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Facilitating reconciliation in the classroom: How one school division in Western Canada is raising the bar

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Abstract

The largest school division in Winnipeg, Canada—the Winnipeg School Division—is undertaking several initiatives in the teaching for reconciliation and in meeting the educational mandate of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's 94 Calls to Action. These initiatives are being implemented in many of the division's K-12 schools and a variety of subject areas. This article examines the reconciliatory initiatives that provide Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners alike with meaningful information about traditional practices and opportunities to engage in relationship-building and cross-cultural understanding. The literature review section examines the historical and societal injustices perpetrated upon Indigenous peoples, newcomers' needs around Indigenous issues, and the important role that Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers have in the reconciliation process. The methodology section focuses on document analysis and its relevance as a research method. The article concludes with an examination of the potential and resistance of teaching for reconciliation in Canada.

Keywords

Reconciliation in the classroom; Truth and Reconciliation Commission; calls to action; decolonising education; document analysis; newcomers and Indigenous issues

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The Winnipeg School Division—the largest school division in the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada—is currently undertaking several initiatives to address the social and historical inequities that have affected Indigenous peoples of Canada. These initiatives are underway in many divisional elementary, middle year and senior year schools. Administrators and teachers in these schools are hoping to instill in their student bodies the importance of reconciliation. Educators in the division also hope to demonstrate the importance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s (TRC) 94 Calls to Action—a series of actions regarding reconciliation among Canadians and Indigenous peoples (Winnipeg School Division, 2019a). Current projects underway include an Orange Shirt Day to recognise the survivors of residential schools, a rock painting exercise to deliver messages of hope to residential school survivors, an art treaty project to commemorate Treaty 1 Indigenous land, an Indigenous woodwinds project that combines music and history, and a traditional birch bark harvest to learn the importance of sustainability in Indigenous culture.

This article introduces the initiatives that are underway and explains the relevance of each initiative, its possible impact on reconciliation, and how the teachers in the division have embraced decolonising education. The literature review section of the article examines the historical and societal inequities that have been inflicted upon Indigenous peoples, newcomers’ needs around Indigenous issues, and the important role that Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators have in incorporating the historical and cultural perspectives of Indigenous Canadians in the curriculum. The methodology section explains how document analysis was used to explore the Winnipeg School Division’s website and various news releases that focused on reconciliatory initiatives underway in classrooms across the division. The final section of the article explores teaching for reconciliation in Canada, including its potential and resistance, and the role of schools and teachers within the TRC’s Calls to Action.

Diversity within Winnipeg and the Winnipeg School Division

The diversity within the city of Winnipeg is important in understanding the reconciliatory approach the Winnipeg School Division is undertaking in its classrooms. Winnipeg, Manitoba—the seventh most populated city in Canada—has experienced significant gains in immigration and diversity in recent years. According to the 2016 Canadian Census, immigrant newcomers comprise approximately 7% of Winnipeg’s population, and roughly 24% of the city’s population is comprised of foreign-born residents. Immigrants from the Philippines (31.4%), India (10.%), China (4.2%), and the United Kingdom (4.1%) represent the highest percentage of newcomers residing in Winnipeg by source country (Statistics Canada, 2016). Incoming refugee groups also add to the city’s diversity. Manitoba generally receives between 1500 and 2000 refugees annually, with a record 3700 refugees arriving in the province in 2016 due to the large influx of Syrian refugees fleeing their homeland because of the Syrian Civil War (Government of Manitoba, n.d.). Approximately 90–99% of the refugees who arrive in Manitoba have traditionally settled in Winnipeg (Magoon, 2005). These refugees arrive from various countries in conflict, including Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Yugoslavia (Ghorayshi, 2010). The statistics indeed complement the reality that Winnipeg is a highly diverse urban centre and an important locale to facilitate reconciliatory initiatives.

The demographics also indicate that immigrant newcomers and Indigenous peoples represent a significant proportion of Winnipeg’s population, indicating that the city likely serves as a meaningful testing ground to explore the nuanced relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Many incoming refugees settle in Winnipeg’s inner city, which has been described as a highly diverse and multicultural collection of neighbourhoods (Skelton, 2008). The

inner city comprises a significant proportion of newcomers and Indigenous peoples. It is estimated that approximately 22% of the residents of the inner city are foreign-born and 21% of residents are Indigenous (McCracken et al., 2013; Skelton, 2008). Indigenous peoples also comprise a substantial proportion of the city's overall population. As of 2016, approximately 12% of the city's residents—some 84,000 people—identified as Indigenous, which means Winnipeg has the largest Indigenous population of any major city in Canada per capita (City of Winnipeg, 2016). With various racialised groups highly represented in its population, Winnipeg is an important locale to harmonise and mend the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in the city and to initiate important reconciliatory initiatives.

Winnipeg's largest school division—the Winnipeg School Division—has a student body that exemplifies the city's diversity. As of 2019, the division was home to 78 schools, roughly 4600 staff members, and approximately 33,000 students (Winnipeg School Division, 2019f). It is estimated that 6700 students in the division are English as Additional Language learners, and approximately 8400 students identify as Indigenous (Winnipeg School Division, 2019f). The division's schools are located throughout central Winnipeg, the downtown area and the inner city.

