

The Power of Story – pp. 14–15

Summary: In this interview, we learn about the powerful healing impacts of storytelling from author David Alexander Robertson.

Reading Level:

Vocabulary: gift, reconciliation, day school, reconnect, healing, relationship

Minds on Reflection (Before Reading): What is a story? Why are stories told? What is your favourite story to tell, or be told? How do these stories reflect your family's cultural background and experience?

Understanding the Page:

1 On page 15, David Alexander Robertson tells us the reasons he created a picture book, explaining that they are engaging and the images help the reader to connect to the stories. Do you agree that this is true? What kind of story do

you prefer (e.g., one with photos/images, or one where you get to use your imagination)?

2 Stories are a fantastic way to share and communicate teachings without just simply expressing what those teachings are. What

are some teachings/lessons that you have learned from your favourite stories?

3 Stories are often shared by older people to younger people. Why is this the case? Think about the stories shared with you in your life.

Who told you those stories? What did you learn from the storytellers and the stories?



Health - On page 15, we are given a peak at part of the story in David Alexander Robertson's picture book, *When We Were Alone*. The girl in the story tells the reader that at residential school when she and the other children were alone, they would whisper Cree words to each other so they wouldn't forget them. She also shares that this made them happy. Why is speaking an Indigenous language, or even just knowing some words, so important for Indigenous people? How might this help Indigenous people feel well?



Global Connections - Stories exist in all cultures around the world. Choose a story to read from a culture different from your own. What teachings are held within the story? Are there similarities in this story to your favourite stories? What can you learn about yourself from this story?



Media - Choose someone who is important in your life to interview about stories. Develop five questions to ask them. These questions can be about the individual's life, stories, or anything you think is related to helping you learn more about what stories mean to people. Write a transcript/summary of your interview.



Language Arts - Write a short story about a favourite memory from your childhood. Think about your purpose and audience. What are you trying to share with people? Are there lessons in your story? Draw pictures to illustrate it, and make it more powerful. Exchange your story with a classmate to provide feedback to each other.



Further Inquiry

Choose an Indigenous language from a nation whose original territory is where you live, or near where you live. Research some of the words and/or phrases in one of the Indigenous languages and make a small one-page dictionary with keywords and phrases. Share with friends and family. Is learning Indigenous languages an act of reconciliation? Why or why not? Explain your thinking.



Health - On page 15, we learn that more than 150 000 Indigenous students attended residential schools over a period of 100 years, and that today 80 000 former students are still alive. What are some of the ways you can think of that the residential school experience may still impact residential school Survivors today? What aspects of their wellness would be impacted? Explain your thinking.



Think About It!

For many years, Survivors of residential schools were silent about their experiences. This happened for many reasons, including Survivors feeling ashamed and that there was nowhere to turn for justice because residential schools were not only sanctioned, but funded by the federal government. How does listening to others' stories help with reconciliation? Why is it so important to listen to the stories of Survivors?



Mathematics - The Stats section on page 15 provides data about the approximate number of Indigenous children who went to residential schools, and gives further statistics about students. Choose a visual to best represent this data (e.g., pictograph, graph, or chart). Justify your reasoning for choosing this type of visual.



Links to Inquiry Question

Now that you have learned about some of the impacts that the *Indian Act* and residential schools have had and what reconciliation is, how do you respond to the inquiry question: "How do we work towards reconciliation?"

THE POWER OF STORY

David Alexander Robertson is a member of Norway House Cree Nation in northern Manitoba, and currently lives in Winnipeg. He uses his gift of writing to entertain, inspire, and educate all Canadians about Indigenous history and current issues in Canada. Dave has written a variety of books, from novels to graphic novels to picture books. He travels across Canada to teach students and adults about what they can do to support reconciliation.

What were residential schools?
Dave: In Canada, the Residential School System started in the late 1800s. The schools were created for First Nations children in order to change their identity. The Canadian government and the Church thought they knew a better way for First Nations children to live and be. We know now that this was wrong, and that we are all just the way we are supposed to be. It makes us feel powerful when we act like ourselves.

Did anyone in your family attend a residential school?
Dave: Yes. My grandmother lived in God's Lake First Nation, but attended residential school in Norway House First Nation. She ended up living there. That's why my dad was born and raised in the community. My dad attended a day school that was the same in a lot of ways. He wasn't allowed to speak Cree at school. He would go into the bush with his friends so they could speak Cree to each other.

What impact has residential school had on you and your family?
Dave: One of the reasons why my dad never taught me to speak Cree was because of the way the Residential School System affected my grandmother and my dad. As an adult, I am just starting to learn some words. My kids are, too. It has also been important for me to reconnect with my culture and community. This was something else I didn't have when I was younger because of the impact of the schools. I feel very strong in who I am now, but that healing has taken a long time.

Why did you decide to write a book about this topic?
Dave: I think it's important for all Canadians to know the history of the Residential School System. It's something that we can teach younger kids, too, if we do it in a good way. In fact, I think the history needs to be introduced at a very young age. Kids can be powerful teachers, when we give them knowledge. Stories are the best way to give kids knowledge. If kids grow up teaching others, it makes me feel excited about the future.

When We Were Alone
 Dave is a firm believer that all children can and should learn about Canada's history if we are going to move forward together as a country. *When We Were Alone* was written to teach children about residential schools in an age-appropriate way.

"But sometimes in the summer, when we were alone, and our teachers weren't anywhere around the place we were, we would whisper to each other in Cree. We would say all the words we weren't allowed to say so that we wouldn't forget them. And this made us happy."
 —from *When We Were Alone*

What made you decide to do a picture book for children?
Dave: Picture books are engaging. They help kids to connect more with stories. When we connect with stories, we learn more from them. I was lucky to work with Julie Flett on this book. She is a beautiful artist, and her work in *When We Were Alone* made the book as good as it is. Kids have learned a lot from it.

What does learning about residential schools have to do with reconciliation?
Dave: Everything. Knowing and understanding the residential school history in this country helps us to understand the impact the system has had on Indigenous Peoples. This impact has been on individuals, families, and communities. It also helps us to understand what our role is in reconciliation. Because everybody has a part. If we learn about the history, and understand its impacts, then we are ready to do our part.

Why is learning about this important for all Canadians?
Dave: I think it's important because it involves everybody. Even if you are not Indigenous, you are still impacted by that history. It might be somebody you see that you can support, or a view that you have on somebody that would improve if you understand what they have been through. If we really want to heal a relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, then everybody has to be involved. We can only do it in a good way if everybody learns the history.

Think About It!
 How does listening to others' stories help with reconciliation?

Stats
 ▶ More than 150 000 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students attended residential schools for more than 100 years
 ▶ 139 residential schools across Canada (from start to finish)
 ▶ 6000 students died at residential schools
 ▶ 80 000 former students still living today
 Source: Truth and Reconciliation Commission Interim Report, 2012