

Source Analysis: Muffins for Granny

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Critical Analysis

The film “Muffins for Granny” by filmmaker Nadia McLaren discusses the stories and life of her grandmother and elders that are survivors of the Canadian Residential School system. This story comes from a place of personal experience and respond with extreme authenticity. Its authenticity can be traced in the many ways that the film uses real life survivors, the impact that it continues to have on society today and by coming from a personal perspective of her Ojibway grandmother’s experience.

Through the use of real survivors it creates a sense of authenticity through the real-life stories and horrors that impacted indigenous peoples in Canada for many generations. When the seven elders told their stories they all had the same message: It should be and will be told. This film was made in 2006 only 10 years from when the last residential school closed.

The initiation of the project, like many residential school films, is to bring to light the collective and unique stories of residential school survivors. There were two perspectives that stood out to us.

First, the artist who discussed the feeling of having lost culture. He talked about the analogy of how art is a big part of the indigenous culture and how it can be used as a tool for finding a connection with one’s culture. He referred to one of his pieces that he drew that had multiple colours and it represented every type of race in society and how in indigenous culture that is what is envisioned for what should be portrayed. The circle of all cultures or colours being connected.

The second was an elder who spoke to his experience of suicide. His suicide attempt occurred after his experience in residential schools. He smiled quite often and was at peace with it. While the experiences shared were full of trauma, it was easy to connect with the experiences of these two elders. All experiences were also shared in a highly respectful manner through how they were edited, which we found to be important to this resource as the Our Word, Our Ways (Alberta Education, 2005) does not account for resources with this level of authenticity.

Classroom Applications

Muffins for Granny could be employed to great effect in a wide range of educational contexts, but there are some situations where it could be used to share powerful messages and facilitate rich learning. While selected portions of this work could perhaps be used in an elementary school context, the nature of the subject matter makes it more suitable for a secondary school audience due to some mature content.

English Language Arts classrooms could make extensive use of this work as an opportunity to explore, and analyze works from a wide variety of cultural traditions (Alberta Education, 2000, p. 33). Additionally, it could be paired with instruction on the current state of indigenous languages in Canada that would serve to deepen understandings of the power dynamics associated with the use of language more broadly.

The Social Studies curricula and classroom provide perhaps the richest opportunities to make use of this resource, due to the curricular strands associated with the land, continuity and change, power, and culture. Additionally, the curricula directs us to engage with controversial issues, consider multiple perspectives, develop critical thinking and facilitate social participation as a democratic practice (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 1-9). The topic of residential schools generally provides ample opportunity to engage with students in all of those areas. Examples of specific grade level curricula outcomes that would benefit from the use of this resource include the Grade 7 examination of confederation and westward expansion, or the Grade 10-12 exploration of the themes of globalization, nationalism and ideology (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 12). A resource such as *Muffins for Granny* could serve as a useful entry point, creating the necessary emotional connections (CAST, 2015) to bring to life and deepen the understanding derived from further explorations such as case study projects, group discussions, and the involvement of indigenous experts. Specifically, students could explore the concept of intergenerational trauma in a group setting by making predictions on the impact of the residential school experience on the descendants of the subjects of the documentary, and the communities in which they reside (Schissel & Wotherspoon, 2003, p. 60-61). Having done so, students could develop knowledge in concert with impacted groups about strategies for reconciliation.

From a purely practical standpoint, the film offers significant flexibility in terms of the delivery options in the classroom environment. While it would be appropriate in many environments to have students view the film in its entirety, this may not always be possible for a variety of reasons. In those cases, a teacher might consider showing the segments of a single residential school survivor, still allowing their full story to be told in a relatively short period of time. Alternatively, one could show only the segments directly associated with the animated dramatizations of the incidents described. These provide some of the most compelling stories in the film, and may be the most enduring aspects students may remember had they viewed the entire film. In an ELA environment such an approach also provides the opportunity for students and teachers to explore the richest aspects of the visual, and auditory design choices made in the work.

References

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