The students who reside and attend schools in the inner city are often presented with a raft of challenges, including substandard housing, the presence of street gangs, drug-related violence, racism and colonisation (Silver, 2010). For many Indigenous peoples of the inner city, their roots are deeply entrenched in racism, racialised poverty and the restriction of opportunities. The significant challenges of living in the inner city, coupled with the increasing number of newcomers, have increased tensions between newcomer groups and the Indigenous peoples of the area (Silver, 2010). Schools in the Winnipeg School Division, especially those located in the inner city, can therefore serve as the foundation whereby reconciliation can be brought into the classroom. The diverse makeup of the division's student body suggests that teaching for reconciliation and embracing a decolonising education approach can potentially have a meaningful impact on all of the parties involved in terms of social engagement, understanding and acceptance.

Settler colonialism and its indelible impact on Canada's Indigenous population

Settler colonialism has resulted in numerous societal and historical injustices perpetrated against Indigenous peoples of Canada. At its foundation, settler colonialism justifies the displacement of Indigenous peoples, masks its use of violence and genocide, and essentially denies its existence (Steinman, 2020). This form of colonisation was enacted to eliminate Canada's Indigenous population and disrupt and detach them from their societal way of life. It was also meant to remove Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands and assign them to other spaces for settlement (Battiste, 2013b; Snelgrove et al., 2014; Steinman, 2020). Early British and French settlement, in particular, resulted in the geographical displacement of the Indigenous population, and several Indian acts enforced by the federal government resulted in Indigenous peoples surrendering their Native lands for insufficient monetary payments, reserve lands and promises of social assistance (Driedger, 2003).

More recent settler-colonial injustices perpetrated against Indigenous peoples include the removal of Indigenous children from families for placement in foster homes (e.g. the "Sixties Scoop") and the taking of Indigenous children from families for placement in residential schools where numerous atrocities were committed, including physical, emotional and sexual abuse (Macionis & Gerber, 2004). The harmful legacy of residential schools has inflicted Indigenous peoples with intergenerational trauma, including low self-esteem, high rates of depression and suicide among youth, and elevated levels of substance abuse and domestic violence (Bradford et al., 2017;

Czyzewski, 2011). This settler-induced trauma has marginalised Indigenous peoples and has largely disconnected them from their families, communities, native languages and spiritual teachings (Czyzewski, 2011). Indigenous peoples did not lose their family connections, languages and spiritual teachings, but rather they were “shamed, beaten, and tortured out of them” (St. Denis, 2007, p. 1073). As this article will reveal, the Winnipeg School Division is attempting to foster reconciliation and address settler colonialism by having students engage in initiatives that embrace decolonising education.

Indigenous peoples today continue to suffer from the numerous effects of settler colonial practices; including systemic racism infiltrated within police practices, over-representation in prison populations, and inequitable and biased treatment within court systems (Macdonald, 2015; Silver, 2010). Many Indigenous communities in Manitoba also suffer from high rates of diabetes and a lack of access to safe drinking water (Bradford et al., 2017). The relationship between Indigenous peoples and the rest of Canadian society is one of manufactured dependence and marginality because of these settler colonial practices. While efforts have been ongoing to redress some of the historical wrongdoings and past injustices, the continued maltreatment of Indigenous peoples and the legacy of marginalisation and settler colonialism will be difficult to surmount as these issues are often disregarded and unacknowledged by non-Indigenous Canadians (Czyzewski, 2011; Driedger, 2003).

It is essential, therefore, to “unsettle” settler colonial practices and to veto settler colonialism as a discursive frame. To bring these important endeavours to the forefront, Czyzewski (2011) proposes transformative education, which she believes is fundamental to addressing inequities and fostering healthy relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. Indigenous educators can initiate measures of transformative education, such as truth-telling, which can generate interest and support and instill in non-Indigenous Canadians a sense of responsibility (Czyzewski, 2011). Non-Indigenous Canadians benefit from the settler colonial practices that were imposed on Indigenous Canadians. As a result, they are responsible for unsettling settler colonial structures and mending the relationships between the two sides today.

Newcomers’ needs around Indigenous issues

Winnipeg is home to one of the largest urban populations of Indigenous peoples in Canada and is also experiencing a rapidly increasing newcomer population. Community activists and leaders in Winnipeg have spearheaded conversations on the importance of decolonisation and reconciliation and have attempted to educate newcomer groups on Indigenous traditions, struggles and rights (Alidina et al, 2020). Instances of discrimination, xenophobia and misinformation, however, have impaired Indigenous and newcomer relations and conciliatory efforts in the city (Alidina et al., 2020; Reynar & Matties, 2018). As a result, more work needs to be done on the ground, as the relationship between Indigenous peoples and newcomer communities has been characterised as tense and nuanced.

