

## DISCUSSION AND DEBATE

# “GATHERING DUST NOT SAVING LIVES”: THE CALL FOR TEXTS WHICH HONESTLY AND STRAIGHTFORWARDLY TEACH ABORIGINAL CHILDREN ABOUT HIV/AIDS AND OTHER IMPORTANT ISSUES

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### Abstract / Résumé

In 2003, William Lindsay was contracted by the British Columbia Health Ministry, Disease Control Division to write two texts which were to teach Aboriginal children in the BC school system about HIV/AIDS. The fast spread of this illness in the Aboriginal community highlighted the need for such work to be done. However, Mr. Lindsay's texts, which were bluntly honest and candid in their explanations, were rejected by the ministry only to be replaced by a more superficial work which did little in its all-important main body to truly educate Aboriginal children about the how's and why's of this destructive disease. This paper documents Mr. Lindsay's journey through the above process and his feelings of frustration in asking why the system fails in being upfront and honest with our already streetwise and savvy kids, when discussion about such important life and death issues takes place.

En 2003, William Lindsay a été recruté par la division de la lutte contre les maladies du ministère de la Santé de la Colombie-Britannique pour rédiger deux documents conçus pour sensibiliser au VIH et au SIDA les jeunes autochtones qui fréquentent les écoles de la province. La propagation rapide de la maladie dans les collectivités autochtones a souligné la nécessité d'une telle activité. Toutefois, les textes de M. Lindsay, qui contenaient des explications carrément honnêtes et franches, ont été refusés par le ministère et remplacés par un ouvrage plus superficiel qui présentait peu de renseignements dans l'important corps du texte pour informer réellement les enfants autochtones du pourquoi et du comment de cette maladie destructrice. L'article présente le cheminement de M. Lindsay au cours de cette période et son sentiment de frustration et demande pourquoi le système n'est pas plus franc et honnête à l'égard d'enfants qui sont déjà adaptés à la rue et avisés lorsqu'on discute de questions de vie et de mort si importantes.

In 2003, I was working as a college professor in a Vancouver, British Columbia Aboriginal post secondary institution. I was also fresh off the publication of a series of newspaper articles, an academic paper, and a children's short story book. In this context, I was approached by a representative of British Columbia's Ministry of Health, Disease Control Division and was asked if I was interested in writing a text or texts which would be used to teach Aboriginal children about issues surrounding HIV/AIDS. The purpose was to reach such ones while young and assist them in becoming aware of this terrible disease and its consequences. "Prevention" was to be a keystone philosophy of the project.

Such education is badly needed. HIV/AIDS is spreading so fast in Canada's Aboriginal population, that it has been referred to numerous times in various mediums as the "second smallpox." In parts of Vancouver, British Columbia—usually in the poorer areas where Aboriginal families live—it is also becoming increasingly common to find used condoms and needles carelessly left about in public places. Such are even found on school playgrounds, where the janitor has to carefully go through a daily ritual of making sure that all such items are carefully cleaned up before the kids arrive. As such items are potentially contaminated by life-threatening diseases, it is good that kids be educated about what these are and what they should do if they find them.

Children and teenagers today are also increasingly savvy about issues surrounding human sexuality. The age of one's first sexual experience is dropping and overall sexual activity is becoming more widespread among the young. This is no surprise to myself or to other teachers working in the system. I knew of one instance where a youthful grade six girl "spent the weekend" with a boyfriend. The whole class was privy to this knowledge and freely talked about it. A teacher attending graduate school, casually mentioned to our class that the school where she worked had recently had to deal with a herpes outbreak. Teenage pregnancy has also become so common that it is no longer shocking when it occurs. Now, occurring in the midst of this youthful sexual revolution, is the spread of life-altering and potentially fatal diseases, such as hepatitis and HIV/AIDS.

Young ones today thus know about sex and some, whether adults want to admit it or not, participate in it with little regard for the consequences. This is because movies, television programs, music videos, books, the Internet, and hit songs, all present sex as common, acceptable, and risk free. I'm not an old prude (having grown up in the wake of the free love generation) but I've been shocked to see some of the content in today's music videos. Women performers wear as little as they can, they dance like they are in the throes of libido, and they are usually

referred to, and treated like, “bitches and ho’s” by male performers. Such are a long way from the insightful and artistic music videos I remember enjoying in the 1980s (Peter Gabriel, anyone?).

This paper, however, is not a critique of societal forces which allow or condone the above. It merely states that such exist and are the norm today. In this context, our Aboriginal (and other) youth have become more street-smart and savvy than most grown-ups would like to admit. They are worldly experienced and their language and attitude conveys this. What they often lack, however, is “accurate” knowledge about sexuality and its consequences, particularly, regarding the spread of diseases like HIV/AIDS.

With all of this in mind, I began the aforementioned project with the determination not to beat around the bush. Lives were literally at stake, so there was no use holding back in the type of language and content that needed to be used, especially in the big city setting (and knowing full well that big city attitudes and actions have spread to rural areas). It made sense that texts dealing with HIV/AIDS would need to be written in a kind and understanding way but they also needed to be blunt, honest, and right to the point if they were to make any true difference. I, Aboriginal educator and one who has had a great deal of experience living in rural and urban Aboriginal communities, knew this.

Too bad the government ministry didn’t know. After a long delay, during which an ad hoc committee discussed the completed project and after the work was run by some advisors and test groups, my work was rejected as “not appropriate.” Adult readers did not like my candid descriptions about sexuality, condoms, needles, and the repercussions of HIV/AIDS. The project was thus to be re-done, in a more “age appropriate” way and I was now out of the loop.

