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Pathways for School Leaders to Enact Social Justice

by

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Abstract

Six years after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action charted changes in policy and practice to advance the process of reconciliation within Canada (2015), authentic progress made in school settings is modest. Approaching the problem of waning attention and commitment to reconciliation education in school settings from a research-based position as well as from the stance of classroom teacher, the author provides insight into the obstacles embedded in educational frameworks, and pathways open to school leaders striving to further levels of awareness and effective action for social justice within schools with an emphasis on students and communities that are First Nations, Métis or Inuit. Examples of critical practices and understandings for teacher leaders and administrators to enact social justice are educator reflection on the beneficiaries of reconciliation education in its current form, in-depth learning about Indigenous worldview and colonial histories, land-based cumulative learning experiences centered around relationships, and the centrality of Indigenous voice and autonomy in matters of reconciliation education.

Contents

Despite a significant growth and extension of teacher knowledge of Indigenous histories, pedagogies and approaches for incorporating reconciliation education into professional practice in recent years, it is evident that we as educators are at the first step of this long journey. In investigating the topic via research and through reflection with colleagues, it has become clear that not everyone shares this perspective, however. The focus of this paper is the variety of pathways to build awareness and action for social justice within schools with an emphasis on students and communities that are First Nations, Métis or Inuit. The intent of this investigation is the curating of stories, theory, and action taken up by school leaders in view of social justice in the form of reconciliatory education, content and pedagogy that engages students in learning about the diversity of Indigenous groups within Canada, the impacts of settlement and policy on these groups, and visions for the future that are a departure from colonialism. The focus of reconciliation education in this paper will focus mainly on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action (2015).

Firstly, an analysis of the problem of waning attention and commitment to reconciliation education in school settings frames the issue within my current teaching context at a French Immersion elementary school located in a suburban community characterized by high socio-economic status. This includes participant observations of school-wide projects and initiatives that proved to be ephemeral in subsequent school years, as well as current policy and wider context impacting the issue. Research also reveals that this state of reconciliation inertia exists commonly in Canadian schools and communities.

Secondly, an evaluation of the problem founded on recent research of initiatives for awareness and practices for social justice that focus on reconciliation within schools will be used

to suggest approaches for policy and action plans taking into account the progress that has been made already. Considering five years have passed following the presentation of the final report from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) containing the Calls to Action, the opportunity exists to assess progress and impact of school-based programs functioning as tools for reconciliation. Exploration into recent reconciliatory action within different school contexts will illuminate pathways for engagement that will apply to my current professional context. This will identify critical practices and understandings for leaders within schools to enact social justice and to honor the Alberta Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) of supporting the school community in acquiring and applying foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit for the benefit of all students (Alberta Learning, 2018). Ideally, these sustainable practices will have potential to become embedded in a larger school culture.

<div align="center">**Literature Review**</div>

Elements of Understanding for Reconciliation Education

The review of selected literature focused on the current state of the infusion of Indigenous knowledge, values and culture, as well as instructional leadership, and recent initiatives to engage learners in reconciliatory education. Some research-based resources feature an amount of crossover between the topics, and explore directions for school leaders. The literature centering on the fifth LQS competency of supporting the application of foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit (Alberta Education, 2018) offered several shared themes. One of these was the components or ingredients to increase social justice in education and to better serve Indigenous students through the practices of school leaders. Discussed in the literature was leaders' role as vision promoters within schools and communities. This was

established as essential for schooling in general, and even more so in a setting where First Nations students are being served (Ottmann, 2009; Stockdale, Parsons & Beauchamp, 2013). Authors emphasized the history and culture that sets First Nations schools apart and stated that a vision in an Indigenous school setting must uphold and cultivate culture and language.

