
DISCRIMINATION AND IDENTITY

Grade Levels: 7–12
Subjects: Language, English

OBJECTIVE

Students will gain an understanding of how bias and discrimination affect the lives and identities of Aboriginal peoples, and how experiencing bias and discrimination affects the choices people make later in life.

SPECIFIC CURRICULUM EXPECTATIONS

Grade 7/8 Language: Reading

- » read a wide variety of texts from diverse cultures
- » demonstrate understanding by summarizing important ideas and citing a variety of details that support the main idea
- » develop and explain interpretations of texts using stated and implied ideas from the texts to support their interpretations

Grade 9/10/11/12 English: Reading & Literature Studies

- » read a variety of texts from diverse cultures and historical periods
- » identify the most important ideas and supporting details in texts
- » make and explain inferences about texts, supporting their explanations with stated and implied ideas from the texts

Grade 9/10/11/12 English: Reading & Literature Studies

- » identify, sort, and order main ideas and supporting details for writing tasks

RESOURCE(S)

April Raintree (Grades 7-9) or *In Search of April Raintree* (Grades 10-12), by Beatrice Culleton Mosionier.

Note to teachers: The original, unabridged edition of *In Search of April Raintree* contains language and a graphic sexual assault scene that may not be suitable for all readers. It should be used with students in Grade 10 and above. The abridged edition, *April Raintree*, was revised with younger readers in mind.

ASSESSMENT & EVALUATION STRATEGIES

- » Rubric
- » Oral Report
- » Checklist
- » Work Samples

BEFORE READING

Prompt: What does the word “discrimination” mean to you? What are some examples of discrimination in our school, community, or world?

Background Information: Discrimination is an action (e.g., treating someone differently). Stereotypes and biases form the attitudes and beliefs that are behind all discriminatory actions. Systems (e.g., media) and institutions (e.g., schools) create and/or support the attitudes and beliefs that lead to discrimination.

Prompt: How are people affected by stereotypes and discrimination? Are both perpetrator and victim affected?

Background Information: Stereotypes and discrimination damage relationships and, as a result, cause harm to everyone involved, including the surrounding community.

Prompt: Who are the Métis? What kinds of bias and discrimination against Aboriginal peoples exist in Canada? What effect has this bias and discrimination had on Aboriginal peoples?

Background information: Find information on the Manitoba Métis Federation at <http://mmf.mb.ca/index.php>, the Métis Nation of Ontario at www.metisnation.org, and the Métis National Council at www.metisnation.ca. Bias and discrimination against Aboriginal peoples mean that Aboriginal children are apprehended into care at a far greater rate than children in the non-Aboriginal population. Discriminatory actions on the part of governments – such as forcing all Aboriginal children to attend residential schools during most of the 20th century – have broken apart Aboriginal families and communities and created many social difficulties. As a result, like April and Cheryl, many Aboriginal peoples lack identity. Many try to escape their pain through self-medication with alcohol and drugs. Because police forces and provincial and federal justice systems often do not understand the histories and experiences of the communities they serve, this results in cycles of self-abuse and institutionalization. Bias and discrimination against Aboriginal peoples and their ways of knowing and being often make integrating into society (e.g., accessing training or education and getting a job) very difficult.

Prompt: What is personal identity? What is cultural identity?

Background Information: Personal identity is a self-concept that comes from one’s knowledge of one’s membership in a social group, and the resulting sense of value and emotional significance. Cultural identity is the sense of importance and attachment one has to a group, along with positive or negative feelings about being part of that group. “Culture” is a collective expression of identity. In pre-contact Aboriginal cultures, personal identity constantly redefined itself; this constant flux ensured cultural survival within an ever-changing world.

DURING READING

Prompt: Describe some of the things that happen to April and her sister as a result of bias or discrimination from community, government, and the school. How might these experiences shape each girl's personal and cultural identity? How do April and Cheryl react to these situations, and how do these situations affect their choices later in life?

Background Information: April and Cheryl are taken away from their family and placed in separate non-Aboriginal foster homes; this leads to family and cultural dislocation and the girls do not develop a personal or cultural identity. April says people are rude to her mother in Winnipeg; she notices non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal kids call each other names in the park; the DeRosiers call her a "halfbreed." Cheryl tells her teacher that the history textbook is not an accurate portrayal of Aboriginal people; she is strapped by the principal and has her hair cut off by Mrs. DeRosier. Later, Cheryl has a boyfriend who is embarrassed to be seen with her in public. April reacts by feeling negatively about her Métis ancestry and trying to "pass" as white; Cheryl becomes angry and becomes an activist for Aboriginal causes.

Prompt: April's experiences in foster care illustrate some of the issues surrounding foster care for Aboriginal children. What are some of the measures that need to be taken to protect the health and well-being of Aboriginal children?

Background Information: Aboriginal peoples are over-represented in the child-welfare system, and most children are still sent to non-Aboriginal foster homes or adopted into non-Aboriginal families, creating generations of Aboriginal people who do not have an Aboriginal identity. Poverty and a lack of adequate supports and services are behind most apprehensions; advocates say that the health and well-being of Aboriginal children will only be protected when the social and economic conditions created by colonialism are addressed. Advocates say that child-welfare services must be culturally appropriate, collaborative in approach, and, where possible, managed by Aboriginal communities and agencies.