A report conducted in 2020 by the Winnipeg Foundation and Immigration Partnership Winnipeg, titled “Fostering Safe Spaces for Dialogue and Relationship-Building between Newcomers and Indigenous Peoples”, found that more adequate strategies and tools are needed to address the tensions between newcomer groups and Indigenous peoples (see Alidina et al., 2020). Despite tensions, the two groups share some commonalities, including a shared history of colonisation, experiences with discrimination and racism, and importance placed on cultural, traditional and communal values (Alidina et al., 2020). Newcomers, nevertheless, tend to replicate the harmful stereotypes shown to Indigenous peoples by non-Indigenous Canadians, and Indigenous peoples

themselves tend to portray xenophobic inclinations towards newcomers. These stereotypical attitudes may continue to exist if the two groups, which have much in common, do not partake in meaningful dialogue (Alidina et al., 2020; Reynar & Matties, 2018). It is vital, therefore, to analyse the source of this tense relationship to avoid defaulting to the implication that nuanced relations are the result of unfamiliarity and ignorance on behalf of newcomer communities.

At the root of the tense and nuanced relationship between Indigenous peoples and newcomer populations is the fact both groups implicitly compete for power and resources and are given ethnic minority status within the country. Indigenous peoples are often inaccurately compared with newcomers, and assumptions, albeit faulty ones, are made that the two groups are synonymous with one another (St. Denis, 2011). By defaulting to a multicultural framework, Indigenous peoples are referred to as diverse groups themselves and positioned similarly to the newcomer and immigrant populations. A multicultural framework also positions newcomers and immigrants as innocent bystanders to settler colonialism and fails to address the harmful settler colonial practices that continue unabated in the country (Lawrence & Dua, 2005; St. Denis, 2011). Lawrence and Dua (2005) caution a comparison, as equating newcomers with Indigenous peoples negate the fact that newcomer populations in Canada are essentially settlers taking up residence on stolen Indigenous lands and implicitly taking part in the continual colonial domination of Indigenous peoples. Scholars are thus encouraged to transition from a multicultural discursive frame to one that will systemically address the ongoing colonisation of Indigenous peoples.

The role of Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators and the need for reform

The reconciliation initiatives that are underway in the Winnipeg School Division will teach students about the importance of reconciliation and familiarise them with the harmful legacy of the country's residential school system. While Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators alike play a vital role in teaching children about reconciliation and the TRC's Calls to Action, a diversified teaching force, including the hiring of more Indigenous teachers, would go a long way in achieving reconciliation. While the diversity in Manitoba is evident, the hiring of teachers of Indigenous backgrounds has not kept pace with the growing number of Indigenous learners (Ryan et al., 2009). Enrolment statistics indicate that roughly 27% of the student population in Winnipeg School Division identifies as Indigenous, yet only 9% of the province's teachers have Indigenous heritage (Macintosh, 2022). Indigenous peoples have suffered numerous societal and historical injustices that have limited their representation in the provincial teaching force. An increase in the number of Indigenous educators, therefore, is an essential endeavour that serves many purposes, such as better reflecting the values of democracy, abiding by the aims of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and adhering to the recommendations of the TRC (Janzen, 2016). Indigenous educators have important roles to play in the education system and can provide all learners with opportunities to engage with reconciliatory initiatives and examine Indigenous culture. By partaking in the reconciliation process, students can learn about Indigenous ways of life and appreciate the diversity that is evident in Manitoba.

Indigenous youth can be inspired by teachers of similar ethnic and cultural resemblance, and tend to benefit from diverse educators who incorporate like-minded cultural or linguistic perspectives in the curriculum (Janzen, 2016). Indigenous educators, therefore, can be positive role models and can assist in making reconciliation and the 94 Calls to Action more meaningful and relevant. Mallet (2016) believes that more Indigenous teachers are also needed in Manitoba to improve the academic outcomes of Indigenous learners and to minimise the educational gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Additionally, Indigenous educators can also stand up against racism, model academic success, and promote the importance of schooling to Indigenous

learners and their families, who may be survivors of traumatic residential school experiences and unwilling to partake in the reconciliation process (Seiff, 2016). While this is important work, it comes at a cost and places a burden on Indigenous educators if left solely to their responsibility.

Indigenous teachers cannot bring reconciliation into the classroom alone as it is not their collective obligation. Non-Indigenous educators also play a crucial role in standing up against racism, informing students about reconciliation, and having them participate in reconciliatory initiatives and projects in the classroom. Indigenous teachers can partner with non-Indigenous educators in the teaching of reconciliation and the TRC's Calls to Action. These Indigenous teachers, for example, can share their perspectives and knowledge of Indigenous history, culture and reconciliation with non-Indigenous teachers, who then may be able to better impart this knowledge to their students.

Dion (2016) asserts that non-Indigenous educators play a significant role in the reconciliation process but cautions these educators to not take up "helping" positions but rather assume direct responsibility for incorporating Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum. If reconciliation is to be successful, non-Indigenous educators must understand Indigenous policies and practices, as Indigenous pedagogy is intricate (Dion, 2016). Dion (2016) advises non-Indigenous teachers, for example, to implement ancestral teachings in their lessons, including the work of Indigenous visual artists, filmmakers, musicians and writers. In a collaborative partnership, Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators have the greatest ability to mend the inimical relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, for it was education that was used to suppress Indigenous peoples for generations (Aitken & Radford, 2018; Montero & Dénommé-Welch, 2018; Warrington, 2018).