To highlight, my work was split into two texts with accompanying review questions and lesson plans. One text was aimed at a lower five to eight age group, and the other to a higher nine to thirteen age group. Each text was tempered according to the realistic circumstances that children in each age group would certainly find themselves in. Positive Native values such as acceptance and love were highlighted, Aboriginal Elders were involved in the stories, and language that most contemporary kids know and use was implemented for maximum effect. One story involved an Aboriginal family living in the city who are forced to confront the issue of HIV/AIDS when an infected family member visits. The other story takes place in a classroom setting, where a nurse with the assistance of Native Elders discusses the issue of HIV/AIDS with a class made up of mostly Aboriginal kids.

I was personally very proud of the finished product, especially after

they were accepted for presentation and discussion at an academic conference at the University of Manitoba in 2004. They were extremely well received there, with one experienced faculty member remarking that both texts were potentially “award winning.” However, I was prouder of the fact that such work could possibly make a real difference in the lives of Aboriginal people, especially the youth.

It was with shock and dismay then that I received the message from the ministry saying that they were not going to use my texts. After another year long delay, their “more appropriate” text turned out to be *The Gathering Tree* (2005) by writer Larry Loyie. It was released to some fanfare and media coverage. I looked forward to reading it, to see how this version would deal with the difficult issues surrounding HIV/AIDS. I was really disappointed when I finally had a chance to read it.

To give the work some credit, some Aboriginal cultural values are highlighted within. Particularly good is the encouragement of acceptance of ones who suffer the trauma of this illness. What was terribly disappointing from an Aboriginal educator’s point of view was the insipid and superficial way the text dealt with the controversial issues surrounding sexuality and HIV/AIDS. Key and needed explanations regarding these issues were ignored in the main part of the text. Readers are informed that the story’s protagonist, a man with HIV/AIDS, will answer serious questions later. Unfortunately, “later” never comes in the story’s main body. Instead, this main section focuses mostly on community and family “acceptance” of the HIV/AIDS infected character because, according to the text, it’s the Native way.

The very best information, the kind which would truly educate and save lives, is found in a glossary-style addendum at the back of the text. Here the information is as honest, informative, and candid as could be hoped for, including discussions about how HIV/AIDS is spread and how it can be prevented.

The problem with this format is two-fold. First of all, young readers may miss or skip over this end portion. Who of us, even as adults, likes to read a glossary-style section of material once a book is completed? If most adults are not in the habit of doing this, why would we expect young children to do so?

The second problem with this structure is that parents and teachers may choose not to read and discuss this end portion’s candid material. My own presented material about these issues was criticized as “not appropriate,” as material that adults would shy away from using. Yet, here is almost the same material, tucked away safely in the back of a text, for parents and teachers to “possibly” use for additional discussion. If like-minded adults were afraid to use my material, which was

upfront and candid in its discussions, why would they use this similarly discussed glossary-style material? If they choose not to, the whole purpose of saving lives and preventing the further spread of this illness is thus lost.

My complaints here might be interpreted as a serious case of academic sour grapes – that someone else got publishing credit for a project that I began and threw my whole heart into. I would like to assure readers that this is not the case. I have had enough projects published that another piece or two is not going to make that much of a difference in my résumé. I am more upset that those in charge of such an important initiative took the easy way out. They avoided the controversial but necessary terms and explanations in the main body of the work, which most people will read, to make it politically and morally “appropriate.” Yet, they can still pat themselves on the back for throwing this “controversial” material in at the end of the text in an addendum-style section which now, unfortunately, may not be used.

If one considers that lives are at stake, sticking this important life-saving information “safely” into the back of a book just isn’t going to cut it. Avoiding language and discussions already used by almost every kid on the playground, just isn’t going to cut it. When the “second smallpox” epidemic is devastating Aboriginal communities, and the dominant lesson in a text designed to inform is a nicey, nicey message about “acceptance” ...well, that really isn’t going to cut it either.

One final thing bothers me concerning this project: I was told before I began researching and writing my texts that “abstinence” was definitely not to be mentioned as an option in the prevention of the spread of HIV/AIDS. The ministry did not want the appearance of “moralizing” occurring, something that might offend parents and teachers. I find such reasoning to be faulty. In life and death issues like this, should not all options be put on the table? Especially what is, in essence, the safest option? By giving in to the morality (or amorality) of such ones, are we not thus catering to *their* ideas and *their* preferences about morals? Sex is about morality, so again, why not candidly lay *all* the cards on the table and let people decide for themselves what is the best option for themselves? By ignoring all options, lives may be put at risk.

In the end, such a project should have been about maximizing information for the purpose of saving lives. By this standard, a watered-down version which takes the safe middle road in its all-important main section, is a failure. As well, when the health and lives of Aboriginal youth are at stake, the old “its better than nothing” argument carries little weight. Maybe next time, those in power will have the courage to do what is right in such projects. As an Aboriginal person and educator, I consider

the doing of such to be of paramount importance.

By the way, if anyone out there would like to come into possession of two manuscripts which candidly and honestly teach Aboriginal kids about HIV/AIDS, they are sitting here in my office. They are, unfortunately, gathering dust not saving lives.

### **Biography**

William G. Lindsay is from Canada's Assiniboine First Nation. He has been a teacher and administrator for over ten years, having worked in the elementary, high school, college, and university systems in British Columbia. He is currently working on his Ph.D. in Educational Studies at the University Of British Columbia. He also works at the same university as Coordinator for Aboriginal Student Services and as a teacher in the Humanities 101 program. William has enjoyed working with Aboriginal students at all levels in his teaching and administrative career. He has also published numerous articles dealing with Aboriginal education, history, and culture.