Prompt: How did Cheryl's education affect her personal identity? Has the representation of Aboriginal experiences, perspectives, and histories changed in schools? How might schools ensure that they are presenting unbiased information about Aboriginal experiences, perspectives, and histories?

Background Information: Most classroom textbooks are written from a Eurocentric perspective. Cheryl seeks to know and understand the components of Aboriginal identity, but because she is separated from her past and from the people and places that might help her know and understand who she is, she is offered only stereotypes. Providing an unbiased portrayal of Aboriginal histories and experiences means listening to Aboriginal voices and honouring Aboriginal perspectives.

Prompt: The sexual assault scene in *In Search of April Raintree* illustrates the kind of violence experienced by many Aboriginal women in Canada. How might stereotypes and bias be connected to this violence? How might violence against women affect Aboriginal communities? Canada has an international reputation as a safe country where people are free – does learning about the violence many Aboriginal women endure affect how you think of Canada?

Background Information: Stereotypes about Aboriginal women deny Aboriginal women dignity and worth, which leads some men to think that they can get away with acts of violence and hatred toward them. Police forces and provincial and federal justice systems are often unaware of the experiences and histories of the communities they serve, and stereotypes about Aboriginal peoples have led to a failure to investigate cases of women reported missing. There are currently over 500 missing Aboriginal women in Canada. Many children and families live in sadness and anger, not knowing what happened to their loved ones. For more information on the effects of bias and discrimination on the lives of Aboriginal women in Canada, visit the Amnesty International website at www.amnesty.ca/campaigns/sisters_overview.php.

Prompt: Why does the relationship between April and Cheryl break down?

Background Information: Deception – April thinks she is saving Cheryl by not telling her the truth about their parents' alcoholism; Cheryl lies to April about her own alcoholism and does not reveal her involvement in the sex trade. Inability to forgive – April cannot love Cheryl unconditionally, which affects Cheryl's ability to heal and change. Honesty and love are two of the seven sacred teachings within many Aboriginal cultures; the girls' relationship is adversely affected by a lack of Aboriginal identity and Aboriginal cultural teachings.

AFTER READING

Prompt: Why do you think the author wrote this novel?

Background Information: Beatrice Culleton Mosionier grew up in foster care; she says she was seeking answers to her many questions. She told a story much like hers to discover an identity that was denied to her.

Prompt: Why do people develop biases or stereotypes?

Background Information: Stereotypes are often constructed by those in power to convince other groups that they are not equal and to justify their inequitable treatment. It is a form of control.

Prompt: What is the main message of the book? How does this message affect your attitudes and beliefs about Aboriginal peoples? Did your attitudes and beliefs change after reading the novel?

Background Information: The choices people make are informed by their life experiences, but as April's story shows, healing is always possible. Although Aboriginal peoples have been negatively affected by bias and discrimination, there are many success stories and many Aboriginal people who seek health and wholeness and a bright future for their children.

ACTIVITY – GRAPHIC TIMELINE

1. Have students select at least six key events in the life of each main character (April and Cheryl). Have students write a brief description of each event or draw a pictorial representation.
2. Have students label each event as either a “highlight” or a “hardship.”
3. Have students plot each event sequentially along a timeline. Highlights are placed above the line, and hardships are placed below the line.
4. Ask students to connect the events with straight lines to show each character’s journey, using a different coloured marker to trace the life events of each character.
5. Have students write a three-page analysis that describes the similarities and differences in each character’s experiences, and how these similarities and differences affected each character’s fate. Have students use specific evidence from the text to support their conclusions.

ACTIVITY – CHARACTER ANALYSIS

1. Have students create a character analysis of one of the main characters (April or Cheryl).
2. Ask students to choose at least four character traits for each character, and describe these traits using examples from the text.
3. Provide students with the following guidelines for analyzing character (teachers may want to model a few examples or have a large-group discussion before students start the assignment):
 - a. What are the character’s ethics?
 - b. Are the character’s actions wise or unwise?
 - c. What is the character’s motivation?
 - d. What is the effect of the character’s behaviour on other characters?
 - e. Look for words that are repeatedly used to describe that character.
 - f. Be aware of items that are associated with the character.
 - g. Read between the lines; make inferences. What a character does not say is often as important as what she does say.
 - h. Is the character “flat” or “round”? A character is flat when she is static, or does not experience change of any kind. Round characters experience some sort of growth.
 - i. Consider the time period in which the character lives and avoid making contemporary judgements about the past. Political and social realities were different; a character’s decisions might be related to the options she had at the time.
 - j. What does the author think? Look for the author’s own judgements about the character. Is the author directing the reader toward a certain interpretation?

REFLECTION

The author has said that the characters each embody different sides of her personality and that their experiences illustrate both the good times and bad times of her own life. Have a large-group discussion on the following statement:

“The journey through life is a chaotic one. We each have many highlights and many hardships. How do these conflicting forces create a strong identity?”