While the above recommendations, including the hiring of additional Indigenous educators and advocating for partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers, are crucial steps in the reconciliation process, fundamental changes to the education system are what is most needed to achieve reconciliation. Western education systems remain deeply entrenched in settler colonialism and tend to push Indigenous knowledge systems to the periphery (Siemens, 2017). The current Western forms of education also continue to silence Indigenous epistemologies while privileging Eurocentric values and thought (Battiste, 2013b; Siemens, 2017). Battiste (2013b) argues that "these systems have excluded, marginalized and diminished what remains of Indigenous knowledges, judged those who have it uneducated" (p. 7). It is problematic, therefore, if the frame of settler colonialism remains unquestioned and reinforced within the education system.

To engage in pedagogical reform and rupture these harmful ideologies, a new approach to education in Canada is required. St. Denis (2011) stresses the need to address the systemic racism that has infiltrated the education system, so there should be a call for teachers and administrators to better understand racism and its harmful implications. Battiste (2013b) acknowledges the need to engage teacher candidates in anti-racism training, integrate decolonisation theories into teaching pedagogy, and explicitly introduce Indigenous knowledge systems to teacher candidates as a way to combat Eurocentrism. By engaging in these pedagogical initiatives, teacher candidates will hopefully come away with a greater understanding of the need to reform the education system and rupture the harmful ideologies that have been historically embedded within it.

Methodology

To examine the reconciliatory initiatives that the Winnipeg School Division is currently undertaking, I conducted an exploratory review of the division's website (<https://www.winnipegssd.ca/>) and analysed the documents that were categorised under the division's news section. The division posts a significant amount of news in the form of releases that showcase what particular schools are engaged in, including community outreach initiatives, inquiry projects, fundraisers, cultural appreciation events and reconciliatory initiatives. The news releases intend to show the division in a positive light. Each news article contains a write-up, usually between 500 and 1000 words in length. The articles are composed by divisional staff and contain summaries, direct quotations and supplementary photos. Students and staff who are involved in the various projects and events are interviewed and provided with recognition within the division. The articles are accessible to the general public, so the divisional news items have the potential to reach a wide audience, especially considering the division is the city's largest in terms of the number of schools, staff and students. The promotional nature of these documents means that a positive representation of the division is likely.

By reviewing the various news releases from the Winnipeg School Division website, I was engaging in document analysis, which is a form of qualitative research (Bowen, 2019; Gross, 2018; Morgan, 2022). This form of analysis allows the researcher to review and evaluate documents to extract meaning, reach understanding, and develop practical knowledge (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis is a systematic procedure to analyse and interpret both print and electronic documents and involves locating and selecting data to analyse, appraising the data, and synthesizing the information contained within (Bowen, 2009; Labuschagne, 2003). By analysing a selection of documents, researchers can unearth important excerpts, quotations and passages that can be systematically organised into general themes and further categorised into subthemes (Labuschagne, 2003). Similar to other qualitative research methodologies, document analysis requires continuous review and a thorough examination and analysis of the data to unearth meaning and develop practical knowledge and understanding of the topic in question (Gross, 2018). It is therefore an appropriate method to examine the extensive nature of reconciliation in the classroom.

Despite the need for repeated review, there are several benefits to employing document analysis in a qualitative-type research study. For example, document analysis can be implemented in a stand-alone study (Bowen, 2009; Gross, 2018; Morgan, 2022) and can be used to respond to queries about "policy, cultural context, organizations, activities, groups, and more" (Gross, 2018, p. 546). In other words, document analysis can be used independently of other research methods and does not need to be supplemented with other methodologies to be an effective means to examine a particular phenomenon.

The advantage of using document analysis as opposed to other methods such as interview or direct observations is that it provides access to valuable information that might otherwise be difficult to access or inaccessible (Morgan, 2022). Access to teachers, staff members and children in schools across a large school division is sometimes limited, especially during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, document analysis provides an effective means to gain a greater understanding of the facilitation of reconciliation in the classroom across an entire division when access to participants is restricted.

To begin the document analysis, all of the news articles from the Winnipeg School Division website from June to December 2019 were scanned, of which there were 72 articles. Following

this initial scan, all of the articles were briefly reviewed to see whether they centred on Indigenous matters and educational initiatives, of which there were 15 articles. Following this initial scan, all 15 articles that focused on Indigenous matters and initiatives were read and carefully reviewed to see whether they could be classified under the theme of “reconciliation in the classroom”. From the 15 articles, it was determined that all 15 could fall under the general category of “reconciliation in the classroom” but in various subcategories; for example, lessons on residential schooling, treaty acknowledgement, Indigenous cultural celebrations, and the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives in music and the arts. From the 15 articles chosen for analysis, 5 articles showcased reconciliatory initiatives being incorporated across various grade levels and subject areas. Five articles were chosen because of time constraints and article length. From these five articles, a colour-coding scheme was used to review and analyse each document. Different colours were used to highlight a general summary of the article, important quotations, key participants, and the connection between the various initiatives and reconciliation. Once the articles were reviewed and highlighted, I began to integrate the information into the following section of the article, which provides a sampling of the reconciliatory initiatives being implemented in some Winnipeg School Division schools.