Another theme was the need for the leader to have a strong understanding of current and historical context, and to sustain a sense of urgency in terms of enacting practices for social justice. The literature described facets surrounding this role of leadership; the leader's position as linking staff and school practices to the larger societal context was underlined (Csontos, 2019; Ottmann, 2009; Stockdale et al., 2013). Ottmann (2009) discusses the requirement for future thinking by school leaders; this reflects the need to espouse long-term goals and processes, and to consider the seventh generation, an Indigenous principle guiding decisions to be sustainable and prudent in consideration of seven future generations. Stockdale et al. (2013) underline the need for students' families to be served by the school to work together to rebuild family and community connection. Csontos (2019) asserts the need to build educator capacity to promote equity in schools by building knowledge and awareness of colonial oppression and patterns in policy and practice, stating the final goal of education for reconciliation initiatives is the resolution of non-Indigenous Canadians to ultimately favor returning land to First Nations' communities. In all cases, researchers communicated the importance of knowledge of context and history.

The leader's role nurturing trusting and authentic relationships was also examined. In their study of the leadership qualities that lead to successful First Nations schooling, Stockdale et al. (2013) indicate trust is a needed element that is essential before transformational change can

occur. They discuss the need for educators to trust school administrators and districts, as well as the need for school leaders to build trust through community outreach. Similarly, Osmond-Johnson and Turner describe school leaders' stymied efforts to infuse reconciliation into learning due to influences from district and ministerial levels that limited relationship-building conducive to building trust (2020). Csontos (2019) explores the dimension of reciprocal relationships in an Indigenous context and respectful coexistence with others as well as with the land. These principles inform the need for authentic and trust-based relationships in serving Indigenous students and moving forward with reconciliation education.

The literature explores a variety of ideas for crucial action that explore levels of obligation for educators in schools. Effective professional development and collaborative learning for educators were named as factors (Ottmann, 2009; Stockdale et al., 2013). Stockdale et al. (2013) list examples of school improvement initiatives on which leaders may embark, as well, such as the critical use of data, and mentorship relationships extending into the larger community. Ottmann (2009) emphasizes the need for leaders to strengthen awareness of oppressive systems existing in school systems, and to enhance this consciousness in fellow educators.

All the literature described our current position in the journey of reconciliation education. There is consensus that we are at the point of departure (Csontos, 2019; Madden, 2019; Ottmann, 2009; Stockdale et al., 2013; Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020). Actual levels of infusions of Indigenous ways of knowing are low, and researchers provide evidence of this by listing needed actions. Stockdale et al. (2013) assert local control of First Nations schools is in its infancy and explore the challenges of community pressures, maintaining high academic expectations, and

weaving in First Nations ethics and culture into colonial processes. Ottmann (2009) calls for multicultural values to be added into curriculum, and asserts multiculturalism is a superficial layer on current programs of study. Her use of the term multicultural is with a focus on Indigenous knowledge within a Canadian context. Csontos (2019) is critical of the current extents to which Indigenous knowledge and cultural values are validated and recognized in current educational settings within Canada. She asserts colonial mindsets and patterns remain embedded in Canadian educational systems and within society at large, and that colonial approaches to enacting education for reconciliation are doomed to fail. She calls for leaders supporting and urging teachers to discuss land distribution and colonization with students, and underlines the urgency of educators becoming both knowledgeable about and aware of oppression against Indigenous people, such as ignorance of treaties, widespread data collection, deficit thinking, the omission of material about present-day Indigenous groups, discrimination of sexual minorities, and the collusion of social services agencies. Related is Osmond-Johnson and Turner's (2020) assertion that Canadians living in the prairie provinces still tend statistically to hold more disparaging views of Indigenous peoples, creating additional challenges for schools attempting reconciliation education.

The literature centered around a number of leadership theories. Stockdale et al. (2013) name "working together leadership" and emphasize the collaborative nature of leadership that was effective in their case studies of successful schooling for First Nations students. They name the main focus of this style of leadership as gauging and responding to the needs of the community. Much of the literature connected to the theory of visionary leadership, as well; the issue of Indigenous education is inherently visionary in that it centers around a long-term

objective requiring profound change of educational organizations. Stockdale et al. (2013) describe how visions were transformed into definitive plans of action with goals, benchmarks and tasks defined clearly. Ottmann (2009) asserts that leaders have a role in driving change within organizations and that they are motivating forces in maintaining focus and drive toward shared visions. Csontos (2019) aims attention at decolonization of education as part of a larger vision of justice for Indigenous people within Canada.

