



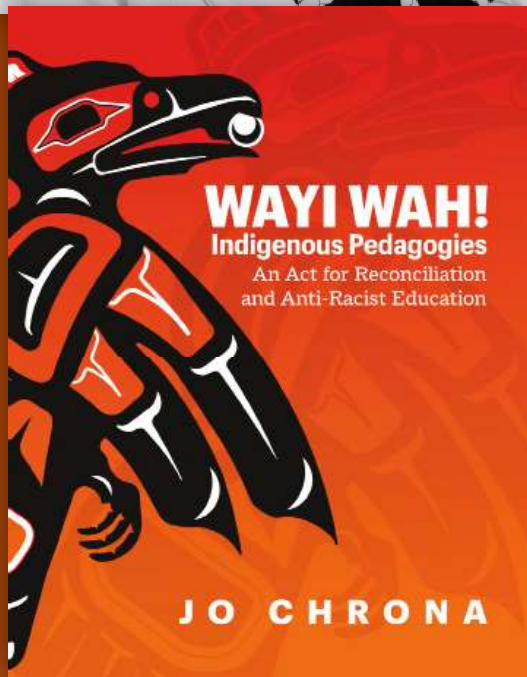
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Wayi Wah!
Indigenous Pedagogies
An Act for Reconciliation and
Anti-Racist Education

by
Jo Chrona

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I'm driving towards the southern tip of Vancouver Island, and I have to pull over. The glow of the sun rising over the ocean in Oak Bay is stunning. A small lighthouse stands bravely on the rocks as waves pound in and fresh cool ocean air hits my face. These lands of the Lkwungen Peoples, specifically the Esquimalt and Songhee Nations, are stunning. I am on my way to speak with educator and author Jo Chrona in her home. Her book, *Wayi Wah! Indigenous Pedagogies: An Act for Reconciliation and Anti-Racist Education*, was released last September and has already had a resounding impact on the education system.

A Walk with a Critical Friend Towards Reconciliation and Transformation



The release of this book is timely, as the province formally adopted the internationally recognized standards of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) on November 28, 2019. The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (DRIPA) was supported by the Declaration Action Plan on March 30, 2022. In this plan, the province committed to a five-year strategy to enact all legal stipulations. Not only does the Act put into place mandatory course credits related to First Peoples as part of graduation requirements, but it also highlights key priorities such as graduation

statistics, Indigenous students' level of success in K-12, and the legal enshrined rights of local First Nation students and community.

In the book's first chapter, Jo Chrona states that she is writing specifically for, "non-Indigenous educators who are seeking to continue to learn about Indigenous pedagogies, Reconciliation through education or creating Indigenous-specific anti-racist education environments." The book strategically guides the reader, beginning with the situation of self, building knowledge of true history, exploring

racist colonial narratives, through to establishing Indigenous practice using First People's Principles, and concludes with outlining future work transforming a system. *Wayi Wah! Indigenous Pedagogies* has something for every person in the education system, no matter where they are on the reconciliation journey. It is also a vital resource and guide for the education system in making significant changes to comply with the five-year Declaration Action Plan.

I climb the steep steps to Jo's front door, and she greets me with a smile and a laugh that is deep and warm. I pull off my boots and head into the living room to set up my camera.

"Cameras make me nervous", Jo says with a tentative smile. "Well," I respond, "that makes two of us: *you* make *me* nervous!" She laughs at that, her face showing clearly that she doesn't believe me. I don't think she understands that her work changed how I saw myself, and how I saw my own actions as an educator; she made me believe this system could change.

She begins. "My name is Jo. I am a member of the Kitsumkalum First Nation, Tsimshian community on the Northwest Coast of the province (Terrace, BC), a member of the house of K'oom." Jo pauses, then continues. "I have been thinking more recently about the ways we situate ourselves. One of the ways we situate ourselves is through understanding whose traditional territories we are on, and understanding the connection that, specifically in British Columbia, First Nations have had with these lands. But situating ourselves is also about each learning more about each other. As that relationship develops, it supports the work we are doing."

We both begin to relax, the camera momentarily forgotten.

In *Wayi Wah! Indigenous Pedagogies*, Jo suggests that the power of words lies not only in what is written or spoken, but in how the words are taken in, turned over, and assessed for authenticity. "If we know each other better, we are more willing to listen to, and

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really hear each other." Jo leans forward slightly on the couch, emphasizing her point. "Once someone shares a part of who they are through story, that piece leaves them, and that meaning is then made by whoever receives it. It is important for us to think about how we receive each other's words. Strong communication between people happens when we understand that communication is about giving and receiving from each other."