Facilitating reconciliation in the classroom

The Winnipeg School Division provides numerous opportunities for its student population to learn about residential schools, engage with reconciliatory initiatives, and explore the culture and ways of life of Canada’s Indigenous population. Several schools in the division provide learning opportunities in subject area classrooms, including in English language arts, social studies, music, art, and outdoor education. These activities allow students to learn about Indigenous culture, appreciate the diversity of Manitoba and actively participate in the reconciliation process. The following is a sample of the many reconciliatory initiatives that divisional schools are currently undertaking.

Orange Shirt Day

All schools across the Winnipeg School Division participate annually in Orange Shirt Day, which is a special day typically held in September to pay tribute to residential school survivors. The Children of the Earth School—an Aboriginal educational institution that serves Winnipeg’s Indigenous population—held a special ceremony to commemorate the day. Orange Shirt Day originates from the story of residential school survivor, Phyllis Webstad, who was wearing a shiny orange shirt on her first day of school at St. Joseph Mission Residential School in Williams Lake, British Columbia in 1973. Webstad was stripped of her orange shirt by school officials and forced to wear a uniform. This story has become a symbol of the maltreatment that residential school survivors experienced and exemplifies the loss of culture, identity and traditions that took place in residential schools across Canada. To commemorate the occasion, students at the Children of the Earth School heard from guest speakers, including two staff members—Rudy Okemaw, an Ojibwe teacher, and Russell Maytwayashing, an educational assistant. Okemaw and Maytwayashing spoke of the hardships they endured at residential school, including their loss of culture, separation from families, and being punished for speaking Ojibwe. Maytwayashing said, “The only thing they didn’t take away from me was my Ojibwe language. I kept that with me all the time. And I will still speak it until the day I die” (Winnipeg School Division, 2019d, para. 10). Despite being punished for speaking their Indigenous language, both men overcame adversity and are now inspirational role models for the school’s student population (Winnipeg School Division, 2019d).

Both residential school survivors also spoke of the importance of forgiveness, stating that forgiveness is crucial in the reconciliation and healing process. Maytwayashing pleads, “It’s time to forgive. It’s hard to do but I will forgive. I will forgive those people that did harm to me. Because if I don’t ... I will get sick from it” (Winnipeg School Division, 2019d, para. 14). Forgiveness is one of the key components of reconciliation, with some scholars debating whether reconciliation can truly be achieved without forgiveness (Carr et al., 2017; Enright, 2001; McLernon et al., 2003). Enright (2001) argues that “one never truly reconciles without some form of forgiving taking place” (p. 31). McLernon et al. (2003) add that forgiveness is the precursor to reconciliation but should not be confused with forgetting. In other words, residential school survivors may never forget the harm done to them in residential school, and nor should non-Indigenous Canadians forget the atrocities that were committed in these institutions.

While they may never forget their traumatic experiences, residential school survivors may have their pain eased and their anxiety lessened by forgiving their perpetrators, and as Maytwayashing said, be less susceptible to illness. The difficulty of forgiveness, however, needs to be acknowledged. The concept of forgiveness varies between Western and Indigenous cultures. Dueck et al. (2020) point out that an Indigenous approach to forgiveness cannot be understood without an understanding of the Indigenous worldview, which is influenced by moral and religious traditions. The concept of forgiveness is also sensitive in non-Western cultures (Dueck et al., 2020). While forgiveness is needed to achieve reconciliatory aims, non-forgiveness should be the right of Indigenous peoples who were mistreated in the residential school system.

The students at Children of the Earth School likely felt sorrow upon hearing the stories of the two residential school survivors and were probably appalled that the two men were punished for simply speaking their traditional language. Perhaps some of the students speak an Indigenous language themselves and can imagine how being punished for speaking their native language must have felt. The students were also likely sympathetic upon hearing the story of Phyllis Webstad, the Indigenous girl who was stripped of her orange shirt on the first day of residential school. The students might have a favourite piece of clothing of their own and can envision how it would feel to have this confiscated for no apparent reason. While the wearing of brightly coloured shirts can never undo the physical and mental anguish that residential school survivors experienced, the Orange Shirt Day initiative teaches students compassion and empathy, and encourages them to be cognisant of the current plight of Indigenous Canadians.

Messages of hope

As part of Orange Shirt Day, students at Norquay School—a vibrant elementary school located in Winnipeg’s core area—painted orange rocks and inscribed them with messages of hope for residential school survivors. Before engaging in the rock-painting exercise, students read books that depicted residential school survivors, such as the titles *Sugar Falls* and *When I Was Eight*. These stories revealed to students the pain and suffering that Indigenous students experienced in residential schools. Before writing the messages of endearment, teachers at the school brainstormed with students about what could be written on the rocks. Some of the messages that were written included “You are strong”, “Every child matters” and “I’m sorry you lost your voice”. Following the activity, students placed the orange rocks around the Point Douglas neighbourhood—one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Winnipeg with a high presence of Indigenous peoples—and near establishments that the Indigenous community frequented, such as the local community centre and museum. Many of these rocks were found by Indigenous community members, and pictures of the rocks with their inscriptions were posted to the Winnipeg Rocks Facebook page (Winnipeg School Division, 2019c).

