

Taking a place at the table: Art as Intervention in a Time of Reconciliation

By Tasha Henry

In collaboration with several artists in a recent exhibit at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, called "It's in the Making", Selkirk Montessori students, were initiated into the world of art installation with contemporary artists who challenge the notion of art as product. The students met with Nicholas Galanin, Tlingit artist and Cedric, Nate and Jim Bomford while they constructed their installations in the Gallery. The grade 3-4 students interviewed the artists with questions such as "Why is art installation important? When do you know when your art is finished? How is art an intervention?". The students then attempted their own installation work in the Gallery mansion as a response to their ongoing work with the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, "Calls to Action".

Art installation as social intervention felt like the appropriate vehicle to explore the children's emerging awareness and questions around the difficult history of residential schooling in Canada. As teachers we are in the unique position to respond to the *TRC's Calls to Action* in ways that model sensitive and historically respectful approaches to Canada's shameful investment in residential schooling. Rather than approach this work as a prescriptive curriculum, we approached the concept of reconciliation as a process of responding to the ongoing impacts of colonialism on Indigenous communities. It was important to us that the children's work around redress be responsive, multi-voiced and open ended.

To prepare for the day of the installation, for months the children studied and learned from the Lekwungen peoples' history and the traditional territories on which our school stands, known today as the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations. The children were honoured to be mentored by such highly esteemed and beloved artists and elders such as Richard Hunt (Kwakwaka'wakw), Butch Dick (Songhees), Monique Gray Smith (Lakota, Cree), and Ron George, Heredity Chief Tsaskiy (Wet'suwet'en).

They studied the cultural traditions of the Coast Salish First Peoples by attempting artistic forms such as beading, sewing Haida button "blankets" on felt and by building and drawing their own cardboard "cedar bentwood boxes". They expanded their learning to conceptual art by analyzing the work of two contemporary Tlingit artists, Nicholas Galanin and Blake Lepine. The students were also introduced to the history of residential schooling through Nicola Campbell and Kim La Fave's acclaimed children's books, *Shi-Shi-etko* and *Shin-chi's Canoe*.

The students were then given a white ceramic plate (bought from The Salvation Army) where they created their own drawings using only red and black sharpie markers. On the day of the installation, the students brought their ceramic white plates with their drawings carefully symbolized through a mix of personal and traditionally influenced designs. With the guidance of elder and artist, Butch Dick, the children were taught the importance of ceremony and symbol in the Songhees tradition. They were asked to place their plates in the dining room area in a spot that meant something to them in relation to their understanding of the history of residential schooling in Canada. With reverent gestures and words, the students spoke to their choices. They had been particularly struck by the descriptions of malnourishment from the testimonies of residential school survivors. Many of the children hid their plates under the large oak table or under the chairs to represent the malnourishment of Indigenous children while at school. As the installation took its living form, the children chose to turn the chairs on their side, and to cluster their plates in the corners of the room to represent the upheaval of home and culture due to mandated schooling for Indigenous children.

By inserting their voices through the act of installation the students experienced a powerful social intervention. They were called to speak to their intentions, on their own terms, in their own words. They realized quickly that their art work was not for them; it was not a product to take home or display on the wall. In the collective experience of installing their art work as a social intervention, witnessed by their teachers and Butch Dick, who himself is a survivor of residential schooling, the children experienced the importance of standing up for those who have been silenced. After the children installed their work and spoke to their choices, we circled the installation and read this quote aloud:

"We are thankful for these and all the good things of life. We recognize that they are part of our common heritage and come to us through the efforts of our brothers and sisters the world over. What we desire for ourselves, we wish for all. To this end, may we take our place in the world's work and the world's struggle." (J.S. Woodsworth)

When teaching a response to the *Calls to Action*, we can only hope that we are able to model what social justice learning looks like within the various institutions that frame social thought. This is not work that can rely on detached lessons within the confines of a classroom. The work of reconciliation must be work with the First Peoples of the land from which we learn, through meaningful, conscious and open ended forms that refrain from an agenda, or desired outcome. By precisely not desiring an outcome or a finished product, the children's temporary installation became a visual testament to the missing and unaccounted for children due to residential schooling. On that day, it wasn't our words that filled the space, it was the sound of children moving with intention, fuelled by a quiet

collective heat burning within each of them that sought retribution for children they had never met. It was their innate desire for reparation that permeated the space and moved them to set a place at the table for the Indigenous children who were not permitted their rightful place in Canadian society.