

My dream is . . . what I like about myself is . . . about me . . .

Mary-Elizabeth Manley

York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Contact: memanley@yorku.ca

Abstract

This presentation offers insight into the research process, resulting data, and performance work achieved during the two-year research/creation project *Exploring the Rights of the First Nations Child Through the Arts: Our Dreams Matter, Too*. Prior to the daCi Congress, the author consulted the Roots Research and Creation Collective's (RRCC) educator/artists, who had acted as associates on the project. These arts education specialists included storyteller and visual artist James Adams; photographer and videographer Dr. Jacqueline Hookimaw-Witt; contemporary and traditional aboriginal dancer and choreographer Starr Muranko; and musician and dramaturge Dr. Norbert Witt. Each educator/artist contributed to the construction of the presentation, expressing her/his views on the project by means of a written statement, through photographs of the research process and ensuing performance work, or via video.

The project was inspired by the courageous activism of Shannen Koostachin and her grade 8 classmates who successfully lobbied the Canadian government for funds to build a new elementary school in the First Nations community of Attawapiskat in Northern Ontario, Canada. The child's right to culturally appropriate education in a safe and equitable learning environment was at the heart of the project. More specifically, the project was designed to apply arts education explorations to a broader spectrum of the United Nations Rights of the Child through an aboriginal lens. The research sought to discover how a select group of First Nations children understands its rights relative to the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child, while at the same time endeavoring to build their creative capacities, cultural awareness, and personal identity.

Utilizing an aboriginal pedagogical approach, complemented by the multiple intelligences theory, the RRCC team of educator/artists guided students in grades 3, 4, and 5 through seven arts education residencies. Students explored 10 selected children's rights by means of Cree educational contexts and culturally appropriate arts — dance, drama (story-telling), visual arts, and music (singing and drumming). Significant links between arts education and First Nations identity and empowerment were revealed, especially through the personal statements the children wrote when creating "feathers" for their dreamcatchers (see Figures 1 & 2).