Another related leadership theory connected to the literature is that of servant leadership. Ottmann (2009) links her research with this theory in describing the combination of personal humility in a leader with professional will to maintain direction towards a goal and as part of a process of building strong relationships. She describes leadership within a context of social justice educational programming and underlines the importance of personal connection in education when working towards equity. The necessary departure from the school leader as singular director of educational vision and focus towards a role of collaborator who facilitates reconciliation education by welcoming Indigenous voices is underlined by the literature (Arellano et al., 2019; Derrick, 2021; Madden, 2019; Osmond-Johnson & Turner, 2020; Poitras Pratt & Danyluk, 2019). Community-led efforts supported by reflective educators connect to the need for personal reflection about settler positioning resulting from ancestral collaboration with colonization, and subsequent privilege.

Csontos (2019) focuses on critical theory in her research and names Tribal Critical Race Theory as connecting with her discussion about the continuation of a concealed goal of assimilation in education. She brings in critical concepts of conscientization when discussing awareness building for settlers to develop the capacity to perceive oppressive patterns, as well as

tribal education, a process of learning based on reciprocal relationships. Generally, the theories of visionary leadership, servant leadership and critical theory combine to varying extents in the literature.

Instructional Leadership Models for Reconciliation Education

A second focus of the literature was that of instructional leadership, corresponding with the sixth LQS competency of providing instructional leadership (Alberta Education, 2018). This leads to exploration of how it may fit with the focus of education for reconciliation. Instructional leadership was generally defined as being geared towards the improvement of teaching and of increasing the professional knowledge of teachers. A complicating factor when instructional leadership is geared towards reconciliation education, however, is the reality that school leaders are typically products of colonial systems and are unprepared to lead in this area (Osmond-Johnson & Turner, 2020). Bush and Glover (2014) as well as Aas and Paulsen (2019) suggest a distributed framework for instructional leadership to maximize its effects and added that educators should take on leadership roles for instruction in areas that they considered personally relevant and important, creating collegial mentors. However, the school leader remains an authority over instruction in general. These models are at odds with current realities surrounding reconciliation education. School leaders and teachers for the most part hold settler identities, and they are not in a position to step up as leaders in this area. This suggests the school community itself needs to be expanded to include those who are prepared to step into this role, opening positions of instructional leadership to those traditionally excluded.

Instructional leadership was connected to other theories in the literature; the importance of instructional leadership was linked to its connection with other leadership styles, and with the

other roles that school leaders play within their contexts. The most common theory that was

portrayed as coexisting effectively with instructional leadership in a reconciliation education

context was distributed leadership. The authors all assert the need for increased leadership

density beyond traditional models of leadership that favor authoritarian styles and rigid hierarchy

(Aas & Paulsen, 2019; Bush & Glover, 2014; Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Bush and Glover (2014)

write the days of the lone instructional leader are over, and, realistically, were never a full

success due to the necessity of staff consent and participation. As well, Aas and Paulsen (2019)

assert that a stable pattern of distributed leadership and student-centered focused instructional

leadership must exist interdependently. This connects to the need for stable and sustained long-

term plans and policy to achieve education systems that are sufficiently decolonized to enable

reconciliation education. This point is echoed by Poitras Pratt and Danyluk who emphasize the

need for stable funding and sustained political will (2019). The additional benefit of a

distributed leadership model is the development of future formal leaders; Bush and Glover

(2014) illustrate this facet of distributed leadership that opens up a transitional space for teachers

to merge into leadership roles, in turn, providing increased opportunity to feed the leadership

pipeline. This has the potential to be true for members of the extended community who are in a

position to be authentic guides for students to engage in reconciliation as part of their schooling.