Like the wearing of orange shirts, simple messages of hope can never undo the physical and mental anguish that residential school survivors experienced. However, by engaging in this rock-painting exercise, students develop a sense of empathy for the survivors and their ordeals. Survivors of residential schools often need their experiences revealed and acknowledged for meaningful healing to take place (Carr et al., 2017). They do not want to be pitied, but their pain needs to be recognised, and non-Indigenous peoples need to be aware of the atrocities that were committed and the suffering that took place in the residential school system (Carr et al., 2017). This explains why the rock-painting exercise at Norquay School is of great importance, for learners who partake in the initiative do not take pity on Indigenous peoples of their community but instead empathise with their struggles. The uplifting messages inscribed on the rocks show that the students from Norquay School acknowledge the struggles of residential school survivors and understand that residential schooling was a dark and damaging period in Canadian history.

Treaty Mosaic Art Project

Located in the heart of Winnipeg's inner city, Gordon Bell High School is undertaking a treaty mosaic art project that will involve the local community. The project received funding from a local charity—the Winnipeg Foundation—and was the vision of Gordon Bell Principal, Vinh Huynh. The project features several murals that have been hung up throughout the school that encompass three core themes—generosity, kindness and reconciliation. The purpose of the treaty mosaic project is to portray the spirit of reconciliation based on the TRC's 94 Calls to Action. The first phase of the project, which is being organised by the school's Indigenous leadership group, examines what reconciliation looks like at Gordon Bell and its impact on the daily lives of the school's staff and students. The hope is that these themes will resonate with the students in the school and with local community members and allow students to contribute and make connections to their community (Winnipeg School Division, 2019a).

Students from Gordon Bell believe that the treaty mosaic art project is something to be proud of and a strong acknowledgement that their school is located on Treaty 1 land. Aya Alshareh, a Grade 12 student and one of the key contributors to the project, stated, "It's a wonderful piece of art. When I look at it, I feel we are acknowledging we are on the Métis homeland and First Nations territory. We are all so proud of that. When people look at this in the future, they will know other Gordon Bell students have worked on this and they can do something too. They are not just students, they can contribute to make this school better" (Winnipeg School Division, 2019a, para. 12–13). A land acknowledgement is an important component of reconciliation, and when taken seriously, should not be considered a form of tokenism. Robinson et al. (2019) point out that acknowledgement is important when something has been previously ignored—the non-Indigenous occupation of rightfully Indigenous lands. The treaty project, in its simplest form, is a way for the students and staff at Gordon Bell to affirm that the school is located on Indigenous territory, and this declaration can act as a starting point to examine the history of colonisation and the continuous non-Indigenous occupation of Indigenous territory (Robinson et al., 2019). While some youth like Alshareh might not be aware of all the atrocities committed by the federal government and the devastating impacts that settler colonialism has had on Indigenous peoples, the treaty mosaic art project is a building block and an important step to engage youth in the complex reconciliatory process.

Indigenous Woodwinds Project

The Grade 6 students at École Lavérendrye—an elementary French Immersion school located in Winnipeg's Fort Rouge neighbourhood—have been learning about the Indigenous North American

flute as part of music history. Students learned that the flute was used by First Nations people across Canada and the United States, including by the Algonquin, Assiniboine, Blackfoot, Cree, Huron, Iroquois, Ojibwe and Sioux peoples. The teacher who initiated the project, Joanne Kilfoyle, wanted to integrate more Indigenous culture into the Grade 6 curriculum, so she taught her students about important Indigenous designs and symbols before the class assembled and painted their flutes. One student decorated her flute with a picture of the Metis flag to honour her Metis heritage, and another student, Sophia Chau, personalised her flute based on her Chinese ancestry, stating, “I put an infinity symbol on my flute because I am part-Chinese and part-white” (Winnipeg School Division, 2019b, para. 10). Kilfoyle reported that the students took great pride in their flutes and learned how important the musical instrument is in Indigenous culture, saying, “The instruments are like part of them now ... when we were building them, it was with the thought that they are creating something that could be passed down” (Winnipeg School Division, 2019b, para. 14). After completing their flutes, the students hoped to perform during an upcoming school concert to showcase their creations (Winnipeg School Division, 2019b).

By engaging in an Indigenous music project, students at École Lavérendrye learn important Indigenous traditions and also learn to appreciate diversity and customs that differ from their own. Music, according to Albayrak (2017), is “influential in drawing attention to the issue and injecting the society with an awareness regarding conflict resolution” (p. 325). In other words, music may not be adequate as a singular means to achieve reconciliation, but the conciliatory aspect of music can be used as a means of resolving conflict. Music can bring people of different backgrounds and cultures to a singular stage where songs can be rehearsed and reconciliation can take shape (Albayrak, 2017).

Students at École Lavérendrye, for example, may hail from different cultural backgrounds, but these backgrounds are woven into one singular ensemble when the students are on stage performing in harmony. Music educators, like their counterparts who teach the social sciences and humanities, play a critical role in incorporating Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum (Tremblay-Beaton, 2017). By introducing her learners to the North American Indigenous flute and by having the students create individualised versions of the flute, Kilfoyle simultaneously infused Indigenous pedagogy into her teaching and taught her students the importance of intercultural understanding—key components of the reconciliatory process (Tremblay-Beaton, 2017).

