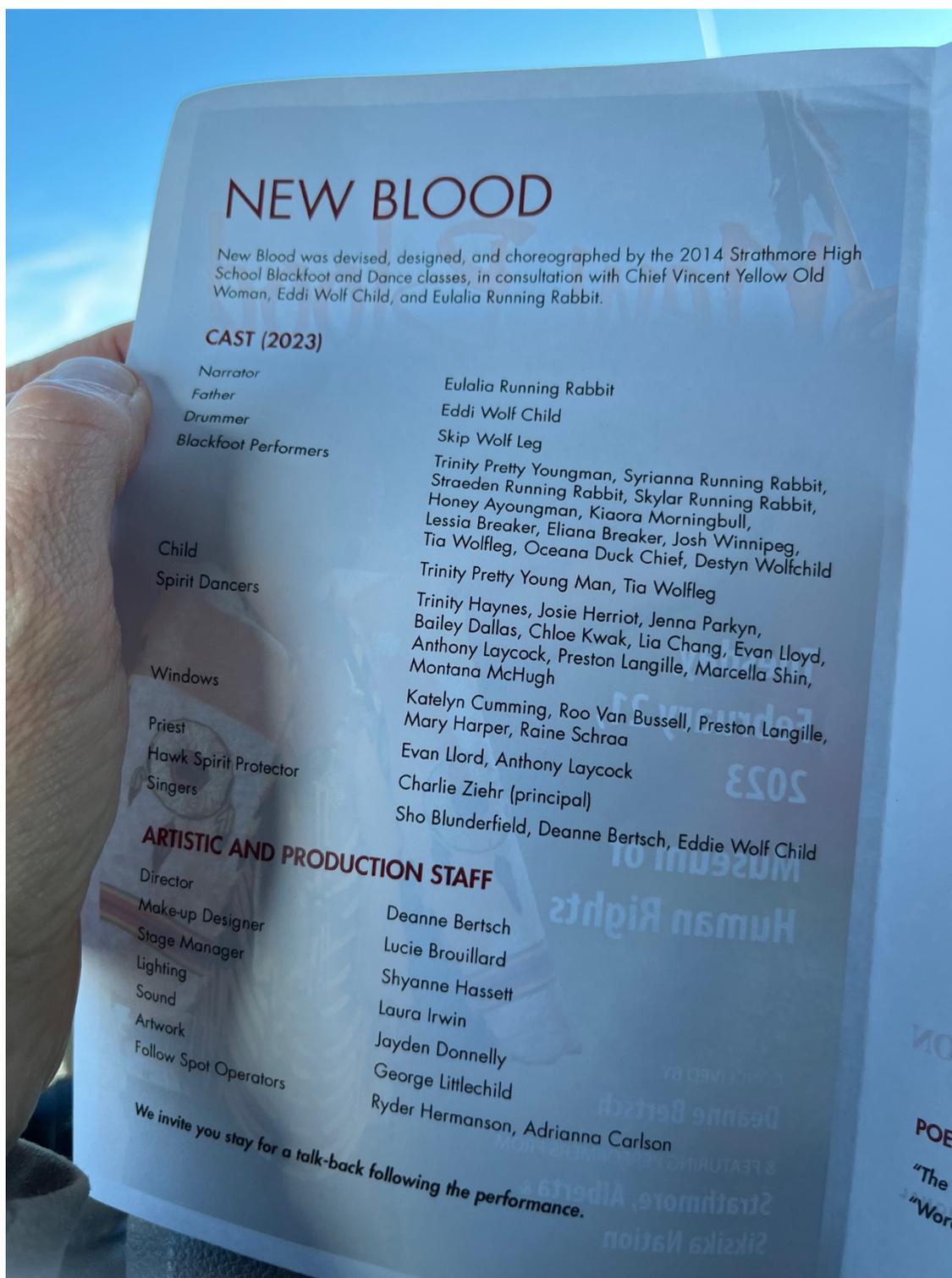
Thank you Creator, for the grace that allowed the People to survive