I ask Jo about the book's statement that, "as educators we know that not knowing something is not a problem; it is not wanting to learn that is a barrier." How does this relate not only to students, but to ourselves as leaders and educators in the system? Without a pause, Jo jumps into her answer. "Every single day, we ask our students to be uncomfortable learning something new. If we were to model that discomfort and growth, think of the impact!" Jo's hands clap together as she exclaims, "We as leaders and educators need to let others see that we don't have all the answers! Asking a question is a place for everyone to start learning, not just students. She expands, "I think that many educators feel that there are so many agendas we need to respond to, and we sometimes create this armour around ourselves that signals that we not only know what we are doing, but that we are masters of it. That armour shuts down the potential for our own learning. I always wonder, if we are not engaged in learning in a place where we are supposed to be helping others to learn, then what does that do?"

I respond to Jo that in her book, the bravery is not only in making your learning visible, but in recognizing that some of your actions have reflected colonial narratives and can be labelled as racist, making this an incredibly vulnerable place to go.

Jo pauses to glance out the window, the soft sound of waves brushing the momentary silence. She then turns to the camera, and her voice is direct as she speaks to all educators. “One of the things we need to do if we are serious about reconciliation through education, if we want to figure out how to move this country forward, is to talk about racism. It is to talk about Indigenous-specific racism, and to understand the complexities of racism and how it is embedded in education. We could talk about interpersonal racism, systemic racism, epistemic racism, but we also need to talk about how racism manifests in our schools and classrooms. We need to talk about how the colonial narratives are so embedded in our educational systems that they are invisible to most non-Indigenous members. We live in a world that continues to centre and privilege non-Indigenous voices.”

Jo sits back with a questioning look and adds, “One reason this still happens is because people may have a perception that Indigenous learners cannot learn and achieve, thrive, and be as successful as anyone else. The roots of this thinking are firmly embedded in the colonial narratives we have inherited, and that persist. More recently, the racism of low expectations has been brought about by well-intended educators. When non-Indigenous educators come to understand

the legacy and true history of this country, and the intergenerational trauma that has been caused, there is a tendency by some to not expect as much from Indigenous learners. If we follow that line of thinking, what we create is a situation where less is expected from Indigenous learners, and where the learners start to internalize that expectation.”

When reading this part of Jo’s book, I had been struck when I recognized myself. I was one of those well-intentioned educators who focused on creating relevancy, having Indigenous students attend each day, and building relationships. Although this was positive, I had not focused on ensuring expectations of academic rigour were high, and that the choices and options for Indigenous students were the same as they were for all students.

Jo explains where I lost track. “Let’s think about having a high expectations relationship with Indigenous learners, understanding that Indigenous learners – like any other group of learners – will need a diversity of supports in order to achieve in life. So, expect that Indigenous learners can achieve – and when I talk about achievement, it’s not only academic achievement, but also social and emotional wellbeing, physical health, and spiritual wellbeing – and that we



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can create learning environments that *expect* learners to achieve, and that provide the supports and types of learning environments where they *can* achieve.”

Wayi Wah! Indigenous Pedagogies tells Jo’s own experience of the racism of low expectations, and she is reflective as she shares. “The racism of low expectations can be a complex process; even the most well-intentioned educators can engage in actions that limit learners. I think about this in my own history as an educator in the system, and as a First Nations person, but also as someone who bought into the idea that we move students along as quickly as possible. I often think about what I have learned from students. They have been my greatest teacher.

“One student who really helped me to recognize my blindness was someone I refer to in my book as ‘Jeremy’ (not his real name). I was teaching English 12 and Communications 12, and had a student in my English 12 class who was an amazing young guy with a smile that would light up the world. He was quiet and soft spoken. He came into my class with significantly low written communication skills, and not too far into the class it became evident that it would be challenging for him to pass the provincial exam. At the time, the exams were worth anywhere between 20% to 40% of the course mark. I talked with the school counsellor, and we thought it would be best to have Jeremy switch into my Communications 12 class which had a provincial exam but was a much less academically rigorous course. Students could take Communications 12 and receive their Dogwood Diploma, but they could not move into a post-secondary program. We thought we were doing what was best for Jeremy. He said no. He liked the English 12 class. I was surprised that he was not going to take the ‘easier route’. But there was so much about him that I didn’t know, didn’t understand, or come to understand until I had spent more time with him. He had an expectation that he could achieve, and he didn’t put a timeline around what he was able to do. His plan was to persist until he was successful at English 12. He didn’t pass that semester. He came back into my class the following semester. If this was a quick wrap to the story, Jeremy would have passed

the second time... he didn’t. But his skills improved. He came back and took the course with me a third time. He passed the course, and he passed the provincial exam.”

I ask Jo what she felt the result might have been if Jeremy had instead agreed to her adapted plan. “I often think about how my advice would have limited him. He had enough awareness of who he was, and what he wanted out of life, that he wasn’t going to take the easier route. How many times in our lives as educators have we made decisions that we thought might have been helping learners, but might have been made for other reasons? For the ease of teaching a course, for administrative purposes, or because the numbers look great if we have more Indigenous students graduating – but not graduating with the same options. What are we doing?”