Traditional birch bark harvest

Students at St. John’s High School, an over 100-year-old secondary school in Winnipeg’s North End, had the opportunity to learn traditional birch bark harvesting from Indigenous knowledge-keepers. The knowledge-keepers, Dano and Jaime Hoover, taught students how to respectfully harvest a birch tree and shared how Indigenous peoples harvest birch trees to make canoes. The tradition is to carefully remove only a small portion of the tree so it can heal itself and harvesting can be done repeatedly. Following the harvest, students learned how to construct baskets and other items from the birch bark. One of the students involved in the project, Paris Collins, who identifies as Metis, enjoyed and benefitted from the interactive lesson, saying, “It was peaceful in the woods and nice to learn out there. Vern showed us how to harvest the bark and what trees you can harvest from. As long as you don’t cut into that membrane and peel it, the tree is able to repair itself. Eventually, that yellow-hued bark will turn black. If you want to go back in several years, you can harvest it again” (Winnipeg School Division, 2019e, para. 6). The St. John’s teachers involved in the project, Arron Cyr and Stephanie Midford, said the students benefitted from the initiative as it allowed them to spend time in nature, learn a new craft, and respect Indigenous peoples who came before them (Winnipeg School Division, 2019e).

The traditional birch bark harvest also taught students how to respect nature and the importance of sustainability in Indigenous culture. Sustainability can increase the strength of Indigenous peoples and communities and has been referred to as a lifelong process rather than as a final destination (Sanderson, 2012). Teacher Aaron Cyr said, “When you think of all the things we buy and just throw out later on, there’s something to be said for the sustainability of this—you’re harvesting from living trees and making a practical, useful tool” (Winnipeg School Division, 2019e, para. 16). The traditional birch bark harvest is also an important cross-cultural initiative. Metis students like Paris Collins learn to value the importance of their own culture while participating in the birch bark harvest, and non-Indigenous students come to understand an important cultural practice that differs from their own (Datta, 2019). In the process of participating in cross-cultural projects like the birch bark harvest, Indigenous and non-Indigenous students discover commonalities and differences among each other and potentially develop connections and mutual respect for one another (Datta, 2019). These meaningful connections and mutual understandings are key to achieving reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians.

The role of schools and teachers within the TRC’s Calls to Action

The TRC’s 94 Calls to Action outline the clear steps that need to be taken to redress the historical and societal injustices perpetrated against Indigenous peoples and to make amends for the atrocities committed by the residential school system (Reynar & Matties, 2018). The education system plays a key role in the reconciliation process as 7 of the 94 Calls to Action pertain to educational initiatives and responsibilities that the federal government can facilitate in schools across the country (Montero & Dénoimé-Welch, 2018; Tremblay-Beaton, 2017; Warrington, 2018). For example, the TRC calls for the educational gaps to be curtailed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and for the elimination of the financial hurdles that prevent many Indigenous youths from accessing post-secondary education (TRC, 2015). The TRC calls on the federal government to enact the 94 Calls to Action; however, the education system, and in particular, schools and teachers, play vital roles in ensuring the Calls were not developed in vain.

Dion (2016) states that educators play an integral role “to restore mutual respect between individuals from different cultural backgrounds” (p. 472). Dion (2016) challenges educators to amend these relationships that were fractured, not because of simple indifferences between the two parties, but because of harmful settler colonial practices that have marginalised Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples have primarily had negative experiences with schooling as a result of harmful policies, so the fostering and maintaining of relationships based on mutual trust and respect are necessary to create positive schooling experiences for Indigenous peoples (Preston et al., 2017). These positive relationships are crucial if the reconciliation process is to be ultimately successful (Warrington, 2018).

Classroom teachers are key stakeholders in the reconciliation process and in helping to establish meaningful and respectful relationships with Indigenous peoples (Warrington, 2018). At the classroom level, teachers are entrusted to meet the needs of Indigenous learners and engage students in a culturally appropriate curriculum that incorporates Indigenous perspectives (Montero & Dénoimé-Welch, 2018; Warrington, 2018). The TRC calls on teachers to “teach age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, treaties, and Indigenous people’s historical and contemporary contributions to Canada” (TRC, 2015, Call 62). The TRC also asks teachers to “maintain an annual commitment to Indigenous education issues, including building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect” (TRC, 2015, Call 63). By exploring the various initiatives that Winnipeg School Division staff and students are engaged in, it appears the division is doing an admirable job of integrating Indigenous perspectives into the

curriculum and developing initiatives and projects that teach all students about the history of Indigenous peoples and the importance of reconciliation. Each of these initiatives also addresses the TRC's Calls to Action, especially Calls 62 and 63. Various schools, such as Children of the Earth and Norquay, have engaged learners in Orange Shirt Day by informing them of the story of Phyllis Webstad, bringing in former residential school survivors to talk about their experiences, and inscribing messages of hope for survivors. These initiatives allow for a better understanding of the residential school system and explain to learners why Indigenous peoples continue to suffer from the traumatic effects of residential schooling today.