You can never kill the Indian, the Indian in the child

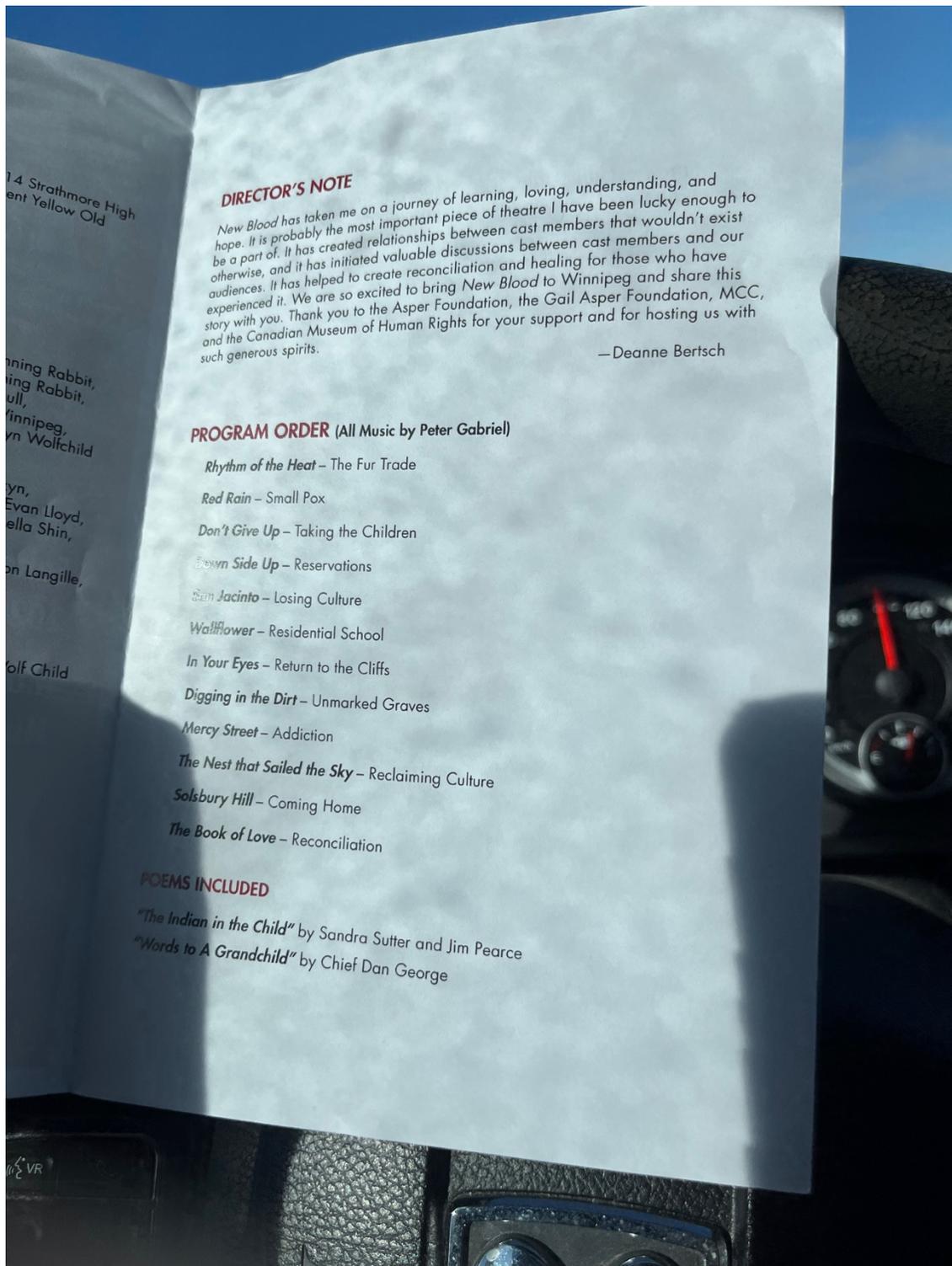
Thank you Creator, for the grace that allowed the People to survive

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Appendix C - Artifact



"New Blood" program, page 1



“New Blood” program, page 2