Recent Initiatives for Reconciliation Education in Schools

In investigating recent progress that has occurred in school settings in relation to TRC

Calls to Action published research is scarce. This is unsurprising considering the impact of the

Covid-19 pandemic measures within classrooms starting in the 2019 school year as well as at

higher learning institutions; research initiatives that would have required academics to visit

schools and communities were halted. As well, schools within the country were compelled to put vast amounts of time and effort into conducting online learning and they struggled to support learners who were generally entering the 2020 school year at a deficit brought on by the previous school year's disruption. Educators and families were placed under significant strain mentally, physically and emotionally, and resources were diverted to provide for learning that was considered essential.

Of the recently published literature on the topic, much centers around stalled efforts and limited progress of the TRC Calls to Action regarding education. A significant barrier in mainstream Canadian schools is racist colonial structures remaining in organizational hierarchies and embedded in school policies and practices. Jewell and Mosby (2019) point out no Calls to Action for education have been attained, and name paternalism, structural racism and consistent prioritization of mainstream Canadians' interests as causes. Within the literature, there were high levels of unanimity on this point; Western assumptions and practices in schooling are often incompatible with reconciliation and efforts to pass on Indigenous knowledge and understandings (Csontos, 2019; Derrick, 2021; Jewell & Mosby, 2019; Madden, 2019; Poitras Pratt & Danyluk, 2019; Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020). These structural hindrances connect to traditional models of instructional leadership that limit the community involvement needed to realize reconciliation education.

Additionally, contested definitions and goals of reconciliation were named in the literature as a roadblock for reconciliatory action within schools. Several researches indicated a major critique of attempts to enact the TRC Calls to Action have been lip service, and that many Canadians seem to feel that the issue has been resolved reasonably (Jewell & Mosby, 2019;

Osmond-Johnson & Turner, 2020; Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020). In some cases, these attempts have exacerbated disadvantages suffered within Indigenous communities by further entrenching stereotyping, deficit thinking and a focus on land rights (Arellano et al., 2019; Csontos, 2019; Derrick, 2021; Jewell & Mosby, 2019; Madden, 2019; Poitras Pratt & Danyluk, 2019).

Possible pathways for educators to use in schools were also presented in the literature and some of these have already shown promise in engaging students in reconciliatory education in Indigenous-led ways. Land-based experiences that provide students opportunities to make connections to Indigenous communities and to realize their own connections with land were named as effective programs (Arellano et al., 2019: Madden, 2019; Poitras et al., 2019). Indigenous autonomy in leading educational initiatives was a related component that was strongly underlined in the literature; all avenues for reconciliation education must have at the heart Indigenous voice and involvement. Working with Elders, Indigenous community members, and families were named as bringing reconciliation efforts to life (Arellano et al., 2019; Osmond-Johnson & Turner, 2020; Poitras et al., 2019).

Ensuring that stories originating from Indigenous sources was another crucial component of reconciliation education. This integration of Indigenous voices was indicated as essential for countering settler myths and inciting self-reflection on the part of learners (Arellano et al., 2019; Madden, 2019). Finally, positioning territorial rights as part of the journey towards reconciliation was a recurring point present in the literature. The absence of the land issue was a critique against the TRC; this was named as a necessary topic of discussion with learners considering it is the core of the Indigenous struggle for social justice (Arellano et al., 2019; Csontos, 2019; Poitras et al., 2019). Researchers explored these pathways within a context of

countless false starts and breakdowns that mark the journey towards reconciliation within school settings.

Analysis of the Work-Based Problem of Waning Efforts Aimed at Reconciliatory Education

Currently I teach grade four at a French immersion elementary in a suburban community in central Alberta. Within my school community, staff have worked together to broaden their knowledge about Indigenous historical perspectives and educational approaches. However, the situation is one that allows individual staff members to remain largely ignorant of the reality and the urgency of the need to discard entrenched colonial paradigms in education. In short, there is little pushing educators to continue engaging on personal and professional levels with reconciliation education. Initiatives have been received passively and been completed with some staff members expecting to then be finished with reconciliation-based professional development; there are differing and often contrary understandings of the goals and levels of obligations for those working in schools. This links with the contested definitions of reconciliation in the literature (Jewell & Mosby, 2019; Osmond-Johnson & Turner, 2020; Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020); a lack of consensus produces varying versions of education for reconciliation within classrooms. My school community would suggest to some little visible need for the growth of awareness of and engagement in education for social justice, as the student demographics could be described as mostly White middle-class Canadian-born Albertans living in a suburban, socially conservative community. There is a very small minority of students whose families have self-identified as First Nations, Metis or Inuit; however, more students tend to share about Indigenous ancestry within the classroom. This mirrors Csontos' calling attention to policy-