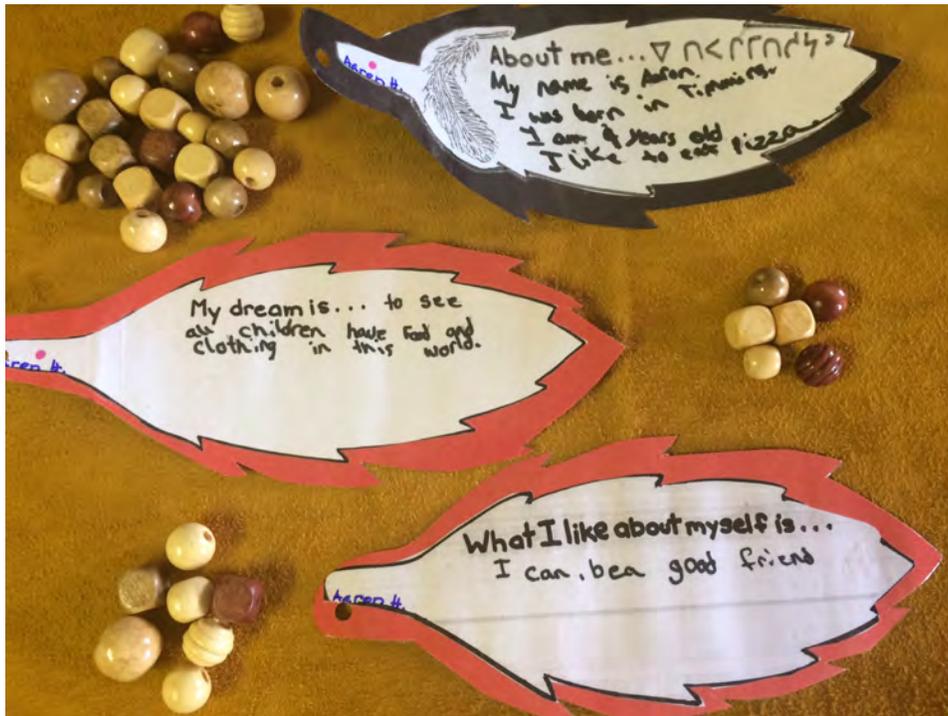


Figure 1

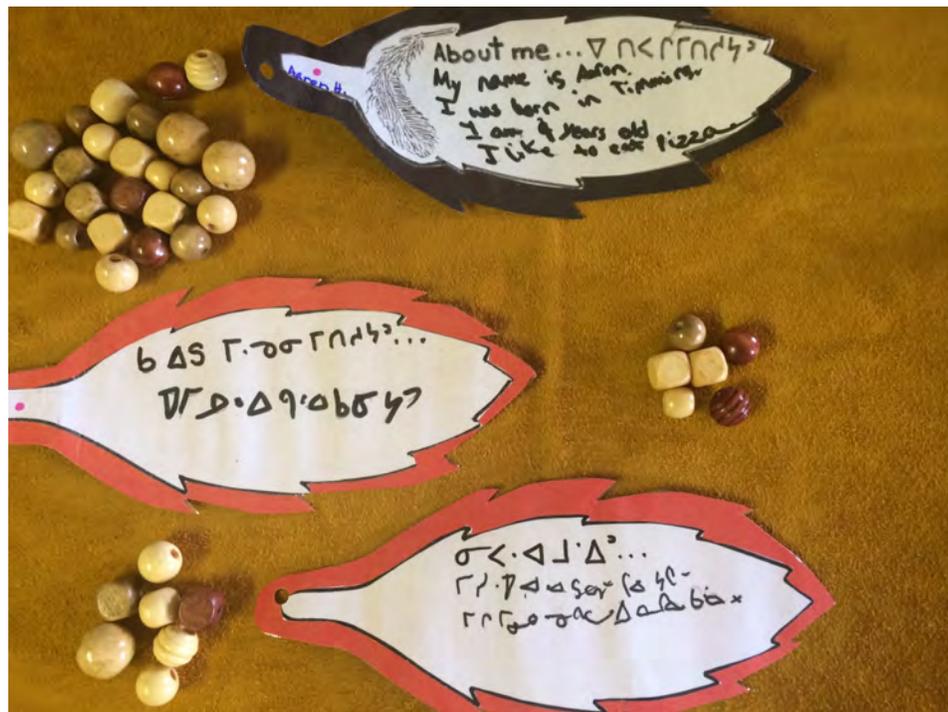


Figure 2¹

During the final residency, a dance/theatre piece was created using a local Cree story, “The Guardians of the Muskeg.” Gifted to Jacqueline Hookimaw-Witt by two Attawapiskat elders, Emily Toomakatik and

¹ Figures 1 & 2: Statements written in English and Cree by one child about his identity and his dreams. The children’s “feather statements” were attached to large dreamcatchers that were placed in the cultural displaycase at the entry to the new Kattawapiskat Elementary School. Photo Credit: Starr Muranko.

John Hookimaw, the story reveals the roles of the Spirit Guardians — Otter, Waterlynx (Mishebeshu) and Bear — in protecting land and culture. By incorporating Turtle into the plot, Jacqueline made a connection to the activism of Shannen Koostachin and her Attawapiskat classmates. Rather than creating a new story, Jacqueline wrote the dance/theatre work in a manner that shows how Guardians of the Muskeg still informs the life and actions of the Mushkegowuk (Swampy Cree) today.



Figure 3²

Our Dreams Matter Too: Guardians of the Muskeg, a social justice theatre work (see Fig. 3) was performed in the first assembly at the new Kattawapiskat Elementary School on September 19, 2014.

Keywords: social justice, arts education, First Nations, children's rights, aboriginal pedagogy

Mary-Elizabeth Manley, Associate Professor, has taught in the Dance Department at York University, Canada, since 1974, directing a range of courses including modern technique, improvisation, composition, pedagogy, education, dance science, and community arts practice. Her research and publications focus on creative and modern dance pedagogy; dance education; choreography and

² Children from Kattawapiskat Elementary School in the finale of the performance, *Our Dreams Matter Too: Guardians of the Muskeg*, at the first assembly in the new school. Photo Credit: Dr. Jacqueline Hookimaw-Witt.

performance for and by young people; and community arts practice. With Drs. Ann Kipling Brown and Charlotte Svendler Nielsen, she edited *daCi's First 30 Years: Rich Returns*, an anthology of papers from daCi Conference Proceedings, 1978 to 2009. Her biography, *Roots and Wings: The Dance Life and Legacy of Virginia Tanner*, is forthcoming.