

Natural Curiosity 2nd Edition: The Importance of Indigenous Perspectives in Children's Environmental Inquiry

By Haley Higdon and Rosa Na

When the first edition of *Natural Curiosity* was published by the Laboratory School at the Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, there were very few resources supporting educators with an inquiry approach to teaching and learning. At the same time, the importance of environmental education was gaining rapid momentum nationwide. Educators faced the challenge of how to bring the environmental inquiry process into their practice. The first edition of *Natural Curiosity* strongly resonated with educators passionate about bringing children outside and helping them create meaningful connections to their natural world.

Even without explicitly addressing the place of Indigenous perspectives in environmental inquiry, the first edition of *Natural Curiosity* found common ground with Indigenous values in important ways, and reflected an awakening respect for Indigenous knowledge everywhere. One Anishinaabe Elder and retired elementary teacher, Wahgeh Giizhigo Migizi Kwe (Eileen "Sam" Conroy), said of the first edition, "I cried when I read it. I said to myself, they're finally starting to get it!"

In hindsight, the creation of the second edition of *Natural Curiosity* was inevitable. As a lab school, a community of learners committed to inquiry, our obvious next step was to revise our own ideas and practices, building upon the resource and updating it with what we have collectively learned since its inception. A core belief of community knowledge building is that all ideas are improvable. Beyond inquiry, and even beyond the school context, this belief is essential to *any* kind of learning. We embarked on the journey to create the second edition in the hope of inspiring this commitment in our children to lifelong learning.



As Indigenous history and culture are mandated across the Ontario curriculum as of September 2018, more and more educators are seeking ways to pursue an authentic process of reconciliation in collaboration with their students. Many teachers, who may not have not encountered concepts of truth or reconciliation in their own schooling, continue to struggle with the challenge of taking up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action. As we continue to grapple with the questions "Where can we start? How do we begin?" we find ourselves at a crossroads: the best time to start was many years ago, the next best time is now, and in whatever capacity we can.

The four branches of environmental inquiry in the second edition of *Natural*

Curiosity, informed by the importance of Indigenous perspectives, are starting points from which educators and students can ground their journey towards reconciliation. We see interweaving threads in each branch, with an emphasis on agency in *Inquiry and Engagement*, on place and real-world experience in *Experiential Learning*, on the holism and interconnectedness of *Integrated Learning*, and on reciprocity and intergenerational love in *Moving Towards Sustainability*. Part 2 describes the experiences of 15 educators from across Ontario who have integrated environmental inquiry into their practice in their own unique ways. Their stories reflect the beginning of a journey rather than a destination.

If we begin to understand and appreciate Indigenous wisdom traditions, and work ethically with Indigenous people to bring those traditions to bear on how we learn, we can improve any education system. We begin to ask: How do Indigenous perspectives relate to environmental education? How might they enhance educators' understanding over time as they explore environmental inquiry? What Indigenous perspectives and principles apply to all of us, and can these be supported ethically in any learning environment?

— *Natural Curiosity 2nd Edition*, pg. 5

These questions must be approached with humility and a recognition that exploring them will take time and involve commitment to meaningful relationships with Indigenous people. Exploring these perspectives in and out the classroom should be the work of all educators—current and future. We all know the next steps in our hearts. We know we have to move past the paralyzing pressure of getting it right to doing it at all, to trying things out with our children as we continue to grow and share our practice together as a community. This is our inquiry.

Reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, from an Aboriginal perspective, also requires reconciliation with the natural world. If human beings resolve problems between themselves but continue to

destroy the natural world, then reconciliation remains incomplete. This is a perspective that we as Commissioners have repeatedly heard: that reconciliation will never occur unless we are also reconciled with the earth.

— *In Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (2015)

Natural Curiosity is a great gift not only to North American educators, but to people around the world. As this good book makes clear, the often-Eurocentric deconstruction of reality does not represent reality. The point of natural curiosity is not to study a thing, but to inquire into the connections and relationships of all things and spirit, seen and unseen. This book is an inspiration, a doorway into a web of life and truth.

— Richard Louv, Author of *Last Child in the Woods* and *The Nature Principle*

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