maker's preoccupation with Indigenous students' identification, only to then use this information to emphasize these learners' educational deficiencies over lacking professional development (2019). Indeed, the link to the Alberta government website for Indigenous student self-identification featured on my district's webpage for FNMI supports directs one to the provincial government site stressing the need for Indigenous students to help inform the achievement gap in our province's schools (Government of Alberta, 2021). This sentiment also fits with the district's fondness for data, which materializes as frequent online literacy assessments for all students grades one to twelve, and subsequent school comparisons. A focal point on achievement by the district echoes families' priorities at the school, as well. Students' families have selected immersion programming; and although classroom composition is currently becoming more typical in comparison with mainstream schools, traditionally immersion was an educational environment with minor social and academic complexities. The make-up of the teaching staff is varied in age and background; however, staff mostly hail from similar backgrounds as our students. Most teachers are female, and a larger proportion are new teachers. Several come from provinces outside of Alberta or from other nations. No one on staff self-identifies as Indigenous, connecting to Osmond-Johnson and Turner's assertion that under-representation of Indigenous peoples in the education sector, especially in leadership, adds an additional layer of challenge to reconciliation education (2020).

In the past several years there have been initiatives both provided by the district and originating within the school to provide teachers with historical knowledge surrounding Indian residential schools (IRS) and the impacts of colonization. In 2016, all staff members engaged in the Kairos blanket exercise, and the entire school participated in Project of Heart, a whole-school

commemorative examination of Canadian IRS by students. Newer staff members who were not yet at the school have no little or no knowledge of these events. The school was also privileged to receive classroom visits for all grades from Elder Wilson Bearhead who is Nakota and a member of the Wabamun Lake Indian Band in Treaty 6 territory, Alberta. His collaboration with the district ended in 2019.

Currently, one lead teacher assembles and shares resources to incorporate First Nations, Metis and Inuit culture and knowledge into classrooms, as well. This has allowed teachers at the school to enhance their knowledge of Indigenous history and issues and their repertoire of classroom lessons and practices. However, many still express discomfort and hesitancy about the September 2019 revised TQS obligation to infuse these into their pedagogies on a regular basis. Actual implementation of the material and resources that have been offered appears to vary. Areas of need for staff to gain these competencies include a review of historical forces and events that have impacted Indigenous communities, the Calls to Action from the TRC, and approaches for bringing reconciliation into the classroom. In the end, a sense of urgency on the part of educators to explore their own histories and positions within Canadian society and to work to gain awareness about remaining colonial practices in schools may be the best professional and personal development geared towards social justice. Moreover, an additional facet of the school community's potential in reconciliation education is that learners are in need of schooling for social justice not because they need to benefit personally from it, but because they likely have no need in many cases. Educators at our school are in a position to nurture ideals of social justice, equity and advocacy in young learners. For the purposes of narrowing

the scope of this topic, the direction of research is leadership practices and philosophies within elementary school settings that enact reconciliatory education in a sustainable way.

Evaluation of Current Policy and Procedures Aimed at Building Indigenous Social Justice

A section of my school district website is entitled First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education; its purpose is to promote programming aimed at learning about Indigenous cultures as well as reconciliation education. The page includes links to a land and people acknowledgement, a page outlining the TRC Calls to Action and the importance of Treaty 6, projects and activities that connect to the topic, and information about parent engagement meetings. Some of the information is dated and has not been updated, so it is unclear to what extent students are engaging in activities year to year. As well, statements about the importance of reconciliation are aspirational, and lacking concrete goals and timelines; there is no divisional document indicating clear objectives or time frames available. Wotherspoon and Milne indicate official policy documents and statements are largely public performance lacking clear objectives and plans (2020). This compares accurately to the school district information on First Nations, Métis and Inuit resources available to the public. There are few recent actions and projects listed on the website; however, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on scholarly research likely affected efforts to infuse schooling with reconciliation education. Further content on the site and learning opportunities for staff and students in upcoming years will provide more clarity regarding district and schools' levels of engagement.