The other initiatives that Winnipeg School Division schools are engaged in familiarise learners with land acknowledgement, traditional cultural practices and the importance of sustainability in Indigenous culture. These initiatives allow for better cross-cultural understanding, and by facilitating these projects, teachers encourage Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth to develop meaningful connections with one another and develop relationships based on mutual understanding (Datta, 2019; Dion, 2016; Preston et al., 2017). Montero and Dénomme-Welch (2018) believe that if teachers embrace the idea of decolonising education, there can be a shift in the way Indigenous youths perceive themselves and how non-Indigenous students view Indigenous students. This can be facilitated through initiatives like the woodwinds project at École Lavérendrye and the traditional birch bark harvest at St. John's High School, as these endeavours create space for Indigenous knowledge and perspectives to be integrated into the curriculum. Too often, teachers simply introduce Indigenous topics without delving deeper into specific Indigenous worldviews, traditions and practices (Montero & Dénomme-Welch, 2018). The Winnipeg School Division initiatives such as introducing learners to the importance of sustainability in Indigenous culture and learning about the important role of the flute in Indigenous society allow students to be kinaesthetically engaged with Indigenous traditions and practices in a meaningful way.

Conclusion: The teaching for reconciliation

Despite the many benefits of teaching for reconciliation, teacher resistance has been well documented and there remains resistance among educators to initiate lessons on the topic of reconciliation (Aitken & Radford, 2018; Battiste, 2013a; Taylor, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Teaching for reconciliation can have an emotional impact on teachers as decolonising education is fraught with complexities (Aitken & Radford, 2018; Battiste, 2013a). In other words, some teachers may feel that topics that explore the historical and societal injustices perpetrated against Indigenous peoples may be too complex and nuanced to introduce in the classroom. This is understandable as many of these injustices, such as residential schooling, the Sixties Scoop, and missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, may be too overwhelming and challenging to broach with learners. This may especially be the case for teachers of Indigenous heritage who may have family members who are residential school survivors or for those teachers who had family members that were removed from their homes during the Sixties Scoop.

Decolonisation is also commonly depicted as a complex and overwhelming topic as the erasing of Eurocentric assumptions, which lie deeply embedded within Canadian society, are difficult to eradicate (Aitken & Radford, 2018). Some Canadians are unsure of what reconciliation is all about, and others view decolonisation as a threat to white privilege (Aitken & Radford, 2018). Tuck and Young (2012) state that "decolonization is a new ordering of the world, one which doesn't replace the centrality of the white settler with reversal of positions, nor a new parallel relationship of reconciliation" (p. 35). In other words, decolonisation must be fully understood and settler colonialism as a continuing structure must be eradicated for settlerhood to dissipate. These endeavours are imperative if reconciliation is to be achieved.

Despite the initiatives underway in the Winnipeg School Division, other schools in Manitoba and across Canada have not responded appropriately to the needs of Indigenous learners and need to do a better job of preparing all students to seriously engage in reconciliatory initiatives. Dion's (2016) research indicates that a lack of Indigenous content being taught in schools across the country results in a lack of understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples. A major challenge of teaching for reconciliation is the fact that Indigenous and non-Indigenous students bring vastly different experiences, knowledge and responses to the curriculum, and that it can be taxing for both non-Indigenous and Indigenous students to be simultaneously subjected to reconciliation (Taylor, 2014). The teaching for reconciliation in Canada, nevertheless, is an important initiative if the harms of colonisation are to be properly addressed. A commitment to reconciliation is important for all Canadians, and confronting colonialism is necessary if the TRC of Canada's goal of creating a balanced relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians is to be achieved (Aitken & Radford, 2018).

All levels of government, public services, corporate organisations, religious organisations, political parties and educational institutions have an important role in the reconciliation process (Aitken & Radford, 2018). Educators, however, likely have the biggest role to play in meeting the directives of the TRC. Former Canadian Justice and Senator Murray Sinclair said, "Education is what got us into this mess—the use of education at least in terms of residential schools—but education is the key to reconciliation" (as cited in Watters, 2015, para. 17). In other words, educators have the greatest responsibility to effect change and to fight the effects of colonialism, as it has been education that has been strategically used to oppress Indigenous peoples of Canada for generations (Aitken & Radford, 2018; Montero & Dénoimé-Welch, 2018; Warrington, 2018).

To effect change and to fight the effects of colonialism, teachers should encourage their students to examine the relationships that have existed since the first contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and to develop an understanding and respect for Indigenous rights and treaties (Dion 2016). This can happen by incorporating Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum in various school subjects, such as learning about the Indigenous flute in music class, becoming familiar with the story of Phyllis Webstad in history class, and participating in a traditional birch bark harvest in an outdoor education class. Teachers play a vital role in educating all students about the injustices that have been perpetrated upon Indigenous people, including the abusive nature of residential schools, dishonoured treaties and misappropriated lands (Aitken & Radford, 2018). The reconciliation projects that are underway in the Winnipeg School Division are necessary to share this history and legacy. Reconciliation is not an immediate process; instead, it is akin to a journey of complexity that will take significant time, stamina and engagement to achieve. If reconciliation is to be carried out, then classroom teachers need to be unified and strong allies of Indigenous peoples in the reconciliation process (Dion, 2016). By facilitating reconciliation in the classroom, educators help young learners understand the country's harmful legacy of maltreatment against Indigenous peoples and the importance of moving forward and reforming the relationship with Indigenous peoples in a more conciliatory manner.

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