I let Jo’s words sink in, and remark that in my work as an educator, I always thought I was acting in the best interest of the student. But that I could now see how, as a non-Indigenous educator, I had more perspectives to gather because I was focused on only one side of the story.

“We are really great at telling the good stories about what we do,” Jo responds. “We are really good at sharing about how great our education system has been, and it has been an amazing system for *some* learners. It has been a *decent* system for other learners, it has *not* been a good system for other groups of our learners. We have the capacity to make a powerful responsive system for *all* of our learners, but in order to do that we need to balance out the good stories with the dark corners. What is happening and what is *not* happening to support the achievement and holistic well-being of every child and youth in K-12? We have a group of learners leaving a system without the skills, ability, and well-being to move on once they graduate grade 12. We have to ask ourselves why we think that is okay. Educators will often ask how they can get learner X, Y, and Z to actually come to school. We might want to reframe that question. *How do we create a learning environment that makes children and youth want to be there?* Let’s

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focus on how we create those learning environments that invite learners in and make that 15-year-old want to be *there* as opposed to somewhere else. Let's focus on ensuring that we are creating schools and classrooms that are relevant to the diversity of the learners we ultimately serve."

I ask Jo about the ultimate vision: what is our own North Star? Jo leans forward slightly. "We start with the recognition that the K-12 systems that we have come from have been flawed. There is value in parts of them, we are not talking about completely turning them upside down. We are recognizing the aspects of the past K-12 systems that were good for learners, but we are also recognizing that we need to continue to transform our education system. If we keep the North Star in mind, we will aim towards creating learning environments that are committed to learners achieving and thriving in ways that honour who they are and where they come from."

Jo smiles, her hands in front of her marking an invisible line forward. "That's when we know we are on the right path, when we have learning environments where learners feel valued. When we cultivate a culture of learning for everyone in our education system, not just for children and youth in the classrooms. Where the culture of learning is also part of how we operate as adults, in whatever roles we have connected to the K-12 system. Where we are curious. Where we are OK with the discomfort that comes with challenging

learning situations. When we are committed to reflection, we engage in experiences, and we learn from them. We figure out how we can do this differently, or better. Are we having the intended outcomes? Are we listening to what learners need? Are we responding to the priorities of First Nations, as opposed to engaging in a saviour complex where non-Indigenous educators decide they know what is best for Indigenous learners? Once we get to those places, we will turn the corner of transformation."

As Jo unspools her questions, I recognize that this is not about blame, or the failure of a system. It is about recognizing the education system for its successes, but about seeing where work needs to be done.

Jo invites reflection. "I like to consider what all of us here right now might think about when we look back in twenty years. What do you think your role will be in creating this powerful responsive education system? What are the stories we tell about who our Indigenous learners are, and about their capacity to achieve and to thrive? What stories do we tell about Indigenous families and communities? Are they stories that are strength-based, or deficit-based? Do you see a system that needs to continue to evolve and transform? Remind yourself, we *are* the education system. We have the ability to create a better society and system through our collective decisions."

Wayi Wah! Indigenous Pedagogies has changed how I see the educational system, and my own role within it. In this perspective, I am not alone. Janet Thompson, Adolescent Learning Coordinator for Social Studies and English teachers in Delta School district, is using Jo's book as a guide for two learning groups of teachers and leaders. One group meets monthly to discuss systemic change through the lens of the book, while the second group meets to use the book as a guide for teaching practice and foundational knowledge. Janet talks of the rich vulnerable conversations where teachers acknowledge the need to evaluate their own bias, and do better. Janet asserts that in using Jo's book as a guide, the 25 to 30 teachers and educational leaders have, "built stronger relationships with all of their students, not

just Indigenous students, and they are just enjoying teaching more.” Janet, after explaining the incredible work that the teachers and leaders are engaged in, is emotional as she declares, “I have been teaching since 1994, and I actually truly believe that this book can have the power to change the system.”

As I wrap up my conversation with Jo, I apologize for going well beyond our scheduled time. It is easy to be transported and impacted by her perspective, her knowledge and experience, and the resounding hope for change. *Wayi Wah! Indigenous Pedagogies* is a gift. A gift to our education system, a gift to its

leaders and teachers, a gift to all children, and – most of all – a gift to Indigenous students who are entitled to an education that honours who they are and where they come from.

I encourage all educators to read this book, and to go further in your own journey towards reconciliation and Indigenous ways of knowing. It is a deep and reflective experience with the power to change the system and improve the experience of your students. Most importantly, it is a book that will change you, and how you move through the world.



Thoughts become ideas
Ideas become actions
Actions become movements
Movements become **change.**

Leona Prince and Gabrielle Prince
Be a Good Ancestor

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one that has driven change in your thoughts,
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