The literature has reported stalled efforts and minimal progress on the majority of the TRC Calls to Action regarding education. Poitras Pratt and Danyluk assert a danger of

reconciliatory education initiatives is the perception within school communities that it is a learning trend that will fall out of fashion (2019). This is a pattern common in other directions in education involving literacy or learning strategies. The authors stress the work of reconciliation as ongoing and evolving, setting it apart from usual models. Although no official statements have been made announcing a closure of reconciliatory initiatives within the district, and no funding has been openly cut, it remains to be seen whether district leadership will devote adequate resourcing to maintain momentum and provide for cumulative and sustained learning for staff and students.

Ingrained colonial structures in organizational policies and practices are another significant barrier. Jewell and Mosby indicate paternalism, structural racism and unwavering prioritization of national interests are causes (2019). A preoccupation of how reconciliation education will benefit mainstream Canadians is an element that is added to discourses in the literature. Madden (2019) problematizes this idea that places settler school systems in service of creating a stronger Canada where Indigenous communities receive superficial justice without significantly changing policy that safeguards colonial structures. This discrepancy prompts reflection for educators in schools about what part they are really playing, and who will ultimately benefit from current reconciliation education programs. Related are the continued dominance of Western assumptions and methods in schooling that attempt to present Indigenous knowledge, experience and understandings through a colonial lens (Csontos, 2019; Derrick, 2021; Jewell & Mosby, 2019; Madden, 2019; Poitras Pratt & Danyluk, 2019; Wotherspoon & Milne, 2020). These are structural and systemic barriers that limit reconciliation education in schools and beyond. This critical concern for educators has not been part of the conversation

during reconciliation education work among colleagues with district guidance. The careful path school staff must tread between authentic attempts at reconciliation education and an awareness of political pressures and professional obligations creates added challenges.

Despite a focus in this paper on reconciliation education as delimited by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action, a crucial step is educator's eventual self-reflection and critical contemplation of the intention, design, and possible outcomes of the project. This step requires not only a familiarity with the history of residential schools, but also a wider knowledge of colonization and the varied ways in which settler governments and individuals have cultivated relationships with Indigenous communities that aim to weaken and exploit them. This level of understanding is a lofty goal; teacher learning on the subject has been minimal and sufficient resources in the form of time and instruction have not been made available. The literature shows educators and school leaders are not adequately prepared for this role (Arellano et al., 2019; Csontos, 2019; Madden, 2019; Osmond-Johnson & Turner, 2020; Poitras Pratt & Danyluk, 2019). Further, the difficult topic of land issues that are the basis of Indigenous struggle is avoided both in TRC Calls to Action as well as typical conversations in schools between colleagues engaging with the topic of reconciliatory education. Researchers point out this discordance and are critical of the omittance (Arellano et al., 2019; Csontos, 2019; Jewell & Mosby, 2019; Madden, 2019). These gaps in awareness limit the possibilities of reconciliatory education in its current form leading to social justice. Within this context, educators must investigate these topics on their own despite being expected to play a significant role in reconciliation for the nation. It is important to add that some do engage in this learning

process as a personal initiative, but this offers little assurance that educators are being guided

adequately on this journey.

Despite the confines in which education for reconciliation finds itself here and now, there

are pathways revealing themselves that allow educators to pursue goals of social justice. Derrick

(2021) proposes an understanding of the Indigenous worldview is needed to achieve authentic

understanding and reconciliation. It is arguable that for most mainstream educators in Canadian

schools that teaching the essential components of a Western worldview is also important;

Western colonial understandings are ingrained and go unobserved to those brought up within

them. Contrasts present in the Indigenous worldview have the potential to provide a basis for

understanding Indigenous stories and ways of knowing with more clarity and respect, and they

could reveal approaches for departure from colonial practices still embedded in education.

