Silenced and Spoken: Laws, schools and the survival of oral traditions

NBE3U, Unit 4: Living Words, Lesson 6. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

For decades, Canadian law and policy worked to silence Indigenous oral traditions: the potlatch ban, residential schools that punished children for speaking their languages, and the loss of fluent speakers. The traditions survived because people kept them, sometimes in secret, and are now bringing them back.

What students do: Students examine forces that disrupted oral traditions (the potlatch ban of 1884–1951, the 1921 Cranmer potlatch arrests, residential schools and language loss, relocation), the forces that helped them continue (secret practice, repatriation, revitalization), analyse perspectives and bias in historical and contemporary accounts, and map disruption and continuation.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
B1.3	explain, with increasing insight, the influence of a range of social, economic, and/or political forces on the disruption or continuation of oral traditions in contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities
A2.4	describe a range of contemporary and historical factors affecting public access to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit text forms, including cultural text forms
B2.8	identify and analyse the perspectives and/or biases evident in oral texts from and/or related to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, and comment with growing understanding on any questions they may raise about beliefs, values, identity, and power

From The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019), English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices, Grade 11, University Preparation (NBE3U). A = First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Perspectives and Text Forms in Canada, B = Oral Communication, C = Reading and Literature Studies, D = Writing, E = Media Studies.

Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning how laws and policies disrupted oral traditions. • We are learning how communities have continued and restored them.	• I can explain how the potlatch ban and residential schools disrupted oral traditions. • I can describe forces that helped traditions continue. • I can identify perspective and bias in accounts of these events. • I can connect the past to access today.

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Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** Silenced and Spoken deck.
- **Handouts:** Disruption and Continuation (page 1), Two Accounts (page 2).
- **Optional media:** A short teacher-chosen clip from the U'mista Cultural Centre or a Kwakwaka'wakw-led source. Preview first.

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–8	**Care**	Before we begin.	Listen.	
8–25	**The ban**	1884–1951.	Note.	
25–40	**Schools and language**	Silenced voices.	Note.	Forces explained.
40–58	**Continuation**	Map.	Map.	Continuation described.
58–75	**Two accounts**	Perspective.	Analyse.	Bias identified.

Differentiation

- **Support:** Timeline with key terms highlighted.
- **ELL:** Glossary: ban, confiscate, repatriate, revitalize.
- **Challenge:** Research the return of the Cranmer potlatch collection.

Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Disruption and Continuation; Two Accounts	Social and political forces (B1.3), access (A2.4) and perspective and bias (B2.8)

Silenced and spoken: key points

- **The ban:** Indian Act amendment approved 1884, in force January 1, 1885; removed in 1951. Targeted the potlatch, where names, rights and histories were witnessed and passed on.
- **Cranmer potlatch:** December 25, 1921, Village Island: 45 arrested, about 600 objects confiscated and sent to museums.
- **Schools and language:** Children were punished for speaking their languages; fewer speakers means fewer listeners and keepers.
- **Continuation:** Practices continued in secret, Elders kept teachings, and communities fought for repatriation (U'mista, 1980) and language revival.
- **Bias:** The official account calls a ceremony “wasteful”; the museum label names a law and a loss. Word choice reveals perspective.

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Teacher notes

- This course discusses colonization, residential schools and their effects. Some students and families carry this history personally. Support: Hope for Wellness Help Line (for Indigenous people across Canada, 24/7, by phone or online chat at hopeforwellness.ca; English and French, with Cree, Ojibway and Inuktut on request at certain times), 1-855-242-3310; Kids Help Phone, 1-800-668-6868 or text 686868; 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline (call or text 988); National Indian Residential School Crisis Line, 1-866-925-4419.
- Potlatch ban: an amendment to the Indian Act approved April 19, 1884, in force January 1, 1885, banned the potlatch and the “tamanawas” dance; it was removed in the 1951 revision of the Indian Act. On December 25, 1921, police and Indian agents broke up a potlatch hosted by Dan Cranmer at Mimkwamlis (Village Island), B.C.: 45 people were arrested, about half were jailed for two to three months, and roughly 600 ceremonial objects were confiscated, many ending up in museums in Ottawa, Toronto and New York (The Canadian Encyclopedia, “Potlatch Ban”). Kwakwaka'wakw communities began working for their return in the 1970s; the U'mista Cultural Centre in Alert Bay opened in 1980 to house returned items (“U'mista” is translated as the return of something important).
- Language: residential schools punished children for speaking their languages. Michif, the Métis language, had 1,845 speakers in the 2021 census, and experts estimate fewer than 1,000 are fluent (The Canadian Encyclopedia, “Michif”). Fewer speakers means fewer people can hear oral texts in their original language (A2.4).
- The “Two Accounts” page uses short original model texts written for this lesson (a 1920s-style official report and a present-day museum label). They are clearly labelled and are not anyone's real words.
- Do not ask students whose families attended residential schools to share. Do not ask Indigenous students to speak for their communities, to share personal or family histories, or to act as experts. Every student's participation in sharing is optional.
- We strongly recommend reviewing this unit with your board's Indigenous education lead and, where possible, inviting a First Nations, Métis or Inuit Elder, Knowledge Keeper or guest speaker following your board's protocols (including offerings and honoraria). Local Nations' own sources come first.

Coming up

Lesson 7, Métis Voices.

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