Exploration into these subjects has not been a focal point during professional development

projects aimed at reconciliation; however, an expanded engagement with Indigenous

communities and their stories may act as a protective factor against the risks present in current

reconciliation education named in the literature, such as stereotyping and deficit models

(Csontos, 2019; Jewell & Mosby, 2019; Osmond-Johnson & Turner, 2020).

Land-based experiences that involve personal connection and relationship-building with

members of Indigenous communities are another pathway showing promise. As a result from

these experiences, students must come away with an understanding of the central importance of

land for Indigenous communities, as well as the destructive effects of the colonial effort to

rupture the relationship with the land (Arellano et al., 2019; Csontos, 2019; Derrick, 2021;

Madden, 2019; Poitras Pratt & Danyluk, 2019). Arellano et al.'s description of the Kitcisakik

land-based education initiative illustrates how Indigenous pedagogies that center on observation, experimentation and whole community involvement teach the relational nature of Indigenous knowledge (2019). An element of research was a collection of participants' impressions after engaging with the program; these illustrated the emotional and intimate nature of the learning, and the authors call for land-based pedagogies to be introduced at all levels of education. Barriers stemming from policy and funding notwithstanding, there are an increasing number of options for students at an elementary level to begin a cumulative process of land-based learning with Indigenous guides and mentors. In the Fall of 2020, staff at my school were scheduled to participate in a river valley walk while learning about Indigenous histories and colonial impacts in the area, but Covid-19 social distancing concerns postponed the event. The excursion is planned for the upcoming school year, and familiarizing educators with this form of learning experience has potential to encourage similar experiences provided to students.

The centrality of Indigenous voice and autonomy in matters of reconciliation education was another recurring theme in the literature. This takes the form of leading educational initiatives, honoring Elders and educators that hold a wealth of knowledge without possessing Western credentials, and fidelity in supporting learning using resources and stories originating from Indigenous communities. The aforementioned challenge of grasping the Indigenous worldview relates to this point; materials reflecting a Western colonial lens reinforce related frameworks and understandings, and would overlook the necessity of engaging with Indigenous teachings in a relational way. Madden (2019) warns against the temptation to define a singular best practice; the warning underlines the contextual nature of learning connecting with truth and reconciliation. This is in almost complete contrast to professional development initiatives typical

for K-12 teachers that are increasingly structured and formulaic. Instead, she offers organizing

questions for educators to maintain a sense of critical self-reflection and awareness of their roles

within institutional settings that have always been inherently at odds with Indigenous community

knowledge in Canada. Using counter storytelling that depicts refusal, resistance, resilience, and

restorying and resurgence was also proposed by Madden (2019) as a framework for educators.

Ensuring that it is Indigenous voices that are the sources of information aims to by-pass teachers'

colonial lenses and worldviews through which endeavors for reconciliatory education would

flow; these stories foreground the colonizer and deepen and humanize portrayals of Indian

residential school survivors, their families, and their communities. The use of organizing

questions for designing a decolonizing curriculum of truth and reconciliation to guide educator's

efforts is a pathway that does not guarantee certainty or a sense of mastery; however, this ensures

an ongoing engagement and reflexive process school staff must navigate. A final point regarding

the centrality of Indigenous voice and autonomy is the need for educators to understand their

positionality and responsibilities beyond the professional realm. Poitras Pratt and Danyluk

(2019) provide a point of departure for individuals wanting to explore reconciliation, and advise

the first step involves learning and listening. They encourage Canadians to do this privately.

Educators do not have this luxury unfortunately, as we are responsible for an essential

component of TRC Calls to Action. A collective and reciprocally supportive effort to move

forward and teach while learning and accepting a loss of authority may be key for educators

working with young learners. Unlike mainstream professional development, teachers need to

come to a point of understanding about the weight and urgency of this teaching on an emotional

level. This is a personal and intimate form of growth and unlike the professional commitments

typically required of those working in schools. School leaders must strive to model this process

and encourage staff to position intentions and actions with students towards a goal of social

justice.

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